Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1979 Volume II: Themes in Twentieth Century American Culture

The 1920s: The Rise of Consumer Culture

Curriculum Unit 79.02.06
by Burt Saxon

I. CONTENT OBJECTIVES

This unit is entitled *The 1920s: The Rise of Consumer Culture* . Economic, social, and cultural aspects of the 1920s will be examined. Three major questions will be considered:

1. To what degree was this decade a prosperous one? Which Americans shared in the prosperity?
2. What role did advertising and installment buying play in the development of the "consumer culture?"
3. How was the popular culture of the 1920s related to economic changes? Did different aspects of the "Roaring Twenties" affect different groups of people? if so, why?

These questions do not appear to be difficult ones at first glance. It would seem that by gathering the appropriate data and analyzing that data objectively, one could answer the questions presented above. Yet the collection of historical data is an imperfect undertaking, while objectivity is at best an ideal. Historians, I would argue, tend to choose their data selectively; furthermore, the type of selectivity used is determined subjectively, not objectively. The historian's beliefs about the subject he is studying determine methods and nature of data selection and hence the final historical analysis. Naturally this leads to competing viewpoints. These competing viewpoints make history an exciting subject to study, for in the last analysis, history is not data ("What happened?") but moral and political philosophy ("What should the world be like?")

Essentially, I'm arguing that interpretation is the substance of history. This is a familiar argument, but I'm willing to argue that interpretation should be the substance of history *at all levels of study* . I disagree with those who say "Teach the facts in high school, the interpretations in college." This view supports Jerome Bruner's contention that "any subject can be taught in an intellectually honest way at any grade level." Here, of course, the subject is historiography, not history.

If interpretative skills are to be developed in a history course, it is wise to begin early. Even bright students may believe that their textbook presents a purely objective view of history. By giving students several analysis of a particular historical issue the first week of school, students can begin to realize that each historian has a unique perspective and point of view. This will help your students begin thinking historiographically. Slavery may be the topic which provides the most dramatic introduction to historiography. A paragraph from the writings of a "Southern school" historian, such as Dunning or Phillips, may be contrasted with a paragraph written by a modern historian, such as Genovese or Franklin. Better students will be able to detect more subtle differences in interpretations and will be able to contrast four or five interpretations. Keep asking "Who is right? How do we know who is right? Can we determine scientifically who is right?" and your students will have started to think like historians.

Ideally, the next step is to have students draw up their own categories of historical interpretations. If this is beyond their grasp, present them with a framework of historical interpretations. Historical interpretations can be classified in a variety of ways. These interpretative frameworks can be placed along a continuum, moving from what is usually considered conservative ideology to radical ideology. One possible framework looks like this:

LAISSEZ-FAIRE CONSERVATIVE

Historians who write from this perspective support a variety of conservative positions. Most tend to support unrestrained capitalism, arguing that the "invisible hand" of a market economy will result in the common good much more often than will government intervention in the economy. These historians see a limited role for the government except in areas such as national defense and education. At this point in history, many laissez-faire conservatives favor a strong defense posture for the U.S.—a reversal of earlier conservatives' isolationist tendencies.

TRIUMPHALIST

This interpretative approach sees America as the apex of civilization, a great nation which has made continuous progress economically, socially, and culturally.

Triumphalists emphasize America's greatness. Triumphalist writing dominated elementary and secondary school textbooks for years (Fitzgerald, 1979). Triumphalists tend to be less critical of America than are romantic conservatives. They can—with justification—praise both the unrestrained capitalism of the late 1900s and the New Deal.

CONSENSUS

Consensus historians tend to hold liberal democratic beliefs. In fact, they are called consensus historians because they point out in their writings that Americans have always held common values and attitudes, such as faith in democracy. Consensus historians tend to be critics of unrestrained capitalism, favoring government regulation of the economy. But they are usually not opposed to capitalism *per se* . In foreign affairs, their views are internationalist. Thus consensus historians were among the later (1969-72) and less vocal critics of the Vietnam war, arguing that the war was “not in the United States’ best interests.” Consensus historians have replaced triumphalists as the major authors of college and secondary school American history textbooks.

CONFLICT

Conflict historians tend to emphasize the economic, social, and—to a lesser degree—intellectual conflicts throughout American history. Often acting as social critics, they see America as a racist, bureaucratic, imperialistic society. Conflict historians are heavily influenced by the behavioral sciences (particularly structural functional sociology), but they are not necessarily Marxists or revolutionaries. Some conflict historians, such as Philip Foner and Herbert Aptheker, are Marxists. Generally speaking, Marxists historians are not optimistic about reform within the framework of capitalism.

APPLYING THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

A unit of the 1920s can provide many opportunities for students to apply their understanding of these interpretative frameworks.

Historians disagree on the degree of prosperity in the 1920s, the role of advertising, and the nature of the “popular culture” of the decade. For each topic, it is best, I believe, to identify a historiographical issue which is also a contemporary issue of concern to your students. Take, for example, the first questions posed at the beginning of this unit:

To what degree was this decade a prosperous one? Which Americans shared in the prosperity?

Many urban students could care less about prosperity in the 1920s, but put the issue in terms of their own lives (“Do people who work hard usually get ahead? Are poor people responsible for their own poverty? Is it true that America’s poor are not really poor?”) and lively, semi-scholarly debate will result—about both the 1920s and contemporary society. Comparing quotes from different sources can start both debate and historical investigation. Even low-level students can understand the difference between these two quotes:

> During President Coolidge’s administration, the country, except for the farmers, enjoyed great prosperity. Business activity and profits increased, and the incomes of many people rose. The Coolidge years were often referred to as “The Golden Twenties.” (*This is America’s Story* , p. 677)
>
> The twenties were, indeed, golden, but only for a privileged segment of the American population. (*The Lean Years* , p. 47)

Students can be motivated to use a simple exercise in quantitative history to help decide for themselves which of the above statements is more valid (see Lessons 2 and 3 in the next section of this paper.) Discussion of modern poverty and affluence will follow naturally.

The second half of this unit—the nature of advertising and installment buying—can also be discussed in a contemporary as well as historical context. The Lynds saw installment buying as “facilitating the rise to new standards of living” (*Middletown* , pp. 81-83). This is a triumphalist perspective. Stuart Ewen, a conflict historian influenced by both Marxism and structural-functionalism, takes a completely different perspective. Noting a 286-percent growth rate of industrial corporations between 1922 and 1929, Ewen claims “the average manufacturing wage-earner showed a wage increase of only 14 percent during this same period.” (*Captains of Consciousness* , p. 30) He views installment selling as a way to deal with this discrepancy. Not surprisingly, Ewen views advertising as another attempt to create a false consciousness among workers and get them to “accept the foundations of modern industrial life.” (pp. 42-43) Far from being a vital concomitant of the free enterprise system, as many laissez-faire conservatives would claim, advertising to Ewen is a manipulative device. Here again we have a historiographical issue which affects all secondary school students every day of their lives. This topic also represents a golden opportunity to present basic principles of good consumerism.

Popular culture, the third issue of this unit, is a very broad topic. It could include sports, dance, music, games, architecture, movies, etc. A variety of approaches can be used in the teaching of popular culture. In this unit, the focus will be on socioeconomic and ethnic tastes in popular culture, especially music. Record-listening will be the main teaching methodology employed, and jazz and ragtime the main kinds of music studies. Was jazz “one great interracial collaboration,” as Alain Locke puts it, or were white jazzmen merely feeble imitators of an art form which emanated from Africa and found its way to Harlem through the plantations of the ante-bellum South? By listening to the music of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, and others, students can begin to speculate on the relationship between Afro-American culture and the larger American culture in both the past and the present. This type of speculation will be much easier if your students are familiar with the music of prior historical periods.

With sports, the focus should be on socioeconomic rather than ethnic differences in both participation and audiences. Starting with the present may be helpful. Ask your students if they think there is a difference in the incomes of those who attend baseball games, tennis matches, and golf tournaments. If this question is too abstract to begin with, start with biographical sketches of prominent 1920s athletes.

These three issues—prosperity, consumerism, and popular culture—are the central themes of my unit. In the following section, I will present two weeks of lesson plans.

II. A SAMPLE OUTLINE

Lesson One: An Overview of the 1920s

This will be a lecture-discussion which sets up the themes previously mentioned. In addition, this lesson will provide a brief political history of the 1920s, focusing on the death of Warren Harding (Was he poisoned by his wife?) in an attempt to appeal to students’ most maudlin instincts.

Lessons Two and Three: The Age of Prosperity?

Quantitative historians often use computers to analyze massive amounts of data. The results of quantitative studies are likely to interest professional historians but bore high school students unless quantitative history can be linked to students’ experiences. One way to do this is through case studies. Why not deal with the “decade of prosperity” motif by having students construct a Cost-of-Living Index for working-class persons in, say, 1920. Here’s how this could be done:

1. Obtain census records for the year 1920. Have each student pick a person from the census to be their 1920s counterpart.
2. Have each student select a possible occupation for their 1920s counterpart.
3. Then have each student obtain from local businesses a possible salary for their counterpart.
4. Next use newspaper ads to discover the cost of certain goods as a percentage of 1920 income.
5. Replicate this procedure for the years 1900 and the present year. Discussion can then center on the degree of prosperity enjoyed by working-class persons in the years 1900, 1920, and the present. Don’t forget to take taxes into consideration.

Lessons Four and Five: The Rise of Consumer Culture

These two lessons are attempts to develop students’ skills in analyzing advertisements. Students will be given the choice of doing this exercise individually or in small groups. The exercise involves the analysis of several advertisements, most from the 1920s but a few from contemporary sources. For each ad, students will write the answers to the following questions:

1. How is this ad trying to persuade consumers to buy the product?
2. To which social class(es) does the ad appeal?
3. To which ethnic groups does the ad primarily appeal?
4. How, if at all, are blacks portrayed in the ad?
5. How, if at all, are women portrayed in the ad?
6. How could a wise consumer avoid letting the ad talk her into buying something she doesn’t need?

No doubt the second day’s discussion will focus on advertising techniques in general. It would also be wise to discuss installment buying, which your students may refer to as “credit” or, more likely, “buying on time.” Perhaps the best way to discuss this phenomenon is to put the following statements on the board:

> Credit increases everyone’s standard of living.
>
> Credit is a way for businesses to control consumers, lives.

Ask each student if she/he agrees with one or both statements.

Be sure to allow ample time for debate.

Lessons Six, Seven, and Eight: Popular Culture for whom?

There are three basic questions to consider here:

1. Why and how did popular culture develop during the 1920s?
2. Did different aspects of popular culture appeal to different groups of Americans? If so, which aspects appealed to which groups?
3. What was the relationship between the mainstream culture and Afro-American culture during this period?

One way to begin is by showing the filmstrip on popular culture from The Decades: The 1920s. Focus discussion on questions 1 and 2 above.

The second day of this lesson can be spent listening to and analyzing the following records (all available from the New Haven Public Library):

1. Rare Bands of the Twenties, Vol. 7
2. The Mid-Twenties, by Bobby Short
3. The Roaring 20s, Vol. 1
4. The Great Music of Duke Ellington
5. Satchmo

See if students can tell if the musicians are whites (1-3) or black (4-5). An interesting discussion of the differences between white and black music and mainstream and Afro-American culture could follow. See if your students can speculate why some black musicians appeal greatly to whites and vice-versa.

The third day of this lesson can focus on sports. If you have previously assigned reports on several athletes, this would be a good day for students to present their reports. Encourage students to try to discover the socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds of the fans who followed each athlete.

Athletes could include:

Jack Dempsey Josh Gibson Red Grange

Babe Ruth Bill Tilden Babe Zaharias
Bobby Jones

III. BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR TEACHERS

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1. Bernstein, Irving. *The Lean Years* (Boston, Houghton-Mifflin, 1960).
This book focuses on the blue-collar worker. Writing from a revisionist perspective, Bernstein sharply questions the "decade of prosperity" argument.
2. Botein, Stephen, et al, ed. *Experiments in History Teaching* (Harvard-Danforth Center for Teaching and Learning: Cambridge, 1977).
This book is invaluable—especially for those of us who have not kept up with new methodologies in historical investigation. It is written for both college and secondary school teachers.
3. Braeman, John et al., ed. *Change and Continuity in Twentieth Century America: The 1920s* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968).
This is a collection of essays on the 1920s of somewhat uneven quality. I found Gilman Ostrander's essay, "The Revolution in Morals," particularly interesting.
4. Carter, Paul. *The Uncertain World of Normalcy—The 1920s* (New York: Pitman, 1971).
This is also a collection of essays, Bernard Voto's "English A" being of particular interest to teachers.
5. Ewens, Stuart. *Captains of Consciousness* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976).
Ewen's analysis of advertising and installment buying is provocative and challenging. His neo-Marxist perspective will excite some readers but alienate others.
6. Leuchtenberg, William. *The Perils of Prosperity* .
A classic consensus account of the 1920s. Contains much diplomatic and political history.
7. Locke, Alain, *The Negro and His Music—Negro Art Past and Present* (New York, Arno Press, 1969).
A good introduction to Afro-American culture. Locke's assimilationist perspective makes him a consensus historian.
8. Lynd, Robert and Helen. *Middletown* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1934).
A sociological classic, this community study of Muncie, Indiana contains many interesting insights on the role of women in the early twentieth century.

IV. BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR STUDENTS

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1. Allen, Frederick Lewis, *Only Yesterday. An Informal History of* the Nineteen-Twenties (New York City: Blue Ribbon Books, 1931).
This book covers all aspects of the 1920s. The original hardcover version contains some fine illustrations.
2. Goldman, Eric F. *Rendezvous with Destiny* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1952).
This history of early twentieth century reform contains much on the 1920s. Recommended only for advanced students.

V. MATERIALS FOR CLASSROOM USE

By far the best source of advertisements I discovered is A.P. Johnson's six-volume *Library of Advertising* (Chicago: Chicago University of

Commerce, 1913). The six volumes could be brought in for use in Lesson Four, or selected ads could be photocopies at Sterling Memorial Library. Some sample ads follow.

(figure available in print form)
Johnson, A. P. *Library of Advertising* . (Chicago: Chicago University of Commerce, 1913.)
(figure available in print form)
Johnson, A. P. *Library of Advertising* . (Chicago: Chicago University of Commerce, 1913.)
(figure available in print form)
Johnson, A. P. *Library of Advertising* . (Chicago: Chicago University of Commerce, 1913.)
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Johnson, A. P. *Library of Advertising* . (Chicago: Chicago University of Commerce, 1913.)

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