

CONFLICTING HISTORICAL VIEWPOINTS: NO. 12

Were the Twenties Roaring and Reactionary?

Few decades in American history have suffered more superficial analysis than the 1920s. In popular thought and in all too many serious works of history, the years between the armistice and the crash have been described — after a contemporary newspaper advertisement for a motion picture — as years of “beautiful jazz babies, champagne baths, midnight revels, [and] petting parties in the purple dawn.” Most studies of the postwar decade, like the talkies, are animated by stock characters typecast as “flaming youth,” “discontented intellectuals,” or “self-complacent Babbits.”

This conception of the 1920s as the Jazz Age of a Lost Generation was the work of many hands. But its chief architect was the self-styled “retrospective journalist” Frederick Lewis Allen, whose *Only Yesterday* (1931) is probably the most readable and widely read account of the decade. In Allen’s view, it was a unique segment of American life with an atmosphere

and style of its own. Isolated somehow from its past and curiously unconnected to its future, the decade was a frivolous interlude in which a nation, on the rebound from Wilsonian idealism, plunged into “a revolution of manners and morals.”

Allen’s portrait, however impressionistic and superficial, profoundly influenced a generation of historians who viewed the period as an unfortunate interregnum between progressivism and the New Deal. The two best overviews of the period, William E. Leuchtenburg’s lively social history (*The Perils of Prosperity*, 1958) and John D. Hicks’s political, economic, and diplomatic survey (*Republican Ascendancy*, 1960), emphasize the decade’s more frivolous and retrograde impulses.

In the late 1950s, however, more subtle and complex images of the 1920s began to emerge. Growing numbers of scholars became skeptical about conventional emphasis on the spectacular, the bizarre, and the unique. Upon close examination, many found continuity as well as change in the postwar decade. Parting the curtain of speakeasies, marathon dances, and raccoon coats, they perceived what Arthur Link has called “the exciting new frontier of American historical writing.” A good example of this new view is Roderick Nash’s *The Nervous Generation* (1970), which did much to mute the roar in the Roaring Twenties. A survey of formal thought and popular culture, this study pointedly deemphasized the degenerate bohemian and the flagpole sitter and argued that the period was notable for neither disillusioned cynicism nor happy revelry.

Similarly, recent political and diplomatic histories no longer teem with one-dimensional political Philistines and resolute isolationists. Arthur Link (*American Historical Review*, July 1959) and Clark Chambers (*Seedtime of Reform*, 1963), for example, revealed powerful reform currents at work in a decade once presumed to be conservative. Robert K. Murray (*The Harding Era*, 1969), Donald McCoy (*Calvin Coolidge*, 1967), and David Burner (*Herbert Hoover*, 1978), among others, have offered provocative new studies of these Republican presidents that help dispel familiar, oversimple notions and that differ sharply in important particulars from earlier and markedly less sympathetic biographies. And foreign relations specialists, notably William Appleman Williams, have challenged “*The Legend of Isolationism in the 1920s*” (*Science and Society*, Winter 1954).

Thus, in the past few decades, historical perceptions of the 1920s have been altered. Although many areas of disagreement remain, there is broad scholarly discontent with Jazz Age stereotypes. However enjoyable and enchanting, the traditional, breezy survey à la Allen lacked the depth and complexity historians now bring to their analyses of the 1919–1929 decennium.

FOR FURTHER READING

The works mentioned above by Allen and Hicks, however flawed in emphasis, remain useful introductions to the period. William Leuchtenburg’s recently revised *The Perils of Prosperity* (1993) is perhaps the most useful general survey of the 1920s.