

Tensions of the Twenties: Lindbergh, Ford and Ruth

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Cultural Historians have long been interested in the 1920s as an important watershed in the development of the United States. It was in that decade that a number of tensions and strains were evident in politics, literature and popular culture. It was in 1920 that the U.S. Census Bureau reported that for the first time the proportion of the population which it classified as “urban” now exceeded 50% of the total. The processes of intense industrialization which exploded after the Civil War had surpassed a significant statistical symbol. The magic of the symbolic statistic and the obvious strains and tensions of the decade has led many historians to see Twenties as the key decade of the transition from the rural-agricultural-individualistic modes of the nineteenth century to the the urban-industrial-corporate modes of the twentieth century.

In exploring this decade with students I have found it useful to triangulate three men as symbols of the tensions of the 1920s: Charles Lindbergh, Henry Ford and Babe Ruth. Lindbergh’s Transatlantic Flight of 1927, as examined by John Ward, produced a mass of reaction praising it as an achievement of the rugged individual, while at the same time praising it as an achievement of the corporate society in the machine age. Henry Ford, as presented by Roderick Nash and others, is a mass of contradictions, being both the creator of urban-industrial society and the preserver of the rural world of Greenfield Village. Ruth is the essence of the rugged individual playing the national game of the cow pasture in an urban stadium before the cheering masses of the machine age.



There was tension in the 20’s but not at the 1977 NASSH dining hall