

Jeffrey Carlyle

Professor Ensley

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Conflict During the Roaring Twenties

The 1920s in America is remembered as the "Roaring Twenties," a timer of great prosperity between World War I and the depths of the Great Depression of the 1930s; however, a review of chapter 7 of *Conflict and Consensus*, reveals that during the 1920s there was a great deal of conflict between the groups that comprised the population of the United States. America of the 1920s was marked by a great deal of conflict.

The nationalism inspired by World War I turned after the war to making the United States a more homogeneous culture. Eric Goldman in the essay The Shame of the Babbitts recounts the story of one Bagdasar K. Baghdigian. Upon completing course registration forms at a Kansas City school, the teacher noticed his Armenian name and quipped, "Oh, give that up and change your name to Smith, Jones or a name like that and become Americanized. Give up everything you brought with you from the Old Country. You do not bring anything worth while anyway."

Instead of influencing Baghdigian to change his ways and become Americanized, it hardened his position that he was an Armenian and still loyal to his Armenian heritage. Indeed Goldman contends, "the melting-pot had failed in important ways" (316). The Americanism of the 1920s was not "the two-way procedure of bringing all the American people into a common community", but the "one-hundred-percent Americanism" of the 1920s defined that all members of the country should conform to ideals of the white, Anglo-Saxon protestants who were not recent immigrants to the country.

The 1920s brought increased segregation to the country. Much of the segregation was not sanctioned by the state, but instead a by-product of groups trying to maintain their own identity. African-American leaders of

the time organized a "Back to Africa" movement. The largest of these movements led by Marcus Aurelius Garvey, had four million supporters at one point; however, Garvey was later reveal to be corrupt. The money his members paid in dues went to finance "very good-looking women" and ornate offices. The chauvinism of the African-Americans of the time was deep. African-American writer James Weldon Johnson claimed that the Negro was "the creator of the only things artistic that have yet sprung from American soil and been universally acknowledged as distinctive American products" (318-319).

American Catholics also tried to fight the forces of one-hundred-percent Americanism. The 1920s saw the creation of the National Catholic Welfare Conference. The conference encouraged Catholics to attend parochial schools, the Catholic Boy Scouts, and a number of other Catholic groups. According to Goldman, the Catholic populous often supported Catholic political candidates based solely on their religious beliefs. He sights the case of Al Smith in the 1928 presidential election and the Congressional campaigns of New York's La Guardia as examples. The segregation of the American people prevented the formation of a general consensus.

Many of the white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants of America feared the new immigrants. During the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan saw rejuvenation after it expanded its mission as not only to be anti-black but also to be anti-immigrant, anti-Jewish, and anti-Catholic. The Ku Klux Klan also broke its traditional confines of the south. In Mid-Western states such as Indiana and Ohio, the Klan enjoyed great popularity. In the height of its popularity, the Klan controlled the governments of Arkansas and Oklahoma. In Indiana and Texas, the Klan could organize rallies of seventy-five thousand supporters. The Klan also had influence in upstate New York, Pennsylvania, and as far west as Colorado. The Klan used the pulpits of many Protestant congregations to expound their propaganda.

There was a great anti-Catholic feeling across the country. Michigan and Nebraska considered amending their state constitutions to ban

parochial schools. Tom Watson, a candidate for Senate in Georgia, spread the impression that Woodrow Wilson had become a tool of the Pope, and Florida's governor Sidney J. Catts told Floridians that the Pope planned to invade that state and establish the Vatican there. The anti-Catholic feeling was exploited by the Ku Klux Klan to help increase their membership.

Not even the Ku Klux Klan was free from attack. The offices of a Klan newspaper in Chicago were bombed. In places like Pittsburgh; Steubenville, Ohio; and Amboy, New Jersey angry mobs sometime comprised of immigrants and sometimes comprised of Jews and Catholics attacked Klan gatherings and beat the Klan members who attended them.

Recent immigrants to the United States usually stayed segregated from the rest of the American people. For the most part, they remained confined to the large cities. In addition, prohibition served to turn many immigrants into criminal. To many immigrants, there was no taboo around drinking so once in America, they continued to consume alcohol despite the nationwide prohibition. Many immigrants found that an easy way to make money was to manufacture, smuggle, or sell alcohol. This helped to fuel the belief by some that immigrants were predisposed to breaking the law.

There were also a number of instances of actions taken against immigrants. John Higham in the essay The Tribal Twenties recounts the attacks against the Italian immigrants of West Frankfort, Illinois. California passed a law by popular initiative that forbade Japanese immigrants from owning land. Across the country, immigrants were forbidden from holding certain jobs.

The nations' Jewish population faced discrimination as well. By one estimate, Jews were excluded from 90 percent of the office jobs in New York. The nations' universities also began to curb Jewish enrollment. Even industrialist Henry Ford began to publish anti-Semitic journals.

The economic prosperity of the 1920s was not broad based. The top 0.1 percent of Americans received an aggregate income equal to that of

the bottom 42 percent. According to statistics cited by Goldman, \$2,000 was required to provide for a family during the 1920s; however, almost one third of the workers of the country received less than that, and one-fifth of the country received less than \$1,000. Two hundred corporations controlled nearly all of American industry. In 1929, one-quarter of the nations employment was in farming; however, farm prices remained stagnant following the end of World War I.

The 1920s were a time not of the melting pot, but instead of a growing disparity between the ethnic and economic groups that comprised that nation. The distrust between groups and paranoia that accompanied it prevented any accurate measure of a national consensus. The reforms of one group, like the introduction of prohibition, served to turn others into criminals. The deep-seated divide between groups of Americans was important. Even the supposed economic prosperity of the country during this time period was only shared by a small number of individuals.