‘Swingin London’ Shows Decline and Fall of British Empire

Lenny Rubenstein

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(Special to the FIFTH ESTATE) LONDON—From the suburban sprawls of America where the language of LSD and grass is used to sell cars and discotheque tickets, the appeal of the country that produced Tolkien, “Morgan!,” and George Harrison is strong and readily fulfilled.

Unfortunately after nearly six months in “Swinging London,” I am willing to face General Hershey and his clerks of conscription and the napalm aces of the USAF rather than stay another six.

Initially London seems like a great place; there are many great-looking girls with long hair, short skirts, and boots; guys with long hair; middle-age middle-class, types with beards and mustaches; and even pleasant looking youngish cops. After speaking to people and working with them, one realizes the many and sad reasons for this cool, hip show.

Underlying all of the city’s good points, and they are many, is the English concern over personal freedom and, thankfully, eccentricity. It is to the lasting credit of the British aristocracy that for them Latin verse was more important than profits, exploring as exciting as war, literature as alluring as business, and idiosyncrasy as valuable as lineage.

Long hair was, and still is, a sign of the non-working gentleman and merely filtered down; even now many people think it audacious for young people to copy this familiar mark of the polished and the established. Cultural osmosis is usually demonstrated by the young, and in a nation where people can start work at 15 (some policemen are 18), there is money to spend on very fashionable clothes and grooming.

The American best, as best described in Lipton’s THE HOLY BARBARIANS, spent his money on records, books, and grass. The idea of spending money on a velvet Regency jacket is the philosophy London offers the declasse American intellectual.

Of course, the background for this superficial showy rebellion is complicated: the absorption until very recently, by the establishment, of the intelligentsia, the admirable social celebre, all sort of force young people into a Fitzgeraldish, 1920s fling. Viewed from America where the problem of both the Negro masses and the war-machine seem soluble only through revolution, and the atmosphere is like the fascist European thirties, complete with our own Spain, England must appear a civilized place in the present power struggle.

However, despite England’s National Health program, its very vague but widespread pacifism, its political tolerance, and its comfortable non-power status, the country is far from being the “socialistic” nation the American right wing calls it. Any workday one can see the charwomen on their little mats washing the floors of Georgian buildings teeming with proper London businessmen in pinstripe suits and bowler hats. In the offices tea-ladies twice daily roll around the cup-strewn trolleys, and pensioned old soldiers serve as doormen and messengers in beribboned uniforms.

This overt class system is just as repulsive as the invisible one in America: the unseen Negroes in the kitchen of every restaurant and the little women who clean the floors of IBM at night; both are the unnecessary remnants

of social systems that fear change, conscious extensions of the middle-class need for identity and security, and the shame of an industrialized urban society.

What few American hippies realize and even fewer Englishmen care to admit is the dependence of the British provotariat on their American comrades. Indica Books, a cross between the 8th Street Bookshop and Underground Uplift, features as a good part of its avant-garde section the works of Ginsberg, Burroughs, Corso, Kupferberg, et al, in U.S. editions, besides THE REALIST, EVO, VILLAGE VOICE, and incidentally, THE FIFTH ESTATE.

There is nothing to equal NYC's Bleecker Street Cinema or Paris' Cinémathèque française, although the British Film Institute's National Film Theatre provides some worthwhile works. A center for pop music, London has no discount record houses, and full English retail prices are just as high as American.

England, aside from London and its new found fads, does offer the young American discontent a fairly accurate model of an industrialized nation living in an atmosphere of planned well-being without the encroachments on private life that such an economy seems to involve for some Americans. If this Anglo-Saxon constitutional democracy can become a socialist country without the centralization of an overgrown bureaucracy or the drabness of a housing project, the U.S. can also.

Besides the National Health program, all English university students receive financial support from their local councils, this in a country where tuition costs are usually illusory. If America could even accept the idea of a limited guaranteed income that is what the student's grants amount to, the nation's (U.S.) widespread poverty could be erased within one generation.

Of course, the United Kingdom is far from solving its problems in housing, employment, and education, but the U.S.'s main obstacle is not a material one, as is Britain's, but an ideological one. If Britain can use the lessons of Socialism, America should also, without the fears of the reactionaries who now command the drain of manpower, money, and technology into the jungles of Viet Nam.

About the author: Born in Royston, Hertfordshire, England, raised in America, pumped out as a BA from New York University; the veteran of two years as a Lower East Side (my apartment faced Ed Sanders' Peace Eye Bookshop); is proud to be a lazy dilettante; passions include the Spanish Civil War, the new psychedelic romanticism, old films, Joan, who wrote my scrawled dribble, and avoiding the army.

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