Britain in the 1960s

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Ⅰ Introduction

From a nostalgic and romantic viewpoint, the 1960s can be seen as a time of freedom, experimentation and creativity, and relative affluence. More realistically, however, the decade cannot be characterized so simply and to fully understand it, it must be located within its historical perspective. Undoubtedly, the experience of World War Two and all the hardships that that brought with it, created a strong desire for change. Interestingly, a major part of this desire was for greater social fairness and recognition that all levels of society had rights to welfare and education. Underlying this desire was the belief that governments could control the economy to ensure that these wishes would be met. Nevertheless, although major social and economic changes were attempted their long term effects were to prove inadequate in meeting people's expectations. In this paper I want to suggest that it was the decade of the 1960s which brought the weaknesses of these into sharper focus and that it was also during this period that Britain changed socially and culturally to such an extent that the 1960s can be seen as a watershed in Britain's social history. It was during that 1960s that the idea of a youth culture fully developed and this, together with increasingly affluence, in fact led to greater individualism and a rejection

of many traditional aspects of British culture. In particular, younger people were far more willing and active in expressing dissatisfaction with Britain's political establishment which created further alienation and individuality in British culture. Furthermore, the experiences of the 1960s set the tone for the subsequent decades and in many respects it can be argued that British society is still dealing with the fallout from that decade. In looking at these issues, I will first provide a short summary of Britain's post second world war experience and then go on to look in detail at cultural, political, economic and social changes which occurred during the 1960s. Clearly, this will be selective and subjective, nevertheless, the topics chosen will show how Britain changed from being a relatively homogeneous community into one which became materialistic, individualistic and distrustful of its own political establishment.

Ⅱ Post-War Britain and the 1950s

In order to understand the changes that took place during the 1960s, it is important to look briefly at how the social issues which manifested themselves during and immediately following World War Two affected Britain's post-war political landscape and economic policies.

Throughout the interwar years, concern over poverty, the lack of welfare provisions and education had been growing. This concern was presented in 1942 in the Beveridge Report which identified the five causes of poverty as being want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness. In response to these factors, the report proposed a range of social benefits and health care funded by a national insurance system and taxation. Despite initial optimism in this respect, Churchill's national government was unable, or unwilling, to act and so it was not until 1948 that the Labour government

introduced legislation to create the National Health Service as part of the Welfare State in which people would receive health care from 'the cradle to the grave'. This legislation effectively brought most hospitals under the control of the central government and although, doctors and surgeons were allowed to continue having private patients, most accepted the new system which provided health care, free at the point of contact.

Two years after the Beveridge Report, the Butler Education Act, was passed. This Act aimed to reform Britain's education system so that academically gifted children from the lower middle and working classes would achieve results more in line with their ability and go on to university level education. The 1944 Act outlined the introduction of a 'tripartite' system of grammar (academic), secondary modern (basic general education) and technical (vocational) schools. By dividing education in this way it was hoped that children would receive an education that suited them and, in addition, provide Britain with a skilled workforce able to compete effectively in the post-war world economy.

Nevertheless, the educational reforms contained within the 1944 Education Act were not fully carried out. For the most part, only secondary modern and grammar schools were established, whilst, perhaps more importantly, fee paying public schools continued with all the privileges which had traditionally been attached to them. As a result, class still played an important role in determining the type and quality of education that a child received and furthermore, there was no significant rise in the number of working class children going on to university.

A further area that saw dramatic change in the post-war era was the

British Empire. From 1947, steps were taken to give independence to various countries and by 1949 India, Pakistan, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Burma had all gained their independence. Similarly, during the 1950s many former colonies in Africa (Northern Rhodesia, present-day Zambia, Nyasaland, present-day Malawi, and Kenya) also gained their independence. Although there may have been an altruistic drive to allow independence, in reality the motive force behind this policy was that Britain no longer had either the money or the desire to maintain its empire (Morgan, 2000). Whether or not granting independence was well conceived, the effect in Britain was that the country became more introspective and this had important repercussions for the development of British culture.

In particular, one area which led to serious social repercussions was Britain's immigration policy. With the dismantling of the empire, and in response to a substantially contracted labour pool, people from the Commonwealth (countries previously forming the British Empire) were invited to take up jobs in Britain. Although initially the numbers of immigrants was small, the number grew over the following years leading to the partial ghettoization in parts of bigger cities such as London, Birmingham, Leicester, Bristol, Liverpool, Bradford, Leeds and Manchester, as those newly arrived in Britain gravitated to where housing was cheaper and those of similar nationality or religion had already established a community. In the main these people took up low paid jobs in the recently nationalized industries and the National Health Service, despite many being highly educated and qualified. On the one hand, whilst it can be argued that this policy helped to solve Britain's labour shortages, on the other, it was clear that no thought had been given to these people's needs as they adjusted to a new way of life nor how to educate the majority community

in accepting people from other countries. By 1958, as a result of ignorance and misunderstandings, tensions between communities were running high and, ultimately, rioting began in Notting Hill in London and in Nottingham. Although, the police quelled these riots, it was done in such a way that those in positions of power were increasingly viewed with suspicion and distrust by the immigrant community and thereby made future genuine social integration extremely difficult.

Nevertheless, towards the end of the Second World War the increasingly clear need for social change within Britain, particularly in social welfare and education which, it was hoped, would create a less divided and a more inclusive society, created a shift in political opinion. Consequently, in July 1945, British politics changed dramatically, when for the first time since its inception, the Labour Party became the party of government, in its own right, with a huge majority in the House of Commons (three hundred and ninety four seats to the Conservative Party's two hundred and ten). This achievement meant that, Attlee, the Labour leader, replaced the very popular war-time Conservative Party leader, Winston Churchill and, in addition, the Labour Party replaced the Liberal Party as the main electoral alternative to the Conservative Party, at least in terms of national politics.

In deed, in many ways this Labour government set the political tone for period from 1945 to the mid 1960s. Although governments alternated between the Conservative and Labour parties, at a basic level there was a consensus on what constituted political priorities. This was particularly so in relation to economic policy with the major parties accepting, in general, Keynesian economics and the necessity of nationalizing major industries such as coal, rail and the supply of other amenities. A further area of agreement

was the in the desirability of full employment over other economic factors, such as inflation, and attempts were made to revitalize old industrial areas in the north east of England which had suffered high rates of unemployment.

Although the Labour Party's policy of nationalization was not popular with everyone, this kind of intervention was accepted for a number of reasons. Firstly, these industries were strongly associated with the industrial revolution and were seen as the bedrock of British economic strength (though in reality this had not actually been the case since the turn of twentieth century). Therefore to lose these industries would have been a huge psychological blow to a country still struggling to throw off the affects of war. Secondly, these industries were major employers in Wales, the Midlands, the north east of England and in Scotland. Thus, maintaining these industries helped to preserve both communities and employment opportunities. Finally, government control meant a more coordinated approach to providing essential services around the country and, whilst economically arguments could be made against this situation, in general the service that most ordinary people received improved significantly compared to their pre-war experiences.

Partly as result of these policies and the normalization of the economy, throughout the late 1940s and into the 1950s, rationing of essential items was ended. At the same time, and particularly as the 1950s progressed, many people found they had sufficient surplus income to purchase consumer goods. This was partly because between 1955 and 1969 wages rose at a higher rate than prices dramatically improving the economic position of many people (Marwick, 1991). Nevertheless, increasing prosperity, as other social trends would show, did not necessarily lead to a more unified society.

By the 1950s a worrying new aspect of social fragmentation was beginning to appear. This was the development of a 'youth culture' which was both violent and openly challenged traditional values. This youth culture was built around a particular fashion style and Rock 'n' Roll music which was being imported from the United States of America. Some people felt that the more openly sexual lyrics, the rhythms and the dancing styles associated with Rock 'n' Roll were having a detrimental effect on Britain's youth. From 1953, Britain saw the appearance of white working class males, known as Teddy Boys, who could be violent both within their own group and towards ordinary members of society in general. Unfortunately, some newspapers reported incidents in a sensational way which may have fuelled an unnecessarily deep fear of Teddy Boys. For many commentators, what was particularly troubling about this movement was that it was happening at a time of increasing affluence for the working class. It seemed confusing that relative financial security should create an atmosphere which could be dark and threatening. As Christopher notes, by the end of the 1950s British society had been transformed so that "its ethics of individualism and pleasure-seeking contrasted sharply with the collectivism and austerity which marked the beginning of the decade." (Christopher, 2006: 6)

A further social change which gained a greater significance as time went on was the introduction of television during the 1950s. Though during the 1950s it was still only the more wealthy households which could own their own set, sales of televisions increased so much so that by 1958 Independent Television funded on advertising revenue had begun in direction competition to the statutory license fee which funded the nationally owned British Broadcasting Corporation. Unfortunately as Shaw and Shaw (1988) argue, increasing the number of television stations did not always result in greater

choice nor did it lead to the improved quality of the programmes broadcast (though, clearly 'quality' is subjective). Most worrying of all television did not completely fulfill its role as educator and, indeed, some programmes may have led to a more populist, narrow view of what education and knowledge are (Shaw and Shaw, 1988).

Therefore, as Britain moved into the 1960s, there were signs of positive change. Improved access to health care, education, pensions and other social benefits together with growing affluence all produced a genuine improvement in the quality of life for many. On the other hand, there were obvious signs of impending social change with growing immigration, the development of a youth culture, which had largely been absent prior to this point, and moves towards a more consumer-based, individualistic attitude towards life. As the 1960s progressed the tension between these forces became increasingly apparent and helped to produce in Britain a society which was radically different to that which had existed prior to World War Two and before.

Ⅲ The 1960s: Cultural Change

The growth in television entertainment continued, but with more impact, a trend which had started in the 1950s with the cinema. Television programmes increasingly reflected and commented on the social changes that were taking place. A significant feature of these programmes was that they took a satirical and pointed approach which could be seen as expressing criticism of the establishment rather than attempting to use humour to be socially cohesive. This was particularly so in programmes such as *That was the week that was* and *Till Death Do Us Part*. The BBC's *Wednesday Play* also provided an opportunity for serious television programming and the plays

shown often provoked strong reactions, notable examples being *Cathy Come Home* which showed how unemployment could still lead to poverty and deprivation at the hands of insensitive ʻsocial servicesʼ and *Up The Junction* which provided a gritty view of working class life in London. Therefore, although it would be unwise to argue that all television programmes dealt critically with weighty political issues, it can be said that there was concern about the social change that was taking place and, perhaps as important, a growing awareness and concern that Britain's traditional establishment lacked relevance and were increasingly unable to control change.

Television also helped to feed the growing interest in popular music with programmes like *Six-Five Special*, *Juke Box Jury*, and *Top of the Pops*. For the first time the current pop sensations were brought directly into people's homes further adding to the power of the popular music industry to influence attitudes and fashion styles which was beginning to take off at this time. However, as the 1960s progressed bands such as The Rolling Stones and The Who attempted to express the feelings and frustrations of the 1960s youth with their wildness and anti-establishment sentiments. The result of this trend was to emphasise the feeling of distance between generations which would become more apparent as the decade progressed (Marwick, 1991).

The development of ʻyouth cultureʼ with its own increasingly strident desire for all kinds of freedom shocked many social commentators. It was from 1964 that London became known as ʻSwinging Londonʼ with its progressive views towards love, drugs and music. However, particularly shocking for many commentators were the demands for greater (sexual) freedom and equality with men in all walks of life made by women. Significantly, one scientific development that helped free women sexually,

was the development of the contraceptive 'pill'. At the same time, the relaxation of laws concerning abortion (the 1967 Abortion Act), gave women greater control over their sexual activity and planning families. Furthermore, the Divorce Act (1969) gave a woman the right to leave a violent and abusive husband rather than having to put with the relationship come what may. By the end of the 1960s, in response to continued male chauvinism, a consciously feminist movement was beginning in Britain. Consequently, for some social commentators it seemed that the traditional British culture which had protected and preserved the country's moral standards was being undermined by the ideology and attitudes of the developing youth culture (Morgan, 2001).

However, set against these points, Christopher (2006) notes that, though without doubt changes were taking place, caution needs to be exercised in describing the extent and speed with which such changes happened. In the other major cities outside of London, life for the majority changed little and a short journey into smaller towns and especially rural areas would reveal a far greater sense of continuity rather than change. Christopher argues that the all pervading sense of change must be to a certain extent down to the effect of sensationalism within the national press.

IV The 1960s: Political Change

Politically, the social changes that were taking place were both reflected in and driven by changes in policies and legislation. As had happened to the Labour Party at the beginning of the 1950s, by the early 1960s, the Conservative Party was increasingly seen as old-fashioned, out of touch with ordinary British people and inextricably linked to scandal. In 1963, perhaps one of the most significant of these scandals took place when it was revealed

that the Secretary of State for War, John Profumo, had lied about his relationship with the prostitute Christine Keeler, who was also involved in a relationship with the Soviet naval attaché stationed in London. Regardless of the extent of the leaks that resulted from this situation, the event captured the national disenchantment with the Conservative Party and helped to bring about their fall from power in 1964.

In contrast, and perhaps as a result of its defeat in elections throughout the 1950s, the Labour Party underwent a reevaluation of its beliefs and policies. In the 1940s the Labour Party had established a clear ideological base for its policies and electoral image. However, by the 1950s this very traditional working class image was beginning to appear outdated and electorally limiting. Rather than tying itself to traditional heavy industries, the Labour Party sought to capture the spirit of the age by associating itself with modernity (in particular scientific and technological progress that was increasingly affecting industry), whilst at the same time preserving the unspoken commitment to consensus politics (Morgan 2000). Despite a power struggle within the party, ultimately the party became dominated by the less ideology-bound and more pragmatic politicians such Harold Wilson, James Callaghan and Dennis Healey. It was this pragmatic faction that led the Labour Party to electoral victory over the Conservative Party in 1964. Unfortunately, its attempt to capture the 'white heat of the technological revolution' ended in failure because the party simply did not realise just what would be required in order to achieve success.

At the same time as wanting to improve its image, the Labour Party also wanted to improve the image of Britain, in particular by replacing slum housing with modern houses. Again, though these initiatives proved to have

mixed results. Old slum housing was demolished and replaced with high-rise buildings which allowed greater numbers of people to live in a smaller space but instead of renewing existing communities, these structures only emphasized a sense of isolation. The consequence of this was an increase in alienation and rising crime rates.

Furthermore, the traditional sense of community was also undermined by changes to the British high street with the growth of supermarkets. Although these were slow to appear, they heralded a major change in British society as it became increasingly difficult for shops focusing on a particular type of product to remain profitable. This shift was symptomatic of the change from communities to individualism that was taking place in British society. Though certainly convenient, in terms of protecting and maintaining local communities, the effects of losing independent shops were serious.

Ⅴ The 1960s: Economic Change

The Conservative Party's handling of the economy between the start of the 1960s and 1964 led to a number of problems which would remain the major areas of concern of most economic policies throughout the decade. These issues centred around inflation, (un)employment and the exchange rate of the pound and its effect on Britain's balance of payments.

Firstly, as the 1960s progressed the economy moved into a period of overall increasing inflation, but with periods of economic contraction. In an attempt to take control of the economy, both Conservative and Labour governments tried to introduce incomes and price limits but without success. In particular, the Labour Party, between 1966 and 1967, introduced a Prices and Incomes policy which aimed to set limits on both prices at which goods

and services could be purchased and the rate of income increases. The result of this policy was to create greater industrial dissatisfaction and a worsening economic environment. Such a sudden change from relative economic freedom to a controlled market caused a sharp move into deflation and this generated a sudden increase in unemployment. This in turn damaged relations between the Labour government and the trades unions creating greater industrial and economic unrest. Ultimately, the long term effect was to undermine British manufacturing and public service industries.

Secondly, for the first time since the war years, Britain experienced a period of full employment. This brought with it a sense of financial security for many people but it also brought increasingly high labour costs for companies and a strengthening of trade union power unlike that seen since the 1920s. As the trades unions provided much of the political support for the Labour Party, the Labour government was unwilling to challenge trades unions' pay demands. On the other hand, it was clear that wages could not simply keep on rising without regard to either productivity or profitability. Following its electoral victory in 1964, the Labour Party did attempt to control the trades unions, but without success partly because its attempt was made in a confrontational manner. Finally, between 1969 and 1970 Wilson's Labour government proposed an Industrial Relations Bill which would have imposed legal and criminal sanctions on striking unions and individual union members. Not surprisingly, the Trades Union Congress strongly rejected this legislation and ultimately forced the government to back down. The consequence of the confrontation was to show that the trades unions had significant influence over any government's economic policies.

Therefore, despite the Labour government's attempts to promote

economic progress through technology, using incomes and price legislation and limiting trade union power, it became increasingly clear that Britain was becoming less economically competitive. The result of this, particularly towards the end of the 1960s, was increasing unemployment. Initially to some extent southern England was cushioned from the effects of unemployment as it appeared first and lasted longest in the north east, Scotland and Wales (Morgan, 2000). Nevertheless, the sudden reappearance of significant levels of unemployment created both serious economic and social problems.

Finally, the appearance of high rates of inflation and unemployment resulted in a worsening economic position for Britain internationally. Since the early 1960s international bodies, journals and magazines had been discussing and reflecting on Britain's declining economic position and this exacerbated the difficulty of the situation. Ultimately, Britain was unable to fight against this kind of pressure and the Labour government was forced in to the very unpopular necessity of devaluing the pound in 1967. This was mostly a psychological blow for the British people, because in reality the pound probably had been over-valued and was creating problems for British industry. Nevertheless, a significant result of this policy was the electorate's view of politicians became more negative and pessimistic and helped to strengthen disenchantment and dissolution with the British political system.

Ⅵ The 1960s: Social Change

During the 1960s, Britain began to throw off its 'Victorian' past and adopted a more modern outlook. Shaw and Shaw (1988) argue that this was partly due to the increasing rejection of religion. In place of religion, people's attitudes were more materialistic and pragmatic which allowed a greater flexibility towards social manners and morals. For some such

changes marked a decline in moral standards. In particular the Roman Catholic Church strongly disapproved of the 'new' contraceptive pill and others, such as Mary Whitehouse, campaigned against what they saw as falling moral standards, particularly on television. However, for others, this change in attitudes meant that real social improvements could be made. It can be argued that the abolition of capital punishment in 1965 and changes to abortion, divorce and homosexuality laws all helped provide a gradual release to the pressures and tensions which had been building in society.

The 1960s separated Britain from its past with the growth of consumerism. With the baby boom that occurred during the 1950s and 1960s, British society appeared younger but at the same time with full employment from the mid 1950s through to the mid 1960s, families had far more disposable income to spend on consumer goods. Consequently, companies began to shift their marketing techniques to more modern practices, in particular, focusing attention on encouraging younger people to spend money. This also affected attitudes towards more traditional aspects of British life and led to a move away from leisure time taken within the family to more emphasis being place on enjoyment in a more individual oriented environment.

Social change also manifested itself in the workplace. From the late 1950s, British culture was increasingly being influenced by American social norms. This influence was particularly strongly felt by the younger generation and women. As access to education and employment opportunities grew, so did demands for equality within the workplace. Although change was slow, important first steps were being made which would lead to more employment opportunities and in turn provide for greater economic independence for younger people in general and women in particular.

Finally, British society changed in another important respect as a result of immigration. As has been pointed out above, people from former colonies had been invited to Britain to make up for labour shortages but that a lack of planning in the practicalities of this policy led to growing racial tensions. Although the immigrant population of Britain remained small, it was heavily concentrated into particular areas which could give the impression that coloured immigrants were driving out the indigenous 'white' inhabitants. Tensions continued to rise even after the riots in 1958, so that in 1968 the Conservative politician, Enoch Powell, felt it necessary to warn that unchecked immigration would lead to 'rivers foaming with much blood' as a result of racial violence. Ultimately Powell was forced to resign, but the speech did raise awareness that a serious debate was needed to think about how to deal with the existing immigrant population and to plan for future immigration. Unfortunately, rather than promoting positive and inclusive policies, in 1968 Callaghan, the Labour Home Secretary, introduced strict immigration laws which had the effect of splitting up many immigrant families and caused problems particularly for Ugandan immigrants escaping from Idi Amin. In addition, organizations like the police were either incapable or unwilling to learn how to deal sensitively with immigrant communities and the trades unions still accepted the image of Blacks and Asians as being inferior so worked to protect the pay and conditions of only their white membership. The extent of racial divisions became clear in 1967 with the formation of the white supremacist National Front. This organization would see limited electoral success throughout the late 1960s and even today, regrettably, remains a political force.

Ⅶ Conclusion

The 1960s in Britain, then, can be seen as a kind of watershed between the sense of consensus and relative confidence of the 1950s and the despondency of the 1970s. On the one hand, Britain became a more open society and as the 1960s progressed more aware, though not necessarily more responsive to, the rights of minority groups and women in general. In addition, society became more tolerant of expressions of individual freedom and choice. This is shown in the legal right to abortion, the use of the contraceptive pill and the decriminalization of homosexuality. On the other hand, however, the 1960s also ushered in a period of sustained economic depression which in the 1970s led to the creation of a deeply divided and deeply selfish society. In particular, governments and the managers of heavy industries failed to realize the importance of modernizing their procedures, both in terms of the way that management interacting with its workforce and in a failure to invest in new technology, and thereby condemning Britain to years of industrial unrest and disruption. The failure by the authorities to deal realistically with the integration of immigrants, largely through ignorance rather than outright malice, created serious social tensions which would flare up again in the early 1980s. Finally, the 1960s failed to realize the desire of post-war Britain by creating a fairer and more egalitarian society through the introduction of the welfare. In fact, as Morgan (2001) says, "The welfare state, then, had not closed the gap between the classes, despite the growth of supplementary and other benefits under the 1974－9 Labour governments. There had been some redistribution of income. But in terms, say, of residual wealth and capital, educational mobility, or occupational status, even in everyday terms of such as dress, hobbies, or accent, British social divisions remained unusually pronounced by European or transatlantic standards" (P.426).

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