The Rise Of Mass Culture

*DISCovering U.S. History*, 1997

Popular culture made possible by more leisure and new mass communication techniques

**Principal personages**

HENRY FORD (1863-1947), pioneer of the mass-produced automobile

DAVID LEWELYN WARK GRIFFITH (1875-1948), originator of the feature-length motion picture

"AMOS 'N ANDY", first nationally popular radio comedy team

CHARLES SPENCER CHAPLIN (1889-1977), early film star who originated the star system in Hollywood

MARY PICKFORD(1894-1979), one of the first great women movie stars

AL JOLSON(1886-1950), star of the first talking motion picture

**Summary of Event**

The development of a mass culture begins when rising technological competence, improved communication procedures, increased urbanization, and adequate leisure time combine to enable the majority of a society to share the same entertainment and recreational activities. Most observers agree that American mass culture began in the 1920's; what is more difficult to isolate is the primary catalyst. The three most important technological advances are easy enough to distinguish—the automobile, the radio, and motion pictures.

The United States by 1920, according to the census of that year, had become predominantly urban for the first time in its history. American census standards regard communities with twenty-five hundred persons or more as urban, and in 1920, the fourteenth census showed that 51.4% of America's population lived in urban areas, while 48.6% continued to reside in rural areas. The urbanization trend continued in the 1920's, and at the end of the decade the disparity was even more marked, 56.2% to 43.8%.

Increasing urbanization brought a complementary and concurrent increase in the importance of manufacturing in the American economy which all but displaced agriculture as the bulwark of America's productivity. Even before World War I, Frederick W. Taylor, the pioneer of scientific management, had begun to call for increased industrial efficiency, a demand that greatly influenced the Progressive era's rationalization of government and industry. When American manufacturers learned in World War I of the enormous profits that accrued from increased industrial efficiency, there was no limit to the amount of goods and the diversity of products that American industry stood ready to manufacture. All that was needed was a national market. After World War I, the American consumer was ready to buy. Congress had paved the way for continued prosperity in the seminal automobile industry with the Federal Highway Act of 1916 which provided that the federal government would match local funds for roads built according to federal standards. By 1921 nearly one-half billion dollars had been spent on the new roads that were to usher in a golden age of American transportation. This golden age was made possible by Henry Ford and the mass production of his Model T automobile.

Besides bringing the whole of America closer together and signaling the decline of rural isolation, the automobile increased the purchasing power of the average American as well as his hours of leisure. Before the automobile, the farmer at the end of a day did not look for diversion; when he finished work he went to sleep. In the cities the
evening hours were marked for entertainment. When the automobile was placed within reach of virtually every family (by 1928 there was one auto for every six Americans) all types of diversion were made accessible to the increasingly prosperous and adventuresome American family. There were 6,771,074 passenger cars registered in 1916; in 1925, the figure was 17,512,638, and by 1929, this had risen to 23,122,000 cars. No longer was it necessary for the rural American to remain isolated from the pleasures of the city, and it is no accident that the drive for national prohibition abated as the cultural gap between "city" and "country" lessened.

If the automobile was responsible for increased physical mobility and closeness, it was radio and motion pictures, along with the new popular magazines, that publicized the new life style of urban America and set the stage for the increased homogenization of popular culture. Public radio broadcasting was born in 1920 in East Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, when station KDKA made the first general broadcast and announced the results of the Presidential election. There were 100,000 radio receivers being sold yearly by 1922; the sales reached 2,000,000 by 1925, and by 1929, the annual sale of sets reached 4,428,000. Even this figure was not radio's peak, for in spite of an immediate downturn caused by the onset of the Depression, the annual sale of radio receivers continued to grow and in 1941, a total of 13,000,000 sets were marketed.

The earliest stations existed solely as a means of selling radio equipment. The rise of commercial broadcasting companies grew slowly until 1926 when modern network broadcasting was born with the debut of the National Broadcasting Company, followed in 1927 by the Columbia Broadcasting Corporation. No longer was entertainment the prerogative of only the big-city dweller. The entire country tuned in to the same programs, music, news, and advertising. "Amos 'n Andy" were no longer entertaining a limited vaudeville audience; rather, they became comedians central to the entire culture. At the same time, the phonograph, at first thought to be threatened by the new medium, instead enjoyed one of its greatest booms. Thus another mass industry was given new impetus. Tin Pan Alley songs could now make a fortune for the lucky songwriter whose tune was on everyone's lips, even for a few weeks.

The birth of the modern American motion picture industry came with the filming in 1915 of David Wark Griffith's The Birth of a Nation. Griffith was possibly the most gifted director in American cinematic history, but his basic contribution to the medium was the feature-length film. Until The Birth of a Nation, American films were one-reelers lasting from eight to ten minutes. The Birth of a Nation, in twelve reels, was three hours long and used a full symphony orchestra as its musical accompaniment. The mass popularity of Charles Chaplin and Mary Pickford in films initiated the star system whereby the leading actors became popular cultural heroes and at the same time grew immensely wealthy. By 1924, there were twenty-one thousand motion picture theaters in the United States. In 1927, The Jazz Singer, starring vaudeville singer Al Jolson, introduced sound to the cinema, and thereafter motion pictures became an even more dominant and viable element in American and world culture. In 1920, America produced five hundred feature films each with two hundred prints. American movie attendance increased from forty million in 1922, to ninety-five million in 1929 and to one hundred and fifteen million in 1930.

Other cultural innovations, formerly catering to an elitist or regional audience, now became available to the entire nation. One such innovation was jazz--the music that originated in New Orleans and migrated northward and eastward until it became almost unrecognizable when it was reincarnated in the 1930's as swing music. There were also many new magazines that reached an ever-expanding market. Vanity Fair, The Smart Set, the American Mercury and The New Yorker were influential in spreading the new urban life style of American cities throughout the country. Hand in hand with the success of new periodicals and books was the growing commitment to public education which enabled America's literacy rate to rise continually. As literacy spread and culture became available to more persons, the quality of culture declined and the middle ground between the high culture of the elite and the low culture of the folk became the preserve for the mass or midculture of an urban dominated American society.
Further Readings


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Gale Document Number: GALE|BT2104241258