

AMERICA IN THE 1920S – TRIUMPH OR DISASTER?

- Chairman Ladies and gentlemen – thank you – if you could come to order [background sound of 6th formers settling down] Thank you.
Well hi! Welcome to this session on: *America in the 1920s – Triumph or Disaster?* And welcome to our seminar leaders. As we always do, before we split into our workshops, I'm going to ask them to share a few ideas with us – to set the scene.
Angie; perhaps you'd like to kick off? What is *your* image of the 1920s?
- Angie Well, I think I'd like to paint delegates a picture of economic extravagance – and remind them of President Coolidge's dictum that: 'The business of America is business'.
For me, the theme of the decade is economic prosperity:
technological innovation, especially in the motor industry – by 1925 Ford were producing a car every 10 seconds;
a burgeoning synthetics industry ... the invention of nylon;
a revolution in communications, and in electrical goods;
a doubling of the number of telephones and radios, and a tripling of the number of cars.
Causes? To a degree, government policy – isolation and protective tariffs – the *Fordney-McCumber Act* of 1922. But more particularly, the rise of a consumer economy, especially the development of advertising and hire purchase, and the growth of the first share-holding economy in the world.

For me, the overriding image of 1920s America is a glossy automobile, rich young men and fashionable young women relaxing by a swimming pool, and the legend 'The Better Buick'.
- Chairman Thank you. What about you, Kurt? What's *your* image of 1920s America?
- Kurt I think – by contrast – I would stress the FRAGILITY of the American economy. Tariffs were ultimately going to harm trade, not help it. Agriculture was in crisis – half a million farmers a year were going bankrupt – and the coal and textiles industries were in decline. Prosperity was an illusory crust on the top of the American pie: the richest 5% of the people earned a third of the income, and in the meantime 42% per cent of the population were living below the poverty line. The 1920s was not about prosperity, it was about over-heating –over-production, over-confidence, and of course the completely mad speculation in shares, and bogus companies, and bad banking that led to the 1929 depression. It all ended in tears.

So if I had to chose an 'icon for the 1920s', it would be that famous *Variety* front page, with its headline: 'Wall Street lays an egg'.

Alistair Flappers! The Roaring Twenties! I'm sure that economy is important, but it's all dreadfully boring, isn't it, and if you're looking for where 1920s America made its mark, surely it's got to be its *social* impact? I mean, this was THE age of revolution ... of liberation. Jazz ... Benny Goodman and Fats Waller. Films – the coming of the talkies ... Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin. And dances! – the Charleston and the Black Bottom.

And most of all, a REVOLUTION in the role of women. The advent of the 'working girl', and – after 1920 – the VOTING girl. Coco Chanel and the '*garconne*' look, short skirts, those AWFUL hats, smoking in public, playing tennis – these developments have formed our world as it is today, and they were born in American society in the 1920s.

So *my* icon for the 1920s would be film goddess Clara Bow in the film '*It*', as the self-confident shopgirl Betty Lou Spence, who *has* 'it' and *is* 'it', as she chases rich businessman Cyrus Waltham.

Kurt Against that, of course, you have to posit Prohibition, 200,000 speakeasies, bootleggers, moonshine, protection rackets, organised crime, 'torpedoes', Al Capone, widespread police corruption ... and Elliot Ness and the Untouchables!

For myself, I'd have suggested a different 'society' picture – that famous picture of the 1929 St Valentine's Day massacre, with the blood-soaked bodies of Bugs Moran's men sprawled in the SMC Cartage Company garage.

Ophrah Actually, you need to add to that institutionalised, all-pervasive, deep-rooted prejudice. These were the years of the Red Scare, and the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti; and hostility to socialists and trade unionists; and racial prejudice, and Immigration Laws.

I know that, at the same time, this was the decade when black activists coined the phrase 'Black is Beautiful' – that it was the decade which saw W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey, the growth of the NAACP, 'artistic action' and the success of black people like Louis Armstrong, Josephine Baker, Bessie Smith, Jessie Owens and Joe Louis. I'm not taking anything away from the progress they made for Black Rights.

But against this you've got to posit the HUGE discrimination against Black people, especially in the south ... Jim Crow Laws, lynchings and the Ku Klux Klan ... in 1923 the KKK had 5 *MILLION* members.

And, most of all, remember the almost total exclusion of Black people from the prosperity experienced by many white Americans.

I know it comes from the 1930s, but if you want an iconic picture for the 1920s, for me it's that photo of the bread line of black people lined up in front of a poster which says; 'World's highest standard of living'. It sums up the experience of Blacks in the 1920s, for sure.

