

"the modern temper:
the american culture
and society in the
1920s" by lynn
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[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



“ The modern Temper: The American Culture and Society in the 1920s” by Lynn Dumenil Essay Sample

In Lynn Dumenil’s account of the era commonly referred to as the “ roaring twenties” in *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* there is an intentional emphasis placed on the effort to dispel the popular notion that the new, revolutionary transformations in culture and society that took place at this time in history were direct results of the First World War. In the stead of this less insightful means of analyzing the 1920’s in America by assuming that the post war era was a direct creation and consequence from the war, the author offers the suggestion that the seeds of the twenties were planted much earlier during the industrial revolution and through the effects of a culture rapidly industrializing in a capitalist society. The war period simply served to expedite the process by contributing to the economic boom that created the prosperity of the twenties, sparking the migration of the rural population of African Americans and whites into urban areas, and by increasing opportunities for women in the work force.

Furthermore, Dumenil goes even as far to say that the popular image and connotation of this era being a time of unparalleled prosperity and success in America is also somewhat inaccurate. For the most part, this view of America becoming an evermore opulent society during this period is correct, but, just as in many other aspects of American society, not everyone had an equal share of this abundant prosperity. The author mentions how the farming industry had never fully recovered from the negative economic effects of war

which caused many farmers to live in poverty throughout the entire period of the twenties.

Additionally, African Americans and other minorities were still victims of racial inequality and were not able to partake in the increased opportunities for work that would secure a more comfortable life. The main beneficiaries of the capitalistic, industrial growth in America were the middle and upper class White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, or WASP's, who lived in ever expanding urbanized areas. It was these fortunate members of society who more often enjoyed the increase of the standard of living brought about by the mass production of goods such as electric irons and vacuum cleaners that contributed to the simplification of life's everyday tasks.

A central theme that pervades many of the factors that contributed to the shift in American culture that made this period so unique is the rapid urbanization that was taking place. According to the 1920 census, exactly one half of the American population lived in the city, the largest percentage to date. However, this calculation can be somewhat misleading when one considers the fact that the cutoff point for an urban population was 2, 500 people. Even during this time in history 2, 500 people was not a significantly high number in regards to population. Regardless, the effects of this trend were clear.

Dumenil describes how this process of urbanization was a natural and obvious evolution from the previous Victorian era into a period that mirrors our own modern way of life. One major factor that helped contribute to this

end was the migration of African Americans to northern cities in search of work and escape from the racist south; however, this trend was not exclusive to African Americans. Other minorities such as Mexicans and rural whites also moved to the city in search of good paying jobs created by the economic boom.

As the cities grew and became more diverse the ethnic pluralism contained therein formed a foundation of fundamental resentment of foreigners that has survived in one form or another to this day. The most concentrated method in which this nativism surfaced was in the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan. Started in our own backyard in Stone Mountain, the "new" KKK had a new policy that was much more modern and open minded as compared to its predecessor. Instead of reserving their hate only for African Americans, the new Klan thought all who were not WASP's as they themselves were should have an equal entitlement to their hate and persecution. This new policy was a direct result of the increased competition that immigrants and African Americans brought into the cities as they all frantically scurried there to find work.

Washington was not oblivious of this mind set either as legislation was passed during this period that had the objective of limiting the number of possible immigrants into America by setting a barrier depending on each country's past immigration levels. Many immigrant communities also saw prohibition as a blatant attack on their lifestyle by imposing a specific cultural value on them that they did not share.

Women of this era, conversely, were able to gain much headway in their quest for gender equality. Putting more emphasis on the more legitimate, professional means of liberation rather than the flapper ideals, the author spells out how the women's suffrage amendment did much to enhance women's role in politics and how the war helped increase opportunities available to women in the workforce. Even though women were only able to get few concessions politically, were still paid less than men for the same work, and when the men came back from war the stereotypically male jobs were quickly given back to the men, many victories for gender equality were won during this period by the women of the country. Again, however, these victories rarely meant much to minorities as they were rarely given equal treatment.

There are aspects to this period that I feel this particular text does not give proper acknowledgement to. Dumenil does a good job of showing the prevailing winds of the time and analyzing the forces that pushed society forward into what it is today; however, little is said about the opposing forces that tried to collectively pull back the reigns of capitalism, secularism, and urbanization. These forces, which came in the form of the Industrial Workers of the World, William Jennings Bryan, and many others who attempted to retain the Victorian way of life also played an instrumental role in shaping society through their broad range of dissent from the path of urbanization and secularization that America traveled throughout this period.

Throughout this text, Dumenil attempts to paint a more accurate picture of how American society was formed in the temper of the twenties. She

accomplishes this by accurately capturing the fire of this explosive era and by documenting the various cultural and political changes taking place to give greater clarity as to the influence these events had on our society. While accomplishing this end, a deliberate emphasis is placed on presenting ideas that transcend the basic ideology about the cause and effects of the events that transpired during the roaring twenties.