



Confessions of a Reformed  
BBC Producer

ANTONY JAY

CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES  
57 Tufton Street, London SW1P 3QL  
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## THE AUTHOR

SIR ANTONY JAY was a founder-producer of the BBC nightly topical television programme *Tonight* in 1957 and was Editor from 1962 to 1963. He became the BBC's Head of Talks Features in 1963 before resigning to go freelance in 1964. He was the co-author, with Jonathan Lynn, of the successful British political comedies, *Yes Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*. He was also a founder with John Cleese of the Video Arts training film production company. He has been the Editor of *The Oxford Dictionary of Political Quotations* since 1994.

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I THINK I AM BEGINNING TO SEE the answer to a question that has puzzled me for the past 40 years. The question is simple – much simpler than the answer: what is behind the opinions and attitudes of what are called the chattering classes? They are that minority characterised (or caricatured) by sandals and macrobiotic diets, but in a less extreme form found in *The Guardian*, Channel 4, the Church of England, *The Observer*, academia, show business and BBC News and Current Affairs, based in Islington, Hampstead and Notting Hill, who constitute our metropolitan liberal media consensus, though the word ‘liberal’ would have Adam Smith rotating at maximum velocity in his grave. Let’s call it “media liberalism”.

It is of particular interest to me because for nine years (1955 – 1964) I was part of this media liberal consensus myself. For six of those nine years I was working on *Tonight*, a nightly BBC current affairs television programme. My stint co-incided almost exactly with Macmillan’s premiership, and I do not think my ex-colleagues would quibble if I said we were not exactly die-hard supporters of his party or his government. But we were not just anti-Macmillan; we were anti-industry, anti-capitalism, anti-advertising, anti-selling, anti-profit, anti-patriotism, anti-monarchy, anti-Empire, anti-police, anti-armed forces, anti-bomb, anti-authority. Almost anything that made the world a freer, safer and more prosperous place, you name it, we were anti it.

And of course it was not (and is not) just the BBC. Our views were shared by many of our counterparts in Fleet Street, by people in publishing, the Church of England and the educational establishment, especially the universities. It was (and is) essentially though not exclusively a graduate phenomenon. From time to time it finds an issue that strikes a chord with the broad mass of the nation, but in most respects it is wildly unrepresentative of national

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opinion. When the Queen Mother died the media liberal press dismissed it as an event of no particular importance or interest, and were mortified to see the vast crowds lining the route for her funeral, and the great flood of national emotion that it released.

Although I was a card-carrying media liberal for the best part of nine years, there was nothing in my past to predispose me towards membership. I spent the early years of my life in a country where every citizen had to carry identification papers. All the newspapers were censored, as were all letters abroad; general elections had been abolished – it was a one-party state. Citizens were not allowed to go overseas without travel passes (which were rarely issued). People were imprisoned without trial, and the government could tell you what job to do and jail you if you didn't do it. Some of my contemporaries were forced to work in the mines.

Yes, that was Britain. Britain from 1939 to 1945. I was nine when the war started, and 15 when it ended, and accepted these political restrictions unquestioningly. I was really astounded when identity cards were abolished. And the social system was at least as restrictive and authoritarian as the political system. It was shocking for an unmarried couple to sleep together and a disgrace to have a baby out of wedlock – it brought shame on the whole family. A homosexual act incurred a jail sentence. Divorcees would not be considered for the honours list or the Royal Enclosure at Ascot. Procuring an abortion was a criminal offence – a doctor would be struck off the register. Violent young criminals were birched, older ones were flogged with the cat-o'-nine tails, and murderers were hanged. Two years National Service was compulsory for 18-year-olds. Small children sat in rows in the classroom and were caned if they misbehaved. Drugs were confined to the surgery (and the aristocracy). And the bobby on the beat made sure the streets were safe at night. And for an England cricket captain to miss a test match by flying home to be present at the birth of his child would have ruled him out of serious consideration not just as a cricketer but as a man.

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So what happened? How did we get from there to here? Unless we understand that, we shall never get inside the media liberal mind. And the starting point is the realisation that there have always been two principal ways of misunderstanding a society: by looking down on it from above, and by looking up at it from below. In other words, by identifying with institutions or by identifying with individuals.

To look down on society from above, from the point of view of the ruling groups, the institutions, is to see the dangers of the organism splitting apart, the individual components all shooting off in different directions, until everything dissolves into anarchy and chaos. Those who see society in this way are preoccupied with the need for order, discipline, control, authority and organisation. To look up at society from below, from the point of view of the lowest group, the individual, the governed, is to see the dangers of the organism growing ever more rigid and oppressive, with every individual freedom stamped out and every individual voice silenced, until it fossilises into a monolithic tyranny. Those who see society in this way are preoccupied with the need for liberty, equality, self-expression, representation, freedom of speech and action and worship, and the rights of the individual.

The reason for the popularity of these misunderstandings is that both views are correct, as far as they go, and both sets of dangers are real. There is however no point of balance or rest: a society is not a pair of scales; it is a living and developing organism. It is constantly adapting to change within and without, and its survival and success are the product of the tension and interaction between the demands of the individual and the imperatives of the institution. It is an ancient and eternal conflict of varying intensity which defines political democracy. Every political theory lies at some point between these two poles, and the battle between them is being fought out every day and all over the world. Drugs cases in schools are a simple and familiar example: the individual-based argument says that to expel the child who is supplying or taking the drugs will

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ruin his career, that he needs help, that he is the victim of the system, and that the school owes it to him to rehabilitate him rather than condemn him; whereas the institution-based argument says that he must get out before the infection spreads throughout the school, that everyone must have a decisive deterrent and a demonstration that drug-taking will not be tolerated, and that one rotten apple ruins the barrel.

It is obvious that just as there is no ‘answer’, so there is no ‘right’ point of view. The most you can ever say is that sometimes society is in danger from too much authority and uniformity and sometimes from too much freedom and variety. In retrospect it seems pretty clear that the 1940s and 1950s were years of excessive authority and uniformity. It was certainly clear to me and my media liberal colleagues in BBC. It was not that we openly and publicly criticised the government on the air; the BBC’s commitment to impartiality was more strictly enforced in those days. An interviewer who used the word ‘we’ when talking to a Cabinet Minister about his party’s policy would have found himself assigned to local radio in no time. But the topics we chose and the questions we asked were slanted against institutions and authority and towards oppressed individuals, just as we achieved political balance by pitting the most plausible critics of government against its most bigoted supporters. And when in 1963 John Profumo was revealed as having slept with a call girl and lied to Parliament about it, the emotion that gripped us all was sheer uncontrollable glee. It was a wonderful vindication of all we believed. It proved the essential rottenness of the institution.

Ever since 1963, the institutions have been the villains of the media liberals. The police, the armed services, the courts, political parties, multinational corporations – when things go wrong, they are the usual suspects. Back in those days, even though I worked in one, I did not really understand the true nature of an institution. I do not mean an institution in the sense that people say ‘marriage’ is an ‘institution’. I mean the institutions which

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form and sustain a civilised nation. We may say loosely that the law or the Bank of England or the Royal Navy are institutions, but these vague generalities do not focus on the precise reality. In essence an institution is a group of people, usually in a particular place and often in a specific set of buildings, who discharge a specific function and preserve and update a body of knowledge and a code of practice; they pass these on to their successors, so that the institution, the service it performs, the values it embodies, the practices it encourages and the standards it sets may outlive its present members and continue down the generations and down the centuries. They have no guarantee of immortality – every year sees the death of some old institutions and the evolution of new ones – but they offer as much permanence as human societies can construct in a mutable and mortal world.

An institution's members may run into thousands or tens of thousands, but at any one time there are no more than a few hundred people who can properly be regarded as the guardians of its soul and probably fewer than a dozen who guide its affairs. It is of course the public institutions that are the foundations of the state – the Law Courts, the Bank of England, Parliament, the monarchy, the police, the armed forces, the government departments – but in a free society there is a great superstructure of private institutions – the TUC, Lloyd's of London, *The Times*, the National Trust, the oil companies, the livery companies, the merchant banks, Marks and Spencer, the Red Cross, and hundreds of others.

In my media liberal days our attitude to institutions varied from suspicion to hostility. From our point of view, the view from below, they were all threats or potential threats to human freedom. Even though I worked in a great institution, I did not identify with it. To describe a colleague as anti-BBC was a term of praise.

Obviously all institutions have to be watched pretty closely. Although their justification lies in the service they provide, their fundamental objective has always been self-preservation. Without

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their critics, those who view society from below, ten-year-old children would still be working in factories and going up chimneys, women would not be able to vote, and sheep-stealers would still be being hanged. Nevertheless they are all that stands between the civilised world and the chaos of anarchy or the violence of tyranny.

A tribe of about five or six hundred people is a self-regulating entity, whether it is a tribe of hunters or an iron age farming community or a pit village. If it is to survive it has to create an informal government framework to preserve internal order, to defend the tribe against attack and to secure long-term economic survival. This spontaneous order is impossible when numbers climb into the thousands or ten thousands or hundred thousands. The answer is institutions; armies, law courts, police, treasury. They may be arrogant or oppressive or self-seeking, but they are absolutely vital to our survival. Without them, chaos would descend. They are the building blocks of civilisation.

It would have been more than reasonable for us to have opposed specific abuses by institutions; homosexual acts were decriminalised during my BBC years, which we all applauded. But the focus of our hostility was not individual decisions or actions by institutions; it was the institutions themselves. It was not (and is not) shared by the majority of our fellow citizens: most of our attitudes and opinions were at odds with the majority of the audience and the electorate. Indeed, the BBC's own 2007 report on impartiality found that 57% of poll respondents said that "Broadcasters often fail to reflect the views of people like me". It often surprised me how often the retired brigadier from Bournemouth and the taxi-driver from Ilford were united against our media liberal consensus. Those same media liberals who today demonise Margaret Thatcher simply cannot understand why she won big majorities in three successive general elections and is judged by historians around the world as having been Britain's most successful peacetime Prime Minister of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



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So how did it happen that this minority media liberal subculture has managed to install itself as the principal interpreter of Britain's institutions to the British public? And even more interestingly, where do its opinions and attitudes come from? Some of the ingredients have a proud and ancient lineage: resistance to oppressive political and social authority, championship of the poor and underprivileged, the Factory Acts and the abolition of the slave trade, are golden threads that run through the fabric of British history. They are the staples of traditional liberalism. But there are four new factors which in my lifetime have brought about the changes which have shaped media liberalism, encouraged its spread, and significantly increased its influence and importance.

The first of these is detribalisation. There are fairly strong grounds for believing that our species has evolved a genetic predisposition to form tribal groups. The primitive hunting-band of about ten individuals is generally accepted as an evolutionary fact. This would suggest, if you add in the non-hunters – the old people, the children and their mothers – a group of perhaps forty or fifty. However a group of this size could not form a large enough gene pool for independent survival. They must have been part of a wider breeding group – a genetic isolate – to provide sufficient genetic variation to survive through tens of thousands of generations. This grouping – not more than about five or six hundred – is still a part of our evolutionary inheritance. It supplies us with our identity, our status system, our territorial instinct, our behavioural discipline and our moral code. It survived the transition from hunting to agriculture: the hunting tribe became the farming village. It even survived the early days of the industrial revolution, in pit villages and mill villages: the back-to-back city slums were the tribal encampments of industrial Britain.

But the evolution of cities, of commuter and dormitory suburbs, with the back-to-backs replaced by tower blocks, has deprived millions of people of the privilege and the satisfactions of

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tribal living. There is a saying that it takes a village to raise a child, but fewer and fewer of us are now brought up in villages, even urban villages. The enormous popularity of television soap operas is because they provide detribalised viewers with vicarious membership of a fictional, surrogate tribe. Many people find strong substitute tribes at work: Marks and Spencer, IBM, the Brigade of Guards, the Inns of Court, government departments – they are not the birth-to-death, 24 hours a day tribes we evolved from, but they provide many of the same social needs.

But we in the BBC were acutely detribalised; we were in a tribal institution, but we were not of it. Few of us aimed to climb the corporate ladder. Nor did we have any geographical tribe; we lived in commuter suburbs, we knew very few of our neighbours, and took not the slightest interest in local government. In fact we looked down on it. Councillors were self-important nobodies and mayors were a pompous joke. Such wider tribal contacts as we had were with a few other media friends dotted around London – a sort of occupational tribe. Most of our lives were lived at one remove from tribal reality: we did not experience tribal, institutional life as participants but only as observers. We were great consumers of media, where reality was filtered and organised for us by people like ourselves.

We were of course not unique. We may have been extreme cases, but more and more of our audience were subject to the same experiences and becoming detribalised in varying degrees. When I joined the BBC in 1955 there were still masses of ‘tribal’ voters – constituencies where voting, especially Labour voting, was unchanged, unthinking, in election after election; an act of social conformity rather than political choice. Detribalisation has made many more people’s voting choice depend on media influence rather than local loyalties.

Because we in the BBC did not belong to any face-to-face territorial tribe – even our next door neighbours were rarely part of our social group – we belonged instead to a dispersed

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‘metropolitan-media-arts-graduate’ tribe. We met over coffee and lunch, had a drink together at the end of the day’s work, and invited each other round to dinner in the evening to reinforce our views on the evils of apartheid, nuclear deterrence, capital punishment, the British Empire, big business, advertising, public relations, the royal family, the defence budget... it’s a wonder we ever got home. We so rarely encountered any coherent opposing arguments that we took our group-think as the views of all right-thinking people.

The second factor which shaped our media liberal attitudes was largely a consequence of the first: a sense of exclusion. We saw ourselves as part of the intellectual élite, full of ideas about how the country should be run, and yet with no involvement in the process or power to do anything about it. We despised local government, and had no say in national government, and yet we were sure we could have done it better. Being inexperienced and naïve in the way institutions actually work, yet having good arts degrees from reputable universities, we were convinced that Britain’s problems were the result of the stupidity of the people in charge. We ignored the tedious and cumbersome practicalities of getting institutions to adopt and implement ideas.

This ignorance of the realities of government and management enabled us to occupy the moral high ground. We saw ourselves as clever people in a stupid world, upright people in a corrupt world, compassionate people in a brutal world, libertarian people in an authoritarian world. We were not Marxists, but accepted a lot of Marxist social analysis. We had also absorbed elements of nineteenth century evangelism combined with aristocratic disdain for industry and commerce. There were some people who called us arrogant; looking back, I am afraid I cannot dispute the epithet.

We also had an almost complete ignorance of market economics. I do not know if this was because we did not know about it or because we did not want to, but that ignorance was there and still is. Say ‘Tesco’ to a media liberal and the patellar

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reflex says “Exploiting African farmers and driving out small shopkeepers”. The achievement of providing the range of goods, the competitive prices, the food quality, the speed of service and the ease of parking that attract millions of shoppers every day does not show up on the media liberal radar.

The third factor arises from the nature of mass media. The *Tonight* programme had a nightly audience of about eight million. However they were only a mass audience statistically: physically they were one or two people on the living room sofa, multiplied millions of times. It was much easier to keep their attention by telling them they were being deceived or cheated or exploited by big institutions than by saying what a good job the government and the banks and the oil companies were doing, and that everything was for the best in the best of all possible worlds. And there is another feature of television that favours the individual against the institution: it is hard to make general ideas, balanced arguments and statistical evidence interesting on television. Its forte is conflict, narrative and personal, individual emotion. The arguments for and against the NHS are tough going, but the grief and anger of ignored and mistreated and suffering patients and their families do wonders for the ratings. People who a hundred years ago would have supported a war at a mass rally will watch the burning of a Vietnam village or of an Iraqi suburb on television and vote against it on a telephone opinion poll. This may be good or bad; that is not the point. The point is that it is another shift away from the institution and towards the individual.

The fourth factor is what has been called ‘isolation technology’. A hundred years ago, even 50 years ago, people did things together much more. The older politicians we interviewed in the early *Tonight* days were happier (and much more effective) in public meetings than in television studios. In those days people went to evening meetings. They formed collective opinions. In many places party allegiance was collective and hereditary rather than a matter of individual choice based on a logical comparison of policies.

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It is astonishing how many of the technological inventions of the past century have had the effect (though not usually the intention) of separating us off from the group. The car takes us out of public transport, central heating lets each member of a family do their own thing in their own room, watching their own television, listening to their own music, playing their own computer game or surfing the net on their own PC or talking to a friend on their own mobile. The fridge, the microwave and the takeaway mean that everyone can have their own meal in their own time. Our knowledge of public events and political arguments come direct from the media rather than from a face-to-face group. Of course we still have some local, territorial group, contacts and group membership, but their importance is now much diminished and their influence is much weakened.

These four factors have significantly accelerated the spread of media liberalism since I ceased to be a BBC employee forty years ago, but they have not changed it in any way. If anything they have intensified it. It still represents the ‘view from below’ and opposes the ‘view from above’. It still champions the individual against the institution. It still identifies with *The Guardian* and demonises *The Daily Mail*. The BBC’s 2007 impartiality report reflects widespread support for the idea that there is “some sort of BBC liberal consensus”. It talks of programme-makers inhabiting “a shared space, a comfort zone”. Their Commissioning Editor for Documentaries, Richard Klein, has said: “by and large, people who work in the BBC think the same, and it’s not the way the audience thinks.” The former Political Editor, Andrew Marr, says: “There is an innate liberal bias within the BBC”.

For a time it puzzled me that after fifty years of tumultuous change in political ideas, allegiances and experiences the media liberal attitudes could remain so similar, indeed almost identical, to those I shared in the 1950s and early 1960s. Then it gradually dawned on me: my BBC media liberalism was not a political philosophy at all, even less a political programme. It was an

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ideology, a secular religion, based not on observation and deduction but on faith and doctrine. We were rather weak on facts and figures, on causes and consequences, and shied away from arguments about practicalities. If defeated on one point we just retreated to another; we did not change our beliefs. Our beliefs belonged not to the political platform but to the ecclesiastical pulpit. The security, the prosperity and even the survival of the nation could not take precedence over equality and social justice.

We were of course believers in democracy. The trouble was that our understanding of it was structurally simplistic and politically naïve. It did not go much further than one-adult-one-vote. But of course the Soviet Union had regular elections based on universal suffrage. We were able to dismiss those on the grounds that it was a police state, which was part of the truth, but it was not the whole truth. The truth is that modern Western civilisation stands on four pillars, and elected governments is only one of them. Equally important is the rule of law. The other two are economic: the right to own private property and the right to buy and sell your property, goods, services and labour as you choose. (Freedom of speech, worship, and association derive from them; with an elected government and the rule of law a nation can choose how much it wants of each). We never got this far with our analysis; perhaps we did not want to. The two economic freedoms led straight to the heresy of free enterprise capitalism. And yet without them any meaningful freedom is impossible.

But of course analysis was irrelevant to us. Ultimately, it was not a question of whether a policy worked or not but whether it was right or wrong when judged by our media liberal moral standard. There was no argument about whether, say, capital punishment worked or not. If retentionists came up with statistics showing that abolition increased the number of murders we simply rejected them. Of course we also looked for other reasons for the increase but we were not weighing arguments; we were attacking heresy. Even overwhelming evidence, if it had existed, that capital

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punishment reduced murder and therefore abolition sacrificed innocent lives to guilty ones, we would not have changed our view. It was not an intellectual opinion, it was an emotional attitude. The same moral imperatives determined our attitude to the British Empire. My years on the *Tonight* programme co-incided with the peak period of the Empire's dissolution. It was right, so there was no further argument. We would not even discuss whether the prosperity and happiness of the Ugandans or the Rhodesians or the Nigerians (and the Biafrans) would be better served by a partial or more controlled and gradual transfer of power; it had to be total and it had to be immediate. We were horrified by the arrogant way our grandparents' generation had used their political and economic power to impose Christianity on religiously backward peoples. Were we, as missionaries for democracy, not guilty of imposing media liberal democracy in exactly the same way?

If I had to mount a defence of our media liberalism, I would say that in the first place the BBC was still in the shadow of John Reith. Political impartiality was much more strictly enforced than it is today, so we had to be much more circumspect in displaying our beliefs. In the second place we had seen all too clearly the dangers and disasters of oppressive and unchallenged authority in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. In the third place, there were areas of British life – the legal status of women, homosexuality, divorce, penal policy – in which most people agreed that liberal reform was necessary. In the fourth place, large areas of British life – the law, industry, banking, the civil service, the armed forces, the cabinet – were dominated by an upper class élite who were holding the country back. For all these reasons I would defend, not our ideas and attitudes, but at least their consequences. I believe – well, at least hope – that we did not do too much damage.

I do not think the same is true today. The four mitigating factors above have faded into insignificance, but the media liberal ideology is stronger than ever. There is a reason why it is a particularly handy ideology for the press and broadcaster. The

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first duty of government is the survival of the state: defending its territory against attack and preserving order within the realm. Next to it is preventing starvation and if possible assuring the prosperity of its citizens. This in fact is the bottom line for all institutions – to survive and succeed.

Equality and social justice may be desirable, but they are not fundamental – as Britain demonstrated between 1939 and 1945. Sometimes they have to be put on the back burner. This meant that I and my fellow media liberals could always create argument, controversy and popular resentment by elevating equality and social justice above survival and success. It was always an audience-winning device to champion the view-from-below against the view-from-above. In my BBC days the Labour politicians always felt (quite rightly) that the BBC was on their side. It came as a severe shock after they gained power in 1964 to discover that as they followed the logic of institutions and obeyed the imperatives of government the BBC was not on their side at all. They had become Authority, and were now our target.

Since then the power of the media liberal ideologies has become ever more pervasive and persuasive. Back in the 1960s, they were the preserve of a fairly small group of us who resisted the national consensus and challenged Establishment values. Today, we see our old heresy becoming the new orthodoxy: media liberalism has now been adopted by the leaders of all three political parties, by the police, the courts and the churches. It is enshrined in law – in the Human Rights Act, in much Health and Safety legislation, in Equal Opportunities, in Employment Protections, in Race Relations and in a whole stream of edicts from Brussels.

It is not so much that their ideas and arguments are hare-brained and impracticable: some of their causes are in fact admirable and many are reasonable. The trouble – you might even say the tragedy – is that their implementation by governments eager for media approval has progressively damaged



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our institutions. Media liberal pressure has prompted a stream of laws, regulations and directives to champion the criminal against the police, the child against the school, the patient against the hospital, the employee against the company, the soldier against the army, the borrower against the bank, the investor against the broker, the convict against the prison – there is a new case in the papers almost every day, and each victory is a small erosion of the efficiency and effectiveness of the institution. Of course institutions have to be watched, and occasionally curbed. Like a state, their principle concern is with their own survival and success, and they will get away with what they can. We do not have to like them, but we need them, and we need them to flourish. I can now see that my old BBC media liberalism was not in fact a basis for government at all. It was an ideology of opposition, valuable for restraining the excesses of institutions and campaigning against the abuses of authority but it was not a way of actually running anything. It serves a vital function when government is dictatorial and oppressive, but when government is ineffective and over-permissive it is hopelessly inappropriate.

I can't deny that my perceptions have come through the experience of leaving the BBC, freelancing for eight years, and then starting my own business with a few friends and chairing it for seventeen years. Suppose I had stayed in the BBC. Would I have remained a devotee of the metropolitan media liberal ideology that I absorbed so readily in the 1950s and 1960s? I have an awful fear that the answer is yes.

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