

MODERN HISTORY

Assess the impact of industrialisation on American society during this period. (1920s and 1930s)

Throughout the course of the 1920s and 1930s, a substantial change in American society was brought about by the significant implications of industrialisation. Growing industrialisation – the process of transformation from an agrarian based society to an industrially based society – in conjunction with the process of urbanisation (the movement of people from rural to urban areas) cultivated in an era of ‘unparalleled prosperity’. Whilst this process maintained both positive and detrimental impacts, historians commonly agree that the long term implications brought about by this process were highly influential in the development of an affluent and advanced society. In particular, the economic and social outcomes of industrialisation in the USA during the 1920s presented a wide range of societal impacts.

Economically, industrialisation was a vital process for American society as it represented a steep incline in overall prosperity. Historian Maldwyn Jones strongly believes that industrialisation had a positive impact, arguing that the 1920s were a decade in which *‘business made huge profit, jobs were generally easy to find, and standards of living rose appreciably’*. Rapid economic growth was characterised by an increase in productivity, widespread availability of credit and the succession of Republican Presidents – ‘the party of prosperity’. As Jones outlines, industrialisation allowed the USA to economically prosper and thus it maintained a positive impact on society.

However, not all historians agree with this view. Historian Frederick Lewis Allen regards industrialisation as an economically ‘flawed’ process as it led to an incline in economic disparity between different societal groups. Allen bases such claims on the fact that the so called ‘unparalleled prosperity’ did not extend to all sectors of society. By 1929, the wealthiest 200 companies in the USA retained 50% of total corporate wealth and America’s working class, populating roughly 40%, earned less than 15% of the nation’s wealth. Furthermore, Allen highlights that the process brought about *‘severe inadequacies among social class’* as there was a *‘lack of government support for labour’*. Thus, according to some interpretations, industrialisation provided great economic detriment primarily resulting in negative implications.

Historian W Boardman opposes this view and observes that industrialisation was beneficial not only economically, but also through its vast social implications. In particular, Boardman contributes the nature of industrialisation to the growing culture of consumerism, arguing it *‘stimulated the economy and gave way to substantial cultural development’*. Urbanisation meant that in 1920, 51% of Americans lived in urban areas and by 1929, 56%. Because of this, cultural elements such as leisure and entertainment, ‘self indulgence’ and the innovation of Jazz Music became socially prominent in American society. Hence, the impact of industrialisation was highly significant as it maintained positive, social developments.

Despite this, industrialisation continued to impact American society in a negative manner, particularly within a social context. Historian Quarles contributes this negative impact to the aggravation of social tensions during the period brought about by the implications of industrialisation. The Great Migration between 1910 and 1940 saw the migration of the African American population from southern states to mid-western and North-eastern states. Quarles comments that in *‘the sprawling, impersonal cities of the north...though they [African Americans] no longer saw ‘white’ and ‘coloured’ signs everywhere, they quickly became aware of segregation in churches and social clubs’*. Allen agrees and writes *‘the northward migration spread near-panic in the south’* as the agriculture industry suffered. Furthermore, the process of urbanisation did not relieve racial tensions and segregation became a common practice in southern states and some northern cities. The race riots of 1919 and 1920 saw the death of over 75 people due to racial tensions out of the growing impact of industrialisation. There was also a significant growth in ‘negro

nationalism', leading to cultural revolutions such as the Harlem Renaissance in New York. These tensions were brought about through the dramatic shift of people from rural to urban areas. Consequently, the incline in racial tensions is reviewed by many historians to be a highly negative implication of industrialisation.

Furthermore, some historians view industrialisation in a negative manner due to the incline in social disparity between urban and rural communities. As an increased division between urban and rural America widened, a divide in social values accompanied it. Rural communities, characterised by the values of hard work, family and heavy religious observance, was marked by an alliance with social conservatism, viewing this new industrial society as grossly 'self indulgent'. Rural communities embraced the traditional American value of 'rugged individualism', where as Urban society began to grow and develop, being aligned with 'social progressivism'. The Jazz age, consumerism, advancement of human rights and decline in morals marked this social development, and thus increased social tension was brought about through industrialisation.

Nevertheless, industrialisation marked a significant, positive change in society - particularly economically. Rapid developments in technology marked the advent of new household products, such as refrigerators, and in return this stimulated the American economy. Innovation in production methods and management techniques brought about highly positive changes in many industries, which contributed to America becoming the most powerful industrial nation internationally by 1941. Perhaps the most substantial economic impact, however, was the introduction of the automobile as the main means of transportation in American society. Boardman claims *'the automobile industry became a big factor in the economic life of the nation...By 1929 the value of its product was one-eighth of all manufactured goods.'* Not only this, but the industry provided jobs for 1,000,000 workers and led to the growth of cities as an economic powerhouse, due to the public's increased ability to travel between urban and inner-city areas. As Boardman maintains, industrialisation had a highly positive impact for American society because of such implications.

Thus, despite the detriment caused by economic and social disparities brought about by industrialisation, the process had a highly positive and substantial impact on American society. Historians generally agree that the positive implications during this period of industrialisation far outweigh the negative, and that industrialisation was therefore highly influential in developing an affluent, advanced society during the 1920s.