



# THE NEW ERA

## CULTURE OF CONSUMPTION & ESCAPISM

### INTRODUCTION

On a sunny day in early March 1921, Warren G. Harding took the oath to become the twenty-ninth president of the United States. He had won a landslide election by promising a “return to normalcy.” “Our supreme task is the resumption of our onward, normal way,” he declared in his inaugural address. Two months later, he said, “America’s present need is not heroics, but healing; not nostrums, but normalcy; not revolution, but restoration.” The nation still reeled from the shock of World War I, the explosion of racial violence and political repression in 1919, and, a lingering “Red Scare” sparked by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.”

More than 115,000 American soldiers had lost their lives in barely a year of fighting in Europe. Then, between 1918 and 1920, nearly seven hundred thousand Americans died in a flu epidemic that hit nearly 20 percent of the American population. Waves of labor strikes, meanwhile, hit soon after the war. Radicals bellowed. Anarchists and others sent more than thirty bombs through the mail on May 1, 1919. After wartime controls fell, the economy tanked and national unemployment hit 20 percent. Farmers’ bankruptcy rates, already egregious, now skyrocketed. Harding could hardly deliver the peace that he promised, but his message nevertheless resonated among a populace wracked by instability.

The 1920s, of course, would be anything but “normal.” The decade so reshaped American life that it came to be called by many names: the New Era, the Jazz Age, the Age of the Flapper, the Prosperity Decade, and, most commonly, the Roaring Twenties. The mass production and consumption of automobiles, household appliances, film, and radio fueled a new economy and new standards of living. New mass entertainment introduced talking films and jazz while sexual and social restraints loosened. But at the same time, many Americans turned their back on political and economic reform, denounced America’s shifting demographics, stifled immigration, retreated toward “old-time religion,” and revived the Ku Klux Klan with millions of new members. On the other hand, many Americans fought harder than ever for equal rights and cultural observers noted the appearance of “the New Woman” and “the New Negro.” Old immigrant communities that had predated new immigration quotas, meanwhile, clung to their cultures and their native faiths. The 1920s were a decade of conflict and tension. But whatever it was, it was not “normalcy.”

### CONSUMPTION IN THE 1920S

“Change is in the very air Americans breathe, and consumer changes are the very bricks out of which we are building our new kind of civilization,” announced marketing expert and home economist Christine Frederick in her influential 1929 monograph, *Selling Mrs. Consumer*. The book, which was based on one of the earliest surveys of American buying habits, advised manufacturers and advertisers how to capture the purchasing power of women, who, according to Frederick, accounted for 90 percent of household expenditures. Aside from granting advertisers insight into the psychology of the “average” consumer, Frederick’s text captured the tremendous social and economic transformations that had been wrought over the course of her lifetime.

Indeed, the America of Frederick’s birth looked very different from the one she confronted in 1929. The consumer change she studied had resulted from the industrial expansion of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With the discovery of new energy sources and manufacturing technologies, industrial output flooded the market with a range of consumer products such as ready-to-wear clothing, convenience foods, and home appliances. By the end of the nineteenth century, output had risen so dramatically that many contemporaries feared supply had outpaced demand and that the nation would soon face the devastating financial consequences of overproduction. American businessmen

attempted to avoid this catastrophe by developing new merchandising and marketing strategies that transformed distribution and stimulated a new culture of consumer desire.

The department store stood at the center of this early consumer revolution. By the 1880s, several large dry-goods houses blossomed into modern retail department stores. These emporiums concentrated a broad array of goods under a single roof, allowing customers to purchase shirtwaists and gloves alongside toy trains and washbasins. To attract customers, department stores relied on more than variety. They also employed innovations in service (such as access to restaurants, writing rooms, and babysitting) and spectacle (such as elaborately decorated store windows, fashion shows, and interior merchandise displays). Marshall Field & Co. was among the most successful of these ventures. Located on State Street in Chicago, the company pioneered many of these strategies, including establishing a tearoom that provided refreshment to the well-heeled female shoppers who composed the store's clientele. Reflecting on the success of Field's marketing techniques, Thomas W. Goodspeed, an early trustee of the University of Chicago, wrote, "Perhaps the most notable of Mr. Field's innovations was that he made a store in which it was a joy to buy."

The joy of buying infected a growing number of Americans in the early twentieth century as the rise of mail-order catalogs, mass-circulation magazines, and national branding further stoked consumer desire. The automobile industry also fostered the new culture of consumption by promoting the use of credit. By 1927, more than 60 percent of American automobiles were sold on credit, and installment purchasing was made available for nearly every other large consumer purchase. Spurred by access to easy credit, consumer expenditures for household appliances, for example, grew by more than 120 percent between 1919 and 1929. Henry Ford's assembly line, which advanced production strategies practiced within countless industries, brought automobiles within the reach of middle-income Americans and further drove the spirit of consumerism. By 1925, Ford's factories were turning out a Model-T every ten seconds. The number of registered cars ballooned from just over nine million in 1920 to nearly twenty-seven million by the decade's end. Americans owned more cars than Great Britain, Germany, France, and Italy combined. In the late 1920s, 80 percent of the world's cars drove on American roads.

## ESCAPISM IN THE 1920S

As transformative as steam and iron had been in the previous century, gasoline and electricity—embodied most dramatically for many Americans in automobiles, film, and radio—propelled not only consumption but also the famed popular culture in the 1920s. "We wish to escape," wrote Edgar Burroughs, author of the Tarzan series, ". . . the restrictions of manmade laws, and the inhibitions that society has placed upon us." Burroughs authored a new Tarzan story nearly every year from 1914 until 1939. "We would each like to be Tarzan," he said. "At least I would; I admit it." Like many Americans in the 1920s, Burroughs sought to challenge and escape the constraints of a society that seemed more industrialized with each passing day.

Just like Burroughs, Americans escaped with great speed. Whether through the automobile, Hollywood's latest films, jazz records produced on Tin Pan Alley, or the hours spent listening to radio broadcasts of Jack Dempsey's prizefights, the public wrapped itself in popular culture. One observer estimated that Americans belted out the silly musical hit "Yes, We Have No Bananas" more than "The Star Spangled Banner" and all the hymns in all the hymnals combined.

As the automobile became more popular and more reliable, more people traveled more frequently and attempted greater distances. Women increasingly drove themselves to their own activities as well as those of their children. Vacationing Americans sped to Florida to escape northern winters. Young men and women fled the supervision of courtship, exchanging the staid parlor couch for sexual exploration in the backseat of a sedan. In order to serve and capture the growing number of drivers, Americans erected gas stations, diners, motels, and billboards along the roadside. Automobiles themselves became objects of entertainment: nearly one hundred thousand people gathered to watch drivers compete for the \$50,000 prize of the Indianapolis 500.

Meanwhile, the United States dominated the global film industry. By 1930, as moviemaking became more expensive, a handful of film companies took control of the industry. Immigrants, mostly of Jewish heritage from central and Eastern Europe, originally "invented Hollywood" because most turn-of-the-century middle- and upper-class Americans viewed cinema as lower-class entertainment. After their parents emigrated from

Poland in 1876, Harry, Albert, Sam, and Jack Warner (who were, according to family lore, given the name when an Ellis Island official could not understand their surname) founded Warner Bros. In 1918, Universal, Paramount, Columbia, and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) were all founded by or led by Jewish executives. Aware of their social status as outsiders, these immigrants (or sons of immigrants) purposefully produced films that portrayed American values of opportunity, democracy, and freedom.

Not content with distributing thirty-minute films in nickelodeons, film moguls produced longer, higher-quality films and showed them in palatial theaters that attracted those who had previously shunned the film industry. But as filmmakers captured the middle and upper classes, they maintained working-class moviegoers by blending traditional and modern values. Cecil B. DeMille's 1923 epic *The Ten Commandments* depicted orgiastic revelry, for instance, while still managing to celebrate a biblical story. But what good was a silver screen in a dingy theater? Moguls and entrepreneurs soon constructed picture palaces. Samuel Rothafel's Roxy Theater in New York held more than six thousand patrons who could be escorted by a uniformed usher past gardens and statues to their cushioned seat. In order to show *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the first movie with synchronized words and pictures, the Warners spent half a million to equip two theaters. "Sound is a passing fancy," one MGM producer told his wife, but Warner Bros.' assets, which increased from just \$5,000,000 in 1925 to \$230,000,000 in 1930, tell a different story.

Americans fell in love with the movies. Whether it was the surroundings, the sound, or the production budgets, weekly movie attendance skyrocketed from sixteen million in 1912 to forty million in the early 1920s. Hungarian immigrant William Fox, founder of Fox Film Corporation, declared that "the motion picture is a distinctly American institution" because "the rich rub elbows with the poor" in movie theaters. With no seating restriction, the one-price admission was accessible for nearly all Americans (African Americans, however, were either excluded or segregated). Women represented more than 60 percent of moviegoers, packing theaters to see Mary Pickford, nicknamed "America's Sweetheart," who was earning one million dollars a year by 1920 through a combination of film and endorsements contracts. Pickford and other female stars popularized the "flapper," a woman who favored short skirts, makeup, and cigarettes.

As Americans went to the movies more and more, at home they had the radio. Italian scientist Guglielmo Marconi transmitted the first transatlantic wireless (radio) message in 1901, but radios in the home did not become available until around 1920, when they boomed across the country. Around half of American homes contained a radio by 1930. Radio stations brought entertainment directly into the living room through the sale of advertisements and sponsorships, from *The Maxwell House Hour* to the *Lucky Strike Orchestra*. Soap companies sponsored daytime dramas so frequently that an entire genre—"soap operas"—was born, providing housewives with audio adventures that stood in stark contrast to common chores. Though radio stations were often under the control of corporations like the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) or the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), radio programs were less constrained by traditional boundaries in order to capture as wide an audience as possible, spreading popular culture on a national level.

Radio exposed Americans to a broad array of music. Jazz, a uniquely American musical style popularized by the African-American community in New Orleans, spread primarily through radio stations and records. The *New York Times* had ridiculed jazz as "savage" because of its racial heritage, but the music represented cultural independence to others. As Harlem-based musician William Dixon put it, "It did seem, to a little boy, that . . . white people really owned everything. But that wasn't entirely true. They didn't own the music that I played." The fast-paced and spontaneity-laced tunes invited the listener to dance along. "When a good orchestra plays a 'rag,'" dance instructor Vernon Castle recalled, "one has simply got to move." Jazz became a national sensation, played and heard by whites and blacks both. Jewish Lithuanian-born singer Al Jolson—whose biography inspired *The Jazz Singer* and who played the film's titular character—became the most popular singer in America.

The 1920s also witnessed the maturation of professional sports. Play-by-play radio broadcasts of major collegiate and professional sporting events marked a new era for sports, despite the institutionalization of racial segregation in most. Suddenly, Jack Dempsey's left crosses and right uppercuts could almost be felt in homes across the United States. Dempsey, who held the heavyweight championship for most of the decade, drew million-dollar gates and inaugurated "Dempseymania" in newspapers across the country. Red Grange, who carried the football with a similar recklessness, helped popularize professional football, which was then in the shadow of the college game. Grange left the University of Illinois before graduating to join the Chicago Bears in 1925. "There had never been such evidence of public interest since our professional league began," recalled Bears owner George Halas of Grange's arrival.

Perhaps no sports figure left a bigger mark than did Babe Ruth. Born George Herman Ruth, the “Sultan of Swat” grew up in an orphanage in Baltimore’s slums. Ruth’s emergence onto the national scene was much needed, as the baseball world had been rocked by the so-called Black Sox Scandal in which eight players allegedly agreed to throw the 1919 World Series. Ruth hit fifty-four home runs in 1920, which was more than any other team combined. Baseball writers called Ruth a superman, and more Americans could recognize Ruth than they could then-president Warren G. Harding.

After an era of destruction and doubt brought about by World War I, Americans craved heroes who seemed to defy convention and break boundaries. Dempsey, Grange, and Ruth dominated their respective sports, but only Charles Lindbergh conquered the sky. On May 21, 1927, Lindbergh concluded the first ever nonstop solo flight from New York to Paris. Armed with only a few sandwiches, some bottles of water, paper maps, and a flashlight, Lindbergh successfully navigated over the Atlantic Ocean in thirty-three hours. Some historians have dubbed Lindbergh the “hero of the decade,” not only for his transatlantic journey but because he helped to restore the faith of many Americans in individual effort and technological advancement. In a world so recently devastated by machine guns, submarines, and chemical weapons, Lindbergh’s flight demonstrated that technology could inspire and accomplish great things. Outlook Magazine called Lindbergh “the heir of all that we like to think is best in America.”

The decade’s popular culture seemed to revolve around escape. Coney Island in New York marked new amusements for young and old. Americans drove their sedans to massive theaters to enjoy major motion pictures. Radio towers broadcasted the bold new sound of jazz, the adventures of soap operas, and the feats of amazing athletes. Dempsey and Grange seemed bigger, stronger, and faster than any who dared to challenge them. Babe Ruth smashed home runs out of ball parks across the country. And Lindbergh escaped the earth’s gravity and crossed an entire ocean. Neither Dempsey nor Ruth nor Lindbergh made Americans forget the horrors of World War I and the chaos that followed, but they made it seem as if the future would be that much brighter.

## QUESTIONS TO ANSWER FROM THE READING

35PTS

1. In what ways did the 1920s bring about a consumer revolution?
2. What was the role of the department store in American consumer culture during the period?
3. The advent of what financial instrument led to a drastic increase in American automobile ownership?
4. How did industrialization breed both the desire for and ability to escape for Americans?
5. Describe the rise of Hollywood during the period. Why were films so popular with Americans?
6. What role did the radio play in American consumerism and entertainment?
7. Who were the heroes of the day? What are some similarities and differences between the types of celebrities popular in the 1920s and those that are popular today?