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History essay

To what extent did life get better/more equal between 1945-1990?

Before and during the 2nd World War, the social life in Britain was difficult. The society was stagnant, still true to it's old Victorian values, with extreme rationing, causing extreme drops in consumer expenditure and ongoing wartime economy. In 1945, the British found themselves with severely impoverished lives, and that situation continued until 1950's, where it was said that Britain finally started to emerge into a “decade of Hope”.

The 1950s was a decade of long needed relaxation. With the arrival to power of the Conservatives in 1951, they decided on a change of social policy: remove the remaining restrictions. Their first step was to lower taxes, mainly the income tax, reduced by 2,5p to 45p, and the purchase tax. The relaxation in taxation resulted in a long needed boom on consumer goods, shown with the sales of new cars and TV sets: in 1950 they were respectfully 11.1 thousand and 43.4 thousand, where as in 1957 they rose to 35.5 and 151.3. Alongside the tax cuts, the salary of an average British worker rose from 134 pounds in 1935-6 to 581 pounds in 1960, 3.827 pounds in 1978 and even 12.220 in 1991, and instead of working 48 hours a week, he passed to a 45 hours working week. Women's salaries were also rising, but they were still lagging behind men. With all of this, that average British worker saw his purchasing power increase significantly, and he quickly started to acquire various consumer goods. Harold Macmillan summed up this change in 1957 by “Most of our people never had it so good”. It was also a beginning of a rise in power of the youth: during the 50s, the disposable income during the late 50s of young people has 50% higher than from before the war. With the decrease of work hours, the young could pass their time in various clubs. The youth was also touched by the arrival of rock and roll, that emphasised the period of teenage rebellion, that resulted in some drastic changes in social policies during the 60s. However, there is one distinctive group that starts to have a harder time: the ethnic minorities. In 1948 the Nationality act was passed, proclaiming that anyone from the Commonwealth can come into the UK. Where at first the new immigrants were a novelty and were met with curiosity of the British, they were quickly faced with increasing number of racial events, such as the 1958 Notting Hill and Nottingham riots, as well as a start of discrimination in housing and employment: there's an appearance of “No blacks, No Irish, No dogs allowed” posters. Overall, the 1950s finally gave the British what they deserved after the years of holding back: finally they start to get richer, and the youth starts to lay down foundations for incoming social changes, even if some start to have a harder time than others.

From a social point of view, the 1960s were a decade of revolution: the British society is finally easing up on their dullness, conformity and conservatism. What we can see is a liberalisation of the society, vastly giving up on it's Victorian code: the British saw a relaxation in many laws, such as the abolition of theatre censorship and relaxed censorship on movies in 1968, legalisation of abortion and homosexuality in 1967, divorce was made easier in 1969 and family planning clinics appeared in 1967. But the first signs of this departure were already seen in 1960, when Penguin Books was acquitted for obscenity in publishing “Lady Chatterley's Lover”, a book unavailable in Britain since 1920s. The British society became progressively less conformist and was talking more and more openly about topics that previously would be considered obscene. The condition of women was also improving: the legalisation of abortion and the beginning of contraception granted women with a lot of power over themselves and their sexuality. Their role in a family was also helped by family planning and the divorce reform act. In work, they still struggle for equality with men, seen with the Daganom Ford strike of 1968, where women workers were striking because they had only 85% of men's pay. But the biggest event for women was the creation of “Women's Lib(eration)”, a party advertising women's rights. The working class was still on the rise: more than 90% had TV's by 1968, and central heating was rapidly spreading. However, ethnic minority groups were still hit by discrimination: in 1961 and 68 the immigration from Commonwealth countries is limited, and in 68 a major conservative politician, Enoch Powell, pronounces his “Rivers of Blood” speech, in which he criticises the British anti-discrimination policies. These policies are the Race-Relation acts of 65, 66 and 68 prohibiting discrimination in public services, housing and employment. The 60s made the British vastly relax their conservatism and conformity, building upon the foundations laid by the youth and leading to a more liberal society.

It is in the 1970, and following into the 80s, that the wind of change that was going through the UK started to slow down, and the increasing divide on the line poor-rich started to be more apparent. There are cuts in benefits for the poor, but taxation is cut for the rich by Thatcher. There's also the problem of male unemployment rising: in 1979 more than 92% of males were employed, but by 1998 that number fell to 81%. Jobs started to be far less secure, and statistically people would have from 5 to 9 jobs in their career that would have minimal security coverage. In addition, there is a decline in the institution of marriage, unemployment of minorities is on the rise and there is a movement promoting the return to old values. However there were some positives: people started to accept more and more homosexuality, women started to be more accepted in management, shown by the 7% of senior positions that were held by women, more and more people started to go abroad for holidays, with 7 millions by early 70s, going up to 39 millions in 1998. Women saw their employment pass from 59% in 1979 to 69% in 1998, as well as acts further increasing women's rights: in 1970 the Matrimonial Property act and the Equal Pay Act, but applicable only in full-time jobs and was voluntary by the employer. In 1975 that act was expanded to make all discrimination in terms of pay, job opportunities and promotion illegal. In the 80s, the British could also see the rise of 1st computers. In all, the 70s and 80s were a big time for women's rights, making women more equal to men in all categories, but a new segregation became apparent: the poor started to get poorer while the rich richer.

In overall, the British society drastically changed between the end of the 2nd World War and the beginning of the 21st century: the British passed from a restrained, dull and conformist society into a new age of capitalism, consumer society, with more way more freedom than it was before the war. During this period the UK didn't only saw the working class getting better: the condition of women has also vastly improved, and the youth was more liberal and easy-going. However, this revolution is still tainted by how the ethnic minorities were discriminated throughout this period. But we still can say that during the 1945-90 period life of the British drastically got better, even if for some that process was harsher than for others.