

The 1920s--Return to Normalcy or Corporate Liberalism Entrenched

I. Republican Resurgence

- Return to normalcy or corporate liberalism entrenched
 - The election of 1920 pitted Democratic candidate James Cox against Republican Warren G. Harding--Harding wins easily
 - Harding's election puts an end to two decades of progressive reform
- Prosperity and politics
 - The first four years following WWI, demobilization causes U.S. economy to slide into a recession
 - However, by 1922, the economy not only recovered, but began to prosper and grow rapidly
 - The American economy
 - New Methods of producing, managing, and selling
 - introduction of moving assembly line (by Henry Ford) boosts productivity by 40% in 1920s--term "Fordism" becomes synonymous with automated manufacturing
 - corporate mergers escalate, so that by 1929, top one hundred corporations control nearly 1/2 of American business
 - competition drops sharply as oligopolies fix prices, divide markets--small businesses (especially retail stores) fade quickly as chain stores grow
 - big business increases sales through heavy advertising and the introduction of installment-buying plans
 - throughout the 1920s, business influence and values permeate through American life
 - Women in the new economy
 - percentage of women working outside the home stays level at about 24% during the decade
 - working women earn less than men holding similar jobs
 - growth of business bureaucracy increases the demand for secretaries, typists, filing clerks--women fill most of these positions
 - few women break into management or into professions other than those traditionally seen as female ones--teaching, nursing, and social work
 - Organized Labor
 - organized labor has little success during the decade -- membership falls from around 5 million to 3.5 million
 - management discourages the growth of unions by intimidation, violence, insistence on open shop (non-union), and benefit plans for employees (such as stock-purchase plans and recreational facilities)
 - overall, wages rise slowly, but majority of unskilled laborers gain little pay improvement
 - women, blacks, Mexican-Americans, and recent immigrant workers cluster at the bottom of the wage scale

- Agriculture
 - the 1920s a hard time for agriculture
 - natural disasters and diseases
 - foreign markets shrink
 - increased production lowers prices
 - as a result, farmers have difficulty paying off loans and mortgages
 - Congress twice passes the McNary-Haugen bill
 - bill provides for government purchase of surplus produce at a fixed price, then resells it abroad for whatever it brings
 - Pres. Calvin Coolidge vetoes bill both times

II. Reactions to corporate liberalism--Society and culture of the 1920s

- Social reactions
 - Urbanite nation
 - In 1920, for first time in U.S. history, more people live in cities than in rural areas
 - urban life-styles and values spread to more and more of population
 - radio, movies, advertising, and popular magazines carry messages emanating from the cities
 - Consumer goods
 - new consumer goods most readily to city dwellers
 - new electrical appliances transform household duties
 - the department stores of food industry--supermarkets and commercial bakeries--spring up during this period
 - automobiles have biggest impact on U.S. life and culture
 - traffic jams and parking problems
 - accidental traffic deaths rise sharply (as many as 26,000 per year)
 - changes in family life--people get away from home more often, automobile comes into the household
 - spread of suburbs
 - new consumer goods themselves consume great amounts of resources--electrical appliances and automobiles need vast amounts of coal, oil, and natural gas to operate them
 - pollution increases, wilderness decreases
 - Life on the assembly-line
 - assembly-line labor makes work less fulfilling
 - each person has one task to do, over and over again
 - even pleasure activities take on assembly-line atmosphere as people to turn to mass-produced entertainment
 - mass-entertainment
 - magazines--Saturday Evening Post, Life, Reader's Digest
 - radio becomes popular--NBC & CBS dominate airwaves; people nationwide hear same shows, same commercials
 - movies, especially following the beginning of the "talkies" with the Jazz Singer in 1927, draw huge audiences, help shape popular values and behavior (popularity of gangster movies)

- mass communication helps create series of nationwide fads, heroes, and media events
 - image of the "flappers", Miss America, crossword puzzles
 - Cult of personality
 - professional sports heroes--Babe Ruth and Jack Dempsey
 - Charles Linbergh's solo flight across the Atlantic in 1927
- Cultural reactions
 - Postwar crisis of values
 - During the 1920s, a number of young Americans (mostly middle-class college students living in the cities) reject the values of their elders about: sex, dress, public behavior, & religion
 - they drink bootleg liquor, go to jazz clubs, discuss openly, date, embrace the ideas of Sigmund Freud--even if they don't understand them--as way of exploring human motivation
 - some young women assert their freedom by wearing makeup (previously associated mainly with actresses and prostitutes), smoking, getting rid of confining undergarments (particularly petticoats and corsets), shortening their hair and their skirts
 - reaction to changing values
 - most farmers, blacks, industrial workers, and recent immigrants pay little attention to these changing values at first
 - more concerned with economic survival than experimenting with new life styles
 - these people begin to pay attention to the changes when their children begin to embrace the new ideas
- Cultural creativity
 - Literature
 - "Lost Generation"
 - decade sees emergence of a number of talented writers--F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis, Ernest Hemingway, e.e. cummings, Willa Cather, John Dos Passos, and the satirist H.L. Mencken
 - writers disillusioned by WWI--become known as "Lost Generation"--many expatriates leave America and flock to Europe
 - writers criticize what they see as the narrow-minded, small-town values of prewar America and the materialistic business culture of 1920s
 - Harlem Renaissance
 - Growing African American population in New York city stimulates black creative movement known as Harlem Renaissance
 - Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Bennett, and other African-American writers explored the black experience in American and the world through series of poems, short stories, and novels
 - black artists depend on white patrons, who enjoy the "African-ness" of their works; yet whites do not want to hear about real problems facing black America

- Southern Renaissance
 - Following WWI, southern literary scene bloomed greatly-- John Crowe Ransom, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Erskine Caldwell, Eudora Welty and others develop a distinct literature centered around the South
 - Nashville Agrarian movement--late 1920s at Vanderbilt-- rejected morals of modern society
 - ***What do writers of "lost Generation," Harlem Renaissance, and Southern Renaissance have in common? Alienation from the predominant culture***
- Art and architecture
 - architecture
 - creation of new and larger buildings--large steel and glass skyscrapers
 - borrow from the German Bauhaus movement--emphasis on functional utility as form (Ludwig Mies van der Rohe)
 - Frank Lloyd Wright and Prairie School--architecture as natural and organic
 - Art
 - Dadists--(Dada name comes from nonsense/baby talk)
 - after WWI, group of artists (such as Marcel Duchamp) felt that European and American culture had lost any real meaning
 - in bitter reaction set out to mock all the values of a culture gone mad
 - Social commentary
 - Jose Orozco--commentary on life of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans
 - Ben Shahn--series of 23 prints denouncing what he saw as the injustices of Sacco-Vanzetti case
 - Edward Hopper and the muted, often empty, life in American cities; the fading of small towns
 - Georgia O'Keefe--organic reality in abstract
 - Thomas Hart Benton--celebrates the individual with almost mythical portrayals of cowboys and the frontier
 - Music
 - Jazz
 - often called America's unique contribution to music
 - George Gershwin gains fame as white jazz composer--"Rhapsody in Blue" and "American in Paris"
 - African-American jazz artists who gain wide audiences include Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington
 - most better-known black jazz artists performed before whites-only audiences in upscale clubs
 - Blues
 - drawn from the songs and music of field hands in the South
 - spread northward with the "Great Migration"

- Cultural ferment
 - many people, especially in rural areas, felt threatened by the changing values of society--thus they formed ways to react to these changes
 - Fundamentalism
 - Religious fundamentalism grew during the 1920s
 - people see world changing in ways they don't understand and can't control
 - their children reject the values that the parents have lived with all their life
 - One way this fundamentalism manifested itself came in the laws of a few southern states which mandated creationism, not evolution, be taught in classrooms
 - Scopes Trial
 - 1925, at the urging of local community leaders, John T. Scopes, a high-school biology teacher in Dayton, Tenn. challenged his state's antievolution law
 - he did so with promise of assistance from the ACLU
 - ACLU hired team of lawyers headed by Clarence Darrow to defend Scopes
 - Prosecution assisted by William Jennings Bryan--who argued for inerrancy of Bible, but sometimes found himself not knowing what the Bible said
 - Scopes convicted by local jury--but received short sentence and small fine
 - Scopes Trial a battle between two sets of values--the older, rural values and the modern urban values
 - Bryan as measuring stick from 1896-1925
 - Fundamentalism (and the South) ridiculed by national press--see H.L. Mencken's reports
 - Although influence of fundamentalism diminished in mainstream churches after the trial, it still retained a large following--Aimee Semple McPherson still reached thousands at her temple and over the radio

III. Republicans in Power

- Scandals
 - After Warren Harding becomes President in 1921, his administration riddled with corruption
 - Harding a quiet, conservative man from Ohio who had a reputation for enjoying good liquor, tall tales, and a good game of poker--had some good appointments, but also several rotten apples
 - Veteran's Bureau chief caught stealing bureau funds
 - the Attorney General and others in the Justice Department found influence peddling
 - Interior Secretary Albert Fall leases government oil reserves at Elk Falls, Cal. and Teapot Dome, Wyoming to oilmen in return for \$400,000 in bribes
 - Teapot Dome becomes symbol of Harding administration

- Silences
 - Following Harding's death in Aug. 1923, VP Calvin Coolidge takes over
 - Mass. native nicknamed "Silent Cal" for his reticence
 - strongly pro-business--tariff rates pushed to all-time high, big tax breaks (especially for upper incomes), govt. refuses aid to farmers or to Mississippi River flood victims
 - the Supreme Court during this period moves against government regulations -- with 5 new appointees by Harding and Coolidge -- striking down a number of progressive and wartime measures
 - Foreign policy during this period was one of an isolationist stance--refuse to join League of Nations or participate in international affairs
 - Coolidge easily wins reelection in 1924
- Hoover, an engineer?
 - In 1928, Herbert Hoover runs as Republican candidate for president against Democrat Al Smith
 - Smith attacked as being a New York Catholic supporting "rum and Romanism"
 - Hoover wins easily despite being seen by some conservatives as too progressive (he headed Food Administration during WWI)
 - Hoover's belief in volunteerism
 - Hoover encourages voluntary cooperation among corporate leaders to raise wages, plan production, market and standardize products
 - he believes that voluntary self-regulation by business, not government intervention ensures economic growth and prosperity
- Hoover and the Great Depression
 - Crash and Depression
 - Stock market
 - 1928, wave of heavy stock-market speculation begins
 - 9 million Americans invest in market, seeking quick profits--many using borrowed money and buying on margin
 - low taxes for rich and easy-credit policy of Federal Reserve fuel speculation
 - Stock buyers ignore signs of economic distress, such as falloff in auto sales and constructions starts
 - Federal Reserve warns banks and speculators, no one listens
 - Black Thursday
 - Thursday Oct. 24, 1919, stock prices plummet as panicked shareholders rush to sell; weak rally next day, slower fall of prices
 - Free fall resumes on Tues. Oct. 29 and continue through mid-November--some stocks lose 70% of value