



The Roaring Twenties

In A Nutshell

The 1920s were a decade best remembered for [unprecedented affluence](#), a profusion of fantastic [new consumer products](#), and a [vibrant and creative urban cultural scene](#). But the decade also brought a deep [agricultural depression](#), fueling traditionalist resistance to the encroachments of modernity on rural America.

Why Should I Care?

"The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." That was the opening line of [L.P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*](#). It's also a decent description of how a lot of us feel about many topics in American history. It's not easy for us to understand, for example, exactly why our nineteenth-century forebears got so worked up over issues like tariff policy or the gold standard.

But the 1920s don't seem so foreign at all-more like a goofy reflection of our own times, viewed through a funhouse mirror.

In both eras-the 1920s and today-we see [presidents elected](#) because the voters liked their personalities, only to endure administrations mired in [corruption and scandal](#).

In both eras, we see soaring [stock markets](#), providing euphoric investors with incredible financial returns.

In both eras, we see a [widening gulf](#) between the incomes of the rich and the poor and middle-class.

In both eras, we see a populace enthralled by [celebrity](#), zealously tracking every move of America's [sports](#) and [entertainment](#) heroes.

In both eras, we see a showdown between the secular values of the marketplace-in which everything is for sale, and [sex sells](#)-and the [old-fashioned religious principles](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/monkeytrial/) of fundamentalist Christianity.

In both eras, we see powerful [movements to restrict immigration](#) amid fears that the arrival of too many newcomers to this nation will undermine American society and culture.

History never simply repeats itself, of course, and there are many important differences

between the 1920s and our own time as well. Still, the similarities are striking.

It is impossible for us now to look back on the 1920s without being influenced by our knowledge of how the Roaring Twenties came to an end-with a [Great Crash](#) and [Great Depression](#). The incredible affluence was only a mirage, the decadent culture only an ironic prelude to a decade of hard times ahead.

But history never simply repeats itself. Right?