CHAPTER 30

American Life in the “Roaring Twenties,” 1920–1929

# focus questions

. How did the Red Scare translate into the Ku Klux Klan and the anti-immigrant movements in American society?

. What were the arguments both for and against prohibition and what were its consequences? How did the Eighteenth Amendment come about?

. What was it about the 1920s that made it Roaring?

. Who were some of the major literary, artistic, and architectural figures, and how did the literature reflect the mood of the 1920s?

5. In what ways did the emergence of “modernism” lead to a broader questioning of values within society?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** A disillusioned America turned away from idealism and reform after World War I and toward isolationism in foreign affairs, domestic social conservatism, and the pleasures of prosperity.

**Theme:** New technologies, mass-marketing techniques, and new forms of entertainment fostered rapid cultural change along with a focus on consumer goods. But the accompanying changes in moral values and uncertainty about the future produced cultural anxiety, as well as sharp intellectual critiques of American life.

chapter summary

After the crusading idealism of World War I, America turned inward and became hostile to anything foreign or different. Radicals were targeted in the red scare and the Sacco-Vanzetti case, while the resurgent Ku Klux Klan joined other forces in bringing about pronounced restrictions on further immigration. Sharp cultural conflicts occurred over the prohibition experiment and evolution.

A new mass-consumption economy fueled the spectacular prosperity of the 1920s. The automobile industry, led by Henry Ford, transformed the economy and altered American lifestyles.

The pervasive media of radio and film altered popular culture and values. Birth control and Freudian psychology overturned traditional sexual standards, especially for women. The stock-market boom symbolized the free-wheeling spirit of the decade.

American literary and artist vision flourished during the 1920s. The emergence of modernism, first highlighted at the Armory Show in 1913, led writers, artists, and architects to question realism, social conventions, and traditional authority.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Analyze the social turning inward of the 1920s as a disillusioned reaction to World War I. Show how the rise of the Klan and immigration restriction especially reflected a desire to preserve America against alien influences.

REFERENCE: Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second KKK* (1993).

* Discuss the Scopes trial as a focal point of the deep conflicts over religion and culture in the 1920s.

REFERENCES: George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (1980); Jeffrey P. Morgan, *The Scopes Trial—A Brief History with Documents* (2002).

* Examine the economic and cultural consequences of the new mass-consumption economy. Show how innovations such as credit buying, advertising, and automobile travel weakened the old Protestant ethic with a new emphasis on pleasure and excitement.

REFERENCE: Ronald Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity* (1985).

* Consider the radical cultural transformations in moral and sexual values brought about by such developments as movies, birth control, Freudian psychology, jazz, and advanced literature, especially as they affected women. Examine the rise of the consumer culture and its impact on traditional moral and social values (for example, the impact of credit buying on the Puritan ethic).

REFERENCE: Stanley Coben, *Rebellion Against Victorianism: The Impetus for Cultural Change in 1920s America* (1991).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Explore the ideology and actions of the 1920s Klan. Consider similarities and differences in relation to the Klan of Reconstruction. (See boxed quote on page 694.)
* Discuss the role of prohibition during the 1920s and its close relation to the rise of organized crime. (See boxed quote on page 697.)
* Explore the complex and sometimes contradictory cultural values of the decade as symbolically represented by Charles Lindbergh’s flight. Discuss how he symbolized technological innovation but also individual heroism in an increasingly mass society.
* Consider the role of both black and white artists in changing American culture in the 1920s. Consider where writers such as Fitzgerald and Hughes were reflecting similar concerns, and where their outlook was different. (See boxed quote on page 716.)
* Have the students read Randolph Bourne’s “Trans-National America” (1916) and “Twilight of Idols” (1917) in David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper’s (Editors), *The American Intellectual Tradition: Volume II—1865 to the Present*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
* Conduct a class debate on topics such as The Department of Justice Is Defending America from Communist Subversion, H.L. Mencken Critiques America, and Prohibition Is a Success. Primary source readings will come from the following book: *Opposing Viewpoints in American History—Volume II: From Reconstruction to the Present*, San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1996. Another good source of debate topics is Larry Madaras and James M. SoRelle, *Taking Sides—Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in American History, Volume II: Reconstruction to the Present*, Connecticut: McGraw-Hill, 2000.
* Have the students read Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee’s *Inherit the Wind* (1955)—a play based on the events of the Scopes trial and made into an award-winning movie in 1960.
* Have the students read selections from H.L. Mencken’s *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (1949) and *A Second Mencken Chrestomathy* (1995), two volumes collected and edited from the vast writings of H.L. Mencken, the “American Voltaire.”

# character sketches

## Henry Ford (1863–1947)

Ford was the automobile genius and industrialist who epitomized the new age of mass consumer production.

Although he hated farm work as a boy, Ford was always nostalgic about rural life and later re-created an idealized version of it in his Greenfield Village.

He was widely praised for paying his workers $5 a day—although not all of them earned that. In 1915, Ford paid for a Peace Ship full of American antiwar activists who sailed to Norway in a futile effort to end World War I. In the 1920s, he published a viciously anti-Semitic paper, *The Dearborn Independent,* which was distributed through Ford dealerships.

Ford enjoyed his own reputation as the voice of the uneducated common person and often sounded off on subjects about which he knew nothing. For example, he asserted that earlier civilizations had had airplanes and cars, that cows should be eliminated and milk produced artificially, and that all the art in the world was not worth five cents.

**Quote:** “I don’t like to read books. They mess up my mind.” (1919)

REFERENCE: David L. Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford* (1976).

## Alphonse Capone (1899–1947)

Capone was the brutal gangster who dominated Chicago organized crime in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Capone’s parents were Italian immigrants from Sicily who came to New York in 1893. Capone quit school after the fourth grade and soon linked up with other gang members, including Johnny Torrio. In one early gang fight, Capone was slashed across the face with a knife, giving him his nickname of “Scarface.”

When Torrio moved from New York to Chicago, Capone followed him to help run the giant prostitution operation and other rackets in the city. In 1925, Torrio retired, and Capone seized control of all of Chicago’s prohibition-era organized crime by gunning down his rivals. Capone’s worth was estimated at over $100 million and for a time in the late 1920s, he had extensive power within Chicago’s political, journalistic, and law-enforcement communities.

After his conviction for income-tax evasion and imprisonment on Alcatraz Island, he was discovered to be suffering from syphilis. He was released on parole in 1939.

**Quote:** “What’s your racket?” (1927)

REFERENCES: John Kobler, *The Life and World of Al Capone* (1992); Laurence Bergreen, *Capone: The Man and the Era* (1994).

## Charles A. Lindbergh (1902–1974)

Lindbergh was the pilot whose solo flight made him the greatest hero of the 1920s and who later became a leading isolationist spokesman before World War II.

A group of St. Louis businessmen put up the money for Lindbergh’s plane, which had never been fully tested before he headed across the Atlantic. He dozed off several times during the flight but was awakened each time by the erratic movements of the plane. Vast crowds greeted him in Paris, although he landed in the dark.

Lindbergh was stunned by the unrelenting publicity and tried unsuccessfully to withdraw from the public eye. He married the daughter of diplomat Dwight Morrow. Anne Morrow Lindbergh later became a popular author. The kidnapping and murder of their two-year-old son in 1932 horrified America and caused the Lindberghs to move to Europe. Lindbergh’s association with Nazism and isolationism in the 1930s cost him some popularity, but he sometimes advised the government on aviation matters even into the 1950s and 1960s.

**Quote:** “These wars in Europe are not wars in which our civilization is defending itself against some Asiatic intruder.… This is not a question of banding together to defend our white race against foreign invasions. This is simply one more of those age-old quarrels among our family of nations.” (Radio address, 1939)

REFERENCE: Scott Berg, *Lindbergh* (1998).

## H.L. (Henry Louis) Mencken (1880 – 1956)

Mencken (aka, the “Sage of Baltimore”) was one of the leading cultural critics of American society throughout most of the early part of the twentieth century. Mencken was a journalist, editor, essayist, and satirist who spent most of his life in Baltimore, Maryland. He was known for his humor and wit and never missed an opportunity to criticize ignorance, intolerance, fraud, and organized religion (mostly fundamentalist Christianity).

Mencken was well read and popular throughout the 1920s; however, during the depression and World War II Mencken lost favor with many Americans.

**Quote:** “Such obscenities as the forthcoming trial of the Tennessee evolutionist, if they serve no other purpose, at least call attention dramatically to the fact that enlightenment, among mankind, is very narrowly dispersed. It is common to assume that human progress affects everyone—that even the dullest man, in these bright days, knows more than any man of, say, the Eighteenth Century, and is far more civilized. This assumption is quite erroneous. The men of the educated minority, no doubt, know more than their predecessors, and of some of them, perhaps, it may be said that they are more civilized … but the great masses of men, even in this inspired republic, are precisely where the mob was at the dawn of history. They are ignorant, they are dishonest, they are cowardly, they are ignoble. They know little if anything that is worth knowing, and there is not the slightest sign of a natural desire among them to increase their knowledge.” (*Homo Neanderthalensis*, 1925)

REFERENCE: Marion Elizabeth Rodgers, *Mencken: The American Iconoclast* (2005).

## Marcus Garvey (1887–1940)

Garvey was the black nationalist leader whose Back to Africa movement had a major influence on African American culture in the 1920s.

Garvey was born in Jamaica and worked as a printer and union organizer. During travels to South America and Britain, he learned a great deal about the history and culture of African peoples, which led him to emphasize black racial pride and to formulate his plans for a return of all blacks to Africa.

His Universal Negro Improvement Association attracted tremendous support from American blacks in the early 1920s, but the government of Liberia (where Garvey hoped to migrate) thought him a revolutionary plotter and withdrew support from his Black Star steamship lines. His conviction for fraud and his deportation to Jamaica effectively ended his political career, but he remained a hero among many blacks for his emphasis on African culture and self-determination.

**Quote:** “Never allow anyone to convince you of your inferiority as a man. Rise in your dignity to justify all that is noble in your race.

My race is mine and I belong to it.

It climbs with me and I climb with it.

My pride is mine and I shall honor it.

It is the height on which I daily sit.”

(*The Negro World*, 1923)

REFERENCE: J. Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey* (1986).

## F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940)

Fitzgerald was the novelist whose literature and life symbolized and promoted the values of the jazz age in the 1920s.

His father was from an old aristocratic Maryland family whose ancestors included the author of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” His mother was from a poor Irish background, and Fitzgerald claimed his dual ancestry gave him a unique view of American life.

At Princeton, Fitzgerald worked harder for social than academic success and was distressed when academic probation forced him to give up his campus literary activities. Fitzgerald’s glamorous postwar life in Europe fell victim to lavish spending, alcoholism, and the mental illness of his wife Zelda.

In the 1930s, he returned to America and wrote *Tender Is the Night* (1934) and a brilliant story, “The Crack-Up,” about his own mental distress and feared loss of talent. When he was sober, Fitzgerald was charming, elegant, and a fine conversationalist.

**Quote:** “America was going on the greatest, gaudiest spree in history. … The whole golden boom was in the air—its splendid generosities, its outrageous corruptions, and the death struggle of the old America in prohibition.” (1935)

REFERENCE: William A. Fahey, *F. Scott Fitzgerald and the American Dream* (1973).

# QUESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

. Why did the United States, which had welcomed so many millions of immigrants for nearly a century, suddenly become so fearful of immigration in the 1920s that it virtually ended mass immigration for two decades? (See boxed quote on page 692 as well as section Makers of America on pages 698-699.)

. To what extent was the Scopes Trial only about competing theories of human origins, and to what extent was it a focal point for deeper concerns regarding the role of religion and traditional moral authorities in American life and the new cultural power of science? (See boxed quotes on page 694 and 701.)

. Was the new mass culture, as reflected in Hollywood films and radio, a source of moral and social change, or did it really reinforce the essentially conservative business and social values of the time? Consider the role of commercial advertising in particular. (See boxed quotes on page 705 and 707 as well as section Examining the Evidence on page 709.)

. Were the intellectual critics of the 1920s really disillusioned with the fundamental character of American life, or were they actually loyal to a vision of a better America and only hiding their idealism behind a veneer of disillusionment and irony? (See boxed quotes on page 712 and 713 as well as section Thinking Globally on pages 714-715.)

# MAKERS OF AMERICA: THE POLES

## Questions for Class Discussion

. How did both economic and religious factors contribute to Polish immigration?

. How was the Polish influence in America similar to that of other New Immigrants such as the Italians (see Chapter 25)? How was it different?

## Suggested Student Exercises

* The text lists five cities that were centers of Polish immigration to America: Chicago, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Milwaukee. Examine the impact of Polish-Americans in one of these cities over several generations.
* Critically analyze negative cultural stereotypes of Polish immigrants in the press and elsewhere in the 1920s and after. Consider what biases may underlie these stereotypes, and how some of the social and cultural changes in recent decades, in both the United States and Poland (for example, the Polish Pope John Paul II and the fall of communism), may work to undercut such stereotyping.

**CONTENDING VOICES: HENRY VAN DYKE VS. DUKE ELLINGTON**

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. How did clergyman and writer Van Dyke describe jazz music?

2. How did Duke Ellington offer a very different interpretation of this new music form?