

# Post-war changes to british society



**Life is more uncertain now than it was in the early 1950s. Discuss this claim.**

## **Introduction**

The welfare state, which was a feature of 1950s Britain was predicated on an optimistic view of the world, and one which anticipated that British social institutions such as the family would remain the same. However, increased technological change, post-war immigration policy and a fluctuating world market brought such certainties into question. Britain rapidly became a more liberal and culturally diverse society and this had implications in almost every area of social life. This paper will examine the view that life is more uncertain now than it was in the early 1950s. In doing so it will examine knowledge, particularly religious knowledge, the concept of the family, and the processes of globalization.

## **The Family**

In the 1950s the institution of the family was seen as one of the best ways of ordering our lives. It was the primary instrument of socialization where children learned the norms and values of the society in which they lived. The transformation of family life and of family forms has been unprecedented in the last thirty years the traditional nuclear family of father, mother and children, has been challenged and in some cases abandoned in favour of other ways of living. <sup>[1]</sup> Some of these changes have come about as the result of the feminist challenge to patriarchal power and the patriarchal nature of the traditional family. Prior to the Second World War men were the family breadwinners and women stayed at home to look after the children and to tend to the husband's needs. From the mid-nineteen fifties onwards women started to re-enter the workplace in increasing numbers. This gave

women more choices about how they would live their lives, such choices were not available in the early nineteen fifties but the late twentieth century and twenty first centuries are characterized by a diversity of family forms. The nuclear family no longer dominates, now we have step families, lone parent families and cohabiting same sex couples, all existing alongside the nuclear family. Statistics on these different family forms have been used by Conservative Governments to claim that there is a breakdown of the traditional family and this has led to a much wider moral decay in society. <sup>[2]</sup> There has also been concern over men's power and role in family life and the implications this may have for social order (Phillips, 1997). <sup>[3]</sup> Phillips argues that the decline in the family may lead to the death of fatherhood and could have implications for men's health and their son's development. It refers not only to changes in the family but to the fact that these changes could also bring about the destruction of the things which hold society together. Feminists on the other hand welcome the change in family forms because they have challenged the patriarchal nature of the nuclear family in the same way as they have challenged the patriarchal nature of religion.

## **Religious Knowledge**

Prior to the Enlightenment religious knowledge was regarded as authoritative. Religious knowledge is knowledge that is based on revealed truths rather than empirical data or scientific experimentation. Although sometimes science and religion are interested in the same questions such as the history of the world and the nature of humnity <sup>[4]</sup> The rise in scientific knowledge called the claims of religion into question and the late twentieth century has seen this questioning in the form of a massive decline in Church

attendance. <sup>[5]</sup> In spite of this Armstrong (1999) <sup>[6]</sup> has said that since the 1970s religion has been high on the agenda in the forms of the Christian Right in America and the tensions between Jews and Muslims in the Middle East. Marx, Durkheim and Weber, the acknowledged fathers of the social sciences, predicted that increased industrialization and new technologies would bring massive social change and that this would result in secularization. <sup>[7]</sup> Certainly on the surface this appears to be occurring, Church attendance has declined since the 1950s and education and welfare, which were once functions performed by the Church, have been taken over by the state. In addition to this, other forms of knowledge, such as science, appear to have more credibility than religious knowledge. <sup>[8]</sup> It might be said that religious knowledge remains to the extent that it provides some kind of answers to questions that science has so far failed to answer, such as where we go when we die. Social scientists have defined religion in two ways, the substantive definitions say what religion is while functionalist definitions say what religion does. Emile Durkheim (1912/1965) for example described religion as a sort of social glue which held society together. Durkheim believed that although religion would remain, it would, over time, change its form <sup>[9]</sup> Thus, because religion served a social function, traditional religious services might be replaced by other traditional gatherings such as Thanksgiving in America (Bellah, 1970). <sup>[10]</sup> Max Weber (1904/1930) on the other hand said that religion gave meaning to people's actions eg. the Protestant work ethic Weber <sup>[11]</sup> Weber believed that when people became disenchanted with the supernatural content of religion then religion would die out. Peter Berger (1967) has said of religion that:

*...religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant* (Berger, 1967: 28). <sup>[12]</sup>

The search for significance spreads across cultures. In the 1950s Britain was still seen as a largely Christian country and the Church of England was the established Church, the official religion. Mass immigration from 1948 onwards has meant that Britain is now a multi-cultural and multi-faith society. At the same time feminists have challenged the masculine bias contained within traditional religious knowledge and say that women's experiences of religion have been ignored. The secularization thesis holds that religion is dying out but the situation with religious knowledge is not as simple as that, rather the situation is changing, and so traditional beliefs are called into question. This questioning tends to make people more uncertain of the beliefs they hold than might previously have been the case. Such changes are not confined to Britain but appear to be taking place on a global scale.

## **Globalisation**

Since the 1950s the world has witnessed vast changes in transportation, in technology, communications and agriculture. Increased trade flow between different countries and the spread of capitalism has meant that the borders between nations are not as fixed as they once were and diverse societies are moving closer together. <sup>[13]</sup> There are differing views on globalization and these can be broadly defined in the following ways. Globalists, argue that we are witnessing changes that are being felt across the world and that increasingly nation states are becoming less autonomous. Internationalists

on the other hand do not hold this view, they believe that the global movements we are seeing are not a new phenomenon. Although international activity may appear to have intensified in recent years they argue that in some areas this has strengthened state powers. <sup>[14]</sup> The third view is that of the transformationalists who say that globalization has created new circumstances which are transforming state powers. Transformationalists say that although the outcome may be uncertain politics can no longer be the preserve of individual nation states. This is because the social and political contexts are changing and this has implications for the way states operate. <sup>[15]</sup> The information age as personified by the internet, satellite television and mobile phones means that people can communicate across the globe in almost an instant. Global economic changes can affect many different societies, some benefit from this and some end up worse than they were before. This has led Giddens (1999) to say that we are living in a runaway world that is propelled by forces that are beyond our understanding. <sup>[16]</sup> Held (1995) has argued that nation states are defined by their borders and the forces of globalization are breaching those borders and threatening the autonomy of individual states.

Large corporations such as Microsoft control global markets hold considerable power, such power could end up in the hands of a few individuals and would thus become domination (Allen, 2004). Technology has the power to influence the way we see people and places, for example we may no longer have to visit a bank to pay our bills but can do it online. In this way the physical distances between people become unimportant. <sup>[17]</sup>

Globalisation means that wherever we live our lives may be determined by

forces that are outside our control. Theorists who take this position see globalization as a threat to different social and cultural histories and to collective and individual action. <sup>[18]</sup> Globalists argue that attempts to resist the forces of globalization are doomed to failure, rather we should welcome changes such as new technologies which may help to reduce pollution in the world.

Internationalists are skeptical about these changes and argue against the idea that there has been a fundamental shift in social relations. They believe that nation states still have the power to order their own economies and determine their own welfare regimes. They do however point to the inequalities that women and unskilled workers may face due to the forces of big business and global capitalism. Transformationalists agree that to some extent nation states have remained autonomous but they also say that the effects of globalization cannot be dismissed. The effects of globalization are uncertain and uneven, they have produced changes in the way we live and these changes need to be studied. They argue that the forms of globalization are not necessarily irreversible but may call for new structures and forms of governance.

## **Conclusion**

The late twentieth and early twenty first centuries have brought with them vast changes to life in Britain. In the early nineteen fifties people's futures seemed secure and this security was bolstered by Government claims that the introduction of the welfare state meant that people would be looked after from the cradle to the grave. History shows that this was an over optimistic claim and the notion of full employment on which the welfare state was

based has not been realized. In the last thirty years advances in many different areas have drastically changed life for a large percentage of the population. Religion is no longer so authoritative as it once was, and many children are not growing up in traditional families. In addition to these things Britain is now part of the European Union and contact with people of other nations is becoming a normal part of life. The notion of security that existed in the years following the war were based on idealistic visions of the future and this may be why we now view life as more uncertain.

## **Bibliography**

Book 3 v2

Book 4 v. 2

Book 5 v. 2

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## Footnotes

[1] Book 3 v. 2

[2] Book 3 v2 page 68

[3] Phillips, M.. 1997 “ Death of the Dad” *The Observer* 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1997

[4] Book 5 vs p. 53

[5] Book 5 v. 2

[6] Armstrong, K 1999 “ Where has God gone” *Newsweek* 12<sup>th</sup> July pp 56-7

[7] The removal of the public functions of religion to the private sphere

[8] Book 5 v2 p. 52

[9] Ibid p, 57

[10] Bellah, R 1970 *Beyond Belief* New York, Harper and Row

[11] ibid

[12] Berger, P. 1967 *The Sacred Canopy* New York, Doubleday

[13] Book 4 v. 2 see page 9

[14] Ibid see page 11

[15] ibid

[16] Giddens, A 1999 *Runaway World, The BBC Reith Lectures* London, BBC Radio 4, BBC Education

[17] Ibid page 18

[18] Ibid page 21