Here we see contrasted a rather convention treatment (Jeansonne’s) of the 1920s, treating it as an aberration, a period in the nation’s past when Americans exhibited acute paranoia, on the one hand, and an analysis (Gerstle’s) that integrates the 20s much better into a history of persistent tension between conflicting visions of the American nation, on the other.

1. Why does Jeansonne think of the 1920s as an Age of Fear? What were Americans afraid of? What events does he include as examples of the way they responded to that fear by turning to repressive tactics against those they perceived as in some manner threatening to core values? Who counts as Americans in this analysis?

2. On the specifics, how does Jeansonne define the motives behind the Red Scare, the return of the Klan, the eugenics movement, immigration restriction, and religious fundamentalism?

3. How were the following groups affected by these reactionary movements: minorities, the labor movement, religious modernists, and people of progressive or radical political views.

4. If Sacco and Vanzetti were quite probably guilty, why does Jeansonne think of their trial and the reaction provoked by their conviction in 1920 and execution in 1927 as an even that “more than any other incident of the decade . . . epitomized the age of fear”?

5. How useful do you think it is to do history by decades in this manner, and to give a period a label such as “an age of fear?” Does this kind of history gloss or slight continuities?

6. To what extent does Gerstle escape this predicament and provide a more satisfying explanation of at least some of the same currents in the 1920s by locating them within a pattern of longer standing characterized by persistent tension between conflicting views of the American nation? What were these two visions, and in each of them, who belonged? Who could get a ticket punched as a true American? What people were excluded by racial nationalists, and why?

7. If Gerstle thinks that World War I gave a boost of sorts to the progress of an inclusive, civic nationalism, how did this happen, how much progress was made, and why was this progress aborted? How did new government programs and agencies created during and right after the war actually inflame old ideological and ethnic animosities and exclude certain groups? What precedents—fateful as well for events later in the century—were set by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and state-level agencies investigative agencies of a similar type? To what extent did these state actions tend
to legitimate aggressive anti-radical activities by private groups such as the American Legion? What limits does Gerstle see to these kinds of measures for “disciplining” the American people? Is a drive for 100% Americanism a by-product of every war?

8. Gerstle argues that immigration restriction was the main area in which the move to control and discipline did not quickly fade after the war. What kinds of concerns and what forms of (bogus) thinking and knowledge does he see behind the movement for a national standard of racial purity? What does he mean when he calls immigration restriction “a policy site onto which Americans projected their fears about their nation’s alleged enemies; here they could translate these anxieties into harsh and repressive legislation.” Against whom, what groups, was this repression aimed?

9. How does Gerstle assess the movement for purity through immigration restriction? To what extent is his take like Jeansonne’s? To what extent does he argue that the movement for racial purity, far from being entirely rooted in traditionalists fears of modernity, was actually grounded in and supported by forms of science? What groups were particularly targeted for exclusion, and on what grounds? Who argued—in the country and in Congress—for exclusion? What particular form did exclusions of Asians take? Who stood up to the racialist argument and defended a more inclusive, civic nationalism?

10. To what extent was Roosevelt’s New Nationalist vision aborted by these various ethnic and ideological purity movements, and by contraction of the role of government after the war? What was the impact of these movements on U. S. liberalism even through the New Deal and beyond?