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History 295

British History: Social Sphere of the Popish Plot

In the 16th Century, the Church of England removed itself from the influence of the Catholic Church. This became known as the English Reformation, and it subsequently led to a great deal of anti-Catholic sentiment in England and a great divide amongst Catholics and Protestants. This animosity was prevalent for centuries and manifested itself in social and political issues as well as religious ones. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, Protestants greatly feared Catholics “ overthrowing the Church of England in Church and State”, their concerns were heightened by “ The king’ s evident sympathy for France; the Catholicism of his consort, Catherine of Braganza; and the apparent conversion to Rome of the King’s brother and heir James, Duke of York”. As a result of this, Titus Oates and Israel Tonge “ revealed” the popish plot, in which they claimed that there was a plot, masterminded by the catholic Jesuits, to murder King Charles II and restore Catholicism in England. The killing of Edmund Berry Godfrey, a staunch protestant, and an investigator of the popish plot, brought legitimacy to the claims of Oates and Tonge. These accusations were proven to be unfounded and Oates was imprisoned for perpetuating the hoax. However there was no taking back the impact of the popish plot. Subsequently the popish plot adversely affected the Jesuits and many prominent Catholics were sentenced to death without cause. As a result of the increased anti-Catholic sentiment, the Exclusion bill was proposed which sought to prevent James Duke of York from ascending to the throne of England, Scotland, or Ireland. James Duke of York was prevented from ruling, refusing to take oath prescribed by the Test Act,

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which revealed him as a Roman Catholic. Protestants feared having an absolute monarchy similar to the catholic monarch of France. Political ideals and religious ideals were blended. The effects from what came to be known as the Exclusion Crisis had a huge “ sphere of influence” on English society in both a social and political respect.

The exclusion crisis initiated with the development of fear in regard to papists at the court that was witnessed immediately after the Restoration. The worries even became more severe when James Duke of York confirmed his conversion to Rome in 1673. In 1678, Titus Oates, en Jesuits spread rumors that the popish had a plan to kill Charles II and create a Catholic monarchy. Although Oates' character was questionable as he was castigated for immoral acts such as sodomy, drunkenness and blasphemy; the Jesuits claim presented adequate plausible information to warrant an investigation. An investigation was launched and the uproar of over the plan exploded when the magistrate tasked with the investigation was found dead. A parliamentary inquiry was formed to probe Oates's story. The team failed to substantiate the allegation, but it identified compromising secret conversation between the French government and the Duke of York's secretary. This heightened tension that prompted the resignation of the Danby, the Lord Treasurer, who earlier had overseen King's business in the Comments for a couple of previous years.

A new election was held in 1661 as Charles dissolved the Parliament. In this situation, the challengers of the court utilized the fear instigated by Oates's treachery plan to stage a campaign to remove the Duke of York from authority. They formed a movement, Green Ribbon Club that was to

spearhead advocacy. Rivalry in the parliamentary and London elections fueled the spirit of excluding the Duke while uniting the mass towards the idea. After a short time, a reaction developed against this agitation that reminded the mass of the assault on the royal court that was witnessed just before the Civil War. Anglican clergy and other antagonists of religious toleration featured strongly in this reaction. The group later became the exclusionist coalition which was named as the Whigs— the terminology initially used to mean Scottish Rebels. On the other hand, the opponents were named the Tories, which implied ' Irish cattle thieves.' Both the Tories and the Whigs had an influential support in London. However, it is worth acknowledging that the Whigs was more influential until the final stages of the crisis, when the tide started to confront them on a national level.

However, even in this latter stage, the Whigs remained unchallenged within the City and in few suburban districts.

The Whig Lord Mayor of London requested a bronze plague be fixed on the Monument to the Fire of London in 1681. This meant that the papist had set the fire for revolution. The propaganda was centrally shaped by historical events. Whig practices and sermons reminded people of the popish plan and atrocities dating back to 16th century. Furthermore, their teachings emphasized on developing a perception that papists had historically been enemies to Parliament, liberty and Protestantism. In contrast, the Tories reacted by depicting Whigs as successors to the puritan insurgents of the Civil War era. The Tories particularly criticized the Whigs for repeating the compromised strategy that led to the collapse of the authority of Charles I and promoted the establishment of the tyranny of Oliver Cromwell. In some

instance, the Tories attempt to confront the Whig pope-burning pageant with aggressive protest in which they burned the statue regarded as John Presbyter.

In the year 1681, Charles assumed authority over the Whigs after engaging in a secret agreement with Louis XIV. Under this deal, Charles was reimbursed a French subsidy that saved him from financial reliance on Parliament. The Whigs remained powerful for a long time in London.

However, the court and its Tory associates staged an offensive conflict using means such as judicial prosecutions to the public press and famous ballads celebrating loyalty and criticizing the Whigs. The Tory newspaper and pamphlets became very popular as various anti-Whig plays were staged and the Anglican clergy supported the idea of royal divine. Earl of Shaftesbury who was the Whig leader was exonerated by the London Jury. However, other Whigs such as Stephen College were convicted by the Jury, the move that weakened the Whigs' command substantially.

The England's foreign policy during this time assumed a relevant position in shaping the activities of the day. England enacted a policy regarded as the Clarendon Code that was aimed at re-establishing the Church of England. Charles separated himself from the policy, although he promoted the idea of religious tolerance. The most significant England's foreign policy was the plan in which Charles signed a secret treaty of Dover. With this deal, Louis was to offer financial aids to Charles and support him in a war while Charles was to convert to Roman Catholicism. Accordingly, Charles attempted to impose religious freedom for Catholics and Protestants rebels. However, the adopted policies had a number of implications on the exclusion crisis. The

Whig party feared Catholics overtaking England and what the country stands for. They used the Popish Plot to justify their fear of Catholics, and they ostracized all Roman Catholics. The Whigs sought to enforce “penal laws” against Catholics, and many Catholics were sentenced to death as a result of the popish plot. In relation with Catholicism, they used the absolute monarchy of the French to serve as an example of what horrors could occur when a Catholic takes power. The Whigs advocated Anti-French foreign policy. They did everything in their power to challenge James Duke of York political growth. They believed in a balanced government with the parliament having a great deal of power and influence. The Whigs differed from the Tories in that they promoted toleration for dissenters. Following the first rejection of the Exclusion Bill, the Whigs sought to “unite Protestants, banish Catholics and arm themselves against any Catholic who attempts to take the throne.” Contrarily, the Tories believed in the divine rule of the monarch and were against the exclusion bill that sought to keep James Duke of York from ruling in England, Scotland and Ireland. The Tories believed in an absolute monarchy and felt that parliament should be subservient to the King. They did not view the Catholics and the French as primary threats to England but rather they cited dissenters and the Dutch as such.

In addition to the birth of political time, this period spawned political activism and encouraged public opinion in a manner never before seen in England. The influence of newspapers was essential in sparking public opinion, and The Whigs and the Tories used the media to gain public favor in a manner similar to modern politics. Articles concerning the Duke of York portrayed this. Those that spoke highly of him were constructed by the Tories;

whereas, negative articles and exhibitions were constructed by the Whigs. This sparked the beginning of public opinion in England; the articles of this era certainly juxtapose the Poem Why Ye Not to Court by John Skelton, in which he had to write in code for fear of writing a direct criticism. This era sparked the beginning of civil liberties to express the freedom of speech and media.

The Tories and the Whigs were both responsible for very subjective pieces and they did what they could to sway public opinion in their favor. They were responsible for antics such as “ fake feasts” and other blatant attacks at attacking their rival political part in scandalous manners. Great progress was achieved as for many centuries citizens were denied their civil liberties of freedom of speech and freedom of press and were arrested or put to death for speaking their minds if their views didn't coincide with that of the Royal family. It also sparked the beginning of Political activism in which both parties had influence in changing the political landscape of England. This was a change from the days where only those born into certain nobility could have any impact on the political landscape of England.

The accidental expiration of the Licensing Act that demanded a censorship of the press during the early stages of the crisis provided an avenue for the publishing of works of controversy that were witnessed in large numbers in early 1640s. In particular, the number of the publications from the London presses increased substantially. The publications varied from long pamphlets to ballads and caricatures. They even included decks of playing cards that featured images of political relevance such as diagrams of episodes in Oates's narrative. The pulpit and plays were also staged as part of the

advocacy. The expiration of the Licensing Act presented as a fundamental step towards a free media. In contrast, to the restrictions earlier imposed by the Act that limited Media activities, presses were free to publish and distribute items that covered diverse socio-political topics. Evidently, the items released increased at a considerable rate. For example, the publications issued from the London presses increased with more than a double rate from 1, 081 to 2145 in 1677 and 1680 respectively. Media freedom meant increased awareness and empowerments as citizens would easily access and familiarize themselves with the politics of the day. The situation explains the vital role of media in exclusion crisis and in shaping the Londoners activities during this era.

It is also worthwhile noting the coffee houses assumed a vital role in the politics of the day, and they impacted on the British in various ways. Coffee houses stocked most the released items thus individuals did not necessary had to buy them. The coffee houses acted as strategic centers or distribution avenue through which the Londoners could easily and conveniently access these items. In this context, the coffee houses assumed a vital role in promoting the activism activities. Through these items that were easily and freely accessible in coffee houses, the activism became easier. The situation fueled the advocacy by providing ideal avenues through which activists would easily popularize their ideologies. The idea was invented in the Ottoman Empire and spread in cities like Venice before being embraced in England. The first English coffee house was established in 1650 after which other several emerged in the same year. Initially, the coffee houses were visited by intellectuals who gathered information about various exotic

subjects. The novelty of coffee and the people who were associated with coffee houses made these places be associated with high prestige and intellectualism. Accordingly, men started associating in coffee houses to discuss various intellectual ideas that touched on various areas. In particular, politics was not the only subject debated in coffee houses; however, political propaganda and debate featured mainly in coffee house sociability. In this context, the restored monarchy of Charles II viewed these places with suspicion identifying them as potential centers of rebellious political activity. This led to the issuance of proclamation from the Crown in 1675 to ban them. However, the move failed, and the declaration was withdrawn a year later. With time, some coffee houses created groupings with well-defined political perspectives. For instance, the Duke of Buckingham mainly identified and held meetings with Leveller supporters at their favorite coffee house. In an era of exclusion, the Amsterdam Coffee House acted as the center of the Whig activity while Sam's Coffee House became the Tories.

The Coffee Houses main attraction and relevance in shaping the British socio-political affairs is identifiable in their role as centers where elites met to exchange ideas regarding current events. To lure clients, most coffee houses subscribed to English and foreign newspapers and bought political pamphlets for their clients to read. Together with the developing press and the politics of the day; coffee houses thus enhanced the creation of a lively public political culture. Some scholars have regarded them as " penny universities" in which customers could get a first-class political empowerment for the modest price of few drinks. In essence, they promoted fast circulation of news and propaganda—a rumor released in one coffee

house would spread through the entire country within hours.

With the Coffee houses and a free media, individuals were much more informed and involved in national politics, and it sparked a change in the social landscape of England. This newfound freedom of speech amongst citizens was greatly represented by “ coffee houses” in which people would discuss issues. Jürgen Habermas defines a public sphere as “ an area in social life where individuals can freely discuss and identify societal problems. Citizens of England were finally able to be heard and they were able to influence change. Habermas theorizes that a government should act in accordance with the public sphere of what the people believe is best. This was an immense change from the England of old in which the people were completely in the disposal of the monarch. Similar to the situation during the exclusion crisis, the idea of coffee houses and the increased activities of the media still assume a vital role in shaping socio-political activities of the modern world. Currently, the media resemble the typical coffee houses of the exclusion crisis era, in which elites meet and engage each other in aggressive discussions on the current socio-political events of high relevance to the society. The new found social and political freedom has lived on into modern day, and it has been a model for democratic countries throughout the world.

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