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David J. Goldberg. *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s.* Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. xii + 210 pp. $21.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-6005-8; $52.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6004-1.

Reviewed by Thomas R. Pegram (Department of History, Loyola College in Maryland)
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Bringing the 1920s into Balance

For too long, analyses of the 1920s in the United States have been dominated by the enormous shadows cast by the Great Depression and the various convulsions of the 1930s. In many studies of the period, the economic exuberance, consumer culture, middle-class self-satisfaction, and political complacency of the New Era took center stage, embodying, in a theatrical way, the national pride that came before the dramatic fall of the stock market and the collapse of confidence. In the shallowest versions of the tale, George Babbitt, Model T automobiles, bob-haired flappers, bathtub gin, Charles Lindbergh, and Calvin Coolidge were collective straw men, stock characters and props to be overemphasized and then cast aside at the watershed arrival of the New Deal. In contrast to overly simplistic general assessments of the period, specialized studies over the past two decades have constructed more sophisticated understandings of the particulars of 1920s politics, culture, and society. The need for a sharper overall appraisal of the 1920s, informed by the work of the last generation of diligent scholars, has become obvious. David J. Goldberg's concise survey incorporates many of these recent insights and helps place the 1920s in its own historical context rather than as a prelude to the 1930s.

For Goldberg, unresolved problems stemming from World War One thrust conflict and uncertainty to the center of American public life in the twenties. Among those populating Goldberg's "discontented America" were: congressional opponents of the postwar international order, progressives anxious to reanimate reform sentiment, unionists battered by the open shop onslaught of 1920s business interests, African Americans building community institutions and fighting racism, Ku Klux Klansmen guarding Protestant ascendancy against immigrants and Catholics, and the proponents and critics of immigration restriction laws. The book opens with sketches of progressive reform, American involvement in World War One, postwar American foreign policy and politics. Notable in this institutional section is Goldberg's stimulating argument that the "normalcy" forecast by Warren Harding in 1920 did not become a reality in politics until 1924. Labor unrest and the Red Scare stirred dissatisfaction at the beginning of the decade, women's suffrage and Prohibition introduced new political issues that created trouble for the major political parties (especially the Democrats in 1924), and the economic downturn of 1920-1922 revived progressive activism and third-party hopes until Robert La Follette's defeat in the 1924 presidential election.

The richest section of the book, however, focuses on the social politics rather than the party politics of the period. Class, ethnic, and racial conflict figure prominently in Goldberg's interpretation of 1920s America. In three fine chapters, he draws on the extensive secondary literature of the past twenty years to construct able analyses of labor, African Americans, and the KKK in the 1920s. As a specialist in labor history, Goldberg is especially effective in handling labor's failed struggle against business dominance in the New Era. He is brisk and surehanded on the open shop and welfare capitalism, the 1922 surge in strikes and labor militancy, creativity on the part of left-leaning "new unions" as well as the craft, gender, and ideological divisions in the labor movement, and capital's ultimate triumph. Although less thematically cohesive than his treatment of labor issues, Goldberg's analysis of African-American life in the 1920s is detailed and informative. The chapter on the Klan ably summarizes a new literature that places the Invisible Empire at the center of 1920s American society, rather than at its margins. Indeed, Goldberg goes beyond most historians – justifiably, in my view – to link the Klan to mainstream Prohibition supporters such as the Anti-Saloon League.

Goldberg's final chapters reconnect the ethnic, racial, and religious antagonisms of the 1920s to public policy and mainstream politics. He examines the movement for immigration restriction that culminated in the 1924

National Origins Act, a piece of legislation that ended the period of open European immigration to the United States. The book concludes with the dyspeptic presidential campaign of 1928, in which the anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant sentiment of the early 1920s revived in opposition to the Democratic candidate, New York Governor Al Smith. The ugliness of the religious bigotry directed against Smith, as well as the bitterness engendered by his opposition to Prohibition, underlines Goldberg's interpretation of the 1920s as a postwar period of adjustment marked by open strife and division. Although he understates the point, Goldberg also observes that neither Smith nor Republican candidate Herbert Hoover endorsed economic policies that reflected the progressive viewpoint that had been so hopeful at the beginning of the 1920s.

Although it is an able summary of the neglected aspects of the 1920s, *Discontented America* is not without flaws. As is often the case when a vast amount of material is condensed and summarized, small factual errors appear in the book. The short section on Prohibition contains a few such mistakes. Wayne Wheeler is misidentified as the president of the Anti-Saloon League and Goldberg conflates the actions of participants in the Women's Crusade of 1874 with those of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. Specialists in other areas may find similar small missteps. More substantive are interpretive quibbles that legitimately can be raised with Goldberg. The thematic connections between his topical chapters are sometimes loosely fashioned. Moreover, Goldberg's thesis of ethnic, class, and racial strife as the centerpiece of 1920s American society works best for the first half of the decade. One could suggest that the distinctive postwar period lasted only until the mid-point of the 1920s, with the latter part of the decade exhibiting the prosperity and conformity more commonly attributed to the 1920s.

In a similar vein, some could hold that in his eagerness to highlight the oft-neglected conflict and tension of the 1920s, Goldberg fails to give sufficient attention to New Era economics, middle-class culture, and technological innovations that were important aspects of American society at the time. Coverage of these latter items is rather thin, although not absent, in *Discontented America.* For this reader, however, Goldberg's thesis is justifiable. He did not intend to write a comprehensive history of American society in the 1920s. More important is the point that in emphasizing the class, ethnic, and racial conflict that affected the majority of Americans in the post-World War One period, Goldberg has righted an imbalance in our perceptions of the 1920s. *Discontented America* is a valuable and intelligent synthesis of recent work on a decade that is far more complex – and more interesting – than many scholars once believed.

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