

Print media: The catalyst in New York's revolution

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Around the year 1770, New York witnessed its emergence as a central zone for various revolts that focused on attaining independence from the British. The citizens in New York City played an active role in the conduction of revolts and explored various avenues to generate awareness among the masses. The sections of society that participated rigorously in the independence movement included the working class citizens referred to as “Freeholders” and former slaves known as “Freedmen.” The period of this revolution witnessed significant events like Boston Tea Party and various other protests on account of acts passed by the autocratic British Government like Townshend Act, Stamp Act and Sugar Act. The participants in the revolution needed to innovate in their efforts to ably communicate their emotions to fellow citizens. Articles in newspapers, advertisements and public notices assisted majorly in New York to organize congregation of people, bring notice to existing problems, and comment on the functioning of the government. The working class revolution through print media cannot be a forgone conclusion because the opposing forces also utilized the same media to give a counter attack. Print media of New York stood as a revolutionary battleground for political conversation that enabled ordinary working class to join forces with the brothers of Boston to tussle against British tyranny and also debate class conflict.

Labor historian Alfred Young’s description of a Boston shoemaker is beneficial to understand the revolutionary scenario existent in Boston. The work done by Alfred Young reveals the natural transition underwent by an artisan named George Robert Twelves Hewes in becoming a part of the revolution.¹ Alfred Young’s research reveals that citizens of Boston

¹ Alfred F. Young, “George Robert Twelves Hewes (1742-1840): A Boston Shoemaker and the Memory of the American Revolution,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (1981): 562–623, doi:10.2307/1918907.

had a natural progression towards independence struggle while New York had quite a contrasting scenario. Research on New York's revolution explains that the citizens in the city took longer time to assemble the forces together and participate in a wide spread agitation. The work done by Alfred Young is hence a useful document to understand the conditions present in the sister colonies and comprehend their impact in awakening New York. Bernard Mason focused on explaining the other side of independence struggle, which involved the tussle to form a new Government. "The Road to Independence" is beneficial in understanding the complicated power struggle present in revolutionary New York and the organization of independence movement.² Mason's research is hence an appropriate source in analyzing the crucial happenings between the years 1773 and 1777 and understand the power equations of the time.

The New-York Gazette published an article on September 12, 1768 describing the resolves entered by the tradesmen of the city as a ploy to inspire New Yorkers from explaining Boston's efforts to fight against Townshend Act.³ The resolves published in the newspaper demonstrate an agreement of the tradesmen to restrict the importation for British goods and also pledge their solidarity to the measures implemented by the people of Boston. The measures cited by the artisans include a prohibition in purchase of European goods, stoppage in transactions with merchants that refuse to sign this agreement, discourage the sale of European products and refuse to offer patronage to people that do not side with the tradesmen on this issue.⁴ These resolves reinforce the inherent unity among working population of New York and their desire to side with people from other cities that also fight on common issues.

² Bernard Mason, *The Road to Independence: The Revolutionary Movement in New York, 1773-1777* (University of Kentucky Press, 1966).

³ "The Following Resolves Are Agreed to by the Tradesmen of This City," *New-York Gazette, and Weekly Mercury*, September 12, 1768.

⁴ *Ibid.*

The supporters of British Government's policies prepared a counter strategy through newspapers to bring their point of view into print and persuade people to act otherwise. A citizen with the pen name "Poplicoa" wrote a letter to the Rivington's New-York Gazetteer saying "The British Company is at this time in extreme distress. Its fall would be fatal to our trading interest."⁵ This citizen tried to emphasize that the East India Company possessed crucial importance in protecting the commercial interests of America and that people who are fighting for liberty did so only for their private interest.⁶ This person accused the working class people of misusing the public unrest for catering to their private interests. The focus on British Company's distress prompts us to understand the intention of painting a sympathetic picture of the British trade habits. An effort to spring a sense of concern is made by suggesting that the ongoing working class struggle can pose a threat to people who do not participate as well and cause potential overall damage to the nation. The writer cited the examples of few merchants in New York that indulged in sale of smuggled Dutch tea and thereby charged the citizens much higher prices than the British themselves.

The newspapers in 1770s served as a dais for supporters of independence struggle to clear the air on possible concerns that the society may have regarding the boycott. The Rivington's New York Gazetteer published a query and answer article on account of the Tea Act being voted independently by the British without any consent of the American demographic.⁷ The journalist addressed the possible queries by stressing on a need for strong action against colonists that indulge in helping the importation of tea by saying "Traitors to this country, without exception, should immediately and resolutely be transported."⁸ The

⁵ Poplicoa, "To the Worthy Inhabitants of the City of New York.," Rivington's New York Gazetteer, 1773.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ An Old Prophet. "Queries. Respecting the Tea Act submitted to the most serious consideration of every person in America." Rivington's New York Gazetteer, 1773.

⁸ Ibid

commitment required from citizens in participation of boycott can be understood by such words as it goes on to claim that people acting otherwise are “traitors.” The colonists needed to stay resistant in such issues and not succumb to the British as freedom cannot be attained without undergoing a struggle. Overall, the article tried to clear the air on Tea Act and takes a stern stance of boycotting the good itself as a response.

The “Poplicola” article and “Queries” published by Rivington’s New-York Gazetteer provide an evidence of contrasting arguments in relation to boycott movement. The glaring opposition of ideologies is witnessed by the support and protest against boycott movement expressed by the two articles. The “Poplicola” article defended British Government and tried to provoke sympathy regarding the plight of issues that needed action from the Government. The “Queries” on the other hand took a hard-hitting stance against importation of tea by expressing the need for people to stay resistant to purchase of tea and urges them to stay stern in their approach. The existence of these two articles in print on the same newspaper reveal the existence of diversity of opinion in New York and also explain the access to expression for the citizens despite sharing ideas from extreme sides of a spectrum.

Citizens used the newspapers to evaluate the choices made in the past and also reflect on possible amendments needed in order to protect the society’s interests. The NYPL published an article where an ordinary citizen with the pen name “The Remembrancer” analyzed the voting behavior of people with regard to election of magistrates.⁹ This citizen spoke about the need to have officials with “better judgment” and “public honesty” at the helm of affairs unlike the previous choices made by the citizens.¹⁰ The Magistrates have

⁹ Another freeman., *To the Freeholders, and Freemen, of the City of New-York. Fellow Citizens. A Survey of the Difficulties Which Press the Enemies of the Common Cause, Must Afford the Highest Pleasure to Its Friends.* ..., 14495 (Holt, John, 1721-1784, printer., 1775), http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=0F2FD4D130EAEF18&svc_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req_dat=0DD8562148E6D180.

¹⁰ Ibid.

colluded with the Crown in order to satisfy their vested interests and showcased ignorance to the needs of the society that elected them. The writer insists people to get wiser in their choices of Magistrates in future because their municipal privileges are at stake. Therefore, the media provided political awareness regarding the working of public officials and the readers received wisdom to amend their voting pattern for following elections.

People utilized print media to appeal to their fellow citizens regarding the importance of dissent and create a sense of urgency with regard to gaining independence. An individual with an alias “The Sentinel” addressed the society of New York about the possible rise of anarchy within the system and talked about the qualities required for responsible representatives.¹¹ The writer suggested “Those who are employed, ought to be endowed with the most extraordinary gifts of nature.”¹² The gifts referred to by the writer in this regard are an incorruptible virtue and knowledge of mankind’s history. The writer made it clear that virtuous men will be well versed with an understanding of both government and also the revolution. The election of “political quacks” can result in haphazard confusion and their ignorance can ultimately cause danger to the entire nation.¹³ This appeal persuaded New Yorkers to make wise electoral decisions and also understand the need for virtuous people as representatives in the Provincial Convention.

An anonymous citizen from the working class with an allonym “Brutus” harnessed the availability of print media to express his dissent against the unilateral decisions being taken by the merchants of New York. Considered as a member of an organization named

¹¹ Sentinel., “To the Inhabitants of the City and County of New-York. My Dear Countrymen, A Steady Friend to Your Rights, I Have Ever Been, and Shall Be Always Ready to Warn You of Danger, from Every Quarter.” no. 15108 (1776), http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=0F2F82D32E990420&svc_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req_dat=0DD8562148E6D180.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

“Sons of Liberty”, the writer argued for an awakening among the people that desire to attain liberty by opposing the illegitimate domination exercised by the high level merchants of New York.¹⁴ The upper level merchants planned on agreeing to the terms of importation for goods like tea, glass, paper etc., and resume trade with the British irrespective of emotions prevailing in the working class of New York. “Brutus” argued that people must forgo the luxuries for a greater good by saying “What are all the riches, the luxuries compare with that liberty?”¹⁵ The liberty struggle gets undermined if people yield to the pressures of higher level domination and Brutus explained the possible loss at stake if the city cease to boycott imported products. The article warned the working class citizens of committing a blunder and letting the earnest emotions of majority people down by breaking the Non-Importation Agreement. Print media educated the citizens about the possibility of a separation within the society where the interests of the lower and middle level workers are ignored.

Writing letters stood as a communication strategy to unify voices among the colonies and the citizens of New York made significant use of it. A sister colony, Boston faced immense suppression after the Tea Party and people of New York were quick enough to correspond with Boston in the formation of a stronger bond. They established a large committee consisting of 51 people to correspond with other colonies on every possible issue of importance.¹⁶ In the letter, the New York committee affirmed “The cause is general and

¹⁴ Brutus., “To the Free and Loyal Inhabitants of the City and Colony of New-York. Friends, Fellow Citizens, Fellow Countrymen, and Fellow Freemen, Nothing Can Be More Flagrantly Wrong than the Assertion of Some of Our Mercantile Dons, That the Mechanics Have No Right to Give Their Sentiments about the Importation of British Commodities.” no. 13180 (1774), http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:EAIX&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=10415E9A163FA208&svc_dat=Evans:eaidoc&req_dat=0DD8562148E6D180.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Remembrancer., *To the Public. By the Following Letters, These Facts Appear Unquestionable ... and Therefore, There Is No Reason to Doubt but the Present Assembly Will (after the Laudable Example of a Former House, on a Similar Occasion) Approve the Acts of the Late General Congress ...*, 42948, 1775, http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-

concerns the whole continent.”¹⁷ The purpose of securing liberty is a common aim for the entire continent of America and the suppression of one colony will affect the entire alliance of colonies. This letter not only condemned the tyranny against Boston but also provided a pathway for greater collaboration with in colonies through the proposal for a Congress of deputies. The letter addressed the need for a Congress as an “emergency” to emphasize the necessity of better communication and correspondence between colonies.¹⁸

Print media also formed the platform to express agreements or disagreements to the ongoing political happenings of New York and present a united voice to the public. An association of freedmen, freeholders and inhabitants of New York issued a notice condemning the British Government’s policies to extract revenue out of America. The association made their intentions clear by stating “Never to become slaves and endeavor whatever measures maybe recommended by the Continental Congress.”¹⁹ The association agreed to adhere by the instructions laid out by the Continental Congress and also the Provincial Convention in order to protect themselves from becoming slaves to the British Government. The preservation of peace, good order, safety of citizens and private property laid the guiding objectives to move a strong opposition forward against the “arbitrary” and “oppressive” laws enacted by the British.²⁰

Print media of New York stood as a revolutionary battleground for political conversation that enabled ordinary working class to join forces with the brothers of Boston to

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¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “New-York, April 29, 1775, A General Association, Agreed To, and Subscribed by the Freeholders, Freemen, and Inhabitants of the City and County of New-York.,” no. 14339 (1775), http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-

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²⁰ Ibid.

tussle against British tyranny and also debate class conflict. The citizens of the city made their voice heard by an increased participation in discussion through print media. The working class citizens experienced a delay in responding to the autocracy of the British but they seized the opportunity to make a valuable contribution to the freedom struggle. The print media stood as a catalyst in harnessing the emotions of the citizens and later played a pivotal role in the organization of an elaborate freedom movement. The possibility of expressing diverse opinions through print media provided the scope for a public debate in New York regarding the past, present and future of the city's prospects.

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