• What activist movements did women reformers undertake in the 1920s, and how successful were these?
• To what extent was Republicans’ foreign policy during the 1920s consistent with their domestic agenda?
• How did grassroots conflicts over race, religion, and immigration shape politics in the 1920s?

Intellectual Modernism

Before World War I, dramatic forms of modernism had emerged in art and literature. In the 1920s, these became—like political campaigns—sites of struggle between modernity and tradition, secularism and faith. The horrors of the war prompted many American intellectuals, like their European counterparts, to question long-standing assumptions about civilization, progress, and the alleged superiority of Western cultures over so-called primitive ways of life. Some of these intellectual movements—such as the Harlem Renaissance—emerged from the social and economic upheavals that the Great War had wrought at home.

Harlem in Vogue

As the Great Migration tripled New York’s black population in the decade after 1910, Harlem stood as “the symbol of liberty and the Promised Land to Negroes everywhere,” as one black minister put it. Talented black artists and writers flocked to the district, where they broke with genteel traditions and asserted ties to Africa. Poet Langston Hughes drew on African American music in *The Weary Blues* (1926), a groundbreaking collection of poems. He captured the upbeat spirit of the Harlem Renaissance when he asserted, “I am a Negro—and beautiful.”

Like Hughes, other writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance championed race pride. Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, and Jessie Fauset explored the black experience and represented in fiction what philosopher Alain Locke called the “New Negro.” Painter Jacob Lawrence, who had grown up in crowded tenement districts of the urban North, used bold shapes and vivid colors to portray the daily life, aspirations, and suppressed anger of African Americans. Author Zora Neale Hurston spent a decade collecting folklore in the South and the Caribbean and incorporated that material into short stories and novels. This creative work embodied the ongoing struggle to find a way, as the influential black intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois explained, “to be both a Negro and an American.”

Jazz

To millions of Americans, the most notable part of the Harlem Renaissance was jazz. Though the origins of the word jazz are unclear, many historians believe it was a slang term for sexual intercourse—an etymology that makes sense, given the association of early jazz with urban vice districts. As a musical form, jazz coalesced in New Orleans and other parts of the South before World War I. Borrowing from blues, ragtime, and other popular forms, jazz musicians developed an ensemble style in which individual performers, keeping a rapid ragtime beat, improvised over and around a basic melodic line. The majority of early jazz musicians were black, but white performers, some of whom had more formal training, injected elements of European concert music.
In the 1920s, as jazz spread nationwide, musicians developed its signature mode of performance, the improvised solo. The key figure in this development was cornetist and trumpeter Louis Armstrong. A native of New Orleans, Armstrong learned his craft while playing in the saloons and brothels of Storyville, the city’s vice district. Armstrong showed an inexhaustible capacity for melodic invention. His dazzling solos inspired other musicians to try solos. The white trumpeter Bix Beiderbecke, for example, pioneered an influential bright-toned style. By the late 1920s, soloists had become the celebrities of jazz, thrilling audiences with their improvisational skills (see Voices from Abroad, “Patrick 'Spike' Hughes and Leo Vauchant: Europeans Encounter American Jazz,” p. 700).

As jazz spread, it generally followed the routes of the Great Migration from the South to northern and western cities, where it met consumers primed to receive it. Before World War I, ragtime and other forms of dance music had created broad, enthusiastic audiences for African American music. Most cities had plentiful venues where jazz could be featured. By the 1920s, radio also helped popularize jazz, as the emerging record industry churned out records of the latest tunes. New York became the hub of this commercially lucrative jazz. While the New Orleans style persisted in Chicago, attracting enthusiasts across racial lines, New York’s jazz, which featured less syncopation and fewer blues inflections, had more mainstream appeal. White listeners flocked to theaters, ballrooms, and expensive clubs to hear the “Harlem sound” from the orchestras of Duke Ellington and other stars. Yet those who hailed “primitive” black music rarely suspended their racial condescension: Visiting a mixed-race club became known as “slumming.”
VOICES FROM ABROAD

Patrick "Spike" Hughes and Leo Vaughtant
Europeans Encounter American Jazz

U.S. involvement in World War I carried American jazz to Europe. After the war ended, some discharged African American soldiers remained in France. Many of these veterans were musicians who quickly found work in Parisian nightclubs, performing for war-weary audiences ready for the pleasures of the new music. Soon, forward-looking European musicians adopted the form and introduced it to cities across the continent. Below, two Europeans comment on their experience of jazz during the 1920s.

Patrick "Spike" Hughes was a British musician, composer, and journalist. In 1926 he saw the all-black revue Blackbirds, which featured an American jazz orchestra led by Fife Davies.

I was hearing, for the first time, Negro music played with all its characteristic colorfulness and vitality. The initial impact of the orchestra was rather strange; here was a group of wind and percussion players using familiar instruments such as trumpets, trombones, saxophones, clarinet, piano and the rest, who played tunes with the most elementary harmonic sequence, who yet succeeded in sounding entirely new...

Whereas the European convention demands that brass instruments should be used in orchestras only for festive or solemn moments in music, here was a band which used them for gay, farcical and sentimental purposes so that the lions we knew could roar could also coo gently as any sucking dove.

Above all things, though, I learned from the Blackbirds orchestra that the music which cathedral organists and ill-informed writers of letters to the newspapers described as "barbaric," "undisciplined," "crude," and "atavistic," was in fact based on a remarkable technical precision of execution in ensemble passages, and a strict, unalterable set of rules governing all improvised playing.

Born Leo Arnaud, French drummer and trombonist Leo Vaughtant became a noted jazz musician in Paris. He also studied classical composition and later, after emigrating to the United States, wrote Hollywood film scores. Here he recalls the Parisian jazz scene as he experienced it after World War I.

[On Sunday evenings in Paris, after playing an afternoon show] there was nothing to do. So I'd go somewhere to jam. I'd go to the Abbaye Thélème or Zelli's—anywhere. I knew all the musicians so I could go where I wanted. Most of the trombone players were guys that sat there and played from the stocks. So I could go anywhere and be welcome. I wouldn't go to the big places. I'd go to the little clubs and


ANALYZING THE EVIDENCE

- What do Hughes's and Vaughtant's comments suggest about why so many discharged African American soldiers chose to remain in France after the war?
- What do Hughes and Vaughtant view as truly innovative in jazz? What do their remarks suggest about the broader critical reception of jazz in Europe?
- In America, jazz was popularly associated with the "primitive." How do you think these European observers would have responded to that association?
Through jazz, the recording industry began to develop products specifically aimed at urban working-class blacks. The breakthrough came in 1920, when Otto K. E. Heinemann, a producer who sold immigrant records in Yiddish, Swedish, and other languages, recorded singer Mamie Smith performing "Crazy Blues." This smash hit prompted big recording labels like Columbia and Paramount to develop "race records" for black audiences. Yet, while its marketing reflected the segregation of American society at large, jazz brought black music to the center stage of American culture. It became the era's signature music, so much so that novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald dubbed the 1920s the "Jazz Age."

Marcus Garvey and the UNIA

Harlem produced not only a tremendous burst of artistic creativity but also broad political aspirations. It was no accident that the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which arose in the 1920s to mobilize African American workers, was based in Harlem. The UNIA's charismatic leader, Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey, championed black separatism. Garvey urged followers to move to Africa, arguing that peoples of African descent would never be treated justly in white-run countries.

The UNIA grew rapidly in the early 1920s and soon claimed four million followers, including many recent migrants to northern industrial centers. It published a newspaper, Negro World, opened "liberty halls" in northern cities, and solicited funds for the Black Star Line steamship company, which Garvey intended to trade with the West Indies and carry American blacks back to Africa. But the UNIA declined as quickly as it had risen. In 1925, Garvey was imprisoned for mail fraud because of his solicitations for the Black Star Line. President Coolidge commuted his sentence but ordered his deportation to Jamaica. Without Garvey's leadership, the movement collapsed.

The UNIA left a legacy of activism, however, especially among working-class blacks. Garvey and his followers represented an emerging pan-Africanism: They argued that people of African descent, in all parts of the world, had a common destiny and should cooperate in political action. Black men's military service in Europe during World War I, the Pan-African Congress that had sought representation at the treaty table, protests against the U.S. occupation of Haiti, and modernist experiments in literature and the arts all contributed to this emerging transnational consciousness. One African American historian wrote in 1927: "The grandiose schemes of Marcus Garvey gave to the race a consciousness as it had never possessed before. The dream of a united Africa, not less than a trip to France, challenged the imagination, and the soul of the Negro experienced a new sense of freedom."

Critiquing American Life

Paralleling the defiant creativity of Harlem, other artists and intellectuals of the 1920s registered various types of dissent. Some had experienced firsthand the shock and devastation of World War I, an experience so searing that American writer Gertrude Stein dubbed those who survived it the "Lost Generation." Novelist John Dos Passos railed at the obscenity of "Mr. Wilson's war" in *The Three Soldiers* (1921). Ernest Hemingway's novels *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) portrayed the futility and dehumanizing consequences of war. Such work linked American writers to European counterparts such as Siegfried Sassoon,
Rebecca West, and Erich Maria Remarque, who explored the devastating impact of trench warfare. In a broad sense, the cataclysm of World War I challenged intellectuals’ belief in progress. In his influential poem *The Waste Land* (1922), American expatriate T. S. Eliot, living in Britain, evoked the shattered fragments of a civilization in ruins.

The war also accelerated a literary trend of exploring the dark side of the human psyche. In such dramas as *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), for example, playwright Eugene O'Neill offered a Freudian view of humans’ raw, ungovernable sexual impulses. O’Neill first made his mark with *The Emperor Jones* (1920), which appealed to Americans’ fascination with Haiti. Telling the story of a black dictator driven from power by an uprising of his people, *The Emperor Jones* offered an ambiguous message. The drama’s black protagonist was played not by the customary white actors made up in blackface, but by African Americans who won acclaim for their performances. W. E. B. Du Bois called the popular Broadway drama “a splendid tragedy.” But many blacks were dissatisfied with the play’s primitivism; one actor who played Emperor Jones altered the script to omit the offensive word nigger. The white crowds who made *The Emperor Jones* a hit, much like those who flocked to Harlem’s jazz clubs, indulged their fascination with “primitive” sexuality while projecting those traits onto people of African descent.

In a decade of conflict between traditional and modern worldviews, many writers exposed what they saw as the hypocrisy of small-town and rural life (see Comparing American Voices, “Urban Writers Describe Small-Town America,” pp. 704–705). The most savage critic of conformity was Sinclair Lewis, whose novel *Babbitt* (1922) depicted the disillusionment of an ordinary small-town salesman. *Babbitt* was widely denounced as un-American; *Elmer Gantry* (1927), a satire about a greedy evangelical minister on the make, provoked even greater outrage. But critics found Lewis’s work superb, and in 1930 he became the first American to win the Nobel Prize for literature. Even more famous was F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which offered a scathing indictment of Americans’ mindless pursuit of pleasure and material wealth.

- In what ways did the Harlem Renaissance and pan-Africanism reflect changes in African American experience?
- What were the origins of jazz, and what role did it play in the culture of the 1920s?
- What criticisms of mainstream culture did modernist American writers offer in the 1920s?

**From Boom to Bust**

Spurred by rapid expansion during the war, American business thrived in the 1920s. Corporations expanded more and more into overseas markets, while at home the decade brought the flowering of a national consumer culture that emphasized leisure and amusement. But some sectors of the economy, notably agriculture, never recovered from a sharp recession in the wake of World War I. Meanwhile, close observers worried over the rapid economic growth and easy credit that fueled the “Roaring Twenties.” Their fears proved well-founded. In 1929, these factors helped trigger the Great Depression.

**Business after the War**

By the 1920s, large-scale corporations headed by chief executive officers (CEOs) had replaced individual- or family-run enterprises as the major form of American business organization. Through successive waves of consolidation, the two hundred largest businesses came to control almost half of the country’s nonbanking corporate wealth by 1929. The greatest number of mergers occurred in rising industries such as chemicals (with DuPont emerging as the leader) and electrical appliances (General Electric). Rarely did any single corporation monopolize an entire field; rather, an oligopoly of a few major producers tended to dominate each market. At the same time, mergers between Wall Street banks enhanced the role of New York City as the financial center of the United States and, increasingly, the world. U.S. companies exercised growing international power. Seeking cheaper livestock, giant American meatpackers opened plants in Argentina. The United Fruit Company developed plantations in Costa Rica, Honduras, and Guatemala. General Electric set up production facilities in Latin America, Asia, and Australia. Republican “dollar diplomats” in Washington worked to support such enterprises.

Immediately after World War I, however, the United States experienced a series of economic shocks. They began with rampant inflation, as prices jumped by one-third in 1919 alone. Then came a sharp two-year recession that raised unemployment to 10 percent. Finally, the economy began to grow smoothly and more Americans began to benefit from the success of corporate enterprise. Between 1922 and 1929, the gross domestic product grew from $74 billion to $103 billion; in the same years, national per capita income rose an impressive 24 percent. Consumer goods, particularly the automobile, sparked this expansion. Not only did the