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The Impact of the French Revolution to the Great Reform Act

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Abstract: This study delves into the intricate relationship between the French Revolution and the Reform Act of 1832, exploring how revolutionary ideals of liberty and equality, evolving class dynamics, and shifting socio-political contexts shaped political reform in early 19th-century Britain. The passage focuses on two main questions. Firstly, on an ideological level, how did the shock of the French Revolution impact the attitudes of various political powers in the UK towards democratic reforms? Secondly, how did the French Revolution influence the attitudes of different social classes in the UK? By examining the attitudes of different social classes, contentious debates over voting procedures, and various forces for change, this research illuminates the multifaceted impact of the French Revolution on Britain's path to reform.

Keywords: The Great Reform Act, The French Revolution, History, Class Struggle

1. Introduction

The French Revolution of 1789 was a groundbreaking upheaval that shook the foundations of monarchical authority and feudal order. Its profound impact extended not only to France but also to the entire European continent, transcending national borders. One of the countries profoundly affected by the unfolding events in France was Britain, a nation renowned for its steadfast monarchy and deeply entrenched aristocracy. The resonances of the French Revolution found their way into British society and politics, ultimately playing a pivotal role in the passage of the Reform Act of 1832.

This paper embarks on a journey to unravel the intricate relationship between the French Revolution and the watershed moment in British history - the Reform Act of 1832. It seeks to elucidate how the revolutionary ideals of liberty and equality, the shifting sands of class dynamics, and the evolving socio-political contexts catalyzed and shaped the trajectory of political reform in early 19th-century Britain. Through an examination of the attitudes of different social classes, the heated debates over voting procedures, and the diverse forces for change, this study illuminates the multifaceted impact of the French Revolution on Britain's road to reform. As we navigate the labyrinthine paths of historical events and societal progress, we shall discern how the resounding echoes of the French Revolution across the English Channel contributed to the evolution of political representation and power distribution in Britain, a transformation that would forever alter the course of its history.

While studying, we've noticed that there are numerous research papers on the Reform Act of 1832, but very few that connect it to the French Revolution. The French Revolution took place in 1789,

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relatively close to the time when the Reform Act was proposed. Therefore, we speculate that the French Revolution might have influenced the enactment of the Reform Act of 1832. We have refined our questions into three aspects. Firstly, on an ideological level, how did the shock of the French Revolution impact the attitudes of various political powers in the UK towards democratic reforms? Secondly, how did the French Revolution influence the attitudes of different social classes in the UK?

2. The Shock that the French Revolution Brings to Britain

In a country that had been thought to have the strongest monarchy in existence, the absolute monarchy had collapsed. And perhaps most unexpectedly, the priesthood gave up its religious rights under coercion while the aristocracy grudgingly gave up a significant portion of their feudal claims. The Declaration of the Rights of Men and Citizens upheld citizens' unalienable rights and encouraged men's equality.

For the British, especially for the people who had seem the French revolution in 1789, the revolution encouraged who wanted to have in change. For the reformers in Britain, they believed that the French Revolution had advanced a system that they felt was long overdue for reform. Paradoxically, despite the "Glorious Revolution" in Britain, which was intended to bestow civil and religious freedoms, a full century later, English Protestants are still enduring a lack of acceptance. British reformers believed that the French Parliament's tolerance and near-universal suffrage would expedite the process of parliamentary reforms, including the elimination of corrupt boroughs and the promotion of greater equality. Moreover, from 1787 to 1789, they continued to call on Parliament to abolish the Tests and Corporations Act and to give equal rights to Protestants. The dissidents' calls for equal rights failed.

The French Revolution began in July 1789, which originally increased British national confidence. Some Britons welcomed it because they thought unrest would undermine their main European rival. Many others, like Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth, had faith that revolutionary France would develop into a modern nation and that this development would hasten political, theological, and social transformation in Britain [1]. In Britain, the French Revolution's beginning in 1789 was simultaneously feared and welcomed [2]. Initially, certain political personalities in France cheered the end of the absolute monarchy. People like Edmund Burke thought that Europe would see a wave of change and that Britain would follow with its long overdue political reforms [3]. At the beginning of the French revolution, many Englishmen would have been dismayed at the early bloodshed, but they felt that it was the way to go if France was to be completely reformed. This opinion started to gradually shift as the violence persisted intermittently throughout the summer and into the fall and Englishmen started to express concerns about the direction of events in France via the news. A government publication called The World questioned if Frenchmen knew how to use their newfound freedom for the good of everyone [4].

The doubt among conservative Britons escalated when the Parisian populace assaulted Louis XVI and his family at Versailles in October 1789. Numerous English sources within France furnished accurate accounts of the attack, and the English press extensively reported on the events over a span of several days. Appalled by the death of Louis, both the government and the Whig Opposition utilized the media to express disapproval of the Convention party's choice. According to The Morning Chronicle, "The murderers have achieved victory at the expense of all principles, rationality, order, justice, strategy, and humanity." [5].

Following the October Days, there was less bloodshed in France, and Britain followed the Constituent Assembly's efforts to draft a constitution for France with interest. As the Assembly implemented changes to France's economy, administration and court, 1790 was a relatively peaceful year. Through their press, the English underlined their desire for France to become a constitutional monarchy in line with their example. The British government believed that a constitutional monarchy

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would thwart France's developing republicanism. The Assembly's repression of republican tendencies and the return of some administrative authority to Louis XVI when he reluctantly agreed to sign the Constitution of 1791 were supported by both the Government and the Opposition.6

After a year, the opposing sides of the Revolutionary War discussion were further outlined by Louis XVI's failed effort to flee to Varennes in June 1791 and his subsequent virtual captivity. Louis's flight to Varennes demonstrated how the party loyalty gap among the BritiMi populace and press had grown more obvious and discernible [6]. In general, the Government press had more sympathy for the monarch's situation than the Opposition press did. With just a few exceptions, the opposition press kept up its support for the Revolution.

Before the 1832 Reform Act, Tory Prime Minister Arthur Wellesley, First Duke of Wellington, passionately opposed legislative reform. However, support for minor reform was growing within his party, mostly because substantially extending the franchise would allow for the exploitation of the influence and resources of Britain's growing middle class. First Duke of Wellington Arthur Wellesley vehemently resisted parliamentary change in 1830 on behalf of the Tony party. However, support for minor reform was growing within his party, mostly because substantially extending the franchise would allow for the exploitation of the influence and resources of Britain's growing middle class. After the Tory government was ousted later in 1830, Whig Earl Grey was named prime minister and pledged to enact legislative change. Despite the fact that two of the Whig Party's reform plans were turned down by Parliament, the third one was approved and received Royal Assent in 1832 [7].

Regarding the reform itself, it effectively addressed longstanding issues in the UK, including the unequal distribution of parliamentary seats, the expansion of voting rights, and the elimination of "rotten boroughs." Additionally, another change introduced by the 1832 Reform Act was the legal prohibition of women's participation in Parliamentary elections, as the Act specifically defined a voter as a male individual. Prior to 1832, women infrequently, though rarely, exercised their right to vote.

3. The Similar Class Power behind the French Revolution and the Great Reform Act

3.1. Introduction

Marxists might argue: Class struggle is the driving force behind human societal progress. Historical materialism believes that the contradictory movement within the evolution of the mode of production serve as the primary driving factor behind the advancement of human society. Within these internal contradictions, the productive forces play a pivotal role in shaping the relations of production and various aspects of social life, ultimately serving as the decisive force that propels societal progress [8]. To a certain extent, these viewpoints are correct, as class dynamics indeed play a significant role in driving historical events. The stance of a social class is linked to their collective interests. When a majority of society supports a particular law, that law is inevitably aligned with the majority's interests. It will be upheld until it no longer serves the majority's interests. Hence, while major reform laws are passed in parliaments to explore the more fundamental driving forces, an in-depth investigation into the ideological changes and interrelations among various classes within society is also essential. For this point, we will talk about how the French Revolution has great impact on these changes.

3.2. The Brief Analysis of the Attitudes of Different Classes

Firstly, the French Revolution was the largest and most comprehensive revolution in modern world history. It dismantled France's monarchical authoritarian system, shook the feudal order across the European continent, and had profound global repercussions for the advancement of liberal democratic ideas [9]. Undoubtedly, these outcomes were not welcomed by the upper echelons of nobility and clergy. For them, a constitutional monarchy formed the foundation of their privileges. Overthrowing the monarchy would mean losing everything they possessed. Given the lessons from France, the

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aristocratic class would likely compromise to some extent in order to maintain their privileges. Hence, we can speculate that the upper class and clergy had reserved or even supportive attitudes toward reform.

Secondly, with the development of British capitalism, workers, peasants, and some small bourgeoisie gradually realized the extreme inequality in the existing electoral system. The property requirements effectively excluded the proletarian and lower-middle-class segments from participation. The democratic rights of the working and peasant classes were far inferior to those of the nobility and clergy. Before the Great Reform Act in Britain, only property owners with a permanent interest worth at least forty shillings in a county had the right to vote [10]. The majority of the proletariat and lower-middle class had no voting rights. After its enactment, the act granted voting rights to small landowners, tenant farmers, shopkeepers, homeowners paying annual rent of £10 or more, and some tenants. This expanded the voter base from around 400,000 to 650,000, enabling about one-fifth of adult males to qualify for voting [11]. Hence, as direct beneficiaries of the reform, the impact of the French Revolution on the demands of the proletariat and lower-middle class is also significant.

3.3. Similar Socio-Political Contexts Before the French Revolution

In 1978, when King Louis XVI decided to convene the Estates-General once again, there was uncertainty regarding the voting procedure to be followed by the parliament. The question was whether to continue with the old procedure used in the Estates-General of 1614, known as "vote by order," or to adopt a new one. The first and second estates strongly advocated for the use of the old procedure because, under the old system, the first and second estates, which held the majority of the country's wealth, could easily outvote the third estate. Unsurprisingly, the third estate vehemently opposed this proposal and put forward two alternatives: "voting by head" and "doubling the Third."

Eventually, on January 24th, 1789, Louis XVI issued another edict that provided instructions for electing deputies to the Estates-General, which represented a compromise between the competing proposals [12]. Some nobles, such as members of the political club known as the Society of Thirty, began advocating for a voting procedure that could better represent everyone as well. With the lifting of the ban on political clubs, they began giving speeches to promote the views of the third estate. The "privileged classes" found themselves facing suspicion and hostility from the citizens. Gradually, a consensus emerged nationwide in favor of "doubling the third" and voting by head [13].

It became evident that these debates among the estates were, in fact, reflective of class struggles. The first and second estates represented the nobility and clergy of the old regime, comprising only about 3% of the national population. It is worth noting that the third estate was more representative of the bourgeoisie rather than the proletariat. Among the 610 representatives, more than half held some form of venal office, and 80 representatives were industrial and artisanal factory owners. There were no representatives from the working-class professions [14].

Essentially, the debate over the French voting process is a reflection of class contradictions. The Third Estate, representing the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, comprises the majority of the population but possesses very limited political rights. This imbalance of political rights and political power inevitably leads to a system evolving towards equilibrium. The same logic applies to the United Kingdom, albeit with slightly different dynamics. In the UK, the reform is driven by even stronger and more complex class forces.

One of these forces includes the proletariat and the petite bourgeoisie, which mainly consist of landless peasants, small farmers, workers, and small shopkeepers and artisans. According to regulations passed in 1430 and 1432 during the reign of Henry VI, most of the proletariat and petite bourgeoisie did not have the right to vote due to their limited assets. In contrast, although never implemented, France had already guaranteed universal suffrage for French men in its constitution of 1792. In the Charter of 1814, the right to suffrage was granted to men at least 30 years of age, with

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the electorate being considered as a social function. Clearly, in France, the voting rights of the proletariat and petite bourgeoisie had already been to some extent acknowledged and guaranteed. In the UK, however, the previous voting boundaries persisted.

The second force for change in the UK is the bourgeoisie. While they also sought change, their demands were different. The proletariat and petite bourgeoisie wanted to secure their voting rights, while the bourgeoisie believed that their wealth was seriously disproportionate to their political power. They considered the existing constituency boundaries to be imperfect and unable to fully represent their interests. The administrative divisions in the UK are highly varied, ranging from large cities to small villages. This is due to the historical evolution of administrative divisions in the UK, which was initially determined by county sheriffs in the Middle Ages. Subsequent administrative boundaries changed very little. This sometimes results in equal rights for representatives of large cities and villages, even though the economic influence they represent is significantly imbalanced. The existing division of MPs does not adequately represent the population. There is even a phenomenon called “pocket boroughs”. The large landowners used their local wealth and prestige to win the support of the borough. A large number of parliamentarians were in the hands of aristocrats and religious figures. The bourgeoisie had to compete for the few MPs in the towns and cities. Therefore, the bourgeoisie in the UK also became one of the class forces pushing for the enactment of reform bills [15].

4. Conclusion

There is no doubt that the French Revolution of 1789 had a profound impact on a country once known for its powerful monarchy. It led to the collapse of the absolute monarchy, the renunciation of religious rights by the clergy and the abandonment of feudal claims by the nobility under duress.

Firstly, by further studying the reaction of the British community to the French Revolution, we confirm that the French Revolution had a profound impact on the electoral sphere in Britain. The Declaration of the Rights of Man inspired British reformers who had long sought political change, hoping to emulate the French ideals of tolerance and universal suffrage. As violence escalated in France, conservative Britons became increasingly suspicious, especially after the attack on Louis XVI and his family at Versailles in 1789. Despite initial optimism, the British government and opposition eventually disagreed over their support for the revolution. In the years that followed, British politics was sharply divided over the War of Independence, with some sympathizing with the monarchy and others supporting the revolution. In the end, the final passage of the Reform Act 1832 resolved long-standing problems in the UK, such as the unequal distribution of parliamentary seats, the extension of franchises and the elimination of "corrupt boroughs". However, it also explicitly excluded women from the right to vote, although women did occasionally participate in elections before 1832.

Second, it is clear that class forces have played a key role in driving social progress. The French Revolution, which led to the collapse of the French monarchy and the challenge to feudal privileges, greatly influenced the thinking and actions of various classes in England. The English upper classes and clergy reluctantly supported the reform in order to safeguard their own interests. At the same time, the middle and lower classes in Britain recognized the inequities in the electoral system and sought greater democratic rights, with the French Revolution serving as an influential precedent. Furthermore, there were similar class contradictions and struggles before the French Revolution and the British Reform Act, which indirectly or directly led to the occurrence of these two events. In France, the third estate represents the majority but has limited political power. Similarly, in England, because of the inequality of political rights and power and the imperfection of economic interests, the class forces, including the proletariat, the petty bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie, pushed for reform. This historical context underscores the role of class dynamics in shaping political change and the pursuit of a more equitable society.

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