

The economic decline was a shock since it followed the seeming miracles of the New Era. In February 1928, stock prices steadily rose, and trade overall mushroomed. However, in autumn of 1929, the market began to fall apart with alarming declines in October, with temporary recoveries. On October 29, Black Tuesday, all efforts failed, and the market remained depressed for more than four years. This crash was just the first visible sign of the Depression, as historians have been arguing over the cause without consensus. They agree that the occurrence itself was normal, but why it lasted so long is remarkable, making the question being why it was so bad. Most agree that a number of factors made the crisis severe, one being lack of diversification in the economy. Prosperity depended on a few basic industries, like construction and automobiles, which declined between 1926 and 1929. While new industries aimed at consumer goods begin to take up the slack, they aren't large enough to compensate. Another factor was maldistribution of wealth creating a weak consumer demand too small for the market, as most were still at or below minimum subsistence level. Another problem was the credit structure. Farmers were in debt, and small banks were constantly in trouble, as were large banks who invest recklessly. Another factor is international trade, because European demand begins to decline, both because of tariffs, recovery, and a destabilized economy due to vast amounts of debt that the States refused to forgive or reduce. Europe had no source of foreign exchange, and default, leading to a collapse in international credit structure after 1931. The stock market crash just triggered a chain of events that worsened over three years. The banking system collapsed, the total money supply fell, deflation, so cut back on production and layoffs. Some say the Depression could have been avoided if the Fed Reserve System was more responsible, but the board was worried about protecting itself and raised interest in 1931, contracting the money supply. The GNP plummets, investments decrease, the consumer and wholesale price indexes declined, and gross farm income plummets.

British economist John Keynes compared the Great Depression to the Dark Ages, as both brought unprecedented despair to the economy, and the Depression impacted society and culture. In the industrial Northeast and Midwest, there is a lot of unemployment, and while people were used to some unemployment, nobody was used to the scale or duration. Many still believed that individuals are responsible for their fates, so unemployment is personal failure, yet there just aren't jobs. Many turn to state and local public relief systems, but they were not equipped to handle these demands. Private charities fail to help. State govts want to help, but taxes are declining and they don't want to strain the budget further, and some believe that an extensive welfare system would undermine morals. Many wait outside the Red Cross and Salvation Army kitchens, go through garbage cans, and take to life as nomads. Farm income declines, and in the Great Plains, there was the Dust Bowl, one of the worst droughts in the nation's history. Fertile land turned to deserts, black blizzards sweep the plains, yet somehow, they produce more food than can be bought. Farm prices fall extremely low, and many leave homes for work, called the Okies, often going to California with extremely low wages. Malnutrition and homelessness grew. When the depression hit, over half of the black population still lived in the south, mainly as farmers, so they lack income and often leave by choice or are forced due to unprofitable sharecropping. Unemployed whites take first claim of all work, displacing blacks in lower work, and some demand all blacks be dismissed. The black shirts demand that blacks not work until all white men have a job, and other people intimidate blacks from jobs. By 1932, over half of the blacks in the South lacked employment, and relief still went to whites first. Many blacks travelled North to less blatant discrimination, but little better than the South. Segregation and disenfranchisement continued, but there were some well known happenings, like the Scottsboro case. In March 1931, several black teenagers were arrested for disorder, and later accused of rape, while there was no evidence, and were sentenced to death. The Supreme Court overturned this in 1932. The International Labor Defense, associated with the Communist Party, helped the teenagers and publicized the case. Then the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People helped. Still, the last of the Scottsboro boys didn't leave prison until

1950. The N A A C P worked for blacks in the labor movement, and supported the Congress of Industrial Organizations to break down racial barriers in unions. Discrimination continued to face Mexicans, who filled many menial jobs in the West, and most lived in urban areas and industrial cities. Whites demand their jobs, and Mexican unemployment rises to a point where some Mexicans were forced to leave the country by officials. Many relief programs exclude Mexicans. Some Mexicans do form unions and resist, but harsh treatment rules, so they live in great poverty. Asians also deal with discrimination and economic marginalization, like in California, where even educated have a hard time moving into professions. Japanese end up working at family fruit stands, and if they do find jobs, they are poorly paid and precarious. Farmworkers suffered. The Japanese American Democratic Clubs tried to protect racial and ethnic minorities from discrimination, and then the Japanese American Citizens League promoted assimilation. Chinese Americans fare no better, still in laundry and restaurants, barely entry level jobs. The economic crisis strengthened the idea of women in the home, still, female employment increased by 20 percent. There were obstacles, as men had been moving into women's field, but there were still some more stable jobs that men were not touching, like as sales clerks and stenographers. Black women suffered unemployment, but still, 38 percent were employed. For feminists, this was a frustrating time because it eroded support for the independent woman. Families, once accustomed to rising standards of living, are now in uncertainty, so they retreat from consumerism. Women sew clothes and preserve food, engaging in home businesses. Households include distant relatives. Divorce declines, but there are still many informal breakups, and marriage and birth rates declined simultaneously for the first time since the early nineteenth century, so family units are weaker.

The Great Depression was traumatic, shaking confidence and created criticisms of American society and the economic system, while confirming traditional values and goals, creating multiple Depression cultures. Social values changed little, and the study of Muncie, Indiana, called Middletown showed that the culture did not change between 1929 and 1937, as many still emphasized the individual. The economic crisis did undermine the success ethic, as people looked at the gov for assistance and blamed economic royalists for distress, but the success ethic was not eroded. Many blamed themselves, and still responded to the idea that they can restore their prosperity and success, which is why *How to Win Friends and Influence People* was one of the best selling books, as it says personal initiative is success with fitting in and making other people feel important. Like progressives being alarmed with the discovery of poverty, many nowadays were alarmed with the horrible rural poverty. Photographers hired by the federal Farm Security Admin traveled the South to record agricultural life, like Roy Stryker, Walker Evans, ARthur Rothstein, Ben Shahn, and Dorothea Lange all produced studies. Many writers turned from personal concerns to social injustice. Tobacco Road, Erskine Caldwell, showed poverty, and Richard Wright's *Native Son* showed the plight of the ghetto, and Steinbeck portrayed workers and migrants in California, and John Passos' trilogy *U S A* attacked capitalism, and playwright Clifford Odets demonstrated political radicalism in *Waiting for Lefty*. However, the most popular cultural products were those that diverted attention from the depression, being radio and movies. By the 1930s, almost every family had a radio, and it became a community experience. Some stations were socially and politically provocative, but the staple was escapism with comedies like *Amos n Andy*, a humorous but demeaning picture of blacks, and adventures like *Superman*, *Dick Tracy*, and *The Lone Ranger*. Radio brought the comedy of Jack Benny, George Burns, and Gracie Allens to a larger audience. Soap Operas were enormously popular. Radio programs broadcast live, leading to public performances. Concerts, including classical music, were broadcasted live. This provided people with their first direct access to important public events, so radio news and sports grew to meet the demand. Some of the most dramatic moments were due to radio coverage of events like the World Series, college football games, Academy Awards, conventions, inaugurations. When the Hindenburg crashed, the enormous reaction was largely due to being broadcasted. Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* created panic. Radio drew the nation together and

reshaped the social life more around the home. Moviegoing seemed vulnerable, but it's less expensive entertainment and more appealing. They were still safely conventional, with Hollywood's tight control and the censor Will Hays. Studio system, in which only a few large companies had control, avoided controversy. But films could not prevent exploration of social questions. King Vidor's *Our Daily Bread* and John Ford's adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* explored political themes. Frank Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *Meet John Doe* celebrated the small town over the urban rich. Gangster movies like *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy* portrayed an unfamiliar dark world. Commercial films were extremely escapist, like in musicals like *Gold Diggers of 1933*, screwball comedies like Capra's *It Happened One Night*, or the films by the Marx Brothers. The 1930s also saw Disney's reign begin. After many cartoon shorts with Mickey Mouse, notably in *Steamboat Willie*, they start with the full length film of *Snow White*. *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind* were adaptations of popular novels released in 1939. Social and political strains of the Depression were successful in print, as much literature and journalism dealt directly with the disillusionment and radicalism. Not all literature was like this, as the most popular were still escapist and romantic literature. *Gone with the Wind* and *Anthony Adverse* were best selling romantics. Leading magazines focus on fashion, stunts, scenery, and arts. The photographic journal *Life* was extremely successful, and did pay attention to politics and economics, but also to photos of sports, theatre, and public projects. One of the most popular features was *Life Goes to a Party*, which turned chatty social columns into photos of fun. Other Depression writing openly challenged culture. Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* was the story of an advice columnist overwhelmed by sadness, Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited* showed the lives of coal miners, and Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* showed the hardened working class youth. In the late 1930s, much political literature was because of the Popular Front, a coalition of antifascist left groups, the most important being the American Communist Party. In 1935, they softened their attitude towards Roosevelt and formed alliances with other progressive groups, praising the New Deal and supporting John Lewis, an anticommunist labor leader. The Popular Front enhanced the reputation and influence of the communist party, and mobilized writers, artists, and intellectuals to social criticism. Part of this was because it left the loneliness of the 1920s. The Spanish Civil War was important to left intellectuals, as it pitted the fascists of Francisco Franco against the republic gov. Young Americans formed the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, created by the American Communist Party, which helped fight against the fascists. Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was about this. The Communist Party also organized the unemployed and staged a hunger march in 1931, and also defended the Scottsboro defendants. They were not, however, a patriotic organization, as they still took orders from the Comintern in Moscow. Most followed the party line. Subordination was clear when the Party was ordered to abandon the Popular Front and return to criticism of American liberals, meaning many disillusioned members left the party. The Socialist Party of America, under Norman Thomas, cited economic crisis as failure of capitalism. It tried to mobilize support from the rural poor. The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, created by socialist H L Mitchell tried to create a coalition of sharecroppers, and tenant farmers for economic reform. However, neither group made progress to establish socialism as a major force. Antiradicalism was a powerful force, so Congressional committees chaired by Hamilton Fish and Martin Dies investigated communist influence wherever. State and local govts sometimes imprisoned communist organizers. People try to drive out communist organizers, though with limited success. Still, this was one of the few times where being part of the left was respectable and conventional. So this was a significant but temporary widening of mainstream art and politics ideology. The New Deal sponsored artistic work through the Works Projects Administration that challenged capitalist norms. Filmmaker Pare Lorentz, with New Deal funding, made powerful polemical documentaries like *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and *The River*, which celebrate the New Deal and critique what industrial capitalism produced. The most successful chronicler of social conditions in the 1930s was John Steinbeck, notably in *The Grapes of Wrath*, which talked about

immigrants from the Dust Bowl, and showed exploitation of agrarian life and the community they represented.

Herbert Hoover started in 1929 and believed there to be a bright and prosperous future. He tried to expand policies he advocated as sec of commerce to create cooperative individualism and a successful economy. So the crisis forced him to deal with new problems, though he still relied on old values. His first response to the Depression was to restore confidence in the economy. He summoned leaders of business, labor, and agriculture to get them to adopt a program of voluntary cooperation, imploring them not to cut production or lay off workers, while forgoing demands for higher wages or better hours. But this collapsed. He tried to use gov spending by increasing the budget for a federal public works program, but spending was not enough to face the problems. And as economic conditions worsen, he is less willing to increase spending because of a large government deficit. In 1932, at the depth of the Depression, he proposed a tax increase. Before the stock market crash, he had been trying to assist the troubled economy by proposing the Agricultural Marketing Act, which would help farmers maintain prices with a fed sponsored Farm Board that could make loans and buy surplus. At the same time, the Tariff Act of 1930, also called the Smoot Hawley Tariff increased protection on farm products by raising agricultural tariffs. Still, this harmed the economy by stifling food exports. By spring of 1931, his position deteriorated, and in 1930 congressional elections, Democrats won control of the House and made Senate inroads by promising gov assistance in the economy. Many held the president responsible for the crisis, calling the towns unemployed lived in Hoovervilles. Somehow, Hoover believed his policies worked. The international panic in 1931 meant the economic crisis was not about to end, and the American economy continued to decline. Hoover then supported measures designed to keep banks afloat and protect homeowners from foreclosure on mortgages. The more important bill, passed in 1932, established the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, which would provide fed loans to banks, railroads, and businesses, and made funds for local gov to support public works projects and relief efforts. Still, it didn't deal directly or forcefully enough with the economy to produce significant recovery. Funds went to institutions with sufficient collateral, so most money went to large institutions. And Hoover insisted only in public works that would eventually pay for themselves. Still, they didn't even have enough money to make a real impact, and didn't spend all the money they did have. By mid 1932, Americans began raising their dissident voices. The Farmers' Holiday Association essentially produces a farmers strike, but it failed. In 1924, Congress approved a payment bonus for veterans that would go into effect in 1945. By 1932, many wanted the bonus to be paid immediately. Hoover rejected this, and the Bonus Army marched to Washington to stay until Congress approved legislation to pay the Bonus, even staying after legislation was voted down. Hoover ordered police to clear them out, and kill two, though Hoover considered this evidence of violence and radicalism, so he ordered the Army to help, which caused the veterans to flee in terror, injuring over a hundred marchers. This was the final blow to his political standing. In the election, it was Hoover against Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a Democrat. He was well known for a while, and had initiated positive programs of government assistance. Nationally, he avoided divisive cultural issues like religion and prohibition, so he assembled a broad coalition, and promises a New Deal. Roosevelt won by a landslide, and Democrats won control of congress, but this was mainly due to Hoover's unpopularity. The four months between the election and inauguration was a series of growing economic crises. Normally the president elect is not involved in the gov, but Hoover tried to exact a pledge from him to maintain policies of economic orthodoxy, which Roosevelt refused. A month before the inauguration, the banking system's collapse suddenly rapidly accelerated. Public confidence ebbed, depositors withdraw money, and banks declare bankruptcy. Hoover asked for reassurances for no tinkering with currency, borrowing, or the budget, and Roosevelt refused. Hoover left office convinced that disaster was imminent.