# Wealth Happiness and Safety in the 1920s

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The class wall was designed with posters created by students, and my contribution interpreted newspaper material from *The New York Times* relating to wealth, happiness, and safety in the 1920s. I arranged the poster with a border and several article cuttings so that viewers could see how people in the period discussed prosperity, fear, war, and social change. The original reflection argues that money was often treated as a source of happiness but could not guarantee security or replace moral and religious values. That central idea remains important because the 1920s are remembered both as an era of extraordinary economic expansion and as a decade marked by inequality, racial violence, political fear, immigration restriction, labor conflict, and uncertainty beneath the appearance of national confidence.

The poster was not intended to present money as entirely unimportant. Wealth provides food, shelter, healthcare, education, mobility, and protection from many everyday risks. The original text correctly broadens wealth beyond possessing a large amount of cash and describes it as having sufficient resources for life. The historical question is whether the expanding consumer economy of the 1920s produced genuine well-being and safety for all Americans. Newspaper stories and advertisements often celebrated automobiles, household appliances, entertainment, investment, and modern living. At the same time, other articles recorded unemployment in particular industries, farm distress, crime fears, racial terror, and the consequences of war. Placing these fragments together allowed the poster to show that prosperity and insecurity coexisted.

## Designing the Poster

I used newspaper cuttings because a newspaper page preserves more than isolated historical facts. Headlines, photographs, advertisements, placement, and language reveal what editors believed readers would notice. By arranging several items on one poster, I could compare different public concerns instead of relying on one article to represent the decade. The border gave the chart visual unity, while the separate clippings created contrast. Stories about money and consumption could appear beside reports involving safety, war, or public anxiety.

The design also required selection. A poster cannot include everything, so my choices shaped the interpretation. I focused on the relationship among wealth, happiness, and safety because those concepts remain connected in present life. The exercise taught me that a historical display is an argument. Even when it uses original sources, the creator decides what to include, which items to place together, and what title guides the viewer.

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# Prosperity and the Image of the Roaring Twenties

The 1920s are often called the Roaring Twenties because industrial production, urban culture, advertising, radio, cinema, automobiles, and consumer credit expanded. Mass production reduced the price of some goods, while installment buying allowed households to obtain products before saving the full purchase amount. For many people, modern appliances and transport genuinely improved comfort and freedom. Entertainment industries created new forms of shared popular culture, and rising markets encouraged confidence that prosperity would continue.

This public image helps explain why money could be associated with happiness. Income made participation in modern life possible (Dumenil, 1995). A family with electricity, a car, and secure housing could experience real convenience and social status. Yet national growth was uneven. Agricultural communities suffered from low prices and debt, many workers remained in unstable employment, and racial and gender barriers limited access to opportunity. The decade's prosperity should therefore be described as significant but unequal.

# What Wealth Meant

The original reflection defines wealth as more than a huge amount of money. This distinction is useful because wealth includes accumulated assets, secure housing, savings, land, business ownership, education, and access to resources that protect a family over time. Income pays current expenses, while wealth provides resilience when work is lost or an emergency occurs. In the 1920s, ownership of property and financial assets was distributed very unevenly.

Wealth also carries symbolic meaning. It can represent success, respectability, independence, or modernity. Newspaper advertising encouraged people to express these qualities through consumption (Marchand, 1985). A person might purchase an automobile not only for transport but because it signaled progress. The poster's question is whether the symbol and the lived condition were the same. A household could own fashionable goods through debt while lacking long-term financial security.

# Can Money Buy Happiness?

The original essay states that money is linked with happiness but does not always buy it. This is a balanced conclusion. Money can relieve suffering caused by deprivation. It allows people to meet needs, choose safer housing, obtain treatment, support children, and enjoy leisure. These effects can improve well-being. The statement that money never matters would therefore ignore the hardship of poverty.

However, happiness also depends on relationships, meaning, health, trust, identity, freedom, and a

sense of belonging. After basic and reasonable needs are met, additional consumption may produce temporary pleasure without permanent satisfaction. People adapt to new possessions, and social comparison can create dissatisfaction even during rising prosperity. The 1920s consumer culture intensified comparison by displaying ideal homes, bodies, products, and lifestyles to mass audiences.

## Safety as a Material and Emotional Condition

Safety means more than protection from physical attack. It includes secure employment, reliable food, stable housing, public health, legal protection, and confidence that institutions will function. Money can reduce some risks. A wealthy family may live in a safer neighborhood, obtain medical care, or recover more easily from a crisis. The original essay correctly argues that money cannot protect people from every danger, especially war and widespread social disruption.

Emotional safety depends partly on perception. Newspapers can inform people about genuine risk while also intensifying fear through dramatic coverage. During the 1920s, reports of crime, radicalism, racial conflict, immigration, and social change contributed to public anxiety. The poster's references to "fear of the unknown" can be understood through this climate. Rapid modernization gave people new opportunities but also disrupted familiar norms.

## The Legacy of World War I

World War I ended in 1918, immediately before the decade represented by the poster. The original essay emphasizes death, injury, economic loss, and the lasting disturbance caused by war. American combat involvement was shorter than that of European countries, but the conflict still affected soldiers, families, industry, politics, and international relations. Veterans returned with injuries and psychological trauma, while communities grieved people who did not return.

The war also transformed the economy and public expectations. Government mobilization expanded production and propaganda, and the postwar transition produced labor unrest and inflation. The 1918 influenza pandemic added enormous loss, though it was distinct from combat. By the early 1920s, the United States wanted a return to "normalcy," but normal life could not simply restore the prewar world (Kyvig, 2002). The poster's newspaper material can therefore be read as evidence of a society trying to define security after collective trauma.

## Fear of Radicalism and the Red Scare

One form of fear during the early 1920s was the Red Scare. The Russian Revolution, labor strikes, bombings, and political unrest led authorities and newspapers to portray anarchists, socialists, communists, immigrants, and labor activists as threats. The Palmer Raids involved arrests and deportation efforts that raised serious civil-liberties concerns. Public fear allowed broad suspicion to

be directed toward people whose beliefs or origins differed from the majority.

This history shows that the desire for safety can threaten freedom. Institutions may claim to protect society while using fear to justify excessive punishment or exclusion. Wealthy and powerful groups may feel secure when dissent is suppressed, while targeted communities experience greater danger. Safety must therefore be evaluated according to whose safety is being protected and at what cost.

## Racial Violence and Unequal Security

The 1920s were not equally safe for all Americans. The Ku Klux Klan expanded, promoting white supremacy, anti-Catholicism, antisemitism, and hostility toward immigrants. Black communities faced segregation, discrimination, and violence. The Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 destroyed a prosperous Black district and killed residents. Such events complicate any simple picture of national wealth and happiness.

A person may possess property and community success yet remain vulnerable when law and public institutions fail to provide equal protection. The destruction of Black wealth demonstrates that economic achievement alone cannot overcome organized racial power. The poster's theme of safety should therefore include civil rights and institutional justice, not only personal resources.

## Immigration Restriction and National Identity

Immigration laws in the 1920s imposed restrictive national-origin quotas and reflected racialized ideas about who belonged in the United States. Supporters often framed restriction as protection of jobs, culture, or security. For immigrants and excluded families, the same policies produced separation and limited opportunity. This is another example of safety being defined differently across groups.

Newspapers contributed to debates over assimilation, crime, labor, and national identity. Examining their language helps reveal whether immigrants were described as individuals or as threatening categories. Historical interpretation should question claims presented as common sense at the time.

## Prohibition, Crime, and Public Morality

The Eighteenth Amendment and Volstead Act established national prohibition of alcoholic beverages. Reformers hoped prohibition would reduce domestic violence, poverty, and disorder. Instead, illegal production and distribution created profitable markets for organized crime, though the relationship between prohibition and crime varied by place. Newspapers reported raids, corruption, and violence, reinforcing the impression that modern cities contained hidden threats.

Prohibition also demonstrates the tension between moral goals and enforcement. A policy intended to

promote family welfare generated conflict over personal freedom and unequal policing. Wealthier people could sometimes obtain alcohol discreetly, while poor and minority communities faced different enforcement pressures. The period's moral values were therefore not separate from money and power.

## Women, Work, and Changing Social Roles

The decade brought visible changes in women's political and cultural participation. The Nineteenth Amendment secured women's voting rights nationally in 1920, though racial discrimination continued to prevent many women from voting. Women worked in varied occupations, participated in reform, and challenged some conventions of dress and public behavior. Popular culture celebrated the "flapper," but that image represented only a portion of women's lives.

Economic independence could improve safety and choice, yet employment was often segregated and poorly paid. Marriage, race, class, and location shaped opportunity. The poster's themes can therefore include the relationship between wealth and personal autonomy. Money may not guarantee happiness, but lack of access to income can limit freedom significantly.

## Consumer Credit and Hidden Insecurity

Installment plans allowed households to buy cars, radios, and appliances by paying over time. This expanded consumption and supported economic growth, but it also created debt. A home filled with modern goods could look prosperous while its owner remained vulnerable to job loss. Credit makes future income part of present purchasing power, so security depends on the stability of that future income.

The original reflection that abundance was sometimes valued above moral concerns can be connected to this system. Advertising encouraged immediate acquisition, and public success became increasingly visible through possessions. When social worth is tied to consumption, people may accept financial risk to maintain appearance.

## The Stock Market and the Illusion of Permanent Growth

During the later 1920s, stock-market enthusiasm encouraged people to believe that wealth could grow rapidly. Buying on margin allowed investors to control shares with borrowed money. Rising prices reinforced confidence, but leverage magnified loss when markets fell. The crash of 1929 marked the end of the decade and exposed vulnerabilities that had accumulated beneath prosperity.

The original essay says the next decade began dealing with problems created by the war. The Great Depression of the 1930s also emerged from financial, banking, industrial, international, and policy conditions that cannot be attributed to one cause. The poster can use the transition from the 1920s to the 1930s to show why apparent wealth should not be confused with durable safety.

## The Child Who Lost a Father

The original conclusion gives the example of a child who lost a father in war and cannot overcome that loss through money alone. This example expresses the essay's moral argument clearly. Financial assistance may protect the child from hunger or interrupted education, and society has a duty to provide such support. Yet grief, absence, memory, and emotional development cannot be replaced by payment. Human loss has a value that markets cannot calculate.

This does not make material assistance unimportant. In fact, the child's grief may be intensified by poverty if the deceased parent provided income. The example shows that well-being has both material and relational dimensions. A just society must address both.

## Lessons From the Poster Project

Creating the poster taught me that history is not a single story. The 1920s can be described as prosperous, modern, fearful, unequal, creative, and unstable at the same time. Newspaper clippings allow viewers to see competing experiences on one wall. An advertisement for a luxury product and a report of racial violence may belong to the same date but represent completely different realities.

The project also made me more cautious about treating headlines as complete truth. Newspapers select and frame events. Historical analysis should compare publications, identify authors and audiences, and place stories within wider evidence. My poster was therefore an introduction to interpretation rather than a final account.

## Conclusion

The poster on wealth, happiness, and safety in the 1920s presents a decade in which economic expansion and consumer culture encouraged confidence that money could produce a better life. Wealth did improve comfort and protected many people from ordinary risks, but it was distributed unequally and could not guarantee emotional well-being, civil rights, or protection from war and social violence. Consumer goods, credit, and rising markets created visible prosperity while concealing insecurity.

The original reflection remains convincing when its historical context is developed. Money contributes to happiness when it provides basic security and meaningful choice, but happiness also depends on

relationships, health, dignity, and belonging. Safety requires fair institutions as well as private resources. The experience of a child who lost a parent in war demonstrates the limit of financial replacement. By placing varied newspaper articles together, the poster shows that the 1920s were not one simple age of wealth. They were a period in which Americans pursued modern happiness while living with unresolved fears and unequal forms of safety.

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