



The 1970s: from idealism to the nihilistic generation

In the western world, the idealism and the social progressive values that had begun in the 1960s continued to grow at the beginning of the new decade. However, few years later both the United States and the United Kingdom, like many other countries, experienced an economic recession due to the oil crisis caused by oil embargos by Arab countries in the Middle East. This was largely in retaliation for the American support to Israel after the country was attacked by Egypt and Syria. The realisation that oil reserves were not endless and that pollution could have a devastating effect on the environment ended the belief in limitless progress that had existed since the 19th century. As a result, ecologic movement began to be quite influential.

Economic growth rates were considerably lower than in the previous decades, inflation reached record levels, and unemployment steadily increased. For most American and British people idealism and confidence were replaced by uncertainty and confusion, and mistrust of politics; cynicism took the place of the optimistic attitudes of the 1950s and 1960s. After the blows of the Vietnam war and the Watergate affair, faith in government was very low, as exemplified by the low voter turnout in the 1976 US presidential election. The Watergate affair was a scandal that came to light in 1974 in the United States when two journalists of the *Washington Post* found out that Republican President Richard Nixon had known of and approved an illegal attempt to spy on the Democratic Party during the 1972 election campaign. As a consequence, he had to leave office in order not to be impeached by Congress.

In the 1970s, feminism started to reach a larger audience than ever before, and most efforts of the movement, especially towards social equality and against sexist laws, were successful. At the same time, the gay movement made a big step forward with the election of political figures such as Harvey Milk to public office. Many celebrities, including the leader of the rock group The Queen Freddie Mercury, and the artist Andy Warhol, 'came out' in this period, bringing gay culture further in the spotlight. The young generations had less and less inhibitions about premarital sex, also thanks to the introduction of the contraceptive pill. The destruction of the idealism of the 1960s, the growing pessimism, the social disengagement created a new generation, characterised by a nihilistic conception of society. They were called punks – that is worthless, rotten, badly-behaved. They deeply penetrated into youth culture, especially in Britain. Punks cursed and used vulgar lexis, they were antisocial and cynical, they refused any political labels. They just wanted to show their negative philosophy living in misery in squalid suburban areas. British bands like the Sex Pistols and The Clash brought the punk subculture into the world of rock music.

ACTIVITIES

- 1 Read the text once again and divide it into paragraphs. Decide where to divide it and think about a title to give to each paragraph.
- 2 Answer the following questions.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 What was the cause of the economic recession of the 1970s? 2 What were its immediate effects on employment? 3 What were the feelings spread among most people in the decade? 4 What was the immediate consequence of the Watergate affair? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5 The passage mentions two important steps forward in the area of civil rights. What are they? 6 What about the sexual attitudes of young generations? 7 How can you collocate the punk movement in politics? 8 What was its aim?
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- 3 Look for videos of the performances of punk groups (in particular Sex Pistols) to realise the essence of the movement.
- 4 Find out further information about the important figure of Harvey Milk (one hint: see the film *Milk* with Sean Penn).