Notes on Mass Culture and the 1920s

The 1920s represented an important watershed in the development of a mass national culture. A new emphasis on leisure, consumption, and amusement characterized the modern era, although its benefits were more accessible to the white middle class than to minorities and other disadvantaged groups. And, although not every family participated in the new life-style, consumption became a cultural ideal for most of the middle class, often providing the criterion for judging self-worth that was once supplied by character, religion, and social standing. Spending money on more and better possessions became a form of self-fulfillment, a gratification of personal needs.

The unequal distribution of income limited some consumers’ ability to buy the enticing new products. At the height of prosperity in the 1920s, about 65% of America’s families had an income less than $2,000 a year, which barely supported a decent living standard. The average family income in the bottom 40% of the population was $725. Of that amount, a family spent about $290 a year for food, $190 for housing, and $110 for clothing, leaving only $135 for everything else, including medical expenses and emergencies. Retailers and automobile manufacturers addressed this situation by selling on the installment plan. In those days “buy now, pay later” was a revolutionary concept. Before WWI, most urban families paid cash for everything except a house, but in the 1920s the automobile became such an object of desire that consumers put aside their fears of buying on time. In 1927, two-thirds of the cars in the US were being paid off on the installment plan. Once people saw how easy it was to finance a car, they bought radios, refrigerators, and sewing machines on credit. “A dollar down and a dollar forever,” a cynic remarked. But by 1929, banks, finance companies, and credit unions were lending consumers over $7 billion a year and consumer lending was the tenth largest business in the country.

Many of the new products were electric appliances, for which consumers spent about $667 million in 1927. By 1930, 85% of American non-farm households had electricity to run their favorite gadgets. Irons and vacuum cleaners were the most popular appliances, followed by phonographs, sewing machines, and washing machines.

Because much of the new technology was concentrated in the house, it had a dramatic impact on women’s lives. Domestic chores became less arduous. Paradoxically however, the time women spent on housework did not decline. More middle class women began to do their own housework and laundry as electric servants replaced human ones. Technology raised standards of cleanliness so that a man could wear a clean shirt every day instead of just on Sunday and a house could be vacuumed daily rather than swept weekly.

Advertising became big business in the 1920s. In 1929 advertisers spent an average of $15 annually on every man, woman, and child---a total of $2.6 billion---to entice them to buy automobiles, cigarettes, radios, and refrigerators. That year the advertising industry, which the historian Roland Marchand called the “town criers” of
modernity, accounted for 3% of the gross national product, comparable to its share after WWII.

Few of the new consumer products could be considered necessities, so advertisements appealed to people’s social aspirations by projecting images of successful, elegant, sophisticated people who smoked a certain brand of cigarettes or drove a recognizable make of car. Ad writers also sold products by preying on people's insecurities, including “sneaker smell,” “paralyzed pores,” “office hips,” “ashtray breath,” and the dreaded “BO.” After the term halitosis was discovered in a British medical journal, many consumers rushed out to buy Listerine mouthwash. Yet American consumers were not passive victims of advertisers who manipulated their every whim. America gloried in its role as the world’s first mass-consumption economy.

Many of these cultural images came together in the flapper, the media version of the emancipated woman of the 1920s. With her slim, boyish figure, bobbed hair, short skirt, and rolled-down silk stockings, the flapper symbolized the personal freedom trumpeted by movies, advertisements, and other elements of the emerging mass culture. Neither maternal nor wifely, the flapper wore makeup (previously assumed to be a sign of sexual availability in lower-class women) and lit up cigarettes in public, a shocking affront to ladylike decency. Like so many cultural icons, the flapper represented only a tiny minority of women. Yet the image mass-marketed the belief in women’s post-suffrage emancipation.