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THE INTELLECTUAL AND MORAL AMBIENCE OF COLONIAL AMERICA DURING THE TOWNSHEND ACTS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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Abstract:

This article attempts to study the ambience of Colonial America during the imposition of the Townshend Acts in 1767 in the American colonies by Great Britain. Unlike other revolutions which are characterised by bloodshed and violence, it was marked by pacifism. This was possible because the revolutionaries expressed their resentment against the oppressive British measures not through violence, but through the intellectual method of writing sedate pamphlets and delivering calm and thought-provoking speeches. The colonists also viewed the British oppression as a means to purify themselves from the sin of luxury and to dedicate themselves to industry and hard work. This was responsible in replacing a bloody revolution by a pacifistic one, at least until the last stage of the revolution.

KEY WORDS:

Intellectual, American Revolution, Ambience, Colonial America .

INTRODUCTION

The two very significant features discernible in the American Revolution are its intellectual and moral content. The American colonists expressed their resistance against Great Britain, until the ultimate stage of the revolution, through their writings and this made it a pacifistic movement. Secondly, the oppression of Great Britain on the American colonists was viewed by the colonists as a punishment of God for their sins and hence the revolution was also perceived by them as a movement for penance and self-purification. This article makes an attempt to study the intellectual and moral content of the American Revolution in the context of the imposition of the Townshend Acts in 1767.

Townshend thought to saddle the colonies with external taxes as a result of which the House of Commons decided to reduce English land tax, depriving the Treasury of £500,000 annually. On May 13, 1767 he introduced the proposals which were subsequently enacted into law. The Townshend Revenue Act, that became law on June 29, 1767, levied duties on glass, red lead, white lead, paper, paint and tea which were to be imported into the colonies. Townshend planned to make the royal officials in the colonies independent of colonial assemblies and he hoped to do so by providing their salaries from an annual estimated revenue of £400,000 to be elicited from these duties. The Customs Service in America was under the jurisdiction of a Board located in London which, Townshend realized, resulted in the colonial evasion of the trade laws. With this in view, the American Board of Customs Act which became law on June 29, 1767, established a separate Board of Customs Commissioners to operate from Boston and with this he hoped to increase the administrative efficiency and ensure the collection of duties. The New York suspending Act which was enacted into law on July 2, 1767 suspended the New York Assembly until it would submit to the

provisions of the Quartering Act of 1765.

In addition to the three Townshend Acts cited above, the imperial authorities, with the Circular Instruction of September 11, 1767, curtailed the authority of colonial lower houses which assumed to themselves the status of miniature Houses of Commons. It was a general instruction to the royal governors not to give assent to any laws through which the lower houses sought to change their constitutions or compositions. The Privy Council, by an Order on July 6, 1768, created three new Vice-Admiralty courts at Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston in addition to the one which was already established at Halifax in 1765. It empowered them with both original and appellate jurisdiction over all cases arising under the trade laws. The provincial vice-admiralty court was operating ineffectively for the last fifty years. But this order of the Privy Council reinforced these courts to make the custom enforcement effective.

The Americans could recognize the presence of a tax in the Quartering Act. The New York Suspending Act confirmed their suspicion that Parliament could go to any point for the exaction of revenues from them, even to the point of destroying their legislative assemblies. The British authorities hoped that Americans would tamely yield to the Townsend Revenue Act since it dealt with external taxes, but as Dickinson wrote in Letters from a Farmer, the colonists found no "distinction made" by them "between internal and external taxes"(20) in their declarations in the Stamp Act Congress and elsewhere. The colonists were apprehensive about the American Board of Customs Act because the salaries to the Customs Commissioners were to be paid from the duties they would collect and hence they would possibly multiply and generate, in turn, the imposition of new taxes on them. Samuel Adams wrote to Dennys De Berdt on May 14, 1768 that the Commissioners were "a useless and very expensive set of officers" and they would appoint "as many officers under them as they please, for whose Support it is said they" might "sink the whole revenue" (Cushing 216).

But the American Revolutionaries did not express their resentments through strikes and lock-outs; they registered their protests through multitudes of debates in print and innumerable proceedings of ideas through writings. The Massachusetts Circular Letter, drafted by Samuel Adams, was approved by the Massachusetts House of Representatives on February 11, 1768 and was sent to the Speakers of the lower houses in the other continental colonies. It declared the Townshend Revenue Act and the other accompanying measures as unconstitutional and invited the other assemblies to take united measures for their repeal. While acknowledging the sovereignty of Parliament it argued that the authority of Parliament was derived from and limited by the British Constitution which affirmed that one's property could not be taken away from him without his consent. It discarded the concept of American representation in the British Parliament. It also denounced the attempt to make royal officials independent of the people as dangerous to the happiness and security of the subjects. While reflecting the undaunted determination of the colonists to thwart every attempt of Parliamentary taxation, it admitted the general legislative authority of Parliament and ruled out any thought for independence.

The writings of the colonists during this period not only denounced the unconstitutionality of the British measures and pleaded for their own unity and firm action, but also helped in sounding alarm and caution to themselves in determining their approach to the issues and in showing the direction they were to take. In Letters from a Farmer, Dickinson tried "to convince the people" that they were, at that moment, "exposed to the most imminent dangers" (15). But he also tried "to persuade them...to exert themselves, in the most firm, but most peaceable manner, for obtaining relief" since the "cause of liberty is a cause of too much dignity, to be sullied by turbulence and tumult" and the persons "who engage in it, should breathe a sedate, yet fervent spirit, animating them to actions of prudence, justice, modesty, bravery, humanity and magnanimity" (15). The Americans would prove that they "have that true magnanimity of soul, that can resent injuries, without falling into rage" (70). He wrote: "Let us behave like dutiful children, who have received unmerited blows from a beloved parent. Let us complain to our parent; but let our complaints speak at the same time the language of affection and veneration" (17). But though Dickinson pleaded to his fellow Americans to so shape their spirits that it would be "impossible to determine whether an American's character is most distinguishable, for his loyalty to his Sovereign, his duty to his mother country, his love of freedom, or his affection for his native soil" (15), yet he emphatically pointed out: LET these truths be indelibly impressed on our minds ... that we cannot be HAPPY, without being FREE ... that we cannot be free, without being secure in our property ... that we cannot be secure in our property, if, without our consent, others may, as by right, take it away ... that taxes imposed on us by parliament, do thus take it away. (67)

And he finally wrote: "and that tho' your devotion to Great-Britain is the most affectionate, yet you can make PROPER DISTINCTIONS, and know what you owe to yourselves, as well as to her" (70).

The American Revolution, unlike others, is not so much external as internal in its operations with a

moral and psychological orientation. As in the Stamp Act Crisis so also during the hazards of the imposition of the Townshend Acts, the non-importation and non-consumption movements were intended not only to bring pressure on England, but also to rescue American society from the corruption into which it seemed to be degenerating. Morgan writes in "The Puritan Ethic and the American Revolution" that the "colonial boycott movements were more than a means of bringing pressure on Parliament ... they were not simply negative in intent ... They were also a positive end in themselves, a way of reaffirming and rehabilitating the virtues of the Puritan Ethic"(8). The colonists extensively wrote on this issue not only to inspire themselves to bring the British Parliament to heel, but more significantly, to express their deep-seated feelings of guilt and anxiety and bring about a moral revolution in themselves. The Americans thought poverty and adversity as the gateway to virtue and Parliamentary taxation appeared to them as an avenue for its attainment. It came out in Boston Evening Post on November 16, 1767 that the Americans had been "of late years insensibly drawn into too great a degree of luxury and dissipation." Va. Gazette on June 1, 1769 wrote about the colonists' realization that luxury had "taken deep root" among them "and to cure a people of luxury were an Herculean task indeed; what perhaps no power on earth but a British Parliament, in the very method" they were taking with the colonists "could possibly execute". Pennsylvania Journal stated on December 10, 1767 :

...Our enemies very well know that dominion and property are closely connected; and that to impoverish us, is the surest way to enslave us. Therefore, if we mean still to be free, let us unanimously lay aside foreign superfluities, and encourage our own manufacture. SAVE YOUR MONEY AND YOU WILL SAVE YOUR COUNTRY!

And Boston Evening Post on November 16, 1767 wrote :

by consuming less of what we are not really in want of, and by industriously cultivating and improving the natural advantages of our own country, we might save our substance, even our lands, from becoming the property of others, and we might effectually preserve our virtue and our liberty, to the latest posterity.

The British policies for the colonists went undeterred. With the death of Townshend in September 1767, his place was taken over by Lord North, a great upholder of the notion of the dignity of Parliament. In January 1768 a new office called Secretariat of State was created by the King to deal exclusively with colonial affairs. Hillisborough, who could even outshine North in his devotion to Parliamentary supremacy, became the Secretary of State. And quite in keeping with his temper, Hillisborough, as a retaliatory measure, sent a Circular Letter on April 21, 1768, ordering Governor Bernard to urge the Massachusetts House to rescind its letter and in the event of refusal, to dissolve it immediately and directing the governors in the continental colonies to persuade the assemblies of their colonies to treat the Massachusetts Circular Letter with contempt. Further, believing in the truth of the Commissioners' screams for help, Hillisborough, in his letter on June 8, 1768 to General Thomas Gage, Commander in Chief of the British forces in America, ordered to station the required troops in Boston and four regiments were transferred to Boston and its surroundings.

The Americans dealt with the might of the British government with their thoughtful action and the written words through which they were gradually forming themselves and laying the foundation of a future nation. Massachusetts Assembly, on June 30, 1768, defied the commands of Hillisborough by a vote of ninety-two to seventeen resolving not to rescind its letter and other assemblies formally approved the Massachusetts Circular Letter.

An anonymous pamphlet then widely read entitled The Power and Grandeur of Great Britain began with a warning and an advice to England : "When an empire has arrived at such a height, as to become the envy of its neighbours, a decline is to be guarded against. To give stability to a state, requires greater abilities, as well as more virtue, than to extend its dominions"(3). But it also proceeded "to see an inviolable union formed between his majesty's American and British subjects ; to see the British Empire advanced to the highest pinnacle of earthly glory ; to see it the sovereign of the world, and at the same time, the protector of the liberties of mankind; to see her an example and encourager of every civil and religious virtue ; to see America enjoying peace and plenty, and the best of civil governments, under her protection"(23-24). The tract ended with a desire for a perpetual union between England and America and more emphatically, with a warning :

But if for our sins, providence should suffer pride, party - spirit, envy and avarice, to defeat the measures of the real well-wishers of their country; I see Britain reduced in her trade; depopulated by the transmigration of her people to America; her populous trading and manufacturing cities deserted; her

nobles, for want of tenants, tilling their own grounds; and calling on oppressed, disaffected America, to relieve and defend her against the power of her enemies. In short, I see Britain in America, and America in Britain. May heaven avert this, and every other mischief from the British Empire. May its union with America be perpetual, and wisdom and prudence direct all its councils. (24)

But while Americans wished for a perpetual union between America and Great Britain, they were also aware of the British attitude and of the harsh realities and the call of liberty was ringing within them. It was the ancient practice of the Saxon clans to assemble under some large tree and hold their town meeting and even under Norman rule since the eleventh century they used to dedicate a tree of liberty as a symbol of their former liberty. This practice too was common in America even before the Revolution. On July 25, 1768 the symbolic ceremony of dedicating a Tree of Liberty was performed at Providence which was expressive of the spirit of the time and the following discourse was spoken by Silas Downer at this function :

We do therefore, in the name and behalf of all the true SONS of LIBERTY in America, Great-Britain, Ireland, Corsica, or wheresoever they are dispersed throughout the world, dedicate and solemnly devote this tree, to be a TREE OF LIBERTY – May all our councils and deliberations under it's venerable branches be guided by wisdom, and directed to the support and maintenance of that liberty, which our renowned forefathers sought out and found under trees and in the wilderness. May it long flourish, and may the SONS OF LIBERTY often repair hither, to confirm and strengthen each other. When they look towards this sacred ELM, may they be penetrated with a sense of their duty to themselves, their country, and their posterity. (Hyneman and Lutz 108)

Such was the spirit of the time that even such a loyal American lover of England like Dickinson went closer toward a revolution, but again through the instrument of writing, though, of course this time with a poem entitled “A Song for American Freedom”, popularly known as “Liberty Song” which came out in Boston Gazette on July 18, 1768. It was modeled on Garrick's “Hearts of Oak” and remained for many years the most popular political song among the colonists :

Come join hand in hand, brave Americans all,
And rouse your bold hearts at fair Liberty's call;
No tyrannous acts shall suppress your just claim,
Or stain with dishonor America's name.
In freedom we're born, and in freedom we'll live;
Our purses are ready, -
Steady, friends, steady, -
Not as slaves, but as freemen, our money we'll give !

The succeeding period appeared gloomy. Having received orders from Hillisborough, Governor Bernard dissolved Massachusetts Assembly. It is during this time, in the context of the British Government's legislation of sending customs racketeers to the colonies and of supporting them with the Standing Army, that the Americans began to rethink about the validity and propriety of the legislative power of Parliament over the colonies, but it took them a little time to crystallize their ideas on this issue.

In an act of defying the Parliamentary authority, Boston convened a town meeting on September 13, 1768 and declared the employment of a Standing Army as an infringement on their natural, constitutional and charter rights and also a grievance. They even took a much bolder step and called a convention which, composed of ninety-six towns of Massachusetts, met on September 22, 1768, and while approving the assembly's previous protests against Parliamentary taxation, disapproved the employment of a Standing Army. The British Parliament, on February 9, 1769, in defense of its authority and in retaliation to the actions of Massachusetts, passed a series of resolutions, directing the King to make inquisition at Boston for treason, making proposals to hang Samuel Adams and a few others and to bring the culprits to Britain for trial before a special commission under an old statute of the thirty-fifth year of the reign of Henry VIII in the 16th Century.

With the presence of British troops, the Customs Commissioners and other revenue officers became energetic. Since the first arrival of the Commissioners in Boston in November 1767 the newspapers were filled with complains against them. Boston Evening Post, on November 30, 1767, wrote : “ ...there can be no such thing as common good or common cause where men's estates are ravaged at pleasure to lavish on parasitical minions.” The American leaders began to be convinced that they were the victims of a ministerial plot to enslave them.

The resistance against the Standing Army was expressed and stimulated by reports of a running account of events in Boston by “Journal of the Times” from the first arrival of British troops on October 1, 1768 till August 1, 1769 when, for reasons not known, it ceased publication. It warned the Americans of the

dangers of a Standing Army and the terrible consequences that would visit them if they failed to stand fast. The Virginia House of Burgesses, on May 16, 1769, adopted a set of resolutions, asserting the exclusive authority of the Burgesses to tax Virginians. They expressed that subjecting Americans to a parliamentary statute of Henry VIII was a violation of the rights of the colonists. Though Governor Botetourt immediately dissolved the assembly for this bold act, its resolutions served as a model for assertion of colonial rights and condemnation of Parliamentary measures by other colonial assemblies. Governor Bernard and the Customs Commissioners were being denounced in the newspapers. Even such a provocative incident as the Boston Massacre of March 5, 1770 found reaction of the Massachusetts patriots in an official version of the Massacre prepared by a Committee of inquiry appointed by the Town Meeting of Boston on March 12, 1770. The report of this Committee, headed by James Bowdoin and with Joseph Warren and Samuel Pemberton as its other members, entitled *A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre in Boston* narrated the history of the Massacre from the colonial standpoint and indicted the soldiers of a designed genocide.

But shortly after the incident of the Massacre, in March 1770, under the leadership of North as First Minister, Parliament repealed all Townshend duties except that on Tea which was retained as a symbol of Parliament's authority to tax the colonies. Hillsborough notified that Parliament would not tax America any more for revenue and Governor Bernard was allowed to summon Massachusetts Assembly. North's gestures resulted in the retardation of discussion on Parliament's authority, in the collapse of the non-importation movements and in submission of the colonists to the tea and molasses during the period between April 12, 1770, the date of repeal of the Townshend duties and May 10, 1773, when Parliament passed the Tea Act. With but a few exceptions, this period has appropriately been called as the "quiet period".

Conclusion : The preceding study indicates that the "quiet period" following the Boston Massacre was possible because of the resistance of the colonists to the oppressive British measures through an intellectual ambience of sedate and learned pamphlets and calm and thought-provoking speeches. The moral ambience generated by the American colonists through the shunning of their own vice of luxury, their prescription of industry and hard work for themselves and consequently their determination to lay aside foreign goods of luxury and to encourage their own manufacture replaced a bloody revolution by a pacifistic one.

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