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Swinging Sixties: A Social History of Britain, 1960 - 1970

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ABSTRACT

Social history seems to be losing its steam after being vibrant for several decades from the 1960s to the 1990s. However, a social history event, the 'swinging sixties', which was the long decade between 1958 to 1972 in British history has remain an unending debate among historians and scholars of this period. This period was a time the people of Britain were perceived to be less conservation and changed to a more radical and anti- establishment leading to a more multicultural society driven by technology and innovations?. But several scholars conclude that the so called singing sixties was just an illusion because the people of Britain never really changed, and the society and culture remained the way they were before this period. This research examined this period taking into considerations the various views about the swinging sixties concluding that even though the people were changing, they were still relatively cautious and conservative.

Keywords: *Social History, Swinging Sixties, Radical, Conservative*

One historical study that has continually elicit divergent views among historians is about the events of 1960s in Britain. Several historians such as Sally Waller, I. MacDonald claim that there were great changes among the people. Arthur Marwick even went further to describe the changes as a "cultural revolution" (Marwick, 1998). This claim has been refuted by historians such as Dominic Sandbrook, Robert Murphy and Peter Sandler. They assert that the changes witnessed in the sixties were not significant enough because Britain remained the way "it had been twenty years before" 1960s (Sandbrook, 2006). However, some modern historians tend to lean towards a moderate view. People like Mark Donnelly, Lawrence Black and Jeremy Nuttall claim that though significant changes occurred in the 1960s, people were not in any way radicalised. They were still relatively cautious and conservative. This study finds out that the long decade was a combination of the new and the old. While there were some significant changes, a vast majority of Britain actually did not enjoy it. This research attempts to present and analyse the various views on this debate. Case studies will also be used to buttress each point of view.

This debate falls into the aspect of history called Social History. One of the most widely accepted definition of social history was given by George Trevelyan. He said social history is "history with the politics left out"(Jeremy Black and Donald Macraild, 2007). It is the aspect of history that deals with the construction and reconstruction of the structure of societies, the social changes, working conditions, families, culture, ethnic groups, mobility, social classes, urbanisation and social movements. E. J. Hobsbawn also describes social history as history of the poor or lower class. History is therefore not just about politics and rulers, but it includes the study of ordinary people and the society. Some historians and public figures have always seen history as the study of rulers and politics. E. A Freeman said "history is past politics and politics

is present history ". While John Brooke said, "the workers, the peasants, collectively had hardly ever mattered".

However, in the 1920s and 1930s, social history began to get popular particularly with the 1929 formation of the French Annales School in Strasbourg, France. There was a surge in social history not only in Western Europe and America but all over the world getting to its peak in the 1950s and 1960s that by 1970s, social history was almost more popular than political history. By the end of 1960s and in the 1980s, interest in social history began to decline as there seemed to be too much romanticism of the People who were almost unsure or indecisive on what they actually wanted. For instance, some communist historians present the people as instigators of radicalism and revolution, but the same people always serve as the strength of the ruling elite. One of the earliest published historical writing done in Britain on the ordinary people was J. R. Green's *Short History of the English People* (1874), which claimed to be a 'departure from drum and trumpet' but still generated his records from the state institutions. The works of George Trevelyan, *English Social History* (1944) and E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) are some of the books described as meritorious social history writings. Social history then, is that aspect history which tries to reconstruct how ordinary people influence politics and other areas of life.

The sixties was therefore a decade where available data shows that the ordinary people were at their most radical in Britain but the intriguing question is how much and how general were the people 'swinging'? This question arises because these facts provided are grossly contradictory. 'Swinging' in this case represents "wealth, sex-appeal, fame, youth, talent, novelty and quick success" (Jonathan Aitken in Sandbrook, 2006). One of the most popular protagonist of a swinging sixties is Arthur Marwick. In his book "British History from 1945", he asserts that even though the 1960s did not witness significant economic and political changes, what took place was undoubtedly 'cultural revolution'. As Britain became classless and a lot of working class individuals achieved personal eminence. He claims that Britain became an affluent society because between 1955 and 1970, wages rose to about 125 per cent, more than eleven million people owned a car, 69 per cent of homes had refrigerators and more than ninety per cent of homes had television sets. This means technology at that time aided the 'swinging sixties'.

These technologies and prosperity were leveraged on by the politicians. Harold Wilson who became the Prime Minister in 1965 said that his intended Britain will be "forged in the white heat of this revolution" where there will be "no place for restrictive practices". While Prime Minister Harold MacMillian in his memoir claims that "most of our people have never had it so good". However, Marwick unequivocally states that most of the changes that took place in the sixties "owed little to the deliberate action of the politicians" but the people were at the forefront of the revolution. Still dwelling on the affluence and opportunities of this period, Tony Judt in his book '*Postwar'*, 2005 describes the "unprecedented range of products" available to the people such as cars, television sets, cameras, cheap but durable and attractive clothes, packaged foods and products, which he claims was a "way of life which stood for the opposite of the past; it was large, open, prosperous and youthful". This was also echoed by I. Mcdonald in *'Revolution in the Head*', 1995 stating that the advanced home appliances available to the people contributed to "the meltdown of community by allowing people to function in a private world".
The labour-saving domestic appliances like washing machines, telephones, record players and television sets means people become detached from others to enjoy some privacy and fuelled

individualism which the British people are still known for today. One other protagonist of a swinging sixties is Sally Waller. In her book *'A Sixties Revolution? British Society 1959-75'*, 2009, Waller buttresses the importance of the new technology in keeping families together as television sets gradually replaced cinemas. People watched fictional television series, football and other sports in the comfort of their homes which means "no one needed to leave home to escape boredom and the status and income of professional sportsmen, celebrities and pop stars were raised to a new iconic level".

Some of the 'faces' of the 'swinging Britain'were Mary Quant, Twiggy, the Beatles and Rolling Stone. This period was characterised by clothes with swirling curves, projecting busts and elaborate curled hair. Mary Quant introduced the mini-skirt in 1965 which looked simpler and brighter as she desired 'clothes to move and run and dance in'. Her innovation enhanced classlessness in Britain as 'duchesses were jostling with typists to buy the same dresses'. The Twiggy appearance of the sixties had black eyeliner and false eyelashes, short, barbed, boyish hair, often flat chest and pale faces. Some of the so-called changes of the sixties were actually contradictory in themselves. For instance, the mini-skirt was supposed to epitomise freedom and liberation for women, but it only helped to emphasise the stereotype of women as sex objects and made them vulnerable to sex abuse.

Pop music had tremendous impact on the youth during the 1960s. The Beatles and Rolling Stones were some of the most prominent pop stars. Their fashion, style and sex-appeal according to Marwick made the "old song-writers practically disappeared". While Sally Waller claims that their style "shocked shocked the older generation as much as bring delight to the young". However, the "Sound of Music" still outsold the second and third album of The Beatles combined because it appealed more to the people. By the end of 1970, the Beatles whom George Harrison had described as 'horrible, spotty drop-out kids on drugs' had disbanded. This is an evidence that they had struggled to stay together although the sixties.

Despite all these rosy, blooming, glowing, favourable and unblemished romanticism of the sixties Britain by Marwick and others, some other prominent historians have refuted this claim. Some of these revisionists are Dominic Sandbrook, Peter Mandler and Robert Murphy. They assert that Britain in the sixties was not all auspicious and radical. The people were still largely unrepentantly conservative. Sandbrook in his book 'White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties', 2006, claims that the rosy picture painted by the 'pro-swinging sixties' were "concentrated overwhelmingly in the activities of a relatively small, well-educated minority" in the advanced cities particularly in London. He states that for "millions of other people" scattered across the provinces outside London "the reality of daily life was rather different. It was more like a party happening somewhere else".

The development claimed by Marwick and Waller actually "provoked considerable unease and anger" among majority of British people. Despite all the mini-skirts, gyrating pelvis and tight trousers, the people's "old-fashioned outlook, gentleness, their deeply moral attitudes to life, all of these things endured" (Sandbrook, 2006). The clear majority of British people – fifty million plus had nothing to do with swinging London. Did not go there, did not know anything about them. In fact, the vast majority of Londoners inhabited in grey, sooty, dirty London that was not the London of the kind of swinging mythology. For ordinary people, they wanted something quite conservative and quite reassuring and familiar and sweet and all about the family and all

the rest of it. And music such as "Sound of Music" were highly successful because they represented conservatism and continuity.

Peter Mandler emphasises the lopsided nature of the changes in his book '*English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair*', 2006, by quoting from '*Values and Social Change*', 1985, "the cultural revolution of the sixties were material, spiritual, moral and social. They were also partial – regionally and class specific, and probably more effective in imagination than in practice, with considerable persistence in traditional values in post-sixties Britain". Robert Murphy, a historian who lived in the sixties moved to London in 1968 said London "might have been swinging, but living in cheap bedsits with building workers and kitchen porters for neighbours, I hardly noticed". This goes to show that for the affluence and prosperity of cars, higher wages and better life in the sixties, a significant section of Britain even in London was still living in squalor. That is why it is difficult to fault the view of Mandler when he said, "not even the whole of London swung in the sixties, and most of the rest of the British Isles were surprisingly untouched".

This period has also been vilified by Conservatives as being too permissive. In 1982, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher while analysing the crisis of the early eighties said, "we are reaping what was sown in the sixties, a society in which the old virtues – discipline and restraint were denigrated" (Donnelly, 2005). The election data of the sixties has questioned the claim of a radicalising people. Labour party victories have always been associated with the people changing. Labour only won three general elections as to conservative's four. The data shows that in 1950, Labour had 46.1% and Conservatives 43.5%, 1951; Labour 48.1% Conservative 48.0%, 1955; Labour had 46.4% compared to Conservative's 49.7%. in 1959, Labour had 43.8% while Conservative had 49.4%.1964, Labour 44.1% Conservative 43.4%. 1966 result was Labour 47.9% and Conservative 41.9%. and in 1970, Labour lost with 43.0% to Conservative's 46.4% (Fielding, 2003). Two of Labour's victories only show a margin of one per cent, but the victories of Conservative were usually in excess of more than three per cent. This shows that the people were still relatively conservative.

The major 'face' of 'anti-swinging sixties' was Mary Whitehouse. She was a teacher in Midlands school with a Christian – based moral inclination whom Thatcher made a CBE in 1980 for her contribution to Britain. Whitehouse launched the 'clean-up TV' campaign criticising "the disbelief, doubt and dirt that BBC projects into millions of houses". She spoke for those with the desire to dissociate themselves from swinging London which Lawrence Black describes as "the voice of the silent millions who could become the pacemakers of the responsible society" (Black, 2010). The manifesto was signed by a huge population of 366,355. It transformed into National Viewers' and Listeners' Association (NVALA) in 1965. Considering the contradictory facts available which shows an over romanticism of the sixties Britain, it will not be out of place to say that "Britain in 1970 was still fundamentally the same country it had been twenty, thirty or a hundred years before" (Sandbrook, 2006).

In between these extreme views are the moderate-viewed historians who believe that even though the 1960s has been over romanticised by the proponents, it will be unfair to totally discard the changes that took place then. Mark Donnelly, Lawrence Black, Richard Weight, Jeremy Nuttall etc, and as also discovered by this study, opine that Britain in the sixties was a mixture of realities: affluence and poverty walking side by side, progressives and conservatives

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playing their roles just as the people were both swinging and cautious. Objectively, the 1960s Britain transformed the society making it "less rigid but more meritocratic" (Weight, 2003) where there was high consciousness for change and desire to erase social classes, it is also a fact that this period passionately resisted change. While the Coronation Street was that reassuring old fashioned working-class way of life, Carnaby Street represented the new fashion, promiscuity and revolutionising London. To buttress this point, one could observe that working-class livelihood improved but most never crossed the line into middle class. They could only pursue "different ways of being working class" (Nick Turatsoo in Fielding, 2003). According to Sanbrook and Mandler, the Sixties were all about illusion. Illusion of enlightenment, illusion of progress, the illusion of youth. That is, a replacement of reality with illusion.

Multiculturalism in Britain is a good illustration of the 1960s. There is no doubt that Britain was becoming a multicultural society in the sixties particularly with the abolition of Empire Day in May 1962. An average of fifty thousand immigrants entered Britain yearly in the sixties from especially The Caribbeans and Asia. They settled in deprived areas and in towns where cheap labour was needed. Gradually, discrimination increased and turned into violence. There was upsurge in racially motivated violent riots. A survey in 1965 showed half of people would refuse to live nest to a black person. Nine out of ten disapproved of mixed marriage (Teachihistory, 2012). Formed in 1967, the National Front, a racist violent group targetedimmigrant; bullying girls, flung stones and 'Paki-bashing' was regular. Tory MP, Enoch Powell's infamous 'as I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see the River Tiber foaming with much blood' got him sacked. However, by the early 1970s, Britain had become more racially tolerant with mosques built by councils, the Notting Hill Carnival became more popular, and Asian and Chinese foods became more acceptable.

By the 1970s, there was consistent rise in the standard of living, consumerism had brought about a blurring in social barriers, homosexuality and abortion were legal, television was broadcasting sex and violent contents and the pill was made available to women to use at will. holidaying abroad had become common, people were owning cars, more women were in decision making roles and earning more money with increased opportunity of being educated. Furthermore, quality education became more affordable and available to everyone, although, only three percent, Britain became more ethnically diverse, single parenthood, divorce and illegitimacy became more acceptable, government became more reflective of the social changes and due to exposure people began to question religious beliefs and customs.

Inasmuch as one could say that sixties was a cultural renaissance (Weight, 2008) and the successes relatively undermined to the extent that they "sound and reads like contradictory hymn rather than conclusion" (Brian Masters in Donnelly, 2005), it is also right to note that the transformation was mainly a London affair as "there was a serious decline in the manufacturing industries of Scotland, Wales and the North of England" (Weight, 2003). Politically, the people were not automatically progressive, conservatives participated (Black, 2010). This 'double standard' nature of the people led to a "split mind of Labour (Party) about the progressive potential of the citizenry" (Nuttall, 2013). With the facts available to us about Britain in the 1960s, one could describe this period as "not good or bad, neither swinging nor cautious, neither better nor worse than the fifties, seventies or eighties" (Donnelly, 2005).

There seems to be a "tiresome ritual of either romanticising or demonising the sixties" (Donnelly, 2005). The 1960s Britain is like a wedding cake adorned with icing sugar which makes it look very attractive but underneath the sugar is a cake that is largely rotten. Looking at trends from the views of Marwick and other pro-swinging sixties, compelling evidence show that the sixties was a transformation period for Britain with the consistent and persistent rise in wages and standard of living, technological advancement and availability, benefits of increased education opportunities, and the ethnic diversity it witnessed. It also transformed the lives women, legalising abortion and homosexuality, a distinctive youth culture, uncensored contents and a rise in consumerism which tried to narrow the gap in-between the social strata. It was a period of titanic battle between the old and the new when people began to question the old way. A time of commercialisation of culture; pleasure for happiness, media satisfaction instead of long term goals. Despite all these, Sandbrook and other revisionists assert that majority of British largely outside London still lived in squalor and poverty, conservatives won more elections than labour with large margins, people still preferred Englebert Humperdinck over the Beatles and Rolling Stones, large population followed NVALA and enjoyed watching 'the gentle Sumer of Dad's Army (1968) and 'the Black and White Minstrel' Show, high rate of decadence, crime and insecurity. Just like the pluralists opine, this essay finds out that Britain in the 1960s was like a sweet-bitter pie where the people were swinging yet cautious.

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