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The social and cultural context

Introduction

Since the 1950s Britain has experienced a period of accelerated social and cultural change. This has coincided with the disintegration of the British Empire, an expansion of the Commonwealth and the immigration of people of numerous nationalities, languages and cultures. The gradual globalising of life, to which these phenomena have contributed, has produced a multi-ethnic Britain, with a plurality of identities and heritages.

One of the most powerful forces for change during this period has been the women's movement. The entry of women into the labour market and their increasing independence has brought about fundamental changes in their position in society and their relations with men. Similarly, the emergence of youth as an identifiable group with a very different lifestyle to members of an older generation, has contributed substantially to the changing social and cultural profile.

Between 1948 and 1978 the impact of ethnicity, feminism and youth in Britain was felt across the arts, as successive governments provided funds through the Arts Council to encourage new styles of expression. This continued until the election of the Conservative Government in 1979, which marked an important turning point. State subsidies and benefits for the arts were replaced with a 'culture' of individualism, private enterprise and the values of the market-place in almost every area of society. Cultural life suffered greatly, as funding was reduced or disappeared in all areas. The arts were treated as any other business, so that plays, films and exhibitions were seen as products for consumption by consumers in a competitive market-place.

'Thatcherism' marked the greatest political, economic and cultural shift in Britain this century. But by the mid-1990s the Conservative Government was suffering from weak leadership and profound internal divisions. There was enthusiasm for change and the victory of New Labour in May 1997 provided the country and its cultural life with a new sense of self-confidence, with promises of moral rectitude and social inclusion in public life, plus subsidies and support for the arts.

New society (1945–60)

Economics and politics

In 1945 Britain was ready for change. After six years of fighting fascism, industry was in ruins, homes were destroyed and many people struggled to survive. In 1948 the Labour Government led by Clement Attlee introduced new plans for a 'brave new post-war world' with the creation of the welfare state, the nationalisation of key industries and a meritocratic, open society. The granting of independence to India announced a gradual dissolution of the British Empire. But despite the reforms it was a time of austerity, with shortages, queues and inconveniences.

The generation which had won the war also wanted fun and consumerism which the government had failed to deliver, and in 1951 Labour lost the election to the Conservatives led by Harold Macmillan. The same year marked the centenary of the Great Exhibition of 1851, held in London's Hyde Park to celebrate imperial greatness. To commemorate the event, the Festival of Britain was organised with parties, parades, speeches and optimism. It was a modest beginning to a decade in which crime rates were low, production rose and consumerism increased. During 1955–60, average industrial earnings rose by 34 per cent. With their new prosperity, many ordinary people were able to discover cars, fashions and foreign holidays.

Britain's economic growth created high levels of demand for manual labour in low-paid areas of work such as transport, health and catering. There was a labour shortage and the British municipal authorities began to offer jobs to Commonwealth citizens in the West Indies, India, Pakistan, Africa and Hong Kong. Enoch Powell and other Conservative MPs went to the Caribbean territories to actively recruit local people and on 21 June 1948, the ship *Empire Windrush* docked at Tilbury, to the east of London, bringing 492 Commonwealth citizens to Britain.

Their arrival marked the beginning of a migration which continued through the 1950s and 1960s and brought nearly half a million West Indians to the UK. Many established communities in Birmingham and the West Midlands, in London, in the textile towns of Bradford and Leeds in the north, and in other poor urban areas of cities around Britain. It was a strange, cold, alien country compared to the ones they had left behind.

Throughout the 1950s around 20,000 per year arrived in a country

which was almost exclusively white. Immigrants were given the right of permanent residence, but many people from the poorer districts (to which the immigrants gravitated) began to resent it. Almost one third of the Commonwealth immigrants made their homes in London's East End, where local communities and daily lives began to change.

As immigration increased, race became a source of social conflict. There was competition for jobs and accommodation, and many were forced into overcrowded, unsafe housing. Attitudes became hostile and in 1958 local black communities were attacked during riots in Nottingham and in London's Notting Hill.

While immigration was mostly a working-class concern, many of the middle class were worried about the increasing danger of nuclear war. Britain had successfully tested a nuclear bomb in Australia in 1953, but there was a strong feeling among the political left that Britain would be safer without nuclear arms. A group of writers, musicians, artists and others formed the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Some of the founder members included the philosopher Bertrand Russell, the composer Benjamin Britten, the sculptor Henry Moore, the historian A.J.P. Taylor, and the novelists E.M. Forster and Doris Lessing.

At Easter in 1958, 5,000 protesters marched from London to Aldermaston, the site of a nuclear research establishment. Bands and folk singers accompanied a mixture of pacifists, Christians, trade unionists, young parents and children. The movement became increasingly influential and the following year some 50,000 took part. It became an annual event and popular protest movements have since become a common feature of the political landscape.

Society and culture

During the Second World War (1939–45) many women had gone to work in the fields and factories, but afterwards they were encouraged to return to their domestic roles as wives and mothers. The birth rate rose sharply and large families became fashionable. But at the same time there were indications of domestic unhappiness. Divorces quadrupled from 8,000 per year pre-war to 32,000 in 1950, and continued to rise. More and more women began seeking the services of psychiatrists and marriage guidance counsellors. Many wanted to return to work and by 1957 one third of married women were in employment, even though the majority of jobs open to women were low-paid, part-time and monotonous.

Worries about women's independence intensified following the publication in Britain of an American study called *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female*, better known as the second Kinsey Report (1953). It revealed that women could enjoy sex as much as men, and that discontent and adultery in marriage were common. The findings caused public shock and disbelief, but initiated public and private debates about the differences

between the sexes and marked the beginnings of a new sexual openness in Britain and America.

The more relaxed attitude towards sexuality had implications for the content of numerous artistic works. Previously, certain books by authors such as D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce could not be published because of their erotic content, and some sculptures by Jacob Epstein were said to be obscene. But within three years of the Kinsey Report, the limits of censorship in the arts and entertainments became more relaxed and many films, plays and books began to include sexually explicit material.

In American and European cinema, the depiction of women gradually changed as Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot became famous for their projection of an innocent, child-like sexuality. In Britain, Diana Dors began her career as a cinematic sex symbol. In their roles they defined a 'third way' for women which was neither submissive nor whore-like. They were shown as fun-loving girls who were independent, sexually confident and happy. However, for many young British women of the 1950s, this was still not an option, and a life of dependence and child-rearing remained the reality.

Due to the post-war 'baby boom', by the late 1950s the average age had dropped sharply and by 1959 there were over four million single people aged between 13 and 25. Society was younger; it was also richer and more image-conscious. With full employment, it was easy to achieve financial independence at an early age. Businesses began to market their products to teenagers who now had enough money to create a new world of their own. Fashionable new clothes, hair styles and records were among the most popular items. Coffee bars and 'melody' (music) bars opened, providing meeting places for a generation with money to spend on leisure and pleasure.

Although unemployment was low, juvenile crimes by offenders under 21 rose from around 24,000 in 1955 to over 45,000 in 1959. There were frequent debates about the relationship between affluence and violence. The influence of television was often blamed, especially the content of commercial television, and the suggestive sounds and lyrics of rock'n'roll music. One of the most visible signs of change among the younger generation could be seen around 1953 with the appearance of 'Teddy Boys', urban working-class gangs dressed in colourful suits. Their behaviour was said to be threatening and brutal, and there were frequent newspaper reports of violent confrontations. The mass media began to report incidents involving the 'Teds', and presented a shocking image which frightened people and sold many newspapers.

The exaggerated images of advertising and mass culture were opposed by a tendency in the arts to confront and expose the real and the authentic in society. Many works engaged with major social issues of the time, such as criminality, punishment, poverty, family tension and racism. In literature, theatre and film, the strident works of radical new writers reflected the lives of the industrial working class in a realistic way. On television

too, new series of plays and documentaries brought realistic dramas and factual reports into millions of homes. In art, the St Ives school painted simple everyday scenes in natural colours. In architecture, cool, clean minimal forms demonstrated the purity of rational design, with a conspicuous absence of decoration or artifice.

The new movements were often received by the public with shock and disdain. But they brought to the stage, screen, novel and canvas the concerns and problems of ordinary people, and not just those of a better-educated, affluent minority, which had been the case before the war. They introduced dissent into the arts, which reflected the growing dissent in society and helped establish a critical, influential tradition of social realism. This had not been done before and has since become a characteristic feature of the arts in Britain.

The debate about popular culture

During the 1950s electronic goods such as televisions, small radios and record players became cheap and widely available, and by 1960 most homes contained at least one of these. Cultural material was increasingly created for mass audiences in the form of television programmes, popular music and films. The sale of popular novels, women's magazines, sensational newspapers and comics also increased to meet demand for light entertainment.

But some social commentators and academics were concerned about the mass consumption of films and music which had been created simply to make profits. They believed that standards and quality in the arts would fall. Like many earlier critics, such as Matthew Arnold and T.S. Eliot, E.R. Leavis believed that great works of art carried a moral, civilising message, which was educational, and a means of social and self-improvement. But the mass-produced forms of music, art and popular entertainment did not and could not do this, and only encouraged individualism, hedonism, laziness and decadence.

Several influential books were written expressing the probable consequences. In *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), Richard Hoggart studied the consequences for the individual. He believed that the absence of moral content in popular literature and the arts made it more difficult for the ordinary person to become educated, wise and cultured. In *The Long Revolution* (1961), Raymond Williams considered the social consequences. He thought it would lead to an increase in materialism, self-interest, a reduction in the importance of the social services (such as education and health) and a less radical, more individualist Labour Party. But he also believed that the negative effects could be combated with a strong left-wing government and better standards of education.

In spite of the worries about moral decay and cultural decline, by the end of the 1950s the consumer society had become firmly established.

British society was about to be transformed. Its ethic of individualism and pleasure-seeking contrasted sharply with the collectivism which marked the beginning of the decade.

Progress and pop (1960–70)

Economy and politics

In spite of the material gains of the 1950s, by the mid-1960s there was a feeling of disappointment with a Conservative Party which had been in power for thirteen years. The country had changed greatly, developing into a dynamic consumer society, but the old-fashioned speech, manners and dress of the figures of authority identified them with a much earlier age. It had also begun to appear disorganised and out of touch with politics and people. In the mid-1950s there were stories of top civil servants defecting to Russia. In 1956 there was a major government failure in the handling of the Suez Canal crisis, which resulted in a brief war and an embarrassing retreat. Later, in 1963, the Minister for War John Profumo resigned from government after admitting he lied to Parliament about his affair with a prostitute. The public was beginning to lose respect for the government, its institutions and the ruling class.

In 1964 a Labour Government won the election with Harold Wilson as its leader. With the rapid advances in science and industry, the Prime Minister famously spoke of 'the white heat of the technological revolution' and, with a television in nearly every home, the new revolution could be seen by all. There was a consumer boom and rising aspirations. Demand grew for secretarial, clerical and administrative skills, creating posts which were frequently taken by women. A commercial mass media, supermarkets and tall, modernist apartment blocks all became part of everyday life.

But in spite of material improvements in the quality of life, dissent flourished. Numerous groups demanded freedoms – political, economic and personal – as rights. The government responded with a retreat from strict social controls and punishments, many of which had been introduced in the Victorian era. Capital punishment was abolished in 1965 and criminal law was reformed in areas affecting private morality (such as obscenity, homosexuality, abortion and gambling). In 1960 gambling was legalised and many betting shops, bingo halls and clubs appeared. Homosexuality was legalised in 1967 and in 1969 18-year-olds were given the right to vote.

But the most significant advance was in the position of women. The style and ideology of the British women's movement was modelled on the movement in America, which in turn had modelled its style on the tactics of the American black liberation movement. Tactics included marches, sit-ins and strikes. But legislation was gradually introduced giving women the equality and rights for which they had fought. In 1967 the Abortion Act

permitted legal terminations for social and health reasons. The same year, the Family Planning Act enabled women to obtain contraceptives through the National Health Service. These included the oral contraceptive known as 'the Pill' which became available free of charge from 1974. Before this time, women had to rely on men with condoms or simply trust their luck. Divorce was also made easier with the Divorce Reform Act of 1969.

Before the advances of the 1960s many women's lives were conditioned by their reproductive abilities. But on taking control of their fertility, they could begin to control their lives. They could decide if they wanted to become wives and mothers, or if they wanted to plan or postpone family life to fit in with their jobs. These measures helped to ensure that another 'baby boom' similar to that of the late 1940s would be unlikely.

As well as demands for more personal independence, the 1960s also witnessed demands for greater regional autonomy. Scottish, Welsh and Irish nationalists all began to demand freedom from British rule. In 1968 there were riots in Northern Ireland where the Civil Rights Association demanded equal treatment for Catholics and Protestants. In 1969 the British government sent troops there to keep order on the streets, where they have remained ever since.

But not everyone approved of the changes which the decade brought. The Church of England, other Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic churches remained firmly traditional, but their influence gradually declined. However, the political right remained firmly opposed to liberal reform and when economic growth began to slow down around 1966, immigration was made a controversial issue. In 1968, Conservative MP Enoch Powell warned that uncontrolled immigration could lead to violence. In an inflammatory, emotive, infamous speech he quoted lines from an epic poem by Virgil, about the River Tiber foaming with blood. His performance made him simultaneously hated by the left and admired by racists, who found support in his speech. Although he was sacked from the Shadow Cabinet by the party leader Edward Heath, it was a sharp warning of the increased polarisation of society which would characterise Britain in the 1970s.

Society and culture

The early years of the decade saw rising affluence, full employment and increasing optimism. As the children of the post-war years became young adults, there were new generational attitudes. An early indication of change came in 1960, when the publishers Penguin Books won against a charge of obscenity for the publication of the D.H. Lawrence novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. On the day of the victory 200,000 copies were sold.

The material affluence and the new freedoms in law contributed to young people's growing self-confidence to choose not only their own fashions and music, but also politics, religion and sexuality. With the freedom

to protest, consume and create their own lifestyle, all sections of society which had previously been ignored became visible: workers, blacks, women, provincials. In the words of the American pop artist Andy Warhol, everyone would be famous for fifteen minutes.

The popular music and fashion industries saw that a numerically significant section of the population had money to spend on an alternative, 'pop' culture, and there was a boom in spending on music and clothes. Many of the period's cultural innovators were young musicians. They often came from provincial towns and spoke with regional accents. They had little or no formal training, but enough natural ability and charisma to capture public attention. The Beatles and the Rolling Stones were discovered and marketed to a mass teenage audience. The Beatles often wrote songs using the informal slang of their young fans, while the Rolling Stones were more influenced by black American blues singers. They became highly influential and many other groups copied their style.

In fashion, the 'canon' of the couturier was largely abandoned and ready-to-wear clothes appeared in daring new styles. Recycling, mixing and matching of clothes from an earlier time became common, while the miniskirt seemed to affirm the new confidence of women in their sexuality. The skinny model known simply as 'Twiggy' became the fashion yardstick and promoted a new look, as a girl who was both thin and desirable.

Across the cultural spectrum, new, exciting, distinctive styles and movements appeared, inspired and amplified by the reflections of writers, novelists, playwrights, film-makers, architects and artists. Pop art, modernist and 'plug-in' architecture, 'swinging' London films and nudity on the stage became symbols of the decade, while James Bond, George Best, the Avengers, Twiggy, the Beatles and the Stones, became some of its most fashionable figures.

But some young people rejected consumerism and became involved with alternative or 'underground' culture. New magazines appeared, such as *Black Dwarf*, *Oz* and the *International Times*, which helped to circulate information on alternative politics and lifestyles. The expansion of higher education had encouraged many young people to think critically about politics and society, and there was a growing interest in subjects offering fresh critical perspectives, such as sociology. Ideas were often radical and diverse, but there was a general belief that progressive, libertarian groups could create a new, unified society based on peace and co-operation, to replace the competitive, materialist Western model.

Towards the end of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s alternative ideas began to find expression in the arts, with the appearance of small-scale, non-profit making co-operatives in art, drama, film, writing and music. Many of their works carried themes which the commercial mainstream found unacceptable, such as racial oppression, women's liberation and gay rights. But at the same time, other young people were rejecting both politics and consumerism, in favour of spirituality and enlightenment.

The attraction was not the traditional Church of England, but the exotic possibilities offered by cheap overseas travel along the 'hippy trail' to India.

Opinion over the changes of the 1960s was divided. Some regarded the reforms as positive, while the supporters of traditional moral standards spoke of the increasing decline and commercialisation of culture. They blamed law reforms in divorce, abortion and the wide availability of contraceptives for increases in juvenile crime, violence and sexual promiscuity. However, studies showed that the sexual behaviour of young people changed very little, and that changes in attitudes and in law concerning sexual behaviour benefitted men more than women. But nothing seemed stable as a new popular culture displaced the old traditions of the past, resulting in confusion and anxiety among many older members of the public.

Anger and division (1970-9)

Economy and politics

In 1970 the Conservative Party won the election, with Ted Heath as its leader. In contrast with the optimism and hedonism of the 1960s, it was the beginning of a dark decade marked by social division, strikes, high inflation, unemployment and political violence. In 1974, with inflation at 25 per cent and prolonged strikes by the miners' union, the lights went out in a series of power cuts, which forced an election. The result indicated a victory for the Labour Party, with a minority government. Its leader Harold Wilson was able to settle the miners' strike and in a second election the same year Labour won with a small majority.

But high oil prices left the economy depressed. The unions were strong and well organised, and as the economic crisis worsened there were rumours of a Communist plot to take over the Labour Party. Political tension increased as International Marxists became more numerous and various anarchist groups were visible. On the political far-right, the National Front was winning more votes in local elections and for a short time became the third party in British politics, beating the Liberal Party in several local elections. Another far-right group, the National Association for Freedom, was formed in 1975, but one of its organisers was killed by the IRA less than one month later. Then the IRA began a bombing campaign in several British cities. Support for Irish, Scottish and Welsh nationalism was at its peak, and political and social fragmentation across Britain was increasingly obvious.

Economists debated the reasons for persistent economic failure. The long-term decline of mining, shipbuilding, steel production and motor vehicle manufacture were all seen as significant factors. These heavy industries were no longer competitive in global markets. The resistance of the

trade unions to industrial change, the tendency of management to think and plan only for the short term, inflation and the oil crisis of the mid-1970s were all blamed. No government could govern effectively and towards the end of the 1970s there was a growing sense of desperation. The forceful personality of Margaret Thatcher and the simplicity of her free-market solutions began to appear an attractive alternative.

Society and culture

The women's movement continued to make progress in their search for equal opportunities. In the field of employment, the Equal Pay Act was introduced in 1970, although this did not become law until five years later. The Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 made it illegal to discriminate between men and women most areas of employment. With these measures, women had access to levels of economic independence which were unimaginable to the previous generation.

The achievements of the women's movement were not only in the field of law: during the 1970s it became increasingly politicised. A modern, untheoretical expression of its beliefs arrived with Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970). When the first National Women's Liberation March took place in London in 1971, there were already signs of a division within the movement. Radical feminists demanded feminism based on lesbian relationships, insisting on their superiority. In 1971 the first Gay Pride march had been held in London, and a lesbian one took place soon after. But many other women insisted on a less radical feminism, one which combined equality with family life and relationships with men.

Departments of Women's Studies opened in many universities and departments of language, literature, anthropology and history began to develop feminist perspectives. Women's writing became an established literary genre and publishing houses (such as Virago) opened to promote writing by female authors. New, non-commercial 'underground' magazines such as *The Shrew* and *Spare Rib* gave coverage and support to women's liberation. Then, in 1972, a colourful new American publication became available in Britain: *Cosmopolitan* dealt with feminist issues such as rape, sexuality, abortion and contraception, but ignored the radical politics and sexuality of the underground press. It was not popular with militant feminists, but many other women found its approach more compatible with their chosen lifestyles.

In spite of the legal reforms to ensure equal opportunities for women and black people, in many areas of the arts and mass media their representation remained firmly traditional. In popular television series, from the music show *Top of the Pops* to the sitcom *Stephoe and Son*, working women were often shown as sexually provocative and available. Similarly, tabloid newspapers such as the *Sun* were frequently criticised by women's groups for their stereotyped presentation and treatment of women as sex

objects. The representation of immigrant groups and individuals also suffered. In television series such as *Till Death Us Do Part* and *Love Thy Neighbour*, blacks were frequently the target of racial jokes and stereotyping in programmes which were among the most popular of the 1960s and 1970s.

Although television had introduced some brave new dramas during the previous decade, during in the 1970s programming became increasingly bland. Many programmes were created to comfort and reassure audiences rather than challenge or provoke them. Historical adaptations and trivial sitcoms were among the most popular programmes of their time and provided light relief from the turbulence outside.

As unemployment rose, so did the number of strikes, and towards the middle of the decade inflation reached 25 per cent. Numerous social groups were demanding rights denied to them, as society became increasingly confrontational. Racial tension increased in the cities, where the National Front had begun to openly provoke black communities and their supporters. Conflict intensified following the 'Spaghetti House siege' in 1975, when three Afro-Caribbeans attempted a robbery and took hostages in a restaurant in the London suburb of Brixton.

Acts of vandalism were frequent, and there was public hostility towards the oppressive severity and frequently dysfunctional modernist architecture. Many felt threatened by the presence on the streets of numerous young vandals, skinheads and football hooligans. Popular newspapers such as the *Sun* and *Daily Mirror* carried sensational stories of social problems and crimes, such as racial violence, robbery, football hooliganism, pornography and rape. Punks appeared on streets around Britain. Their shocking appearance reflected a sense of disgust with a society which seemed to have abandoned its youth and its future.

In many areas of the arts, fantasy and reality were mixing freely in a kind of dream-like disorder. Films such as Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) reflected the ugly mood of the times. It is filmed as a type of documentary about a declining society in which aggressive, drug-crazed youths rob and rape their way through the city. In a similar style, Derek Jarman's *Jubilee* (1978) showed London as a city full of nightmares. In the theatre, it was a time of highly politicised dramas which addressed Britain's resistance to change. Plays by David Hare, Howard Brenton and David Edgar shocked their audiences with frank depictions of sexuality and violence in a decade marked by division and decline.

All change (1979-97)

Economy and politics

Following the defeat of the Conservatives in the 1974 election, Margaret Hilda Thatcher, a greengrocer's daughter from the market town of

Grantham in Lincolnshire, was elected as the new leader. She went on to lead the Conservatives to victory in the election of 1979 and the party remained in power until 1997. The period opened optimistically, with Thatcher quoting St Francis of Assisi, a medieval saint who made a virtue of poverty:

Where there is discord, may we bring harmony,
Where there is error, may we bring truth,
Where there is doubt, may we bring faith,
Where there is despair, may we bring hope.

Her early publicity depicted her as a happily married suburban housewife, cheerfully washing up in her suburban semi-detached house. But at the same time she was developing economic ideas which were guided by the fashionable theories of monetarism. These involved reducing inflation with high interest rates and submitting all aspects of the economy to free-market theories and the laws of supply and demand.

But in the early 1980s Britain's economic crisis became even worse. The government became deeply unpopular, as factories closed and unemployment rose to over 13 per cent, with more than three million out of work. Manufacturing declined and the shipbuilding, mining and steel industries practically disappeared. The regions of Scotland, the north of England, Wales and the West Midlands had traditionally depended on this kind of industry and were economically devastated.

There was civil and industrial conflict in many areas, and in April 1981 rioting broke out in London, Bristol, Liverpool, Nottingham, and other cities around Britain. It was spontaneous and anarchic, directed against the police and the local environment. On 2 April the following year, Thatcher led Britain into war with Argentina over the occupation of the Falklands Islands (Islas Malvinas) and emerged victorious on 14 June.

In spite of record unemployment, riots and a war, the Conservatives emerged victorious in the General Election of 1983, and the economic and political ideas which came to be known as 'Thatcherism' began to be fully expressed and implemented. These included an even greater reduction of public spending and measures to privatise industries in the public sector (such as gas, steel, transport and telecommunications). The measures were highly unpopular with the working class and unemployed, and resulted in more violent industrial disputes. They were also expensive to implement, being of great cost to the welfare state, but the discovery of oil in the North Sea in the 1970s helped to finance Thatcher's project.

Next she addressed those she called 'the enemy within.' These consisted of powerful trade unions, the miners, left-wing local governments, the IRA, illegal immigrants, the Greens and 'unreliable' members of her own party. The most notorious confrontation with these was the Miners' Strike of 1984-5, which Thatcher saw as part of her plan to break the power of

the unions. She became known as the 'Iron Lady' and passed legislation to permanently weaken the unions' power.

Early opposition focussed on the stationing of nuclear weapons in Britain. This began to be forcefully expressed with the establishing of a women's 'peace camp' outside Greenham Common airbase in 1981. There were also concerns over the environment and membership of Green parties such as the Ramblers, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and Hunt Saboteurs increased.

The government found new opposition in 1987 when the Local Government Act was introduced. Clause 28 of the Act prohibited state schools from promoting homosexuality or teaching that it is acceptable. As a result, campaigning for gay rights and equality intensified, with greater participation in the annual Gay Pride march, and in the activities and profile of pressure groups such as Stonewall, Act Up and Outrage. Some tactics involved exposure in the media ('outing') of homosexuals and lesbians, and high levels of public interest.

During 1985-6 there were more riots in cities around Britain. Burglary, car theft and vandalism all increased. Football hooliganism became a serious social problem. Relations between the police and public were tense. Commentators on the left blamed high unemployment (almost four million), homelessness (around one million) and the loss of community, which an ethos of economic individualism had promoted. Those on the right blamed the permissive society of the 1960s, which had allowed the young to grow up with no respect for the police, teachers or authority.

But after the government removed restrictions on money-lending and dealing in shares, the financial sector boomed. Credit was easy to obtain and taxes were cut, and share prices rose quickly when newly privatised public industries such as British Airways, British Steel and all the public utilities (such as gas, water and telecommunications) were floated. The dominant economic influences changed from heavy industry and manufacturing to financial services and North Sea oil revenues.

Government policies had severe consequences for the poorly educated and least skilled, who were unable to obtain manual work as they had done in previous generations. Many were women, who transferred from manufacturing work to low-paid, part-time service industries in which there were no pension or union benefits. But on a different social level, women were beginning to occupy posts in traditional male-dominated areas such as business, law and banks. Many could enjoy the benefits of increasing financial and sexual freedom, and were postponing marriage and children.

By 1986 the economy was strong and house prices were rising sharply. There was an air of enterprise and optimism as a new society emerged. Britain became more affluent, competitive and more interested in cash than class. There was a new generation of aspirational, stylish and image-conscious consumers, and spending on restaurants, clothes, cars, homes and holidays reached record levels.

Advertising and publicity became fine arts. The Conservatives employed the services of the Saatchi and Saatchi advertising agency to promote the party. Its logo was a flaming blue torch, a symbol closely associated with the Oscar-winning film *Chariots of Fire*. Meanwhile, Labour adopted a red rose as their logo and hired the services of Hugh Hudson, the director of *Chariots*, to make a publicity film of the leader Neil Kinnock.

Following her third election victory in 1987, Thatcher claimed she had cured Britain of its strikes, low productivity, low investment and 'winters of discontent' forever. But the same year the economy began to stagnate when share prices crashed. At the same time, house prices and inflation continued to rise dramatically. The unemployed and sick suffered greater poverty and insecurity through the reduced levels of social services. Increasing numbers of homeless beggars appeared on the streets, the use of illegal drugs increased, while the numbers of AIDS and HIV sufferers also grew alarmingly.

But the government ignored a gradual deterioration in many people's quality of life. For several years Britain lived a kind of 'American Dream'. Its dominant attitudes, values and beliefs were openly approved of by the majority, even if they were excluded. But towards the end of the decade the public began to realise that what the politicians said about Britain was very different from the reality of living in it.

Society and culture

For many years the arts had been insulated from the realities of commercial life. The Arts Council, created to support the arts in 1946 under the chairmanship of the economist John Maynard Keynes, did not interfere with the work of artists and performers. Its ideology survived changes in government and helped to support the wealth and variety of British theatre, music and the visual arts. But during the early 1980s the free market became the only source of information for social, economic and political ideas. The Council's funding was sharply reduced, as the arts were treated as any other business.

The effects of the cuts were widely felt. For the first time, many museums and galleries began to charge admission prices. To attract subsidies, arts productions had to become less adventurous and more populist, for example by showing Shakespeare's plays in ways which removed their social content and stressed their sentimental aspects. But some writers were still prepared to write brave dramas which critically engaged with modern society. Numerous works by Howard Brenton, David Edgar, David Hare and Caryl Churchill continued to depict a growing amorality and a loss of liberal values. Many works of literature reflected similar sentiments. Martin Amis, Ian McEwan and Graham Swift wrote novels about a disordered, chaotic country, and showed their disgust with the replacement of liberal values by those of the market-place.

In television, all channels including the BBC became more conscious of the need to compete in a commercial world. During a brief period of eighteen months, television programming was transformed. Previously, broadcasts had begun around early afternoon, but in 1983 the BBC and ITV both began transmissions from dawn. Channel 4 started transmitting in 1984, the same year as the privately owned station Sky television. Sky marked the introduction of satellite television in Britain and for many households a 'dish' antenna on the outside wall became a fashionable accessory.

Some of the most successful serials of the early 1980s were traditional reconstructions of the past such as *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Jewel in the Crown*, which were both popular and critically praised. But there were still notable series which bravely commented on modern themes. The loss of the dignity of work was memorably expressed the drama series *Boys from the Blackstuff*, while *A Very British Coup* showed how the conservative nature of Britain's institutions, in particular the civil service and press, could conspire to bring down any socialist government of the future. *Edge of Darkness* and *The Monocled Mutineer* were brave, highly praised series which contrasted the government's view of nuclear conflict and of war with the realities of life as perceived by the public.

The arrival of Channel 4 provided programmes for minority groups and often radical, permissive plays. It also began to sponsor critical films, such as *My Beautiful Launderette* and *A Letter to Brezhnev*, which expressed their opposition to the loss of tolerance and liberal values. These and others such as *The Ploughman's Lunch*, *Britannia Hospital* and *Defence of the Realm* promoted a lively political critique of the mass media, society and defence under the Conservative Government. The new possibilities open to many women were depicted with humorous vitality in films such as *Educating Rita* and *Shirley Valentine*, in which the heroines abandon the security of their domestic 'prisons' for romance, excitement and a new life.

But some of the most commercially successful of the decade were 'heritage' films. They were often based on successful novels, such as E.M. Forster's *Room with a View* and *A Passage to India*, which reconstructed an elegant, upper-class, imperialist Britain. *Chariots of Fire* also enjoyed huge commercial success. Its themes of competing, winning and British superiority coincided with the wedding of Prince Charles to Diana in 1981, victory over Argentina in the Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas) in 1982 and the victory of the ruling Conservative Party in the election soon afterwards. It became the film of the moment and won four Oscars.

In architecture, there were few advances during the early 1980s. The construction industry was at a standstill due to a lack of investment and low economic confidence. But the renovation of older buildings frequently provided cheaper, more attractive solutions, and started to become a common practice. Later in the decade when credit restrictions were lifted,

there was a period of accelerated growth. New high-technology office blocks were built in a fashionable post-modern style. One of the most outstanding developments was Docklands in east London, where glamorous, futuristic buildings announced a booming economy.

The individualism and commerce promoted by the Conservative Government were embraced by many young British artists. Traditionally, they had depended on the patronage of gallery owners, but now began to look for empty warehouses and other buildings where they could show and sell their work more independently. At the same time they introduced a variety of challenging new styles which often made use of living and organic material, such as the installations of Damien Hirst. Warehouses also became the location for the dominant musical force of the decade. High-energy dance music was played at maximum volume in fiestas of apolitical hedonism or 'raves', illegally held in large unoccupied buildings around Britain where thousands of young people danced defiantly through the years of Tory rule.

The Blair Revolution (1997-)

Economy and politics

Until the early 1990s, the Labour Party was divided and in chaos. It was committed to policies such as leaving the Common Market, big tax rises, nuclear disarmament, the restoration of trade unions' privileges and returning privatised industries to state control. Michael Foot had replaced James Callaghan as Labour leader, but was dominated by the militant left-wing in his party, which was firmly rejected in the election of 1983. After another change of leader, the party's symbol of the red flag was rejected and the red rose introduced. With new leader Neil Kinnock, the party was given a less militant, more centrist and popular appeal.

In 1981, a new party had been formed by MPs from the other major parties: the Social Democratic Party. In the late 1980s, under its new name of the Liberal Democrats, it won many seats from Labour, attacking the problems of poverty, homelessness and unemployment. But after the 1987 election, many political observers suggested that it had prevented the Labour Party from winning power by dividing the opposition vote.

There were more serious disturbances in 1990 with rioting in London during demonstrations against a new tax known as the 'poll tax'. Margaret Thatcher also became increasingly hostile to the idea of an integrated Europe. The issue divided her cabinet and eventually contributed to her rejection by the party in 1990. John Major was elected as the new leader. But political commentators saw a divided party governing a divided, disillusioned nation. He managed to briefly reverse the Conservative's fortunes with an unexpected victory in the 1992 election, bringing a record fourth consecutive election victory for the Conservatives.

But later that year there was humiliation when Major faced opposition and internal rebellion from those opposed to the Maastricht Treaty and closer monetary union with other European countries.

Divisions over European integration and the decline in popularity of the Conservatives gave the Labour Party an opportunity to reorganise. John Smith was elected as the new leader. But after his sudden death from a heart attack, Tony Blair was chosen. He transformed the party, leaving behind the traditional socialist ideas about stronger unions and state ownership of the major industries. Many were concerned that the party was becoming too much like the Conservatives and not enough like the traditional Labour Party, with its commitments to nationalisation and redistribution of wealth. But he stuck to his message about principles being futile without power, which alienated some traditional labour supporters.

For much of the 1990s there was an overwhelming sensation of disillusion. Studies repeatedly showed that public confidence had fallen in all the major institutions, especially in Parliament, the legal system and the press. And throughout the decade the monarchy, like the Church, was appearing increasingly fragile and irrelevant, amid the devolution of power to Scotland, the plans of the Labour Government to abolish the House of Lords and increasing demands by the Republican pressure group Charter 88.

Meanwhile, the Conservative decline continued, and there were more internal divisions about weak leadership, an uncaring attitude towards weaker sections of the community and doubts over closer European integration. There were also allegations of financial and moral impropriety within the party, commonly known as 'sleaze'. The opinion polls were high in favour of the opposition Labour Party and in May 1997 it gained a historic electoral victory, with a majority of 179 MPs. There was a record number of 101 women Labour MPs and three openly gay men and one lesbian. But public interest in politics seemed to have declined, especially as the manifestos of the two parties appeared to resemble each other so closely. Instead there was increasing tendency to take direct action, especially on environmental issues, such as opposition to road-building schemes and support of animal welfare. In a decade marked by confusion and uncertainty, politics became the least convincing of the performing arts.

Demands increased for regional autonomy and, within several months of its 1997 election victory, the Labour Government began to introduce a devolution of power to Scotland, an assembly to aid regional autonomy for Wales and made a peace treaty with Northern Ireland.

The death of Diana, Princess of Wales, at the end of August 1997 threw the nation into a period of mourning and emotional introspection. Some of the public said her death had affected them more than the death of their own loved ones and, on the day of her funeral, hundreds of thousands were on the streets to throw flowers at the funeral car. The Prime Minister called her the 'People's Princess' and almost provoked a crisis when the

public took this as a signal to turn against the formal, old-fashioned Royal Family. Instead, Labour's publicity department came to their aid and helped organise the funeral, which became a national event of unique emotional impact. The Royal Family began to change, characterised by less formality, less protocol and a closer relationship with the people, in an attempt to restore their diminished popularity.

As the nation publicly mourned the loss of Diana, the rest of the world could watch every detail of the ceremony. Telecommunications and the internet had increasingly become part of people's daily lives, and a globalisation of news, politics and the economy meant that events could be watched as they happened almost anywhere in the world. These, together with a greater understanding of genes and how to manipulate them in humans and animals, were among some of the most significant technical developments of the decade.

But at the same time there was a growing suspicion of science and medicine. There were reports of fatal new diseases, such as CJD, and threats to nature, such as global warming, forcing many to believe the environment needed protection not exploitation. There were few signs that this would happen soon and many intellectuals were pessimistic about the future. Health became a political as well as a personal issue, as people were retiring earlier, living longer and were often in child-free households, which all imposed a greater burden on public health provision. Traditional pleasures became suspect, as food, drink, sex, smoking and sunshine were all said to carry substantial health risks.

In a move which seemed to represent a loss of confidence in science, there was increasing interest in the paranormal and less conventional forms of religion. In 1997 some 70 per cent of Britons professed religious faith but not necessarily the traditional Christian one, and 90 per cent did not go to church regularly. Some social commentators argued this was due to the personal insecurities which life in the 1990s had produced. Moreover, that growing interest in 'alternative' religion showed a public lack of confidence in traditional authorities such as government, science and the Christian church, and their ability to provide answers to modern problems.

Society and culture

In spite of the progress made by the women's movement since the 1960s, Britain's institutions have remained largely male-dominated. Within Parliament there are still relatively few female MPs, with 24 in 1945, 41 in 1987 and 141 of 650 MPs after the election of 1997. In 1990 there were no female Law Lords and only 1 in 80 was a High Court judge. Within the Church of England, women could not be ordained until 1992 and continue to be excluded from the orders of bishops, deacons and priests. In 1990 less than 10 per cent of businesses were owned by women, only 21 of the

top 200 companies had women in their boardrooms, and of 401 professors at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, only 12 were women.

Although some women have made considerable advances in their chosen careers compared with twenty years ago, most are white, middle-class university graduates. They also earn approximately 20 per cent less than men in business, industry and government, even when doing similar types of work. Within the domestic sphere, divorce rates have continued to rise and in 1994 some 40 per cent of marriages ended in divorce, leaving many women in single-parent households. But in the 1990s debates about equality began to move from economic to social issues, such as political correctness in language and behaviour, sexual harassment and male violence, in what became known as a 'post-feminist' era.

With regard to the ethnic composition of British society, in March 1995 just under 6 per cent (3.2 million) of the total population of Great Britain considered they belonged to a 'non-white group'. 1.6 per cent (891,000) were Afro-Caribbean, 1.5 per cent Indian, 0.9 per cent Pakistani, 0.3 per cent Bangladeshi, 0.3 per cent Chinese, while 0.9 per cent belonged to other ethnic groups. Although half the 'non-white group' (around 1.5 million) were born in Britain, many are unwilling or unable to integrate fully into British society and continue to live in the same urban areas as in the 1950s and 1960s where the concentration of immigrants is much higher. According to the national census of 1991, 25.6 per cent of the population of inner London considered themselves as belonging to some ethnic group. This contrasts with 14.6 per cent of the West Midlands and approximately 1 per cent of the rural parts of Scotland and Yorkshire. While the culture and lifestyle of many non-whites is often quite different to other British citizens, it often has little in common with those living in their country of origin. Years spent living in a different culture have resulted in the appropriation of different social and artistic influences to generate new styles of language, literature, music and other arts. The result is the creation of new cultural spaces, which help to sustain a lively and imaginative multi-cultural Britain.

Compared with only ten years ago, the gay community has emerged as another significant minority group. In 1999 programmes were created specifically for gay audiences on BBC2, Channel 4 and on Radio 5. There were several newspapers for the gay community and many bookshops carried a large selection of gay literature. With an increasing understanding and acceptance of homosexuals and lesbians, more 'came out' and publicly declared their homosexuality. The age of consent was reduced from 21 to 18 in 1994 and in the near future this is likely to be lowered to 16, the same as for heterosexual relationships. However, homosexuality is still seen as a sensitive area surrounded by ignorance and prejudice, and while it is openly represented in literary and theatrical works, in other areas of the arts, such as television and film, it remains relatively rare.

Following the change of government in 1997, there was a powerful

sense of cultural confidence and renewal which extended across the arts. In the same year, the Department for National Heritage was replaced by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, with responsibility for government policy and expenditure on museums and galleries; the Arts Councils of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; plus regulation of the film industry, broadcasting and the press.

Decisions were taken to advance plans for the Millennium celebrations at Greenwich in London, which included the construction of an enormous dome, whose architecture seemed to be a physical, permanent demonstration of a new national optimism. Numerous other new projects also began in the public sector which embraced arts buildings, sports stadiums and transport schemes. Many were assisted with funds from the National Lottery, which began in 1995.

Although new public architecture often appeared imaginative and futuristic, the most fashionable new domestic housing continued to be traditional in appearance and modern in convenience. Taking an attractive traditional design and making it practical, relevant and usable, has been common in architectural practice for over a century. But in the late 1990s the practice had become frequent in many other areas of cultural life. 'Makeovers', 'reworkings' and reinventing traditional plays, stories, styles and songs were frequent in literature, in film adaptations and in popular music.

Elsewhere in the arts, the influence of realism was overwhelming, with frequent attempts to find drama in authentic daily life, rather than create it in works of fantasy and imagination. In television, many 'reality' programmes brought viewers true-life experiences from a variety of settings, from cruise ships and airlines to modelling agencies and animal hospitals. The public found them entertaining, but critics saw them as merely cheap and populist. Broadcasters had become more cautious, offering more populist programmes which were guaranteed to attract large audiences. This was due to acute competition in the television 'business' of the late 1990s, as the terrestrial channels faced challenges from satellite television and a proliferation of new channels from digital services. The realist influence extended to many new works by young British artists. These were often personal and confessional, and sometimes involved the use of organic or bodily matter combined with modern technology. The public often found them confusing and controversial, but many younger spectators found them provocative and original.

For the first time in many years, the cultural scene appeared to renounce any American influences and stood proud and alone in its splendid isolation. The media spoke enthusiastically of 'Cool Britannia' which coincided with recent international successes in film with *The English Patient* and *The Full Monty* and in pop with bands such as Oasis. But 'BritFilm', 'BritPop' and other 'BritArts' are phenomena which were overwhelmingly made in England, indicating a clear trend towards the

centralisation of creative activity. London continues to be pre-eminent for the presentation of almost any production. The presence of all the national media and the opportunity to give their works maximum exposure, often to an international audience, has attracted many creative professionals, who feel the need to live and work there to develop their careers.

But in the theatre, which was once a source of the most radical and original cultural productions, the majority of performances staged around Britain were musicals and interpretations of historical plays, and for the first time in a decade, it was rare to find a political drama on the London stage.

Not for the first time, some critics complained of a spiritual emptiness in modern culture. But traditional debates about 'high' and 'low' forms were rarely heard. Diversity and variety in the arts had inhibited the making of such distinctions. Moreover, increased educational opportunities and fewer social distinctions had created broader, more diverse and generally better-educated audiences.

Although many of Raymond Williams' predictions of 1961 had come true, so did his wish for a broader education in schools and universities, which included studies of society, the press, film, television and drama. Instead of debates between proponents of 'elite' culture and 'popular' culture, academics began to ask difficult, theoretical questions about how great works have emerged and how they are maintained; how distinctions between 'high' and 'low' emerge, and whether absolute aesthetic standards can exist. By the mid-1990s, cultural and media studies had become one of the most popular subjects in British universities.

Discussion topics

- 1 Briefly summarise the most important political and social changes in Britain since 1945. Which period do you find the most interesting from a cultural point of view?
- 2 Use the text and other sources to explain the following terms: immigration and multi-cultural Britain / the women's movement / the permissive society / Thatcherism / the Arts Council / New Labour / regional autonomy.
- 3 Think of a distinctive period in your country's recent history. What cultural elements and symbols, such as songs, books, films and popular music, do you associate with it?
- 4 What changes can you see in the arts of your country compared to ten or fifteen years ago? What has caused those changes? Have they been positive?
- 5 Should the government subsidise the arts or should they exist independently like any other commercial enterprise?
- 6 'The value of the arts is not merely in their worth as imaginative constructs, but in their relationship to political events and history.' Discuss.

Suggested further reading

Books

- Booker, C. (1969) *The Neophiliacs* London: Collins.
- Booker, C. (1980) *The Seventies: The Decade that Changed the Future* New York: Stein & Day.
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- Mirza, H.S. (ed.) (1997) *Black British Feminism: A Reader* London: Routledge.
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- Phillips, M. and Phillips, T. (1998) *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* London: HarperCollins.
- Rowbotham, S. (1997) *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the U.S.* London: Viking.
- Strinati, D. and Wagg, J. (eds) (1992) *Come On Down? Popular Culture in Post-War Britain* London: Routledge.
- Thorne, T. (1993) *Fads, Fashions and Cults* London: Bloomsbury.
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- Whitehead, P. (1985) *The Writing on the Wall: Britain in the Seventies* London: Michael Joseph.
- York, P. and Jennings, C. (1995) *Peter York's Eighties* London: BBC Books.
- Young, H. (1989) *One of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher* London: Macmillan.

Journals

The daily and weekly quality newspapers provide an excellent source of material to follow cultural trends.