Chapter 21
The Promise of Consumer Culture: The 1920s

Learning Objectives:

After reading Chapter 21, you should be able to:

1. Explain the reasons that led to the decline of reform movements.
2. Discuss the fragmentation of women’s rights activism in the 1920s.
3. Understand why Prohibition was enacted and why it failed.
4. Detail the rise of reactionary impulses directed against radicals and immigrants.
5. Analyze the persistence of civil rights activism among African Americans.
7. Discuss the significance, particularly for African Americans, of the Harlem Renaissance.
8. Comprehend the role radio and automobiles played in transforming leisure.
9. Explain how and why science was put on trial in cases like the Scopes trial.
10. Detail the growing relationship between big business and the federal government.
11. Understand how advertising fueled the new boom of consumer spending.
12. Discuss how poverty persisted amidst the prosperity promoted in popular culture.
13. Analyze the causes and effects of the start of the Great Depression in 1929.
14. Show how the unequal distribution of wealth increased the effects of the economic downturn.

Time Line

1916
Marcus Garvey opened a Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) branch in Harlem

1917
United States entered the First World War

1920
Eighteenth Amendment outlawed the production or sale of alcohol

1922
Marcus Garvey arrested and sentenced to five years for mail fraud

1924
Johnson-Reid Act severely limited immigrants from outside the western hemisphere

Scopes Monkey Trial
Chapter Overview

A new consumer culture dominated the United States in the 1920s, with new forms of popular entertainment, such as motion pictures and jazz, coming to symbolize the entire era. Sex roles changed as the idea of nation was transformed from the producer economy of the nineteenth century to the consumer ethic of the twentieth. The glamorous life shown in movies was not available to all, as much of rural American and two out of every five workers remained deep in poverty. At the level of national politics, conservatives dominated governments committed to helping big business while remaining unconcerned about the huge gap between rich and poor.

I. The Business of Politics

A. Warren G. Harding: The Politics of Scandal

Harding was elected president by a landslide in 1920 and quickly established a conservative agenda which would dominate the decade. Harding’s presidency was marred by scandals as word began to get out about his drunken White House parties (despite Prohibition) and extramarital affairs. Even more serious was his selling of public offices and pardons as well as the providing of police protection for bootleggers. The biggest scandal was the Teapot Dome incident in which government oil reserves were secretly and illegally sold to two oil tycoons.

B. Calvin Coolidge: The Hands-Off President

When Harding died in 1923, Calvin Coolidge became president, avoiding the type of scandals that had plagued his predecessor. Believing that the government should do as little as possible, Coolidge took long naps and provided little leadership. Known mainly for his hatred of labor unions and support for business, Coolidge was opposed in the 1924 presidential election by Progressive Republicans led by Senator Robert M. La Follette, as well as by the Democrat John W. Davis.
C. Herbert Hoover: The Self-Made President

In 1928, Republicans turned to Herbert Hoover to battle Democratic candidate Alfred E. Smith. Hoover was a supporter of Prohibition, while the New York governor Smith was a known opponent of the act. Besides Prohibition, the election turned on the issue of religion, since Smith was a Roman Catholic. Although Hoover won, Smith carried all the major urban areas, showing the power of the Catholic and immigrant vote.

II. The Decline of Reform

A. Women’s Rights in the Aftermath of Suffrage

A sign of the decline in progressivism was the fragmentation of the women’s rights movement. While the more radical wing launched a campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), other former suffragettes worried that complete legal equality would cost women their special legislative protections. One way women continued their political influence was by running for public office.

B. Prohibition: The Experiment that Failed

In January 1920, the Eighteenth Amendment was ratified, outlawing the production or sale of alcohol. Those supporting Prohibition had a diversity of motivations. Some thought that women and children suffered because men spent their paychecks at the saloon and would become violent. Others hoped to undermine immigrant machines that used saloons as places to forge their political bases.

Enforcement proved impossible. The understaffed federal agency responsible for enforcement was forced to rely on local police who were often uncooperative or corrupt. Americans who wanted to drink could purchase smuggled liquor or even make their own “bathtub gin” or “moonshine whisky.” Illegal clubs, known as “speakeasies,” flourished in most urban areas, with a new one popping up every time federal raids closed one down.

Rather than cure society’s ills, Prohibition proved to be a boom for organized crime. The vast amounts of money being made allowed for further corruption of police, who could make a tidy sum by looking the other way. While alcohol consumption declined by two-thirds the first year, by 1929, it was back to 70 percent of its pre-Prohibition level, while the money spend on drink actually increased by 50 percent.
C. Reactionary Impulses

The 1920s were a decade of hostility towards political radicals and immigrants. In May 1920, two Italian immigrant anarchists, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, were arrested for a murder that took place during the robbery of a Braintree, Massachusetts shoe factory. Despite a very weak case (for example, Sacco proved he was in Boston applying for a passport at the time of the murder), both were convicted and sentenced to death. Despite massive world-wide demonstrations and appeals for clemency, they were executed on August 23, 1927.

Immigration slowed to a trickle. In 1924, the Johnson-Reid Act limited immigrants from outside the western hemisphere to 165,000, with quotas set to virtually exclude Jews, Slavs, Greens, Italians, and Poles while completely cutting off immigration from Asia. The door was kept open for Mexicans only because large farmers in California and Texas pushed to keep them as sources of low-wage labor.

D. Marcus Garvey and the Persistence of Civil Rights Activism

Black nationalist Marcus Garvey moved to New York’s Harlem in 1916 and opened a branch of his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). In less than a decade, the UNIA had 30,000 members in New York City, 6000 each in Philadelphia and Cincinnati, and 4000 in Detroit. Soon, Garvey had nearly a million followers calling for political justice and labor rights.

Believing in black-owned businesses, Garvey established the Black Star Line, a shipping company he told his followers to invest in. The business ran into numerous problems and in 1922, Garvey was arrested and sentenced to five years for mail fraud. Despite his apparent failure, his message of pride and self-help had a tremendous influence in the African American community.

III. Hollywood and Harlem: National Cultures in Black and White

A. Hollywood Comes of Age

As movie theaters spread across the nation, Hollywood began to get a mass audience. Films and their stars provided models for new styles of dress and leisure. Although the nation was closing its doors to immigration, foreigners in films caught the imagination of native-born Americans. In the late twenties, motion pictures with sound arrived and diverse accents and ways of speaking were made familiar throughout the country,
B. The Harlem Renaissance

A black arts movement, known as the Harlem Renaissance, gathered intellectuals and artists in New York City. Renaissance writers identified themselves as Americans, but included the experience of African Americans as well as often promoting anti-racist messages.

In New Orleans, Chicago, and St. Louis, jazz was key to both black culture and the emerging popular culture of the nation, so much so that the 1920s is often called “the Jazz Age.” Black filmmaking also flourished, with films addressing themes of class and racial conflict.

C. Radios and Autos: Transforming Leisure at Home

By the end of the decade, over 6 million radios were being used nationwide as radio began to link the nation together. As more and more radio stations were established and national broadcasts began to replace local ones, the Federal Radio Commission was created to regulate access.

Automobiles dramatically transformed the consumer industry, as inexpensive cars gave Americans mobility. People mortgaged their houses or did without plumbing in order to purchase autos. Autos were part of a consumer society focused on leisure, pleasure, and intimacy as courtship patterns changed, with the back seat of a car replacing the front porch.

IV. Science on Trial

A. The Great Flood of 1927

In 1927, years of levee construction on the Mississippi River were undone as heavy rains came and forced 900,000 people to flee. The flood caused $100 million in crop losses and $23 million in livestock deaths as 26,000 square miles in seven states were submerged under flood water. Refugee camps were racially segregated and black workers allowed to leave only when their white landlords came for them.

B. The Triumph of Eugenics: Buck v. Bell

Racial theorist Lothrop Stoddard wrote The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy in order to argue that the white race was being weakened by immigration and intermarriage. Although these theories had no scientific merit, a large number of policymakers believed in the notion of racial superiority. In like manner, social Darwinists misused the ideas of Charles Darwin to claim that only the fittest humans should survive.

A number of states enacted eugenic laws that allowed the state to sterilize “inferior” individuals. Those sterilized were loosely defined as “feebleminded,” which in practice meant poor, immigrant or minority women who were sexually active. In Buck v. Bell, the U.S. Supreme
Court upheld the law in Virginia. Soon thereafter, 30 states had passed sterilization laws and when Nazi Germany was looking for a model for their eugenics laws, they choose to model theirs on the California statue.

C. Science, Religion and the Scopes Trial

In 1924, former presidential candidate William Jennings Byran was pitted against Clarence Darrow in the famous Scopes Monkey Trial. At issue was a Tennessee law which made it illegal to teach the theory of evolution in schools. Although Bryan won the legal case, the larger public victory appeared to be for Darrow and those who supported evolution. In the long run, however, textbooks began to remove material on evolution and the controversy continues today.

V. Consumer Dreams and Nightmares

A. Marketing the Good Life

Advertising fueled increased consumer spending while at the same time promoting a positive image of big business. This often took absurd extremes, as shown by the Florida land boom and bust. Florida land prices peaked in 1925 and quickly collapsed as over-speculation and then a hurricane destroyed the once-expanding project.

B. Writers, Critics, and the “Lost Generation”

Besides economic disasters, consumerism was blamed for stifling conformity. In books like Sinclair Lewis’s Babbitt (1922) and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (1925), social critics attacked the era’s empty materialism, obsession with status and wealth, and superficiality and conformity.

C. Poverty Amid Plenty

Most Americans had not the means to invest in Florida land deals or escape to Paris. Although the middle class and better-off workers might enjoy many new consumer goods, the poor struggled just to get by. Southern sharecroppers, black and white, were particularly excluded from the new consumer culture, as they lived constantly in debt. Still, African Americans were limited to almost completely unskilled labor and Latinos had little chance for advancement.

Industrial workers had to contend with a society hostile to labor unions and uninterested in social justice. When workers were forced to strike, local governors typically called out the National Guard to help break the strike and arrest strikers.
D. The Stock Market Crash

On October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed. By the end of the year, stocks had lost half of their value. The economy went from bad to worse as industrial production fell by half, banks failed, and unemployment rose to 25 percent in 1932. The government, not believing in social programs, did little to help those hurting. America was in a depression.

There were various reasons for the depression, ranging from stock speculation to bad government decisions. Within the United States, a major reason was the unequal distribution of wealth which made the downturn worse, since average Americans could not buy the goods they produced.

Identification

Explain the significance of each of the following:

1. “flapper”:

2. *Spirit of St. Louis*:

3. Equal Rights Amendment:

   1. “speakeasies”:

   2. Sacco and Vanzetti:

   6. Johnson-Reid Act (1924):

   7. Marcus Garvey:

   8. Harlem Renaissance:

   9. Langston Hughes:
10. Federal Radio Commission:

11. *Buck v. Bell*:

12. Social Darwinism:

13. Scopes Monkey Trial:

15. Alfred E. Smith:


17. Sinclair Lewis:

18. Gertrude Stein:

19. Southern Tenant Farmers Union:

20. “Black Tuesday”: 
Multiple Choice Questions:

1. Which of the following was NOT associated with the “flapper” culture?
   A. changing sexual behavior
   B. abstaining from alcohol consumption
   C. wild dances like the Charleston
   D. breaking from time-honored conventions
   E. increased independence of women

2. In the 1920s, how many American households owned a car or a radio?
   A. fewer than half
   B. about two-thirds
   C. almost 80 percent
   D. more than 60 percent
   E. about 50 percent

3. The Equal Rights Amendment was added to the U.S. Constitution in
   A. 1921.
   B. 1922.
   C. 1923.
   D. 1924.
   E. none of the above.

4. The prohibition of liquor
   A. caused many restaurants to go out of business.
   B. provided vast opportunities for crime and profit.
   C. actually increased the amount of money spent on drinking.
   D. all of the above.
   E. none of the above.

5. Although charged with murder, Sacco and Vanzetti said their crime was being
   A. loyal Americans.
   B. anarchists.
   C. Mexicans.
   D. Democrats.
   E. born again Christians.
6. The Universal Negro Improvement Association was led by
B. Booker T. Washington.
C. Marcus Garvey.
D. Jim Crow.
E. Martin Luther King, Sr.

7. The Harlem Renaissance was a
A. flourishing of African American culture centered in New York City.
B. vital part of the growth of Hollywood.
C. style of painting among African Americans particularly strong in St. Louis.
D. all of the above.
E. none of the above.

8. Eugenic laws that sought to sterilize the “inferior” were
A. passed in 30 states.
B. held to be constitutional by the Supreme Court.
C. often only repealed in the 1980s.
D. all of the above.
E. none of the above.

9. Warren G. Harding is known for
A. the Teapot Dome scandal.
B. bringing the United States into the League of Nations.
C. being a role model for upright personal moral behavior.
D. all of the above.
E. none of the above.

10. Herbert Hoover defeated Alfred E. Smith, in part, because Smith was a
A. supporter of Prohibition.
B. Roman Catholic.
C. man from rural America.
D. Republican.
E. Socialist.

11. In his novels, like *The Great Gatsby* (1925), F. Scott Fitzgerald
A. argued that capitalism was the work of God.
B. supported advertising as one of the modern world’s great gifts.
C. criticized the decadent consumerism of the aspiring and upwardly mobile.
D. stated that the rich are more deserving than the rest of us.
E. none of the above.
12. Most Americans in the 1920s were
A. investing in Florida real estate.
B. influenced by the new desires and dreams of consumer society.
C. making trips to Paris.
D. able to own brand new radios and automobiles.
E. fighting to change Social Security.

13. In the 1920s, most African American worked at
A. unskilled jobs.
B. jobs envied by whites.
C. jobs that paid better than they do today.
D. positions they got through affirmative action.
E. all of the above.

14. After the stock market crash, most Americans who lost their jobs
A. had few places to turn for help.
B. went on unemployment insurance.
C. used their social security benefits.
D. took new jobs with the federal government.
E. none of the above.

15. One cause making the Great Depression worse was
A. government regulation of corporations.
B. federal intervention in the economy.
C. unequal distribution of wealth.
D. high taxes on the rich.
E. all of the above.

MAP QUESTION:
After examining Map 21.2, discuss the motivations behind Americans moving in such large numbers. What caused more people to move during some decades as opposed to others?

CONNECTING HISTORY
Explain what the continuing existence of the Ku Klux Klan says about American society. What fears lead people to join the Klan? Will it and organizations like it ever disappear from American society?
INTERPRETING HISTORY

Imagine you were an immigrant like Mario Puzo. Write an essay explaining how you would have felt coming to America. Would your experience today be different from Puzo? If so, why?

Answers to Multiple Choice Questions

1. B
2. A
3. E
4. D
5. B
6. C
7. A
8. D
9. A
10. B
11. C
12. B
13. A
14. A
15. C