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After World War I there was a further decline in the birth rate and a continuing spread of contraception, though contraceptive methods had been known and practiced by all sections of society for a considerable time before this. What was important in the interwar years was a development of contraceptive practices within marriage. The gradual spread and acceptance of “family planning” was also important; however, this acceptance was not usually seen in terms of women’s rights. The birth rate continued to fall through the interwar years, and in the 1920s the two-child pattern of marriage was becoming established. With it came the “nuclear family” structure that was to be characteristic of much of the 20th century, with households predominantly made up of two parents with children who on achieving adulthood will leave the home to establish similar families themselves. Nonetheless, as always, there was considerable variation in practice. Coresident kin and lodgers were still found, particularly in working-class households, where overcrowding was often marked, as it was in London after the disruptions of World War II. There was also a concentration on childbirth within the early years of marriage, as well as longer life expectancy for children themselves.

Marriage was thus becoming a different kind of institution, at once more intimate and private, as well as an arena in which individual self-expression was becoming more possible than previously. In many respects, the privacy that was possible for the better-off in society in the mid- and late 19th century became increasingly possible for those less well-off in the course of the 20th century. However, the privacy that new kinds of family life and new economic possibilities made possible for poorer people differed from middle-class privacy. It was concerned with securing order and control of people’s lives in economic conditions that were still often difficult. As a result, “working-class respectability” differed from the respectability evident further up the social scale. For instance, privacy was evident in the slowly increasing possibility of separate rooms for separate functions (kitchens, sculleries, and bathrooms, for example) and the development of more-private sleeping arrangements. However, the respectability of this private life was also public in that it was on show to neighbours as a living proof of the family’s capacity to create order in difficult lives: the elaborately presented front of the house and the purposefully opened curtains of the “best room” of the home displayed the carefully presented if precarious affluence of the family.

Nonetheless, despite material and cultural class differences, there was a convergence across the social spectrum upon an increasingly common privatized and nucleated family life. This was part of a much more homogeneous life course and set of life experiences, which made the population increasingly uniform, at least compared with that of the 19th century. Age at marriage, the experience of marriage itself and of running one’s own household, household size, and the similarity of the age at which major life-cycle transitions occurred all tended to produce more cultural uniformity than previously; this increasing uniformity was of vast importance for the new

consumer and media industries, not to mention the political parties. The political culture was in fact transformed from one based on class to a new sort of populist, demotic politics, shaped at least as much by the mass media, especially the popular press, as by the politicians.

The greater individualism possible within this more-privatized form of marriage received expression in the growing incidence of divorce, even as marriage itself grew greatly in importance in the 20th century. By the 1970s almost every adult female married at least once, though this figure fell considerably beginning in the 1980s. By 1997 one-third of births occurred to parents not formally married; however, more than half of these were to parents residing at the same address. The phenomena of one-parent families, as well as of stable unmarried cohabitation, now became widely apparent. If people married more often, they divorced more frequently too, so that by the 1980s marriage disruption rates by divorce were equal to those caused by death in the 19th century. By this time approximately one out of three marriages ended in divorce. These changes were of profound significance for politics in that, in the public and the political mind, they became linked to the phenomena of antisocial behaviour by youth. Although this link was in reality complex, it did not stop the Blair administration from pursuing a "respect" agenda, which was designed to restore an at least partly imagined former era of civic virtue and public order. The ill-fated ASBO (Anti-Social Behaviour Order), restricting the movement of offenders, was celebrated by some as an appropriately strong response to troublemaking neighbours and gangs but was condemned by others as an attack on civil liberties.

Of course, these social changes also greatly affected the understanding of women's role in society. They were complemented by the growth of women's employment, particularly in part-time jobs and most notably in the service sector, so that after 1945 a different life cycle for women evolved that included the return to work after childbirth. These changes did not result in the equality of earnings, however; for example, despite the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, under which the Equal Opportunities Commission was established, women's pay rates in the 1980s were only about two-thirds of those of men. Still, higher education was increasingly opened to women from the 1960s, so that by 1980 they formed 40 percent of admissions to universities, although, as with male students, they were overwhelmingly from the higher social classes. As part of the widespread movement toward greater liberalization in the 1960s, in part inspired by developments in the United States, women's liberation also developed in Britain.

In turn, that movement gave rise to a whole range of feminisms, some more radical than others but all aiming at the ingrained assumptions of male superiority in employment practices, in education, and in the understanding of family life itself. Intellectual life became increasingly characterized by an explicitly feminist analysis, which led to some fundamental rethinking in a whole range of academic disciplines, though resistance to this was strong. Changes in patterns of employment challenged stereotyped distinctions between the breadwinner and the housewife, as well as stereotypical notions of life as a married couple being based upon a well-understood division of labour within the household. The phenomena of the "new man" developed, though his progeny of the 1990s, the "new lad," was not quite what his father had expected. Coined to describe what was in fact a reinvented, consumer-led version of a long-held and ingrained masculine worldview, "laddism" turned out to be a snazzier, more fashion-driven, and above all more unashamed version of the old devotion to "birds"(women), beer, and football (soccer).

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