

A Study of British Political Identity in “A Tale of Two Cities”

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ABSTRACT

Dickens's “A Tale of Two Cities” was written in Britain, where the labor movement was fierce in the 1850s. The novel depicts the violence and inhumanity in Paris during the French Revolution, while London is portrayed as a savior. Through the comparison of killing and redemption, the novel actually constructs a community imagination of British democratic politics. British parliamentary politics has played a key role in alleviating social contradictions. In the turbulent society of British workers fighting for political freedom, the novel portrays the “two cities” literature. The image, while warning against violent revolution, also highly strengthened the British national identity.

Keywords: “A Tale of Two Cities”, democratic politics, British, National Identity

1. THE SHARP SOCIAL CONTRADICTIONS IN ENGLAND IN THE MID-19TH CENTURY

Dickens' “A Tale of Two Cities” depicts the violence and redemption in London and Paris before and after the French Revolution. By exposing the French feudal aristocracy's use of their privileges to trample on the lives of the peasants, the French revolutionaries retaliated wildly, and the latter's murderousness and indiscriminate killing created an atmosphere of hell in Paris. Dickens always unconsciously reflects the superiority of England in his comparative discourse between England and France. As Benedict Anderson says in “Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism”, “imagination” is not a “fabrication” but a cognitive process indispensable to the formation of any group identity. Therefore, the name “imagined community” refers not to the product of any “false consciousness”, but to a social psychological “social fact” [1]. To some extent, “A Tale of Two Cities” created a social psychology of British people's panic and revulsion against the French Revolution; it strengthened their social identity and pride in the British democratic system. This paper focuses on the British national identity embodied in “A Tale of Two Cities” in terms of the development of British capitalism, the proclamation of humanitarianism, and the long-established tradition of political democracy in Britain.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the domestic and international crises faced by Britain became increasingly serious. Since the 18th century, while strengthening its

military power, Britain has used diplomatic means to fight against the powerful France, seek a balance of power in Europe, and create conditions for domestic economic development and overseas trade. This has enabled Britain to continuously improve its position in Europe from a second-rate country to a first-rate country. The British generally sympathized with the French Revolution and believed that the revolution was progressive. Therefore, the British maintained a neutral attitude. The continued development of the Revolution caused Britain to change its attitude. First, under the stimulus of the French Revolution, British radicalism continued to develop and threatened the ruling class. On the other hand, the French revolutionary government defeated Austria, Napoleon continued to launch wars of aggression, and the expansion of France broke the balance of power in Europe, and Britain turned from non-interference to opposition. The British Prime Minister William Pitt, the Younger was very disgusted with the French Revolution. He pointed out in a document: “At all times, you must carefully declare that the British government is convinced that the hereditary monarchy should be recognized and Louis XVII should be the legal ruler.” [2]. When the French Revolution became a “model” and was “copied”, its threat became apparent. The exaggerated description of violent revolutionaries in “A Tale of Two Cities” undoubtedly aggravated the panic among the British.

The London Workers' Association was established in 1836, demanding that “all strata of society obtain equal political and social rights.” Through the most just method of public opinion, the living conditions of workers do not have to be improved through violence or riots [3]. Due to the high entrance fee, the working class is very small. The

“People’s Charter” drafted by the London Workers’ Association and the radicals of the bourgeoisie is to ensure equal voting rights. It requires that members’ elections be disqualified, and each electoral district is equal [3]. Between 1842-1848, The Charter Movement erupted in three successive climaxes. Although all were suppressed in the end, social instability still existed. This is exactly what Dickens wrote, “That era is so similar to this era.”

With a long-term perspective, the working environment of the workers in the nineteenth century was an inevitable price on the difficult road to complete enlightenment. The reform trend of Western European governments, whether expressed in the form of legislation (UK) or revolution (France), can be arranged in this way, and it seems inevitable that the individual freedom of all citizens will be increased [4]. The high crime rate exposed by the development of British capitalism and the later more serious labor movement, as well as the arrogant and conceited attitude of the authorities, have led to the social and psychological identification of the British fear. “A Tale of Two Cities” has touched The British mentality. Dickens believed that such barbarism should not happen in Britain, which has a democratic tradition and advanced civilization.

2. “A TALE OF TWO CITIES” EMBODIES BRITISH DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

In the 19th century, personal freedom, political freedom, and legal freedom have become the characteristics of Britain, and these characteristics are precisely the source of British power and status that people consider [5]. The realization of these freedoms was also established through legislation after repeated contests between British activists and the government.

The outbreak of the French Revolution made most British people happy. One is the decline of its rival France, and the other is that France may establish a British model of a constitutional monarchy. The French Revolution objectively strengthened the British’s identification with democratic politics. In fact, the real influence on British politics was actually produced by activism. The emergence of activists was mainly due to the development of the British economy and population growth in the late 18th century. Large numbers of people gathered in the center of big cities and a large number of commercial development appeared. The middle-class people with certain economic strength often suffer from their own economic interests. They are increasingly dissatisfied with the policies formulated by the traditional land elites. When social conflicts are intensified due to improper government policies, artisans and workers in the city actively invest into the political reform movement [6]. In the 1860s and 1970s, domestic economic reforms and external wars, as well as the resulting social turmoil, led to the intensification of class contradictions. People blamed these on the negligence of the ruling class.

Since the “Glorious Revolution” of 1677, after a century of political, social and economic progress in Britain, public opinion is being formed. The rule of law restricts the authority of the ruling elite, while civil liberties ensure that many Britons firmly believe that they are free people living in a free country, and use this as a criterion for their actions to continuously pursue their political rights [6]. When the news of the French Revolution reached Britain, it brought hope to the middle and lower classes who were dissatisfied with the status quo. In 1792, the “London News Agency” was established. Its members included higher-class people, shopkeepers, craftsmen and other middle-and lower-class people. They wrote to the French National Assembly stating that the British people would also take the road of the French Revolution and fight for freedom. [3]³⁶¹ After activism continued to develop into a unified national organization. They established the National Assembly and demanded the realization of universal suffrage. French revolutionaries chanted the slogan “freedom, equality, fraternity, or give me death” [7]. Influenced by the enlightenment, activists believed that they were gifted with human rights, and they also chanted the slogan “freedom, give me death” [3]. activists demand the right to vote and change the situation of poverty.

With the deepening of the French Revolution, the radical democratic movement in Britain became more and more widespread, causing panic among the British ruling class. Conservatives fear that Britain will repeat the mistakes of France, have a violent revolution, and wage a fierce struggle with the radicals [3]. In the late period of the French Revolution, the growth of British conservatism as the opposite of activism hindered the activities of activists to a certain extent. The reason for this situation was that after the French Thermides came to power, they acted backwards, and Napoleon launched a foreign policy war of aggression [3]. That made people fail to see the advantages of the republic, and instead fell into authoritarian rule and war. The aristocracy was deprived of their rights and wealth. More and more British people felt uneasy. They were afraid of this kind of “destroying social order and private property.” Flames will also spread to England, and the violent acts of the French Revolution are described in “A Tale of Two Cities” shockingly. Therefore, the attitude towards the French Revolution changed from sympathy to fear and hatred, supporting the current constitution and monarchy [3]. At this moment, British public opinion has turned to conservatism. Some British people believe that freedom and prosperity in British political life are the product of the current British parliamentary monarchy and legal system. The activists’ contact with the French revolutionaries at this time was considered to be an act of breaking the constitution and causing anarchy. In this way, people’s aversion to radicalism has been strengthened, and people’s spontaneous identification with traditional British politics has been strengthened.

The representative of the British conservative Edmund Burke expressed his disgust with the French

Revolution, criticizing the French Revolution for failing to protect private property and depriving citizens of their rights for no reason. He sympathized with the French nobles and senior priests who were demoted for no reason [8]. He also criticized the French politics for not being democratic enough. The National Assembly cannot truly reflect public opinion, and the British government is responsible to the Parliament and the people. From Britain's joy to the criticism of the French Revolution, Burke increased his recognition of his country's political system while criticizing France.

Passing legislation to protect the rights of the people is also one of the ways in the UK to alleviate the social crisis. As early as the early 1830s, the British government promulgated a new poverty relief law in response to the unemployment of many small handicraftsmen caused by the production of large machines in the Industrial Revolution. However, it did not improve the living conditions of the workers, and objectively provided labor to the industrial bourgeoisie. The movement against the new poverty relief law appeared in the areas where the factory reform was most powerful. These workers later turned to the charter movement. By the mid-nineteenth century, a new atmosphere of reform was formed, and Britain completed the Industrial Revolution and entered the heyday of Victoria. However, its own problems were gradually exposed. The rebellious mood of the working class reflected by the Charter Movement, the aversion of the middle-class radicals towards the state power in the hands of the nobles, and a series of problems brought about by industrialization were all clearly revealed. [9] 119 workers demand universal suffrage, and a social reform movement for the working class to fight for political and life rights arises. The three climaxes of the Charter Movement brought the British social conflict to the climax. However, the separation from the working class made this movement a failure. In the end, no violent revolution broke out, but instead promoted British democracy. The parliamentary reform in the mid-nineteenth century realized the transition from an oligarchy political system to a popular democratic system [9]. They awakened the consciousness of the working class to pursue political rights, and at the same time made the government make concessions, realizing a compromise between the government and potential revolutionaries.

The left-wing Whig Party sympathizes with the French Revolution and believes that only by concessions to the middle class and suppressing radicals with violent revolutionary tendencies can the government prevent radical incidents similar to those in France. Advocating (moderate) reforms (reforms of the electoral system) in Britain is to avoid the French Revolution [3]. The bourgeois revolution that broke out in Britain abolished the monarchy, but it only touched minor laws very superficially, with almost no change in customs and practices. Judicature and administration retain their original form, but the top level is shaking, but the foundation remains unchanged [10]. The middle class can

realize some of their rights through resistance, and there is no need for revolution.

In addition, the parliament passed some important legislation. The "Reform Act of 1832" adjusted the number of seats in the British House of Commons and increased the number of seats in newly-emerging industrial cities; the abolition of the Corn Act in 1846 hit British land. The power of the nobility promoted the advent of free trade in Britain. This has weakened the power of activism to some extent. Although the British economy has experienced several depressions during this period, the overall economy is growing steadily, and the living standards of the poor are slowly rising rather than falling [11]. The violent turn of the French Revolution weakened the edge of radicalism, and the British government's suppression of the labor movement together prevented the occurrence of violent revolution in Britain.

Therefore, Britain's avoidance of a violent revolution was the result of a combination of various forces. On the one hand, due to the violent turn of the French Revolution, the radicals who previously advocated to imitate the French Revolution died down. On the other hand, it benefited from the legal organization of the labor movement to pursue its own rights, the government's repressive measures, and the British's attitude towards democratic political traditions. Recognition and self-confidence finally established the legal demands of the British through legislation.

3. CONCLUSION

The writing background of "A Tale of Two Cities" is that the development of British industrial society has produced profound social contradictions. The shaping of the human beauty of ideal characters reflects the lack of humanity in British society. In addition, in comparison with the French Revolution, especially the dialogue between Charles Darnet and his uncle Marquis about the "new philosophy", and the portrayal of the image of the bank clerk Mr. Lowry, it reflects the advantages of British capitalism; In order to perfect his lover, Sidney Caton exchanged his life for his love rival. This spirit of sacrifice represents the faith of Christianity and embodies altruism.

Taking important historical events as texts to participate in the construction of writers, the influence of such literary works can often not be ignored. Harry T. Dickinson mentioned: Dickens was heavily influenced by Thomas Carlyle's French Revolution. This novel may have had the greatest influence in shaping the British people's views on events in France during the horror period. Dickens believed that there was a potential for a revolution in London, and wanted to alert the British by describing the brutality of the French Revolution. He did not want most readers to notice the violence in Paris rather than the subtle hints of the author. [11]18 An important reason for the popularity of Dickens' novels in the UK lies in his writing technique. He is good at

describing the lives and scenes of low-level characters. This is also related to his life experience at the bottom when he was a child, especially the description of prisons. The scene can arouse the resonance of the citizen group.

The French Revolution almost forced every intellectual at that time to stand in front of it and express his attitude [8]. The chief representative of the conservatives who opposed the French Revolution in Western thought, Burke, believed that social traditions should be respected by people, and the French Revolution destroyed traditions. Burke believes that tradition is constantly evolving. At any time, a society will have various interests that contradict, entangle, and check and balance each other; therefore, a good policy must be able to take care of the entire society and everyone in it to the utmost extent [5]. Burke's words show that the British are very proud of its system. They often express the expectation that British constitutional principles and political practices can be imitated by other countries, but they often doubt whether the people of other countries possess the necessary national or personal qualities [11]. It shows that the British have a strong sense of identity and superiority towards their political system.

Since the British Industrial Revolution, the resulting labor movement has not aimed at overthrowing the bourgeoisie, but has placed hopes on the bourgeoisie, forming alliances to strengthen its own strength, negotiating with the bourgeoisie, and fighting for its own rights. Their purpose is to a large extent. It is different in France. The working class and petty bourgeoisie have no hope of reaching agreement with the aristocracy and big bourgeoisie and cannot be resolved peacefully. The working class can only overthrow the rule of the bourgeoisie and establish its own government to realize its own rights and interests. The British "Glorious Revolution" from 1688 to 1689 has always been the pride of the British. They have obtained more civil and political rights through peace movements, and the UK is gradually establishing a more democratic politics system. The British embodied a certain degree of autonomy in constructing their own national identity and developed a sense of superiority. The British social conflict and parliamentary system in the 18th century was precisely the constant compromise between the parliament and the people, which prevented the working class from launching a violent revolution. They were resolved through peaceful means, thus avoiding the bloody conflict in France. The political legislation of the United Kingdom or the violent revolution in France together reflects that the increase in people's personal freedom is an inevitable trajectory. Obviously, the role of the British Parliament in handling national affairs has gradually constructed the British national identity.

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