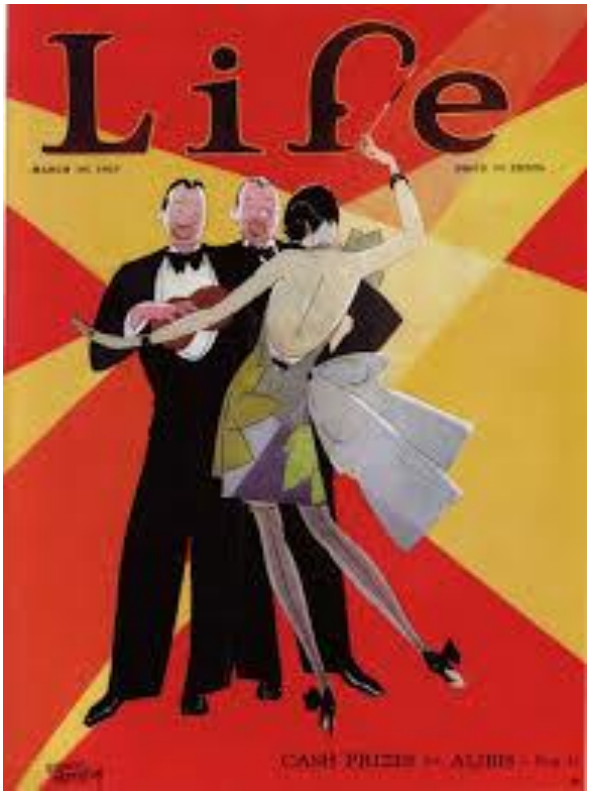
The Clash between Traditionalism and Modernism



Section 1: Introduction

The two magazine covers shown opposite and above capture the tension between traditionalism and modernism during the 1920s. *The Leslie's Illustrated Weekly Newspaper* appealed to traditionalists with nostalgic images rooted in small-town America. *Life* reached out to modernists with images of trendy fun seekers and style setters.

In 1916, the *Saturday Evening Post*, one of the country's most popular weekly magazines, started putting Rockwell's charming pictures on its covers. By 1925, Rockwell was nationally famous. "Without thinking too much about it in specific terms," Rockwell said of his work, "I was showing the America I knew and observed to others who might not have noticed."

Most of the trends and changes that made the 1920s roar emerged in the nation's cities. Although rural life was changing as well, Rockwell's paintings appealed to a longing for the reassurance of the simple life. Some people who lived in rural areas did not approve of the changes they had witnessed since the end of World War I. They were **traditionalists [traditionalist: a person who has deep respect for long-held cultural and religious values]**, or people who had deep respect for long-held cultural and religious values. For them, these values were anchors that provided order and stability to society.

For other Americans, particularly those in urban areas, there was no going back to the old ways. They were **modernists [modernist: a person who embraces new ideas, styles, and social trends]**, or people who embraced new ideas, styles, and social trends. For them, traditional values were chains that restricted both individual freedom and the pursuit of happiness.

As these groups clashed in the 1920s, American society became deeply divided. Many rural dwellers lined up against urbanites. Defenders of traditional morality bemoaned the behavior of "flaming youth." Teetotalers opposed drinkers. Old-time religion faced off against modern science. The result was a kind of "culture war" that in some ways is still being fought today.

Section 2: The Growing Traditionalist-Modernist Divide

As the war ended and the doughboys began to come home from France, the title of a popular song asked a question that was troubling many rural families: "How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm (after they've seen Paree)?" After seeing the bright lights of cities, many returning soldiers decided to leave behind the small towns they came from. The 1920 census revealed a startling statistic: for the first time ever, the United States was more than 50 percent urban. This population shift set the stage for the growing divide between traditionalists and modernists.

Urban Attractions: Economic Opportunity and Personal Freedom

During the 1920s, some 19 million people would move from farms to cities, largely in search of economic opportunities. Urban areas, with their factories and office buildings, were hubs of economic growth. As the economy boomed, the demand for workers increased. Wages rose as well. Between 1920 and 1929, the

average per capita income rose 37 percent. At the same time, the **consumer price index [consumer price index: a measure of the cost of basic necessities, such as food and housing],** a measure of the cost of basic necessities such as food and housing, remained steady. As a result, urban wage earners saw their standard of living improve.

In the 1920s, a booming economy and high wages lured workers to urban areas such as New York City. Cities offered steady jobs and freedom to explore new ways of thinking and living.

Rural Problems: Falling Crop Prices and Failing Farms

The personal freedom people experienced in cities stood in strong contrast to small-town life. In rural areas, most people lived in quiet communities, where they watched out for one another. New ideas and ways of behaving were often viewed with suspicion.

In addition to losing their younger generation to cities, rural communities faced other problems during the 1920s. Farmers had prospered during the war, producing food crops for the Allies and the home front. Enterprising farmers had taken out loans to buy new machines or extra land in hopes of increasing their output and profits. After the war, however, European demand for U.S. farm products dropped sharply, as did crop prices. With their incomes shrinking, large numbers of farmers could not repay their loans. By 1929, per capita income for farmers was less than half the national average.

Changing Values Lead to Mutual Resentment

The divide between urban modernists and rural traditionalists was not just economic. Modernists tended to view rural Americans as behind the times. Many writers say the simple and honest life in the rural setting as outdated, bland, and boring.

The defenders of traditional values often looked to their faith and the Bible for support in their struggle against modernism. As a result, the 1920s saw a rise in religious **fundamentalism [fundamentalism: the belief that scripture should be read as the literal word of God and followed without question]** —the idea that religious texts and beliefs should be taken literally and treated as the authority on appropriate behavior.

Section 3: Generations Clash over New Youth Culture

Before World War I, if a young man were interested in courting a young woman, he would visit her at home and meet her parents. If things went well at this first meeting, the boy would visit again. If he invited the girl to a dance or concert, an older adult would go with them as a chaperone. Eventually, the girl's parents might trust the young couple enough to let them sit by themselves on the front porch. In traditional families, these courtship patterns continued after the war. In more modern families, however, courtship changed dramatically, often confusing, if not upsetting, the older generation. Courtship was one example of how the older and younger generations clashed in the 1920s.

The Youth Perspective: The Old Ways Are Repressive

During the 1920s, a growing drive for public education sent a majority of teenagers to high school for the first time in U.S. history. College enrollment also grew rapidly. As young people spent more time than ever before outside the home or workplace, a new youth culture emerged. This culture revolved around school, clubs, sports, music, dances, dating, movies, and crazy fads.

The most daring young women broke with the past by turning themselves into "**flappers [flappers: during the Roaring Twenties, a young woman who broke with traditional expectations for how women should dress and behave].**"

Older people fretted about the younger generation's "wild" ways. Many young people, however, felt free to ignore their elders. After witnessing the war's waste of life, they decided that the adults who had sent young men into battle did not deserve respect. As one young person said, "The older generation had certainly pretty well ruined this world before passing it on to us."

The Adult Perspective: Young People Have Lost Their Way Many adults considered the behavior of young people reckless and immoral. They tried to restore the old morality in a number of ways. One was censorship. Traditionalists pulled books they saw as immoral off library shelves.

Section 4: Wets and Dries Clash over Prohibition

On February 14, 1929, men dressed in police uniforms raided the headquarters of Chicago's Moran gang. When the officers ordered the gangsters to raise their hands and line up against the wall, the gang members thought nothing of it. The police were always annoying them. These "police officers," however, were members of Al "Scarface" Capone's rival gang in disguise. Capone's men whipped out their guns and blasted away. Seven members of the Moran gang died in what soon became known as the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre. This bloodbath was one of many unexpected consequences of what Herbert Hoover called "an experiment noble in purpose"—prohibition.

The "Dry" Perspective: Prohibition Improves Society

Traditionalists and progressive reformers saw passage of the Eighteenth Amendment, which prohibited the manufacture, sale, or transport of alcoholic beverages, as a great victory. They pointed to evidence that alcoholism caused crime, violence, and the breakup of families. "Drys," as backers of prohibition were known, believed that stopping people from drinking would result in a healthier, happier society.

Drys also saw prohibition as a way of taming city life. Support for prohibition centered mainly in rural areas, and many drys saw the Eighteenth Amendment as a triumph of rural over urban Americans. As one dry put it, prohibition allowed the "pure stream of country sentiment and township morals to flush out the cesspools of cities."

The "Wet" Perspective: Prohibition Restricts Freedom and Breeds Crime

Opponents of prohibition, called "wets," were small in number at first. But as the law went into effect, their numbers grew. Opposition centered mainly in large cities and immigrant communities.

Many modernists attacked prohibition as an attempt by the federal government to legislate morality. Journalist H. L. Mencken, a champion of modernism, called drys "ignorant bumpkins of the cow states who resented the fact that they had to swill raw corn liquor while city slickers got good wine and whiskey." Another modernist, Massachusetts Senator David Walsh, rejected traditionalist arguments that drinking was sinful. He reminded drys that the first miracle performed by

Jesus had been to turn water into wine. Were Jesus to perform this miracle in prohibition-era America, Walsh observed, "he would be jailed and possibly crucified again."

Prohibition seemed doomed from the start. In October 1919, Congress passed the **Volstead Act [Volstead Act: a law passed by Congress in 1919 to enforce the Eighteenth Amendment, which prohibited the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages]** to enforce the Eighteenth Amendment. But the federal government never gave the enforcement agency, called the Prohibition Bureau, sufficient personnel, money, or supplies. The bureau's agents were simply outnumbered by the millions of Americans who wanted to drink. Hoover later estimated that the government would need 250,000 agents to make prohibition work.

As a result, prohibition led to an increase in illegal behavior by normally law-abiding citizens. As thousands of bars and pubs were forced to close, they were replaced by nearly twice as many secret drinking clubs, called ***speakeasies [speakeasies: a secret club that sold alcohol during the era of prohibition].*** The term speakeasy came from the practice of speaking quietly about illegal saloons so as not to alert police. The growing demand for liquor created a golden opportunity for crooks like Al Capone. **Bootlegging [bootlegging: the production, transport, and sale of illegal alcohol]** —the production, transport, and sale of illegal alcohol—was a multibillion dollar business by the mid-1920s. Chicago bootlegger Capone exhibited his wealth by driving around in a $30,000 Cadillac while flashing an 11 1/2-carat diamond ring

Section 5: Modernists and Traditionalists Clash over Evolution

In 1925, Dayton, Tennessee, was a sleepy town of almost 2,000 people, plus a freethinking New York transplant named George Rappelyea. That year, the state legislature passed a law making it illegal for a public school "to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible."

While chatting with friends one day, Rappelyea mentioned an offer by the American Civil Liberties Union to defend any teacher who would test the law. Why not find one right here, he suggested. A trial would show how foolish the law was. It would also attract national attention to Dayton. One of his friends knew just the man for the job—a young science teacher named John Scopes, who

would be willing to teach a lesson on evolution. And so the stage was set for a dramatic contest between modernists and traditionalists over the place of science and religion in public schools.

The Modernist Perspective: Science Shows How Nature Works Like many modernists, Rappelyea looked to science, not the Bible, to explain how the physical world worked. Scientists accepted as true only facts and theories that could be tested and supported with evidence drawn from nature. By the 1920s, people could see the wonders of modern science every time they turned on an electric light, listened to the radio, or visited their doctors.

One of the most controversial scientific ideas of that time was British naturalist Charles Darwin's **theory of evolution [theory of evolution: developed by naturalist Charles Darwin in the mid-1800s, a scientific theory that all plants and animals, including humans, evolved from simpler forms of life over thousands or millions of years]** . Darwin theorized that all plants and animals, including humans, had evolved from simpler forms of life. The evolution of one species from another took place over thousands or millions of years. It worked through a process he called "natural selection." Others called it "survival of the fittest." In this process, species that make favorable adaptations to their environment are more likely to survive than those that do not. As favorable adaptations pile up, new species evolve from old ones. In such a way, Darwin argued, human beings had evolved from apes.

The Traditionalist Perspective: The Bible Is the Word of God Traditionalists were more likely to see science and religion in conflict. This was especially true of Christian fundamentalists, who believed the Bible was the literal word of God. They rejected the theory of evolution because it conflicted with **creationism [creationism: the belief that God created the universe],** the belief that God created the universe as described in the Bible.

Creationism Versus Evolution in Tennessee

Tennessee became the first state to enact a law banning the teaching of evolution in public schools. The law might not have caused a nationwide stir if Rappelyea had not decided to contest it. He sent a student to pull Scopes off a tennis court and said, "John, we've been arguing, and I said that nobody could teach biology without teaching evolution." Scopes not only agreed but also volunteered to

teach a lesson on evolution the next day. Rappelyea then asked the American Civil Liberties Union to defend the young science teacher before going to the police and having Scopes arrested.

The **Scopes trial [Scopes trial: a criminal trial, held in Dayton, Ohio, in 1925, that tested the constitutionality of a Tennessee law that banned the teaching of Darwin's theory of evolution in schools; science teacher John Scopes was found guilty and fined for his conduct, leaving the Tennessee law intact],** which began on July 10, 1925, brought far more attention to Dayton than Rappelyea had hoped. Bryan offered to represent the state of Tennessee. Scope's supporters added high-powered lawyer Clarence Darrow to the defense team.