

4 HOW WAS SOCIETY CHANGING IN THE 1920s?

Changing attitudes and values

THE PROSPERITY OF the 1920s brought a change in lifestyle for many Americans: more people owned their own homes and cars, and had labour-saving devices to help with housework. They had more leisure time and more money to spend. The entertainment industry grew, with dancehalls and clubs opening up. There were wider changes in social attitudes. People were influenced by what they heard on the radio and saw at the cinema. Prohibition encouraged wild partying where alcohol flowed freely. The fact that it was illegal made it all the more exciting. This was, after all, the 'Roaring Twenties'.

The car

The impact of the car on life in the USA cannot be exaggerated. It gave people great freedom to travel, whether to visit friends or take day trips to the cities. Many people moved out to live in the suburbs during the 1920s because they could drive into work. The car meant that young people could escape their parents and go off to cinemas or clubs. Not everybody was in favour of the car: some people thought that it was leading to a moral decline in young people, giving them the 'opportunity for sexual freedom'; others blamed it for making crime easier.



SOURCE 2 College students in a Ford car, 1926

SOURCE 1 R. and H. Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, 1937; car ownership was seen as very important

“We’d rather do without clothes than give up the car. I never feel as close to my family as I do when we are together in the car.”

Radio

America’s first radio station – Station KDKA – was started in 1920. The radio quickly became an important part of life. By 1930 40 per cent of all homes in the USA had a radio set. The radio gave Americans access to new types of music from dance bands to jazz. It also created a national habit – listening to sporting events that they could not go to see. Sporting personalities, like baseball stars, became national figures because of the radio.



SOURCE 3 Babe Ruth, the most famous baseball player in the 1920s



SOURCE 4 Dancing the Charleston in Broadway. Before the war dancing had been formal and slow. It gave way to fast, rhythmic dances like the Charleston

Jazz

The 1920s has been called the 'Jazz Age'. This is because black music – whether jazz, blues or soul – dominated all other music at this time. It arrived with the great black migration to the northern cities and had a tremendous impact on the young. It fed into dancehalls, popular music and stage musicals. Older people saw it as a corrupting influence linked to sexual excess, as Source 7 shows.

SOURCE 7 Anne Shaw Faulkner, 'Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?', in *Ladies' Home Journal*, 1921

“Jazz originally was the accompaniment of the voodoo dancer, stimulating the half-crazed barbarian to the vilest deeds. The weird chant has been employed by other barbaric people to stimulate brutality and sensuality. That it has a demoralizing effect on the human brain has been demonstrated by many scientists . . . Jazz stimulates to extreme deeds, to a breaking away from all rules and conventions; it is harmful and dangerous, and its influence is wholly bad.”

Clubs and dancing

Visiting clubs and dancehalls became enormously popular in the 1920s. The slow, formal dances of pre-war America were replaced by fast dances like the Charleston and more rhythmic dances that had a more openly sexual element to them. Dancing had such a dramatic effect that many people condemned it (see Source 5).

SOURCE 5 Rev. Burke Culpepper, at Mount Vernon Methodist Episcopal Church, 1925

“Dancing is a divorce feeder. It is heathen, animalistic and damnable. It degrades womanhood and manhood. Now is the time to say plainly that it is one of the most pernicious of all modern customs.”



SOURCE 6 Duke Ellington, the famous jazz composer, pianist and band leader

Sex and the cinema

One of the biggest areas of change and controversy was sexual morals. Sex outside marriage became more common, and contraceptive advice was openly available for the first time. A big gap was developing between the attitudes of young people and their parents.

Young Americans in particular visited the cinema two or three times per week. They were greatly affected by what they saw on screen and by the lives of the 'stars' off screen. People wanted to know what their favourite stars were wearing and doing – and to copy the fads and fashions in their own lives. Studio publicity agents made sure that the magazines got all the information they needed to keep their readers interested.



SOURCE 8 Clara Bow – the 'It' Girl. Everyone knew that it meant sex

SOURCE 9 An advertisement for the movie *Alimony*, 1925

“ Brilliant men, beautiful jazz babies, champagne baths, midnight revels, petting parties in the purple dawn, all ending in one terrific smashing climax that makes you gasp. ”

The much freer sex of the 1920s horrified many older Americans. They blamed the cinema for its blatant use of sex symbols such as Clara Bow and Rudolf Valentino.

They were shocked by the morality in Hollywood films and by the private lives of some of the screen stars. Public scandals, like the mysterious death of a young girl at a party given by Fatty Arbuckle (a famous comic film star), led to a call for censorship. But Hollywood got in first by setting up the Hays code which specified that: 'no film shall be produced which shall lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin.' Nudity was not allowed and the length of kisses was restricted.



SOURCE 10 Rudolf Valentino was the first male star to be sold on sex appeal. The studio publicity machine reported how women fainted when they saw him. When Valentino died tragically in 1926 people filled the streets outside the funeral parlour where the body lay, and 100,000 filed past his corpse. A hundred were injured in the struggle to gain admittance



SOURCE 11 Theda Bara (real name Theodosia Goodman) was manufactured to be a 'bad girl' – her film name was an anagram of 'Arab Death'. She was said to have occult powers and be frightfully wicked. Her first picture, *A Fool There Was*, created a sensation. For years the film's most famous line, 'kiss me, my fool', was a popular catch-phrase

1. How do Sources 8–11 show why the cinema was regarded as responsible for the decline in morality?
2. Study the painting in Source 12 carefully.
 - a) List all the activities you can spot.
 - b) Look at the woman on the right: note all the points about her that suggest changes in women's lives and their position in society.
 - c) What impression of the 1920s do you get from the painting?
 - d) In what ways is this painting useful to historians writing about changing lifestyles in the 1920s?
3. Copy and complete a chart like the one below, using evidence from pages 36–39.

Why some people saw the 1920s as an exciting period of changes in behaviour and attitudes

Why some people saw the 1920s as a very worrying decade of moral decline



SOURCE 12 Mural, *Entertainment*, by Thomas Hart Benton