Analysis of the British National Characters

—From a Historical Perspective

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Abstract: This essay discusses the intricate formation of the British national character through a historical lens, and put forwards a view that it is combined by two contradictory elements—conservatism and radicalism on the basis of adequate historical facts and personal reflection. By illustrating with historical facts, the essay reveals the lasting traits of British conservatism, which is evident in steadfast attachments to monarchy and deep-seated respect for legal traditions. Despite periods of upheaval, such as the Glorious Revolution, the British have showed a resilience in preserving established norms and structures, which reflect a pragmatic approach to social evolution. On a contrary, the essay also demonstrates radical impulses that have propelled transformative movements for political and social equality in British history, from the Peasants' Revolt to the suffragette campaigns. Through this dialectic, British national character emerges as a dynamic synthesis of tradition and transformation, conservatism and radicalism, where ruling elites navigate change with pragmatic conservatism while social masses champion radical progress.

Keywords: British, national character, western culture, historical research

1. Introduction

When people first think of "the British", many national hallmarks might come into their minds—British humour, afternoon tea, or the world-famous fish and chips? This essay will analyse the influencing factors behind the form of British national characters based on the national identity at the stand point of diachronic historical perspective.

Mr. Peter Mandler has pointed out that nation character is always in flux and always changing through different times, and the remains left after being baptised by the arc of history, are the consistent and essential elements in the national character of British people [1]—conservative and radical, these two seemingly completely features have accompanied them through thousands of years of history, becoming one outstanding part which constitute their national characters.

This essay will be mainly developed based on two minor subjects: the conservative and radical features in the character of British people.

In this essay, the term "British people" mostly refers to the traditional group of habitants in Great Britain before the wave of globalisation and immigration (mainly refers to people in England since there is a large disparity of culture and tradition between the English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish.). As

the barriers among different countries are gradually being eliminated, the group "British people" is self-aggrandising and the definition of "national identity" is now broader than any time in the past.

2. Conservative feature in British national character

When people dive into the British history, it is clear to highlight how the trait "conservative" has manifested itself over time.

2.1. Their deep-rotted attachment to monarchy

A look at British history, there has been a lot of unrests and challenges to royal power. In 13th century, the barons rose up in opposition against Henry III, and Earl Simon de Montfort even took the king prisoner in the battle of Lews; During the reign of Richard II, Peasants' Revolt occurred in 1381, when commoners challenged the authority of the king. War of the Roses, The Pilgrimage of Grace……years of violent power struggle and political upheavals brought endless bloodshed, but never shook the orthodox theory of the existence of the monarchy. Even in Glorious Revolution— which was the closest the British came to abrogating the monarchy. Instead, monarchy has been ingrained in the veins of British people and become the significant part of their national identity.

In 1688, the Glorious Revolution took place in England, when the Protestant King William III of Orange, along with his wife Queen Mary, were coronated as new rulers of the country. With the victory of the revolution, Britain became the first nation in the world to implement a constitutional monarchy, which is epoque-making, and paved the path for the future development of capitalism and first industrial revolution.

Through the revolutionary nature, people can still see the conservative undertones behind it. Unlike many continental European nations experience extremely radical, and even violent upheavals, such as the French Revolution in 1789, the British had chosen a relatively bloodless transition for power—the revolutionary camp did not abrogate the crown but just limit their power. This preference for stability, in another word, pursuit for compromise, underscores the conservative nature of the British approach to political reform [2]. When it comes to the ideological level, people may find that the Glorious Revolution can be seen as a response to the fear of a return to Catholic rule under James II. The will of the predominantly Protestant population was to maintain religious and cultural traditions of Protestantism also mirrors the British inclination to protect the heritage and refusal to succumb to the influence of Roman Church.

2.2. Deep respect for the rule of law and legal traditions

The English legal system, with its root tracing back to the Magna Carta of 1215, which marked the beginning of the restriction to the monarch's power. The deep respect for legal traditions is embedded in the British society, showcasing a conservative approach to governance and justice [3]. The common law system siphons principles and experiences from the precedents, emphasising the very importance of past decisions in shaping current rulings. The reverence for precedent not only ensures stability and consistency in the court but also reflects the adherence of British people to historical wisdom and established norms.

What is more, the prevalence of unwritten laws of Britain, characterized by conventions, statutes and judicial decisions, is also a testament to the British conventional mindset. When people have a glance into the British law, they may find something seemingly hilarious and out of fashion. An example of an "outdated" unwritten law still in effect today is the tradition of "beating the bounds" [4], whereby communities conduct a ritualistic walk along their parish boundaries to reaffirm land rights and settle any disputes. This practice has its origins in medieval England and remains a legally recognised rite in some parishes to this day.

And, instead implementing a radical overhaul, the British legal system has preferred to evolve their law framework incrementally, preserving fundamental principles while allowing for necessary adaptations over time. The slow legislation process of homosexuality is a good example. Actually, homosexuality has never been decriminalised entirely since the mid-20th century, rather, the law introduced a limited exception for private acts between men over 21 years old in private. With the social norms changing over years, the British law slowly adapted its law regarding homosexuality— the age of consent for same-sex relationships was reduced from 21 to 18 in 1994, and it was not until 2014 the government legalised homosexuality, allowing same-sex couples to marry legally and officially [5]. This path took more than 50 years. The incremental approach demonstrated the conservative nature of British law-making, as the laws gradually adjusted to the idea of same-sex relationships having equal legal statues.

In the realm of criminal justice, concepts like trial by jury and the presumption of innocence until proven guilty have been fundamental to British legal traditions. These principles underscore a cautious attitude towards change, ensuring faire trials and protecting individuals' rights. Even facing the years of societal changes, the British legal system has maintained their conservative values, valuing the preservation of individual liberties and due process.

3. Radical features in British national character

"Radical", sounds completely contradictory to the word "conservative", also constitutes an important part of British people's character, which has shaped the nation's identity in various ways. In this part, the author will explore the radical facet of the British people, and traced its historical trajectory through pivotal events.

3.1. In the field of politics

The radical features of British people could be traced back to 14th century, when Wat Tyler rose to prominence as a charismatic leader during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. He engaged King Richard II in direct dialogue unprecedently, demanding an end to serfdom and the establishment of a more equitable social order. The audacious act underscored the radical shift, as a commoner stood before the king as an equal, challenging the ingrained hierarchy.

While the revolt faced suppression and Tyler was ultimately met a tragic end, his legacy endured as a symbol of the commoners' unwavering commitment to radical change. The resonance of his vision extended beyond his time, influencing subsequent generations of social reformers and activists.

More than four centuries late, the Chartist Movement remarked the raise of working-class people, and a giant step in the development of British democracy. The movement emerged in the 1830s and 1840s, advocating for political reform and the extension of suffrage to the working class. At a time when voting rights are limited to the aristocracy and the wealthy elite, Chartists demanded universal suffrage, and hoped for a society where every man had the right to vote regardless of his social status. Lenning called it "the first large-scale working-class movement in the world", which marked outstandingly the pioneer spirit of British people.

Different from the weakness and compromise of the bourgeois movement, the working class had showed incredible persistence and revolutionary spirit. Chartist organised mass petitions, the most famous being the People's Charter of 1838, which expressed their demands for universal male suffrage, equal electoral districts, voting by secret ballot and end to property qualifications for MPs. The movement gathered millions of signatures, which showed the widespread support for their radical cause. In the face of power and repression, the Chartists never cringed and used their brave actions to highlight the unity and determination of the working class to challenge the existing political power [6].

If the Chartist Movements proclaimed a new era in which male citizens took a giant step towards universal voting right, the women's suffrage movement is even more extreme and epoch-making. Women, facing systemic oppression, embarked on a radical campaign for their right to participate in the political process. Activists like Emmeline Pankhurst and Emily Davison employed militant tactics, demonstrating a radical departure from traditional methods of petition (Davison even sacrificed her life to practice her faith). The author would like to call it a "revolution" in British history for their striking courage. Their efforts ultimately paid off—Britain became one of the first countries to grant women universal suffrage in 1928.

The courage and revolutionism marked the radical undercurrents that lay the foundation of British national character.

3.2. Societal Transformation

As what has been illustrated in the first half of the essay, the British jurisdictional system took half a century on the path of legalising homosexual marriage, which reflects the reluctance to change and conservative tendencies. However, when it came to the societal perception towards this sentimental topic, people's attitudes were relatively radical.

Before the legislation of homosexual marriage, the LGBT rights movements had spread the nation, advocating for equal rights and societal acceptance. The formation of organisations like Stonewall in the late 1908s highlighted people's growing determination to challenge the traditional norms and demanded recognition and equality for the LGBT community. On a personal note, the author is totally impressed by the resilience and courage exhibited by the members of this group—the act of coming out, a deeply personal and often challenging journey, has become a powerful catalyst for a societal change. The willingness of individuals to openly embrace and express their authentic identities, despite prejudice and stereotype, has been instrumental in reshaping social attitudes and fostering empathy.

The radical trait of the British character, evident across centuries, has played a pivotal role in shaping the nation's identity. From challenging monarchical authority to advocating for democratic principles, gender equality, LGBT rights, the British people have consistently displayed a radical spirit, driving societal transformation and progress. This unique blend of radicalism and conservatism continues to define the British national character, making it a subject of enduring scholarly interest and global admiration.

4. Conclusion

In the annals of British history, the formation of the national character has been an intricate interplay between conservative features and radical impulses. According to my analysis above, the author came to an elementary conclusion that the ruling elite, including the bourgeois, barons and legislators, often assumes a more conservative or neutral stance when confronted with transformative changes. This conservatism is manifest in the retention of enduring monarchy and the compromise forged during the Glorious Revolution. However, in stark contrast, the broader societal mass often acts with rather radical fervour, demonstrated through movements such as Chartism, the women's suffrage movement, and the LGBT rights movements.

In contemplating these historical facts, the author has a reasonable assumption that the upper class, or the ruling elite often exhibit a conservative instinct, rooted in the preservation of established structures and traditions. This sort of conservatism is pragmatic,seeking to navigate changes while safeguarding the foundations of the nation. On the other hand, the broader society, which encompassed the commers and marginalised groups, acts as the vanguard of radicalism. They fight, bravely challenging the traditional norms for more rights of their own. Whether through the Chartists'

pursuit of democratic ideals or the contemporary movements for equality, the commoners become the torchbearers of societal transformation.

In a summary, the arc of history of British national character is a canvas painted with strokes of conservatism and radicalism. The ruling elites tends to preserve the traditional structures, while the broader societal fabric pulsates with radical impulses, pushing against established norms in a quest for progress. The delicate equilibrium, shaped by the interplay between rulers and the ruled, the dominate and the marginalised, defines the intricate tapestry of the British national character—a dynamic synthesis of tradition and transformation.

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