

# How far were the 60s distinctive in their own rights

[History](#)



The Sixties were distinctive in their own rights and very significant to the many changes that occurred throughout the period. It was a time that saw many cultural changes, these changes spread widely; especially with the young. The changes can be seen through the disciplines history and science. To understand why and how the changes took place in the Sixties we first need to understand the concept and practicality of historical periodisation. Periodisation is simply different periods of time that have been chopped into a smaller time frame, such as 'the Medieval Period' or 'the Modern Period'.

By naming each time frame it makes them distinct. However, in some cases further subdivisions of time are made within the smaller time frame, for example 'The Early Modern Period' or the 'Late Modern Period'. Each period is significant in their own way 'particular periods of time contain a certain unity, in that events, attitudes, values, social hierarchies seem to be closely integrated'. (Block 6, p18) Within each period, points of change can be identified by attitudes and who or what began to dominate.

For example, Lawrence Stone named a short period in the 1640s 'Affective Individualism'. Other 'phrases' are 'the Revolution' and 'Enlightenment France'. For a clearer example of how periodisation works we can look at the contents of a book that covers long periods of time, you will see that each period is divided and these periods indicate changes. This standard practice has been followed by many. Eric Hobsbawm used shorter period labels to point out the characteristics of certain periods, these showed how each period differed.

To complicate things further, periods do not start with the beginning of a decade or at the end of a century, for example the Sixties began in approximately 1958 and ended around 1973, which is why historians name each period rather than indicate the date. We must remember though that 'the past' is not what history is about, it is 'the knowledge about the past produced by historians' (Block 6, p19) and that periodisation is a logical way that historians use to select periods that is being studied, however each period must be distinctive in their own rights with a point of change.

The Sixties can be seen as a distinct period where social and cultural history is concerned. However they were not distinct in economic, political, diplomatic or constitutional history. We next need to take into consideration the different cultures. Culture in the wider sense means 'the network, or totality, of attitudes, values and practices of a particular group of human beings'. (Block 6, pp23-4) There are several different cultures to take into consideration, for example: 'youth culture' and 'Western culture'.

Before the Sixties 'Mainstream culture' was thought of as repressed, this was based on attitudes from that period, such as subordination of women to men, and children to parents, repressed attitudes to sex, respect for authority, the prevalence of racism, obeisance to canonized art, respect for the 'giants' of science and a strict regard to formalism. The Sixties saw the beginnings of 'counter-culture', this included such things as: black civil rights, youth culture, protests, criticisms of 'technocratic society', frankness in books and in the media, feminism, and gay liberation.

This new culture came out through several different trends such as, the transistor radio and records and by the use of cunning commercial exploitation. All of these different movements' forms of protests and expression were opposed. These movements all came from ideology, behind each one there was the values and attitudes from a particular class whose main interest was their own, they were against rival classes, such as the working class would be in opposition to that of the bourgeoisie. Therefore a new wave began.

The conservative attitudes of 'mainstream' culture that had been around for centuries were being questioned. People began to fight against the social class system; they no longer wanted to follow their practices. 'Counter-culture' was created. 'Counter-culture' guided society towards liberalism and the Left, away from commercialisation, towards self-identity, self improvement, self-fulfilment and a desire for supportive community with the hope of big changes. After the Second World War there was a 'baby boom' craze, which produced a vast amount of teenagers by the beginning of the Sixties.

These teenagers were influenced by major technological developments such as, television, 45-rpm records, transistor radios as well as advanced consumer products such as refrigerators, washing machines and then onto the production of the contraceptive pill. These young teenagers embraced and modified black rhythm 'n blues which changed music. 'Beat' and 'rock' music was introduced which led to a new inhibited fashion. These young people wanted to have their say. Campaigns began for various reasons such

as civil rights protests, nuclear disarmament, preservation of the environment, women's conventional role in society.

These acts led to a media change, books, films and TV programmes started to mention one of the greatest taboos-sex. Television was one of the most important technological developments that played a significant part to the cultural change in the Sixties. There are various instances that demonstrate that TV programmes were very different in the Fifties. Swearing had become apparent in many programmes in the Sixties such as in *Cathy Come Home* there are several usages of the word 'bloody' as well as one 'bugger off'. The character Alf Garnet in *Till Death Us Do Part* used racist terms such as 'coon'.

These programmes showed that censorship had change drastically compared to the very different 'plummy-sounding standard " BBC English" of the 1950s television'. (Audio Visual Notes 2, p31) 'Social realism' was seen in such programmes as *Up The Junction* and *Cathy Come Home* as they were filmed on real locations, such programmes showed scenes of men in a pub with women mingling with them. This showed that women were no longer confined to the home doing daily house chores. Each programme shown in TV25 deals with controversial social issues.

*Till Death Do Us Part* shows controversial issues by the means of comedy and satire. Racism is the issue in once clip and the other is based on Britain's loss of world power status. Homelessness and single parenthood are the issues in *Cathy Come Home* this is presented through 'docu-drama'-the technique of a fictional story presented in a realistic documentary setting. *Up The Junction* can also be classed as 'docu-drama', the clip shows a very

disturbing scene of woman going through an 'at home abortion'. Scenes like the above would not have been allowed aired in the Fifties.

These programmes included stylistic and technical modernisations such as the pop music soundtrack to *Up The Junction*, and a hand held camera in *Cathy Come Home*. The creators of these programmes showed their views within them. Nell Dunn simply 'just wrote what happened around [her]' (TV25) Nell not only shows what was going on, but also how dangerous an illegal abortion was, this simple act can be used as a powerful case for the legalisation of abortion, as the programme showed what was happening at the time. Johnny Speight states he wanted to challenge people's views of certain issues such as racial bigotry.

*Till Death Us Do Part* was to 'provoke thought-get the debate going in the open'. (TV25) TV26 demonstrates clearly the usage of technological developments, without it the Bobigny Trial could not have been aired and the word of mouth of legalising abortion in France would have been harder. The Bobigny Trial is one of the most significant involvements of ordinary people-a single mother and her teenage daughter. The trial is based on one radical case-the abortion law. In 1968, Britain, the old sanctions against abortions were removed which led to a separate act where contraceptives were made available on the National Health Service.

French women, those who could afford it, travelled to London to have an abortion. However, for these who could not afford it back-street abortions were their only choice, for many this was their only form of contraception. In 1968 the French feminist movement were represented in the Women's

Liberation Movement (MLF). Demonstrations began which led to many famous women declaring that they have had an abortion. Attitudes slowly changed and the police backed off to enforce the law against abortion. Marie Claire Chevalier, a fifteen year old fell pregnant was adamant that she did not want to keep the baby and decided an abortion was required.

However, the Chevalier's could not afford to pay a gynaecologist. So a part-time abortionist proceeded with the abortion-Marie Claire almost died. Marie Claire and three others were to stand in front of a juvenile court for their actions. Protests and campaigns spread, these were met with police brutality. The late Sixties were regarded as by social change within sexual matters and civil rights, these included claims by women. By legalising abortions everyday life of ordinary people were transformed. The Sixties saw the birth of 7000 seriously deformed babies.

This was first noticed in Germany. The defect in the babies were all the same: the bones of their arms failed to grow, which led to very short arms where the hands grew more or less from their shoulders; the legs were also affected but not as much. This deformity of their limbs is known as phocomelia-which was rare, at the time doctors had never come across such a case. All of a sudden, hundreds were born and diagnosed with phocomelia in Germany, Australia, Canada and the UK. The doctors were unable to explain why the spread or what caused it.

Doctors questioned the mothers, one investigator, Widukind Lenz saw that twenty percent of the mothers questioned took a drug called Contergan. The remaining mothers were asked again if they had taken any form of

medication, specifically Contergan-fifty percent said yes. Contergan was withdrawn from the market in Germany-radio and television helped to spread the world. Lenz's studies showed that the embryo between the twenty-eighth and the forty-second day after conception would have been when the drug affected the unborn child, as this was the period when the embryo forms the arms and legs.

Thalidomide is the active ingredient in Contergan, which was first synthesized in the early Fifties and was used as a sedative. The drug was tested on animals, however no harmful effects were found. By the Sixties it was a favourite sleeping tablet, which was sold over the counter and was also used in hospitals and mental institutes. Thalidomide was also in other over the counter medications such as cough and cold remedies and tablets for migraines and neuralgia.

Moving on, in the late Sixties one of the major allegations against science by critics was 'that it had become heavily militarised ... and] dedicated to the development of weapons of mass destruction'. (Book 6, p75) Radical critics were not the only ones who spoke about this, the US President and five-star General, Dwight D Eisenhower also voiced their concerns. Senior members of the Democratic Party agreed with his concerns. However the military disagreed. Chemical warfare in Vietnam began protests at MIT in the late Sixties. Due to television, and journalists in the war zone, stories and images of the 'death and destruction' in Vietnam were broadcast in homes throughout the world. The impact was remarkable.



MIT started their protest this led to forty-seven academics signing a statement that viewed their opposition to the Vietnam War in 1969.

Chemical warfare effected everyone world wide, even people in the world of literature, Rachel Carson published her book Silent Spring based on the disastrous effect In conclusion, by looking briefly at only two disciplines we can see that the Sixties were significant where changes were concerned as people's attitudes altered drastically, and by the use of the media the likes of sex and abortion was broadened where the government was forced to alter their views and listen to the majority of people.