**CHAPTER 21**

**Prosperity and Change in the Twenties**

**Learning Outcomes**

* 1. Describe the consumer economy that developed in America during the early twentieth century, especially after World War I.

**Objectives**

1. Explain the improvements that were made in factory work during the 1920s, give reasons why owners saw these as good business moves, and describe what happened to union membership during the era.
2. Trace the development of modern consumerism through the 1920s, explaining the various ways that manufacturers sold their products, and how consumers could buy those products.
   1. Explain the experiences of the nation that effectively put an end to the Progressive movement during the 1920s.

**Objectives**

1. Discuss the effects of the Red Scare on Americans after World War I, and explain how such fears contributed to a change in attitude toward immigrants.
2. Explain the Great Migration of Blacks and the outbreak of race riots.
3. Describe how Prohibition became the law of the land in 1919, and discuss efforts to enforce the new legislation.
   1. Describe the various kinds of leisure activities that became popular in America during the 1920s.

**Objectives**

1. Describe the varieties of popular culture that became a big part of the 1920s: movies, radio, music, and sports.
2. Assess the importance of the Harlem Renaissance and Marcus Garvey to the emergence of the “New Negro” in 1920s America.
3. Discuss the actions of women in the years following their gaining the right to vote.
4. Describe the reasons for the disillusionment that was common among American writers in the 1920s, especially those who chose to become expatriates across Europe.
   1. Discuss the strong reactions among various groups in America to the changing cultural mores of the 1920s.

**Objectives**

1. Explain the differing views of Modernists and Fundamentalists in American religion during the early 1900s, and show how the Scopes Monkey Trial exemplified these differences.
2. Analyze the reactions of Americans to the growing, changing numbers of immigrants to America after the turn of the century, and list some of the ways in which Congress responded to the divisive issue.
3. Explain how the Ku Klux Klan managed a short-term revival in the 1920s, and trace their downfall by the end of the decade.

**Chapter Summary**

World War I did not accomplish what most Americans had hoped that it would, and the 1920s were a time for a return to isolation as much as possible, considering that American factories produced a significant amount of goods that needed consumers to purchase them. Thus, factory workers began to change their methods so as to get more productivity out of their workers. Henry Ford and his team of inventors revolutionized the automobile with his development of the conveyor-belt-based assembly line, a mechanized belt that moved a car chassis down a line where each man performed a single small task, over and over again.

In order to keep selling cars by the thousands, he would have to pay his workers enough for them to become customers too. Hence, his innovation in 1914, the five-dollar day (when a salary of $1.50 per day was standard), shocked other businessmen at first, but by the 1920s, other business owners were coming to understand that they could mass-produce consumer goods only if they also created a supply of consumers. In the 1920s, the economy began to transition from being driven by large industries to being driven by consumer dollars.

Business leaders looked to thwart worker radicalism by offering new benefits, a form of welfare capitalism, and as a result helped lead to a decline in union membership. Manufacturers relied more heavily on the now ubiquitous ads in print and radio. Easily available credit allowed millions of Americans to enjoy a whole host of new consumer products. However, unwise trends in Florida real estate and buying stocks on credit suggested that economic problems loomed over the horizon.

The exuberance of the 1920s spelled the end of the Progressive Era. A brief period of fear over political radicals and race riots ushered in this decade while the Republican presidents interfered as little as possible in domestic affairs.

Before the economic “good times” took hold, however, America confronted a Red Scare, or fear that the United States was vulnerable to a communist takeover. Politicians and businessmen reacted to these developments by initiating a hunt for potential revolutionaries.

Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti became suspects in a 1920 payroll heist and were arrested, tried, and convicted of robbery and murder of a guard and paymaster despite a flimsy trail of evidence. Only in 1977, fifty years after their executions, did the governor of Massachusetts admit the trial was conducted unfairly. Despite the paranoia of the Red Scare, it is obvious today that a “red” revolution was never a real possibility during these years. The economy was too good.

Meanwhile, the nation also attempted in a spectacularly unsuccessful manner to end alcohol use in the U.S.; this effort led to the rise of organized crime and the glorification of gangsters.

The Roaring Twenties witnessed significant changes in popular culture, the attitudes of African Americans, and the status of women in society. Movies, music, and professional sports exploded in popularity, while simultaneously less famous Americans followed new fads and the disreputable behavior of newly glamorized Hollywood stars. The Harlem Renaissance was one example of the “New Negro,” as African Americans stimulated American culture.

Several intellectuals, such as W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, sought to politicize the growing number of urban black people, although few leaders had much luck organizing politically. The NAACP, meanwhile, pursued a legal strategy to end forced segregation in America’s cities. The first Black Nationalist leader to foment a broad movement in the United States, Marcus Garvey, founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1914 and moved its headquarters to Harlem in 1916.

Women won the right to vote with the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, one of the final great reforms of the Progressive Era. Many activists turned their attention to economics and the job market. At the urging of Alice Paul, a former suffragist and now head of the National Women’s Party, a group of congressmen proposed an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution in 1923.

The New Woman, personified by the glamorous flappers, worked for a greater voice in politics and for greater control over women’s bodies, as exemplified by Margaret Sanger’s campaign for birth control. Although some writers criticized American life, the nation’s culture gained growing international acceptance.

The gaiety of the 1920s masked major divisions in American society. Modernists and fundamentalists clashed over the demise of Protestant morality in American culture, culminating in the Scopes Monkey Trial. Concerns over the demise of the Anglo-Saxon foundation of American society led to new restrictive immigration laws that aimed at keeping the undesired out of the United States. These Europeans (Italians, Russians, Greeks, or other people from southern and eastern Europe) would be considered white by today’s standards, but they were viewed as “others” during the 1920s because they were Catholics or Jews from countries in eastern and southern Europe, and they spoke foreign languages.

In various locations across the country, not just the South, the second coming of the KKK, now also heavily anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic, established, at least briefly, a significant presence in the culture and politics of local and state governments. But for one brief period, the majority of Americans left others to worry about immigration, religious differences, and going into debt for all sorts of new consumer goods. Had they been able to see into the future, would they have made a real effort to keep the economy from getting into such terrible shape?

**Chapter Outline**

I. The Consumer Economy

1. 1920s Work
2. Good Times
3. Welfare Capitalism
4. Decline of Union Membership
5. 1920s Consumerism
6. Advertisements
7. Buying on Credit
8. Early Car Culture
9. Adventures in Real Estate
10. Stocks and Shares

II. The End of the Progressive Era

1. National Politics
2. Red Scare
3. Sacco and Vanzetti
4. Race Riots
5. Warren G. Harding
6. “Silent Cal”
7. Prohibition

III. A New Culture: The Roaring Twenties

1. 1920s Popular Culture
2. Movies
3. Music
4. Professional Sports
5. Fads, Triumphs, and Sex Scandals
6. The “New Negro”
7. Marcus Garvey
8. Changing Roles for Women
9. ERA
10. The “New” Woman
11. Disillusioned Writers, Liberalizing Mores

IV. Reactions

1. Religious Divisions
2. Modernists
3. Fundamentalists
4. Scopes Monkey Trial
5. Immigration Restriction and Quotas
6. Immigration Restriction
7. Quotas
8. Social Intolerance
9. The Resurgence of the Klan
10. The Election of 1928

V. Looking Ahead…

**Suggested Lecture Topics**

1. Henry Ford: A Complex Individual
2. Clothing Styles of the 1920s
3. Who was the Real Al Capone?
4. Triumphs and Tragedies of the Charles Lindbergh Family
5. The Sacco and Vanzetti Case
6. The Best and the Brightest of the Harlem Renaissance
7. Prohibition and the War on Drugs: Goals and Failures of Progressivism

(21-3d). There were at least four reasons why traditional Protestant morality came under assault in the first decades of the twentieth century:

1. Loss of biblical authority
2. Decline of universal morality
3. Psychology
4. Consumerism

The decline of Protestant morality came at a period in history that saw the rise of “teenagers.” Have students discuss the loss of (or alleged loss of) morality by teenagers during the 1920s using the Reasons Why box as a guideline. What also may have impacted teenagers of the 1920s (automobile culture, jazz, movies, Prohibition)? Then, have students compare and contrast the loss of morality that older people discuss about teenagers today. Which of the Reasons Why still pertain today? What new factors influence (negatively or positively) teenagers today (Internet, pop culture, etc.)?

**The Reasons Why…**

**Research Topics—Projects and Papers**

Students might choose to complete a project to be presented in class or to write a more traditional research paper. Or the instructor, could decide which he or she prefers to have them do. Below are a few topics that are relevant to this chapter. The instructor may, of course, choose to develop his or her own topics.

* 1. Al Capone and the Feds: Who Really Won? Do research in the news magazines of the era and put together a profile of Capone. Include information about his best-known hideouts. Find out if there is any viable evidence indicating that Capone left a fortune behind somewhere.
  2. Expatriate Writers: Gather names of the writers who moved to Europe during this time period. Ask students to write a two-page paper in which they summarize this group’s reasons for leaving the U.S. and also some of their most creative work completed while they were abroad.
  3. For the Instructor: Show the film *Inherit the Wind* in class. Have each student write a response paper that answers this question: How true does the film appear in comparison to the facts of the case?
  4. The Klan in the 1920s: Discover some of the most violent cases, and find out if anyone was ever brought to justice. Ask students to report on their findings.
  5. Ask students to research “speakeasies” and similar establishments in their communities. What was the main attraction for each? Find out if there was organized gangster activity there and, if so, prepare a report for the class on the findings.

**Additional www Resources**

“Langston Hughes,” Famous Poets and Poems.com

<http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/langston_hughes>

“Henry Ford Changes the World, 1908,” EyeWitness to History.com (2005)

<http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/ford.htm>

“Monkey Trial,” American Experience. PBS.org

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/monkeytrial/>

“The Internet Guide to Jazz Age Slang”

<http://home.earthlink.net/~dlarkins/slang-pg.htm>

**Primary Source Discussions**

**Assignment Name: H.L. Mencken’s Account of the Scopes Trial**

*Introduction:* H. L. Mencken was a popular newspaperman who, to say the least, had a way with words. In Tennessee to cover the Scopes Trial, Mencken mingled with and observed the townspeople of Dayton. His observations on the people and the trial are humorous, but he was being honest in his own way. In an essay, Gibbons Burke described Mencken as “a libertarian before the word came into usage.” Mencken himself once said, “I believe that religion, generally speaking, has been a curse to mankind—that its modest and greatly overestimated services on the ethical side have been more than overcome by the damage it has done to clear and honest thinking.” Considering the topic, you have been warned. Enjoy!

*Visit URL*: http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/scopes/menk.htm

[Read H.L. Mencken’s account of the Scopes trial](http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/scopes/menk.htm) and then take a brief quiz to check your understanding.

*Reflection Questions*:

1. How did Mencken describe the town and its people as he came to know them before the trial began? What surprised him about Dayton?
2. What did Mencken think of William Jennings Bryan? According to Mencken’s report, how effective was Bryan during the trial?
3. What warning did Mencken give to his readers in other states? Why did he feel it was necessary to do so? How would his readers probably interpret the last sentence of his essay?
4. What metaphor did Mencken use to describe how the trial had been conducted? What was so humorous about his choice of words? Do you think the good citizens of Dayton would have recognized his humor?