

Progressive Era: The Roaring Twenties

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TOP: Russell Patterson's "Where There's Smoke There's Fire," showing a fashionably dressed woman of the time, often called a flapper, was painted around 1925. Courtesy of Library of Congress. BOTTOM: Calvin Coolidge in the late 1910s. Photo courtesy of Wikipedia.

The 1920s heralded a dramatic break between America's past and future. Before World War I (1914-1918), the country remained culturally and psychologically rooted in the past. In the 1920s, America seemed to usher in a more modern era.

The most vivid impressions of the 1920s are of flappers, movie palaces, radio empires, and Prohibition, the nationwide ban on alcohol that led to people making alcohol and drinking it in secret. But also during this era, scientists shattered the boundaries of space and time, aviators made men fly, and women went to work. The United States was confident and rich.

A time of contradiction

But the 1920s were also an age of extreme contradiction. The unmatched prosperity and cultural advancement was accompanied by intense social unrest and reaction. The same decade also reintroduced the Ku Klux Klan, discrimination against immigrants, and pitted religious fundamentalism against scientific findings.

America stood at a crossroads between advancement and tradition.

Many of the trends that converged to make the 1920s distinct had been building for years.

It was an era of liberation for women as the decade gave rise to flappers, who were young women who dressed and acted boldly for that time. Meanwhile, a powerful women's political movement demanded and won the right to vote in 1920.

Independent women

Spurred on by economic growth that required a larger female labor force, young women now were able to lead independent lives and, as such, many female workers lived alone in private apartments or boardinghouses, free from the watchful eyes of their parents.

The 1920s are often thought of as an era of prosperity and, in many respects, Americans had never lived so well. Advancement in machinery and technology made it possible for people to work fewer hours and earn more money. Furthermore, people also had more opportunities to buy material things, thanks to new methods of production and distribution. By 1929, American families spent over 20 percent of their household earnings on factory-made furniture, radios, electric appliances, cars, and entertainment, such as going to movie theaters or amusement parks.

The proliferation of advertising helped expose people to lives associated with the purchase of goods and services by selling them their dreams, or what companies wanted people to think their dreams were.

American urbanization

For the first time ever, more Americans lived in cities than in villages or on farms during the 1920s. This urbanization also included economic growth, as machines increased productivity in manufacturing, railroads, and mining. Much of this was due to technological advancements, including electricity, which almost two-thirds of households had by the mid-1920s. The electric vacuum cleaner, the electric refrigerator and freezer, and the automatic washing machine became staples in middle-class homes, and cars became affordable and trustworthy.

As a sign of the advancements in daily life, the most common sources of disagreement between teenagers and their parents during the mid-1920s were: going out on school nights, the times they must be home, their grades, spending money, and use of the car.

Meanwhile, film and radio advanced during the 1920s. On November 2, 1920, a radio station in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, broadcast the presidential election returns for the first-ever live radio news. Shortly thereafter, Americans were listening to music, live baseball games and more on the radio.

Presidents of the 1920s

Warren G. Harding was America's 29th president, serving from 1921 until he died while still in office in 1923. Although his administration was full of scandal, Harding was widely admired by the American voters.

Harding was replaced by Calvin Coolidge, who may have been the most quiet man ever to occupy the White House. "Silent Cal" slept 11 hours each day, vetoed far more laws than he proposed, and claimed that his only hobby was "holding public office." In 1928, Coolidge announced unexpectedly that he did "not choose to run for president" again.

Herbert Hoover took the oath of office as the nation's 31st president in 1929, with the Great Depression beginning only months later. The country's despair profoundly affected him. However, Hoover did not initiate strong action during this time of widespread unemployment and starvation, and he became one of the most despised men in America.

At odds with the revolution

The great revolution that was sweeping through America didn't meet with uniform approval from everyone.

In 1925, a young high school science teacher in Tennessee named John Scopes violated the state's law that evolution could not be taught. Evolution is the scientific process of a gradual, natural development of living things over time. This process was at odds with many religious beliefs. In Tennessee, a battle between science and fundamentalist Christianity followed, as did a trial in court. The anti-evolution law remained until the 1960s.

Meanwhile, the Ku Klux Klan had faded away until 1915, when it was reorganized. The new Klan included among its list of enemies Jews, Catholics, Asians, and "new women." By 1925, the organization claimed at least 5 million members, with the Klan controlling politics in several states and helping put in place anti-immigration laws that would last for years.

A weak economy

Amid the great prosperity and excess of the 1920s, America's economy was weak. There were massive gaps between the rich and poor, with those living in the countryside being affected the most as farm prices hit rock bottom while cities prospered.

Such glaring inequality had consequences. Boom times relied on mass consumption, and eventually, working people reached their limit. The very wealthy could only buy so many cars, washing machines, radios, and movie tickets. When consumer demand bottomed out, America's economy simply stopped functioning.

The stock market collapsed in 1929, and the influences of under-consumption and over-estimating the success of stocks began wreaking havoc on the American economy as the nation's first modern decade drew to an end.

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