

Chapter 30: American Life in the “Roaring Twenties” (1920-1929)

Seeing Red

- Communists came to power in Russia with the Bolshevik Revolution (1917)
 - Support for Communists created a small Communist Party in the U.S.
- There were many strikes at the end of WWI
 - Many of them were fighting against high prices and were organized by labor unions, but the Communists were often blamed
- The red scare (1919-1920) was an anti-Communist/radical-left movement in the U.S.
 - There was a general national movement against Communists and radicals
 - Communists were often jailed or sometimes deported
 - There were the criminal syndicalism laws (1919-1920) that prevented the use of violence to carry out social change (only harmless words were allowed)
 - The Americans believed that the Communists used violence to get social change and enacted this law to prevent them from doing so
 - The red scare promoted business by suppressing unions and other socialist groups
 - Industrialists advocated the “open shop,” or a non-union-based labor system, as their idea of the American plan (their economic view of the U.S.)
- There was the controversial court case of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti for a murder
 - There was great prejudice against the defendants because they were “Italians, atheists, anarchists, and draft dodgers” — more fitting the foreign, socialist stereotype that the nativist Americans disliked

Hooded Hoodlums of the KKK

- The KKK sprung up again in the 1920s
 - It was similar to the nativist KKK group of the 1850s (and less like the anti-black KKK of the 1860s) — they basically were prejudiced against everything that was not the white Anglo-Saxon race
 - Basically an ultra-conservative, extremist movement that went against recent liberal policies and reform concerning race relations
 - They had wide membership (5 million at its peak) and had rallies and parades
- This KKK reprisal was stopped by the common people and by legislature
 - Basic human decency caused people to lose interest in such a backwards society that hated foreigners
 - The government investigated financial scandals in the KKK
 - Civil rights advocates forced through anti-lynching laws in the 1920s, also limiting the KKK's power

Stemming the Foreign Flood

- America had become very industrial and isolationist, didn't need a mass influx of immigrants
 - Most of the new immigrants in the early 1900s were coming from Southern and Eastern Europe, which the Americans condemned for not fitting their ideal stereotype of the

white northwestern European (like the Old Immigrants that formed most of the American population and its ancestry)

- Congress passed multiple laws to slow the flood of immigration into the U.S.
 - The Emergency Quota Act (1921) limited immigration from each country to 3% of the population in America of that nationality and based the quota numbers off of the 1910 census (by which many New Immigrants had already immigrated to the U.S.)
 - The Immigration Act of 1924 lowered quota to 2% and based quota numbers off of 1890 population (more Old Immigrants than New Immigrants)
 - Many countries revolted against this, believing that the U.S. was prejudicing against the Southern and Eastern European countries
 - This law exempted Canada and Latin American countries because immigration with those adjacent countries could be more easily facilitated
 - This law caused the first net emigration of foreigners from the U.S.
- Differences between isolated immigrant groups often weakened them and pitted them against one another
 - Industrial companies used this to their advantage to weaken potential labor strikes because the people were less cohesive
 - Horace Kallen proposed to solve this by having the U.S. government provide protection to different ethnic groups to preserve their culture and identity, which would strengthen each ethnic group and therefore all ethnic groups as a whole as a result
 - Randolph Bourne believed that immigrants should work together and interweave with each other (assimilation)

The Prohibition “Experiment”

- The Eighteenth Amendment (1919) banned the consumption of alcohol
 - The Volstead Act carried out the Eighteenth Amendment (later the same year)
 - Most supporters were churches and women
 - Very popular support in the South and the West
 - Mostly for moral reasons
 - Strongest opposition in large cities, which had high immigrant rates with people used to drinking
- Some corrupt politicians supported the Eighteenth Amendment but still used alcohol
- Prohibition was not very well carried out
 - Enforcement was weak and understaffed
 - Many people were killed in riots involving
 - Saloons were replaced with speakeasies, or secret underground bars that brewed alcohol illegally
 - This allowed many people to still drink large amounts of alcohol
- There were many “homebrew” alcohol sales, which were unregulated and often unsafe
- Prohibition did have some effect, although it was rather minimal
 - Bank savings increased as a whole
 - People were less often absent from work
 - Death from alcohol-related diseases and complications decreased

The Golden Age of Gangsterism

- Prohibition created a large, profitable illegal alcohol market
 - There were many policemen bribed to avoid reporting the gangsters
 - There was a lot of gang violence between gangs competing to control the alcohol market
 - E.g., in Chicago there were 500 gangsters killed in the gang wars of the '20s
 - E.g., Al Capone was a major gangster and alcohol distributor
 - Very rich and powerful, bribed many policemen, eventually stopped by legal process on evading taxes
- Gangsters also operated in “other profitable and illicit activities: prostitution, gambling, and narcotics”
 - They also forced people to pay money to them so that the gangsters would not attack them
 - Racketeers (people who dealt with dishonest business practices) organized crime
 - Organized crime was very profitable, taking in more revenue per year than the U.S. government
 - They began kidnapping people for ransom (and killing some of the hostages)
 - The Lindbergh Law (1932) was an example of the public's response to one kidnapping, making kidnapping a death-penalty offense

Monkey Business in Tennessee

- Education reform greatly improved education in the South
 - Much higher graduation rates as a result
- Professor John Dewey created a hands-on philosophy of learning, moved away from simple lectures that were more common before
 - “Education for life” or “teaching a man to fish” philosophy
- There was better scientific and medicinal research, improving and lengthening the average life
 - Fundamentalists opposed the scientific view of the world and supported a more religious basis of understanding, and they opposed Darwinism and evolution
 - They were mostly congregated in the “Bible Belt” South
 - There was the “Monkey Trial” in Dayton, Tennessee, in which John T. Scopes was trying to teach evolution in school and the Tennesseans ruled that he was guilty of teaching that over religious beliefs

The Mass-Consumption Economy

- The war and the new tax policies allowed for people to invest more into companies
- There was a new electricity industry and car industry
- Advertising became common to promote commercial products
 - Advertising especially helped new industries and sports
- Borrowing on credit (i.e., modern equivalent is credit cards) became common as well
 - Many Americans, who were Puritan and previously frugal, began spending beyond what they had to get new products at that moment (not saving for the future)

Putting America on Rubber tires

- An enormous car industry sprung into being in Detroit
 - In 1910, 181,000 cars were produced per year and were relatively unreliable
 - Frederick W. Taylor helped improve the efficiency of large industrial processes such as the car manufacturing process
 - This new efficiency was called “Scientific Management”
 - Henry Ford and Ransom E. Olds (of Oldsmobile) were leading figures of the car industry
 - Ford standardized a cheap automobile and gained a lot of wealth
 - He created a moving assembly line that greatly improved efficiency of car making, and formed the basis of the industrial philosophy of his, known as Fordism
 - His cars were very cheap because of efficiency
 - In 1930, there were 20 million Ford cars
 - The U.S. had far more automobiles than the rest of the world combined at this point

The Advent of the Gasoline Age

- The automobile industry spawned other industries and opportunities
 - The steel industry expanded
 - The petroleum industry expanded
 - Rural farms were more prosperous because they could reach markets more easily
 - Many newer, paved roads were created in the U.S.
 - Buses were made common and helped carry schoolchildren
 - Many Americans became commuters now that they had a mode of transportation to work in the cities but live outside it
- Generally newer industries boomed, and older industries faded out
 - The railroad industry was hit by competition from cars for cheap transportation
- The automobile industry effected social change on top of economic change
 - They became more of a necessity than a luxury
 - They “developed into a badge of freedom and equality— a necessary prop for self-respect”
 - Driving gave women more independence
 - People had a new social pastime: joyriding
- Automobiles led to some negative social effects as well
 - It led to a high rate of death by crashes
 - It also allowed teenagers to be more free (not necessarily good if undisciplined)
 - Many people used cars for secret love affairs
 - Gangsters could get away quickly with cars

Humans Develop Wings

- Aviation began with the Wright brothers at their first flight at Kitty Hawk (1903)
- Planes were successfully used to some extent during WWI

- People celebrated fliers who were daring enough to do stunts or set records
 - Charles A. Lindbergh was a hero to the people because he traversed the Atlantic in a single flight by himself
 - Many people looked up to him, and the idea of aviation was popularized by him
- Airplanes became another large industries
- Planes were originally very unsafe, but later became even safer than cars on crowded highways

The Radio Revolution

- Radio technology was invented by Guglielmo Marconi in the 1890s
 - Radio was used during WWI for communication
- Radio was originally only for long-range communication; eventually it carried voice, phonographs, radiotelephones, and television
 - This led to the TV culture and programming
- Radios helped bring families closer together again (after automobiles gave them more independence and tore them apart)
 - Music and sports were often on the radio

Hollywood's Filmland Fantasies

- Movies were invented and became popular
 - Most of the early ones were aired at "five-cent theatres," or "nickelodeons"
- Hollywood quickly became the center of movie-making
 - Many of those movies were scandalous and the public requested censorship regulations
- Movies eventually had sound added
- Movies became the most popular form of entertainment
- Movies helped spread Americanism, especially to foreign groups; this helped overcome class conflicts and create a more mainstream idea of American identity

The Dynamic Decade

- The census of 1920 showed that over 50% of Americans then lived in urban areas (the first time this had happened)
- More women were employed outside of home, but still generally were employed in lower-paying jobs
- Fundamentalists were losing popularity to the Modernists
- Sexual appeal was commonly used in advertisements
 - More women became scandalous flappers, who flouted conventional societal standards
- Jazz became a common form of music in this time period
- Harlem, a black community in NYC, grew in size and popularity to become one of the largest black communities in the world
 - Marcus Garvey was a charismatic black leader from Harlem
 - The United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was created by Garvey to resettle African Americans back in Africa
 - Garvey's promotion of racial pride helped African Americans be more confident and assimilate into society better

Cultural Liberation

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Wall Street's Big Bull Market

- There were dubious economic practices in the seemingly-prosperous “roaring twenties”
 - There was a lot of real-estate speculation into poor-quality real estate
 - There was a lot of speculation in the stock market
 - Many people were buying stocks “on margin”; i.e., with a small down-payment and not enough money to pay back if they lost money
- The government did little to stop this overzealous speculation
 - The national debt had greatly risen during WWI under Wilson, and fiscally conservative politicians aimed to use extra government money to lower the debt
 - The government created the Bureau of the Budget (1921) to help monitor and advise government spending
- The Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon was very rich and sought to lower taxes so that he and other rich people would benefit
 - He ended up reducing taxes, and Congress similarly ended up “repealing the excess-profits tax, abolishing the gift tax, and reducing excise taxes, the surtax, the income tax, and estate taxes” so that rich people paid much lesser taxes
 - The federal debt was lowered under these policies (although some people have argues that it should have lowered greater considering the great financial boom of the 1920s)