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## CONSERVATISM AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE 1920s

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The period between the end of World War I and the collapse of the nation's economy in 1929 is often referred to as the "Roaring Twenties." Indeed, in many ways that characterization is appropriate, for the 1920s witnessed an explosive cultural transformation that affected the lives of the nation's youth, its African American population, and women. In some ways, the decade has a counterpart in the civil rights and women's rights movements and with youth rebellion associated with American life in the 1960s. Yet in the 1920s there were contradictions: women and black Americans were still subordinated, and despite the burst of cultural development that took place, the nation was led by conservative presidents who represented the social, cultural, economic, and political status quo. Political radicalism and trade unionism would challenge the economic and political relations that prevailed, bringing radicals and trade unions into direct confrontation with a government that would not tolerate deviations from the accepted political ideology.

What then made the Twenties "roar"? Following the war, the nation experienced an economic boom. Many Americans, especially in the nation's urban areas, helped the expansion of the economy by increasingly participating in America's growing consumer culture, from the automobile to the phonograph. New cultural forms such as jazz and modern art revolutionized American civilization, and the Harlem Renaissance offered black poets, artists, and authors an opportunity to make valuable contributions to American cultural life. Still, under the surface there were pressures, contradictions, and the

same racial and ethnic maladies that had always plagued the nation. Increasingly, the nation was divided demographically, as rapidly changing, dynamic urban life stood in stark contrast with the more static, traditional, and—to a certain sense—more Protestant rural areas. Also, while the economy boomed, not all benefited. Many who were poor after the war remained that way through the 1920s and beyond. Millions of immigrants entered the nation during this period, alarming indigenous Americans that the United States would soon be overwhelmed by foreign cultures, especially from southern and eastern Europe. An investigation of the features, tensions, and passions of the 1920s offers an opportunity to view the nation at a pivotal point in its history, when many sought to leave the past behind and others yearned for a “return to normalcy.”

### KEY CONCEPTS

- The 1920s were dominated by conservative Republican presidents.
- Americans experienced an unprecedented burst of consumer activity as new mass-produced commodities were made available.
- Tensions prevailed between rural and urban America.
- The decade witnessed a rise in nativism and racism.
- The period was culturally vibrant as new forms of music and art became popular.
- The U.S. government persecuted radicals in the red scare.

The decade of the 1920s is discussed in depth in *The American Pageant*, 14th and 15th eds., Chapters 31 and 32.

### POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

The presidential election of 1920 focused on whether to accept President Wilson’s idealism (for example, to enter the League of Nations) or to, as the Republican candidate Warren G. Harding stated, “Return to normalcy”—in other words, return to an earlier time when Republicans occupied the Oval Office and the nation was not embroiled in foreign problems. The Democratic ticket was composed of presidential candidate James M. Cox and his running mate, Franklin D. Roosevelt. The election, the first in which women nationally had the right to vote, was a landslide for Harding and his running mate, Calvin Coolidge. It appeared the Republicans were given a mandate from the American people, who rejected the policies and philosophy of Wilson’s administration by returning a Republican to the White House in such a convincing way. In the meantime a reconversion of the nation’s economy had taken place as wartime government regulations on business were relaxed. Two pieces of legislation serve as significant examples of this reconversion:

- **The Jones Merchant Marine Act (1920)** The act authorized the sale of ships built by the government to private bidders.
- **The Esch-Cummins Act (1920)** Control of the railroad industry was returned to private companies. Unions had offered the Plumb Plan (named after a railway union’s legal counsel), which would have allowed the government to purchase the railroads; management of the industry would comprise government officials,

railway employees, and railway operators. Congress rejected the plan, however.

The Harding administration sought to cut taxes, especially for the wealthy—as could be seen in the Mellon tax plan—reduce government spending, and to protect American industries from the demands of labor and from foreign competition. In the case of the latter, Congress passed the Fordney-McCumber Tariff, which placed high taxes on imports, a policy that the nation's trade partners would adopt in retaliation.

Harding had never really wanted to be president. Content as an Ohio newspaper owner and U.S. senator, he found the role of chief executive more stressful than his mind and body could endure. Three years into his term, in 1923, he died suddenly, catapulting Calvin Coolidge into the Oval Office. Had Harding lived, he would have endured the humiliation of congressional investigations that revealed widespread corruption on the part of Harding's associates and advisers. The most infamous case involved the sale of U.S. naval oil reserves at Teapot Dome, Wyoming, to private businesses. Harding's secretary of the interior, Albert Fall, was convicted of bribery and sent to prison, the first cabinet member in U.S. history to suffer such a disgraceful fate. Other political associates, such as Attorney General Henry Daugherty and Secretary of the Navy Edwin Denby, barely escaped conviction. However, one of Harding's closest friends, Jesse Smith, who had arranged the payoffs, committed suicide.

## "SILENT CAL" COOLIDGE AND THE "DO-NOTHING"

### HERBERT HOOVER

The new president, Calvin Coolidge, the former governor of Massachusetts, rose to national prominence by putting down a police strike in Boston. A man of very few words, Coolidge believed the best thing a president could do for the nation was to do very little, especially when it came to government control or regulation of the economy. Under his conservative stewardship the business sector flourished, though his critics claimed he maintained the status quo by failing to address important social and economic concerns. Farmers, for one, could find little support from the administration, especially after farm prices slumped in the postwar years. Even though Congress passed the McNary-Haugen Bill (in 1927 and 1928), which provided for the government to purchase crops in order to maintain price levels comparable to what they were before the war, both times Coolidge vetoed the legislation as being an economic burden on the government.

Because he had not been tainted by the scandals of the previous few years, Coolidge ran for election in his own right in 1924. He easily defeated his Democratic opponent, John W. Davis, and a third-party candidate, the progressive senator from Wisconsin, Robert La Follette, who nevertheless received 5 million votes. Coolidge's election, then, served as an indicator that Americans were more concerned with economic progress than progressivism. Throughout the nation, women were elected to serve in local, state, and federal positions. The nation's first two women governors, for example, were elected in 1924.

When it came time for Coolidge to seek reelection in 1928, the taciturn president told reporters, “I choose not to run for president in 1928,” and kept to his word. In the ’28 election another Republican, Herbert Hoover, was elected over New York’s Governor Al Smith. Smith’s religion (he was a Catholic) probably cost him significant support among Protestants. (It would be another thirty-two years before the nation would elect its first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy.) Sadly for Hoover, the Great Depression struck less than two years into his one and only term. Unfortunately for the American people, Hoover, who had done so much as an administrator for Belgian war relief in 1917, did so little to provide aid to Americans suffering from the effects of the economic collapse. His detractors called him a “do-nothing” president. His successor, Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt, would oversee the nation as it made its way through the perilous waters of the worst economic collapse in the nation’s history.

## MASS CONSUMERISM

After a brief recession in the first two years of the decade, the economy quickly rebounded. It would soon reach unprecedented heights as the nation engaged in a torrent of consumer spending stimulated in part by the stock-market “bubble” and available surplus capital that often comes with periods of economic recovery. Purchasing on credit (installment buying) allowed Americans to “buy now and pay later.” Consequently, those items that had earlier been considered out of reach for millions of Americans, such as home appliances, could now be purchased and paid off over time. Unfortunately, this spending spree led many to fall into debt. The advent of department-store catalogs, such as those offered by Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward, made it easier to purchase commodities, especially for people who did not have access to large urban department stores. And mass advertising convinced the consumer of the need to purchase new and improved commodities. The advent of the radio provided Americans a new form of entertainment and faster access to national and international news, as well as a venue for the nation’s advertisers.

The period’s most notable consumer item was the automobile. Although there were very few cars in the United States prior to World War I, by the end of the 1920s over 25 million autos would be registered; 20 percent of Americans owned cars by 1930. Of course not everyone could afford to purchase such an expensive commodity, but Henry Ford’s revolutionary use of the assembly line made the Model T accessible to many, including his own workers, who were paid an unprecedented \$5 per eight-hour day! The expansion of the auto industry spurred associated developments, such as highway construction, increased suburbanization, and the growth of the rubber, oil, insurance, and advertising industries. By the mid-1920s, many in the middle class came to associate their status with automobile ownership. Yet the expansion of one form of transportation spelled the decline of another—namely the railroad industry.

## Entertainment: The Motion Picture Industry and Professional Sports

Like the birth of radio and the recording industry in the 1920s, of television in the post–World War II years, or of the Internet today, the motion picture industry provided Americans with a revolutionary new source of entertainment and information. The first one-reel movie (*The Great Train Robbery*) had been produced in 1913, followed by the first feature-length film, *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Utilizing editing techniques, *Birth of a Nation* captivated the American public despite its politically charged representation of racist stereotypes and glorification of the KKK. The 1920s movie industry built on the successes of the previous decade as silent motion pictures became enormously popular. The first movie documentary, *Nanook of the North*, was released in 1922. Animated films also became very popular in the 1920s as the American public was drawn to such cartoon characters as “Krazy Kat” and Walt Disney’s “Steamboat Willie” (later known as Mickey Mouse). It was not until 1927 that Americans had the opportunity to hear their first “talkie,” *The Jazz Singer*.

Although baseball had suffered a serious black eye as a result of the Black Sox scandal of 1919 when members of the Chicago White Sox threw the World Series, the sport rebounded in the 1920s as athletes such as Babe Ruth became national icons. Boxing and football also grew as popular diversions in the 1920s.

While the economy boomed, there were social and cultural undercurrents that indicated that all was indeed not well domestically. In fact, prominent American writers known by the collective moniker the “Lost Generation” wrote of American ills and excesses in works like Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt* (1922), F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). By 1930 many Americans who had spent enormous sums on consumer items in the 1920s would find it difficult to purchase even the most basic needs of life.

## DIVISIONS ON THE DOMESTIC SCENE

Many social scientists see the 1920s as a time when the ideals of modernism clashed with the stability of tradition, secular and religious. These tensions manifested themselves in a variety of political, social, and cultural ways:

- **Urban versus rural** To those living in rural America, the nation’s cities represented vice and sin. Ironically, as the nation was prepared to enter into the decade known as the Roaring Twenties, the sale, distribution, and consumption of alcoholic beverages was outlawed in the United States by the Eighteenth Amendment and enforced by the Volstead Act. The campaign to outlaw alcohol, launched by Protestant fundamentalists—the “drys”—was based on the assumptions that liquor caused crime, poverty, poor health, and broken families. With prohibition, speakeasies popped up in cities large and small. There, “wets” would dance—for example, the

frenetic Charleston played by jazz musicians like Louis Armstrong—and drink illegal alcohol. Rural Americans viewed it as an exceedingly provocative lifestyle. (Prohibition ultimately led to the rise of urban gangs, such as the one led by Chicago’s Al Capone. It also cost millions to enforce, and it failed to resonate on a moral level with the American people. Having outlived its welcome, the Eighteenth Amendment was repealed in 1933 by the Twenty-first Amendment.) The attitude of urban women as represented in their clothing and behavior (in part shaped by advertising) seemed equally disturbing to small-town Americans. Each year, it seemed, women’s hemlines inched ever higher, and some women were wearing cosmetics and smoking cigarettes. Known as “flappers,” these women flaunted their disdain for traditional women’s roles in a manner that angered those who favored a more Victorian comportment for women.

- **Moderate versus radical unionism** Major moderate unions such as the American Federation of Labor (AFL) experienced a decline in their membership due to their limited successes in achieving real gains for workers when the nation’s economy was booming. Radical unions such as the Industrial Workers of the World (the “Wobblies”) had been effectively neutralized by the government during the war. The 1920s witnessed the growth of industrial unions whose members identified with radical political and economic solutions to their plight.
- **Science versus religion: the Scopes Monkey Trial** In 1925 a Tennessee teacher was arrested for teaching Darwin’s theory of evolution in defiance of state law. The case provided fundamentalist Christians an opportunity to silence those who questioned the theory of creation as described in the Book of Genesis. Moreover, the case pitted the ideals and ideas of urban modernism against the religious fundamentalism of rural Protestant America. Three-time presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan was the prosecutor in the case; the famous attorney Clarence Darrow represented John Scopes. The jury ruled against the teacher, but the verdict was eventually overturned. To this day, the role of religion in education is debated in the halls of Congress and across the nation.
- **Modern versus traditional art forms** The emergence of abstract art forms such as impressionism and cubism provoked controversy. At the infamous Armory Show, held in New York City in 1913, the highly controversial works of Pablo Picasso and other modern artists were exhibited. Picasso’s use of geometric abstract shapes in his paintings outraged traditionalists, as did Marcel Duchamp’s “Nude Descending a Staircase,” which seemed suggestive and provocative to those with more modest sensibilities. Ultimately the modernists won out. In 1929 the Museum of Modern Art opened in New York City. By that time many had come to accept and even appreciate the new art form, whose case was prejudiced by the nativist sentiment that consumed the nation in this decade. Following World War I, New York’s Harlem became the center of black American cultural and intellectual life. Black artists, poets, authors, musicians, and painters flocked to this cultural mecca, where they produced some of the finest literary, musical, and artistic works in the 1920s—or in any decade, for that matter. James

Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and other authors and poets touched a chord in white and black Americans alike. The musical arrangements that emerged from this movement tended to be a synthesis of gospel music, jazz, and African rhythms. Known as the Harlem Renaissance, the movement also provided an opportunity to protest racial attitudes and promote black pride.

### **AP® Tip**

What was it about the 1920s that seems so important and unique that it deserves a separate chapter? As with all historical questions, the answer is very much interpretive. Some historians see the period as essentially one in which Americans became increasingly identified with consumerism and materialism, repudiating the reforms associated with the pre-World War I era and embracing conservatism and even racist and reactionary politics, in part as a response to the progressive era. Other historians see the reaction by more traditional and conservative citizens as a legitimate attempt to preserve the values they associated with being an American, which was expressed, for example, in nativism and anti-modernism. What is more, many Americans were responding to what they viewed as an unhealthy expansion of federal power that they attributed, in part, to the progressive era and World War I. Other historians view this expansion of federal power as a not unexpected consequence of the development and expansion of the American economy. To be sure, this is a sampling of interpretations, but you should be conscious of divergent perspectives, as well as how many of the issues that shaped an earlier historical period are contemporary concerns as well.

## **NATIVIST ANXIETY**

The success of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917 gave rise to the first red scare (1919–1920). Americans and their government believed that communism was on the rise and could someday spread to the United States. When bombs exploded outside the home of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer in 1919 and on Wall Street the following year, killing thirty-eight people, the attacks were blamed on communists. Paranoia swept the nation in what became known as the “red scare,” a period when the government reacted against domestic radicals, many of whom, though opponents of capitalism, were law-abiding citizens who should have been protected by the First Amendment. Under Palmer, deportations soon followed, as did attacks on trade union members, socialists, and immigrants.

After the red scare died down, the 1920s were characterized by a conservative reaction to immigration and political radicalism. Foreigners were perceived as somehow posing a radical challenge to the American way of life. Nativist sentiment consumed the nation in this decade. It can be seen on a number of fronts:

- **The reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan** The KKK had fallen on hard times in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as membership declined. By 1915, however, it had returned with a vengeance. Its targets were now Jews, eastern Europeans, Catholics, radicals, and unions, as well as black Americans. By 1924 the organization's membership peaked at 5 million, and it had expanded into northern states. The Klan was even successful in electing its members to important political positions in the 1920s.
- **The Sacco and Vanzetti Trial** In some ways this legal case was a microcosm of the political and ethnic problems and tensions that existed in the 1920s. Accused of murder, the two Italian anarchists were convicted and executed in 1927, despite claims that there was insufficient evidence to convict them. Many of their contemporaries argued that the men's ethnicity and political views, not their complicity in the crime, convicted them. Historians are still divided over the nature of the case.
- **The "Hundred Percenters"** Considering themselves 100 percent American, not foreign-born, this group attempted to limit foreign cultural and political influences on the United States and sought a foreign policy that would isolate the United States from foreign entanglements and relations.

Anxiety about foreigners inevitably gave rise to immigration restrictions. Despite the growing need for cheap labor, intense anti-immigration sentiment for cultural and racial reasons again took hold, as expressed in the following legislation:

- **Literacy Test Act (1917)** Passed over Wilson's veto, it required immigrants to pass a literacy test in English or their own native tongue.
- **Emergency Quota Act (1921)** This act reduced southern and eastern European immigration.
- **Immigration Act (1924)** Based on the belief that immigrants from eastern and southern Europe were more difficult to assimilate, this legislation provided a national origins plan that dramatically restricted immigration to 2 percent for each nationality represented in the 1890 census.
- **Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)** This act limited Asian immigration, which was not significantly changed until 1965.

In 1929 the Roaring Twenties came to an abrupt and unexpected end when the stock market crashed, bringing down with it the nation's economy. To be sure, the lives of millions of Americans, black and white, rural and urban, had been untouched by either the prosperity or cultural achievements that defined the 1920s. As the nation entered one of its darkest hours, the Great Depression, the lives of those already marginalized would deteriorate even further. For those who had flourished in the 1920s, their lives in the next decade would be in stark contrast to the excitement and sense of newness of the 1920s.



## Topic 16 Content Review

To answer the Topic 16 Content Review questions, return to the Period 7 page on the *Fast Track to a 5* site and click on the Topic 16 tab. The review contains 15 multiple choice items with feedback.

## Short-Answer Questions

1. Two technological advances of the 1920s created great social and cultural change.
  - A) For both of the following, discuss at least one example of how it affected people's daily lives in the 1920s.  
Cars  
Radios
  - B) Discuss ONE example of how the changes brought about by these items led to backlash during the decade.

Question 2 refers to the following passage.

“Strange,  
That in this nigger place  
I should meet life face to face;  
When, for years, I had been seeking  
Life in places gentler-speaking.  
Until I came to this vile street  
And found Life stepping on my feet!”

—Langston Hughes, “Esthete in Harlem,” 1930

2. Langston Hughes was a major figure and prolific poet in the Harlem Renaissance.
  - A) How does Hughes describe Harlem in this poem?
  - B) Why were the 1920s the right time for a movement like the Harlem Renaissance? Include at least ONE historical example in your answer.

## Long-Essay Questions

1. Despite the popular image of the 1920s as a time of rampant leisure and prosperity, the decade was also significantly marked by social, economic, and cultural discord among Americans.

In your essay discuss THREE of the following to support the above statement:

- A. urban versus rural attitudes
- B. nativism versus immigration
- C. science versus religion
- D. the red scare

2. To what extent did the United States undergo a cultural transformation in the 1920s?

## Answers

### SHORT-ANSWER QUESTIONS

1. The car and the radio both led to multiple changes in society. The increased popularity of the car led to physical changes as roads needed to be created; it also led to social changes by allowing people to move farther away from their jobs and giving women and younger people more freedom to move around. The radio brought new access to information and entertainment, as well as popularizing forms of music that could only be heard at live performances prior to its invention. You could discuss multiple forms of backlash here, including the rise of fundamentalism and Harding's declaration of a return to normalcy amid a backdrop of jazz and flappers.
2. This poem celebrates Harlem and the opportunities it provided for black artists like Langston Hughes. You could discuss several reasons for the 1920s providing the space for the Harlem Renaissance to happen, including the work of prior activists like Washington, DuBois, and Garvey; the effects of the Great Migration and creation of enclaves of African Americans in the North; the greater acceptance of new forms and expressions of culture in the 1920s; or one of several other reasons.

### LONG-ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Although in some ways a lively decade that witnessed important cultural innovations, the 1920s also represented an era of conformity, repression, and bigotry. Significant tensions developed during this period that you should discuss. As the nation's cosmopolitan urban areas reflected modernism and consumerism, rural America continued to represent tradition and stability. Urban areas were ethnically and culturally heterogeneous, whereas rural America was homogeneous culturally and religiously as well; this is an appropriate opportunity for you to discuss the tensions that prevailed between "Bible Belt" areas and those areas that were exposed to scientific literature and ideas. This is indicated in the tensions that existed between U.S.-born Americans and the millions of immigrants who were arriving in the United States in this decade. Even events outside of the United States had an impact on the discord and intolerance that prevailed in the 1920s. For example, the red scare was in large part caused by the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. (Historical Thinking Skills: I-3: Periodization, II-4: Comparison, IV-8: Interpretation)

2. In responding to this question, you should take into account the profound effect consumerism had on American culture. New consumer items shaped the way Americans lived in many unprecedented ways. Radio, motion pictures, the automobile, and modern art were both causes and effects of a cultural transformation that helped to shape the Roaring Twenties. Further, you can incorporate into your essay a discussion of the causes of prohibition and its effects, such as the cultural phenomenon known as the speakeasy. You might discuss changing gender roles as well. Keep in mind that the question asks you to “discuss the extent” of this cultural transformation; therefore, you should also identify its limitations. For instance, much of the Roaring Twenties was an urban experience; the rural areas of the nation did not experience the 1920s in the same way as those living in major cities did. (Historical Thinking Skills: I-2: Patterns of Continuity and Change Over Time, II-4: Comparison, II-5: Contextualization, IV-8: Interpretation, IV-9: Synthesis)