Theme 3: Society in Transition, 1918-79

The Liberal Society

1950’s attitudes towards sex

Britain was reserved and sexually repressed:

- Cases of venereal disease were high until penicillin was discovered and prostitutes flourished during WWII.
- A 1950’s survey found that one-fifth of women born between 1894 and 1904 had experienced pre-marital sex. Half of all women born between 1924 and 1934 had sex before marriage.
- From 1930’s onwards there was a growing demand for books on advice for sex. Chesser’s 1941 book *Love without fear* explained both men and women could enjoy sex sold 3 million copies by 1964.

Shows there was a big difference between British People in the 1950’s said about sex and what they actually did. The statistics do not represent a sexual revolution.

1960’s attitudes towards sex

Statistical evidence shows the image of the decade of a sexual revolution that took place is misleading. Michael Schofield’s *The Sexual Behaviour of Young People* published in 1965 was based on interviews with 2,000 teenagers showed that one in three boys and one in six girls between sixteen and nineteen had had sex. Nearly all of these were in committed relationships and weren’t promiscuous. Geoffrey Gorer came to similar conclusions—attitudes towards sex before marriage, homosexuality, infidelity and contraception were similar to popular attitudes in the 1950’s suggesting attitudes hadn’t changed by 1969.

The Media

Britain’s newspaper industry played an important role in the dissemination of sexual ideas. During an age of mass consumerism advertisers paid to place their advertisements in the tabloid press knowing they would reach a wide audience. Tabloid Sex scandals and discussion of sex in articles captured a large readership and associated sex with celebrity and consumerism.

Lady Chatterley Trial and Impact

Penguin publishers were put on trial under the 1959 Obscene Publications Act which had been introduced to relax censorship. The jury decided that *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* had literacy merit, demonstrating that laws surrounding obscenity were outdated and Britain’s attitudes towards sex and morality was changing.

Sexuality and the State

The Sexual Offences Act, 1967

Introduced through a private members bill, that decriminalised homosexual acts between two consenting adults over the age of 21 in private. Jenkin’s said that criminalising aspects of private life was ‘uncivilised’.

1967 Abortion Act

Also introduced through a private members bill which Jenkin’s also allowed parliamentary time for. The act legalised abortion up to 28 weeks.
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The Sex Discrimination Act, 1975

In 1975 the Labour government established the Equal Opportunities commission as part of the sex discrimination act to ensure fair employment practices were observed. It established Tribunals to deal with workplace harassment and recognised the everyday sexual discrimination women faced.

Although Legislation made discrimination more difficult, women still faced prejudice in political life and the workforce which they had to fight hard to overcome.

Political Advancement, 1945-79.

The number of female MP’s stayed constant between 20 and 30 with dips in 1951 and 1979 despite an upward trend of candidates. This was due to prejudice and the widespread belief that women would be too busy being the ‘home-maker and mother’. Women in parliament were rarely selected for Cabinet Posts, one or two was the norm. In local constituencies they were expected to fulfil the same subsidiary roles as before the war.

Changes in family life and the quest for personal freedoms, 1918-1979

Family Life and personal freedoms, 1918-1939

Divorce.

The 1937 Matrimonial Causes Act which allowed for divorce if either partner had been unfaithful as well as desertion after three years. The act opposed by the CofE and Catholic Church but had widespread support. Before the average number of divorce petitions was below 4,800 a year, by 1951 this was 38,000.

Birth Control

In 1921 Dr Marie Stopes founded the birth control clinic in London. The Labour Party in 1927 voted for a resolution at their conference against allowing local authority funding for Birth Control clinics. In 1930 the act in which it decided in 1930 that it was acceptable for clinics to advise mothers who had already had one child and for whom a second pregnancy would damage their health. In 1930 the Church of England allowed married members of their congregations to use Birth control methods, but the Catholic Church remained staunchly opposed. In 1930 the General Medical Council allowed doctors to give contraception advice, only to married couples for the first time.

Self-expression

The advances in legal and political rights for women were mirrored in the way they expressed themselves. Large numbers of young men killed in the war left lots of young single women who found freedom as a result. The growth of new clerical jobs for women enabled young single women to enjoy the consumerism of the interwar years. Many young women turned to the ‘flapper’ look which grew s a social trend after 1918.

Family life during the great depression.

Women in the poorest parts of the country ate less so their husbands and children could have meals. In the 1933 Hungry England enquiry reported that in some cases women were starving feed their families.