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Rethinking the 1920s: Historians and Changing Perspectives

The decade of the 1920s continues to fascinate historians. New works dealing with social and cultural history have supplemented the more traditional focus on political history to provide us with a fuller and more well-rounded portrait of a society where class, ethnic, racial, regional, political, and cultural divisions remained quite sharp.

The first significant history of the 1920s, Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1931), set the tone for many subsequent accounts. Allen emphasized Americans' disillusionment with Wilsonian idealism and the emergence of new social trends affecting the urban middle classes. His book still makes for entertaining and informative reading. William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) covers many of the same topics as Allen albeit in a more scholarly fashion. Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995) is a major reinterpretation that makes extensive use of recent scholarship in depicting social and cultural trends pointing to the emergence of a mass consumer culture. David J. Goldberg, *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1999) emphasizes the extent to which conflicts during the decade emanated from World War I. Loren Baritz, ed., *The Culture of the Twenties* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970) is a splendid collection of primary source materials. Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), a study of Muncie, Indiana, has proven indispensable to historians studying social, economic and cultural changes during the decade.

Much of the politics of the 1920s can be approached through the presidential administrations of Harding and Coolidge. Some of the principal works are Robert K. Murray, *The Harding Era: Warren G. Harding and His Administration* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969) and *The Politics of Normalcy: Governmental Theory and Practice in the Harding-Coolidge Era* (New York: Norton, 1973), and Robert H. Ferrell, *The Presidency of Calvin Coolidge* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998).

Revisionist historians have stressed that Herbert Hoover who served as Harding's and Coolidge's secretary of commerce was the dominant political figure of the decade. The revisionist interpretation is best stated in Ellis Hawley, "Herbert Hoover, the Commerce Secretariat and the Vision of an 'Associative State,' 1921-1928," *Journal of American History* 61 (June 1974): 116-140 and Joan Hoff Wilson, *Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975).



Herbert Hoover listening to a radio, 1925. (Image Courtesy of Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-111716.)

Forgotten Progressive (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975).

Throughout the 1920s, the Democratic Party remained divided into urban and rural wings. For a description of this split including an account of the epic 1924 Democratic Party convention, see David Burner, *The Politics of Provincialism: The Democratic Party in Transition, 1918-1932* (New York: Knopf, 1967) which can be supplemented by Douglas B. Craig, *After Wilson: The Struggle for the Democratic Party, 1920-1934* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). Al Smith's role in American politics is traced in Robert A. Slayton, *Empire Statesman: The Rise and Redemption of Al Smith* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

Due to the hostility generated by Americans' disappointment with the Treaty of Versailles, the U.S. government did not expand its role overseas during the 1920s. But business gained increased access to foreign markets and mineral resources, and this is described in Emily S. Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999). The U. S. government refused to extend recognition to the Soviet

Union and encountered considerable difficulty in responding to the Mexican Revolution. These conflicts can be followed in Peter G. Filene, *Americans and the Soviet Experiment, 1917-1933* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) and Daniela Spenser, *The Impossible Triangle: Mexico, Soviet Russia, and the United States in the 1920s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999). Conflicts between the United States and Japan are best traced in the magisterial book by Walter LaFeber, *The Clash: U.S.-Japanese Relations Throughout History* (New York: Norton, 1997).



New York City Deputy Police Commissioner John A. Leach, right, watching agents pour liquor into a sewer following a raid during prohibition, 1921. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-123257.)

The 1920s was very much a business-dominated decade and American business greatly increased its productive capabilities, developed new ways of marketing its goods and refined techniques of public relations. The best description of business ideology is still James Warren Prothro, *The Dollar Decade: Business Ideas in the 1920s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954). The most up-to-date treatment of the nation's best-known industrialist is Steven Watts, *The People's Tycoon: Henry Ford and the American Century* (New York: Knopf, 2006). For Ford's anti-Semitism, see Neil Baldwin, *Henry Ford and the Jews* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001). For the advertising industry, see Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985).

Recently, historians have put great stress on the role that consumption and consumerism have played in American history. For a book that relates this notion to the working class, see Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). During the 1920s, department stores reached their zenith as downtown institutions. For a far reaching treatment, see William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1993).

The 1920s proved to be a very dismal decade for the American labor movement. The best older treatment is Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), and the most innovative of the new works is Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) which is a splendid source for understanding the impact of both the new media and welfare capitalism.

During the 1920s, "social issues" sharply divided Americans. No issue caused more conflict than prohibition. The best overall analysis of the temperance movement is Norman H. Clark, *Deliver Us From Evil: An Interpretation of American Prohibition* (New York: Norton, 1976). Catherine Gilbert Murdock, *Domesticating Drink: Women, Men and Alcohol in America, 1870-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) is a superb demonstration of why any study of prohibition requires a gendered analysis. David E. Kyvig, *Repealing National Prohibition*, second edition (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2000) and Kenneth D. Rose, *American Women and the Repeal of Prohibition* (New York: New York University Press, 1996) deal with the efforts of "wets" to organize against the constitutional amendment.

The growth of organized crime is covered in Humbert S. Nelli, *The Business of Crime: Italians and Syndicate Crime in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), Laurence Bergreen, *Capone: The Man and the Era* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994) and David E. Ruth, *Inventing the Public Enemy: The Gangster in American Culture, 1918-1934* (Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Efforts to include creationism in the curriculum of public schools and the emergence of the Christian right have renewed interest in fundamentalism and the Scopes trial. The best overall treatment of the various issues involved in the controversy over evolution is Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic, 1997). Other helpful books are William Vance Trollinger, *God's Empire: William Bell Riley and Midwestern Fundamentalism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990) and Edith L. Blumhofer, *Aimee Semple McPherson: Everybody's Sister* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Erdmans, 1993). Sympathetic portrayals of William Jennings Bryan's role in the evolution controversy and Scopes trial are provided in Lawrence W. Levine, *Defender of the Faith: William Jennings Bryan: The Last Decade 1915-1925* (New York: Oxford, 1965) and Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

The Ku Klux Klan attracted those uneasy with the more assertive role of African Americans, Catholics, and Jews as well as those uncomfortable with the rapid pace of social change in the United States. Numerous books have been written about the Klan and some may have exaggerated the influence of an organization which reached its peak in the early 1920s. There is no adequate overall history of the 1920s Klan, but David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1965) provides an encyclopedic account as does Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in*



"The Awakening," a presentation by Dick Dowling, Klan No. 25, Port Arthur, Texas, June 23 to July 3, 1924. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-38118.)

the City, 1915-1930 (New York: Oxford, 1967). Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) is a cutting edge book that examines certain "progressive" positions taken by the Klan as well as the role of women in it. Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford, 1994) provides a new perspective for examining the Klan's racism, and Charles C. Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965) and Leonard Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) are two of the best regional and state studies.

In 1921 and 1924, the United States Congress passed laws that sharply curtailed immigration to the United States. John Higham's *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (1955; New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988) remains the essential work for understanding the racist notions that led to the adoption of the quota laws. Matthew Fry Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) provides a perspective that has gained great currency among historians and Desmond King, *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of Diverse Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) has much valuable material on how support for eugenics, which peaked in the 1920s, influenced the restrictive legislation. For the exclusion of the Japanese, embodied in the 1924 bill, see Izumi Hirobe, *Japanese Pride, American Prejudice: Modifying the Exclusion Clause of the 1924 Immigration Act* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001). On immigration law, see Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

For Mexican American life in the 1920s, see Douglas Monroy, *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford, 1993); and Zaragoza Vargas, *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

During the 1920s, African American migration from the South to the North continued at a steady pace. Books that deal with various aspects of African American life in the North include Peter Gottlieb, *Making their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), and Mark Robert Schneider, *"We Return Fighting": The Civil Rights Movement in the Jazz Age* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002). Kevin Boyle, *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004) is an award winning book that describes the ramifications of Ossian Sweet's effort to defend his home in Detroit in 1925.

The Universal Negro Improvement Association headed by Marcus Garvey won significant support from African Americans in the early 1920s. Books that discuss various aspects of the organization

and its ideology include Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986) and Ula Yvette Taylor, *The Veiled Garvey: The Life and Times of Amy Jacques Garvey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

There is a voluminous literature on the Harlem Renaissance. Two of the best works are Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford, 1971) and David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Knopf, 1979). Alain Locke ed., *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Atheneum, 1992) is an anthology of essays, poetry, fiction and drama originally published in 1924 that did much to define the movement. Richard J. Powell, *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) is a splendidly illustrated chronicle of the movement's artistic vibrancy.

During the 1920s, the vast majority of the nation's African American population continued to reside in the South. For developments affecting southern blacks, see Neil R. McMillan, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989) and J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944) is a brilliant autobiographical novel that is unsparing in its depiction of whites and blacks.

The flapper image dominates the popular perception of women in the 1920s but historians have disagreed about the extent to which women experienced tangible changes in their lives. Estelle B. Freedman, "The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s," *Journal of American History* 61 (September 1974): 372-93 is still a good starting point for this discussion. Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) is a major reinterpretation and vital for understanding many issues affecting women during the 1920s. For young women and youth culture, see Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford, 1977) and Vicki Ruiz, "'Star Struck': Acculturation, Adolescence, and Mexican American Women, 1920-1950," in *Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in America, 1850-1950*, ed. Elliott West and Paula Petrik, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1992), 283.

Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998) is valuable for the increased emphasis on being fashionable and up to date and compares the beauty culture of black and white women. Susan Porter Benson, *Counter-Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), and Susan Strom Hartman, *Beyond the Typewriter: Gender, Class and the Origins of Modern Office Work* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992) are some of the major works that explore female employment, and Kristi Andersen, *After Suffrage: Women in Partisan and Electoral Politics before the New Deal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) is valuable for understanding the impact of women's suffrage.

During the 1920s, Margaret Sanger emerged as the leader of the birth control movement. The most thorough biography of her is Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control*

Movement in America (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992) which can be complemented by Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America*, rev. ed. (1976; New York: Penguin, 1990) and Carole R. McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States, 1916-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) and Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) explore the emergence of a distinct gay subculture.

Clara Bow, Mary Pickford, Buster Keaton, Rudolf Valentino, and many other actors and actresses became household names in the 1920s, a decade when Americans flocked to films, whether viewed in neighborhood theatres or the new downtown movie palaces. Some of the leading works on film are Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), Steven J. Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) and Paula Marantz-Cohen, *Silent Film and the Triumph of the American Myth* (New York: Oxford, 2001). Radio also exploded on the national scene and the standard source remains Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, Vol. 1, to 1933 (New York: Oxford, 1966). For the new music, see Kathy J. Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz* (New York: Oxford, 1989).

Some of the best books on the 1920s do not fit neatly into any particular category. They include Caroline Ware, *Greenwich Village 1920-1930: A Comment on American Civilization in the Post-War Years* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), a landmark study focusing on Italian-American life, Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), one of the best guides to cultural and intellectual currents during the decade, and John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Simon Schuster, 1997) which explores the social and political ramifications of the natural disaster.

American writing flourished during the 1920s and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1924) remains indispensable for an understanding of the decade. While the works of Willa Cather, T. S. Elliot, Theodore Dreiser and Ernest Hemingway are vital, the best literary guide to the decade is the quartet of novels by Sinclair Lewis: *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922), *Arrowsmith* (1925), and *Elmer Gantry* (1927). Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (New York: Norton, 1934) is a valuable memoir.

Lastly, John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Great Crash* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1954) remains a useful guide to an event that ushered in a totally different decade. Though the 1930s revolutionized many aspects of American life, it was the 1920s that previewed the type of society which emerged by the 1950s. But because so many countervailing trends existed simultaneously, the 1920s will continue to generate controversy and provoke debates about its meaning. □

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