

Uncertainty in modernism: family, identity and work



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

Introduction

This assignment will investigate the claim that life is more uncertain now than it was in the early 1950s. Beginning with a brief description of the climate of the 1950s the assignment will then look at three areas, work and welfare, the family, and identity. In doing this the assignment will draw only on material supplied for the module.

Post-war Britain was quite different to what we see today. In the early 1950s there was still considerable war damage and so the Government had introduced massive building programmes to make sure that people had adequate housing. The welfare state had been introduced in the years immediately following the war. Based on the notions that the (predominantly male) workforce would enjoy full employment, and that 'traditional' family life would continue, the Government claimed that it would be able to look after its citizens from the cradle to the grave. They were overly idealistic in their views and in the last fifty years Britain has witnessed massive changes in the areas of work and welfare. There have also been changes in family structures and this has had corresponding implications for peoples' identities.

Work and Welfare

During the Second World War, and in the years after, people felt that they were secure in their employment. In industry particularly working class men had been conditioned to the view that if they worked hard then they would have a job for life. ^[1] This was not to say that ordinary people earned a lot of

money, they didn't. Normally sons and daughters would follow in father's and mother's footsteps once they left school, In the early 1950s Britain was a stratified society and people did not often move from one class to another. The class into which a person was born therefore was very often the one in which they stayed and this had implications for their life chances in other areas. People did not have the choices that they have nowadays few women went out to work and it was the father's responsibility to go out and earn money to support his family. ^[2] There were some uncertainties of course for families who were reliant on one wage. Traditional areas of employment are being eroded as the number of industries has declined and more people are taking jobs in areas that were previously seen as women's work. Nowadays both the man and his wife may be working. They might work full time, part-time, or rely on state benefits. In some households it is a mixture of things. ^[3] Hutton (1999) ^[4] maintains that the diverse sources of employment can in themselves be sources of uncertainty because in some areas (agency temping for example) people may not know whether they will have work from one week's end to the next. This creates divisions between those families who have alternative sources of employment the 'work rich' ^[5], and those whose suitability for different types of employment is limited. Such changes in employment patterns affect not only the traditional working classes but also the middle classes. In the early 1950s young middle class men could expect a secure career with a steady climb up the ladder, that is not the case today. Many people face redundancies, followed by the hard searching for a new job, in some cases they may find themselves dependent on state benefits for considerable periods. ^[6] Such changes may also have

an effect on a couple's marriage and if this ends in divorce then both people could be worse off. The wife may find herself looking for work after having been out of the labour market for some years because she was caring for children. This gets worse the further down the income scale a family is. In the past labourers and industrial workers may not have had as much job security as their middle class counterparts because some of them became unfit for work before retirement age. People did have some security however. Nowadays people can end up reliant on state benefits over a very long period and this can result in social exclusion where they are unable to fully participate in society (Mackintosh and Mooney, 2004) ^[7]. Changing employment patterns have, in many cases, led to changing roles in society and this has had implications for people's sense of identity.

Identity

Mercer (1990) argues that modern society is characterised by diversity and uncertainty and that this has corresponding implications for people's identities. ^[8] Changing gender roles and more women in the workplace have resulted in changes in people's sense of self. In addition to this as Mercer has highlighted Post-War immigration along with rapid social and technological change has brought with it an increasing focus on contemporary racialised and ethnicised identities. ^[9] This mixing of people's new identities along with older ones contributes to the sense of uncertainty that many people feel is a feature of modern life. ^[10] Identities are relational, thus blackness is seen in its relationship to whiteness and vice versa. This has led to what have been termed hybrid identities where people draw on different cultural heritages. Social trends such as the greater exclusion of ethnic minorities from better

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paid jobs and decent standards of living point to the fact that the social structure in the UK is permeated with racialisation and ethnicisation where people are seen only in terms of their skin colour and ethnicity. ^[11] These structures in turn, affect people's identities because they prevent them from becoming something other than that which society has defined. On the other hand changes in society affect social structures which in turn affect people's identities in myriad ways. Because identities are no longer fixed they are a source of continuing uncertainty. This uncertainty leads to further changes in the social structure. Contemporary people's identities are unsettled because the changes mentioned above tend to cross ethnic boundaries. For example the changing role of women and their greater inclusion in the labour market has affected not only women's and men's identities, it has also led to changes in family structures.

The Family

Nowadays there seems to be considerable concern over what is termed the traditional family. In the papers and on television journalists are increasingly expressing concern for the death of what they call traditional family values. Critics raise the subject of cohabitation, divorce, same sex marriage, and the increasing number of lone parent households, and regularly pose the question of what is happening to British society. Mooney et al (2004) have said of this that it results in contemporary family life being viewed with a mixture of 'fear and fascination.' ^[12] There is widespread concern that the changes we are witnessing in family structure will lead to wider social problems and may have troubling implications for the individuals involved.

^[13] This raises the question of whether such changes should be viewed with

pessimism or whether they are simply a result of the different ways that people order their lives in response to changes in society. Will these changes result in changes in patriarchal society or will they serve to further strengthen masculine power and supremacy? Although family roles and responsibilities are changing, for example women are no longer viewed primarily in terms of their housewife role, nor men as the family breadwinner, the family is still a widely accepted concept. ^[14] It is becoming increasingly difficult to refer to the traditional family without making reference to the past, what some people term, ' the golden age of the family'. ^[15] Numbers of people have questioned whether there was such a thing or whether it is an ideological form that served a certain period of society.

Conclusion

It has been claimed that life is more uncertain now than it was in the early 1950s. Certainly Britain has seen considerable changes in the last fifty years. The welfare state was presaged on notions of full employment which did not foresee the changes that would take place as the result of new technologies. Change does cause uncertainty but that does not mean that it is necessarily a bad thing. Harking back to the early 1950s as a sort of golden age is wrong. History shows that societies that do not change and are not prepared to go forward eventually die out, change may not always be easy and this can result in uncertainty, but worrying about it will not stop progress.

Bibliography

Block 1 (6) (3)

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Block 3 (3) (2)

Block 1 (8) (4)

Block 3(1) (2)

Hutton 1999 cited in Block 3 (3) (2)

Mercer 1990 cited in Block 1 (8) (4)

Mackintosh and Mooney 2004 cited in Block 3 (1) (2)

1

Footnotes

[1] Block 1 (6) (3) see page 153

[2] Block 3 (3) (2) see page 78

[3] Page 78 ibid

[4] Cited on page 78 ibid

[5] Block 3 (3) 2 page 78

[6] ibid

[7] ibid

[8] Cited in Block 1 (8) (4) page 130

[9] *ibid*

[10] *Ibid* page 131

[11] *ibid*

[12] Block 3(1) (2) page 46

[13] *ibid*

[14] *ibid*

[15] *Ibid* page 47