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Understanding the causes of American war of independence from the perspective of IC communication

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Abstract

In the 18th century, the American War of Independence was a mere accident, but it had happened, dealt a telling blow to the pride of the British Empire and destroyed its revenue mine. Understanding its causes from the perspective of IC communication, this article argues that failed communication played a major role. This article starts with the exploration of the unwise policies imposed on the American colonies due to lacking a set of effective communication strategies and channels, on which basis it analyzes how mechanical, semantic and psychological barriers blocked the communication between the British Empire and its 13 colonies. The past-oriented VS future-oriented time concepts deeply rooted in the mindsets of the mother country and its colonies are also examined.

Keywords: American war of independence, IC communication, time concepts

Introduction

In 1760s, the British Empire was something to be marveled at. The GNP was worth some £48,000,000 annually and £15,000,000 was being exported. Before the American Revolution broke out, the prospects of the British Empire at the close of the French and Indian War looked bright indeed. Everywhere the British armies and fleets had been successful—in Europe, Africa, the West Indies, North America, and India. And most American's colonies had never plotted and planned for independence. In fact, right after the Seven Years' War, most American colonists were "pleased to be subjects of British empire, and were proud to regard themselves as freeborn Britons enjoying great liberty and prosperity than most people on earth." (Dickinson, 2010, p91) ^[4] Until the revolution, most colonists considered themselves British and kept British tradition, including using British made goods and enjoying tea time. Most colonists wanted only the right to manage their affairs within the Empire. "In reality Great Britain never made any serious attempt to conquer the colonists until the summer of 1778, and up to that time had been constantly in hope of being able to effect a reconciliation. (Barnes, 1918, p692) ^[1] Even a month after the war broke out, in June 1775, Continental Congress voted to make a careful list of supplies captured from the English at Fort Ticonderoga so that they could be properly returned when restoration of the former harmony made it possible. (Hugh, 1990) ^[2] The Olive Branch Petition was adopted by Continental Congress on July 5th, 1775 to be sent to the King as a last attempt to prevent formal war from being declared. The Petition emphasized their loyalty to the British crown and emphasized their rights as British citizens.

In that vein, how did the most powerful empire then lose its most cherished colonial possessions? Thinking it through from the perspective of IC communication, this article finds that imperfect communication plays an important role.

Failed Communication Led to Unwise Policies

The British Parliament, George III and the colonists had not agreed upon the power of the mother country over its North American subjects, but the long-standing differences had never been argued out. Instead, there had been a system of accommodation : the British authorities had frequently overlooked colonial violations of parliamentary regulations, and

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the colonists had preferred to go on quietly breaking these laws when they could rather than openly challenge Parliament's right to pass them. In fact, not only almost a century's Restrictive laws existed on British statute books had not been consistently enforced, but also been ignored and defied by the colonists. (Barnes, 1918) ^[1] Trade restrictions were very laxly enforced by the British authorities and smuggling was common. Obviously, the latent disaffection was never talked about and it seemed that the two sides were trying their best to avoid communicating with each other. Then after 1763, when the debt-ridden mother country resolved to enforce these long-ignored laws, the dormant differences suddenly moved into the center of the political arena, which inevitably led to a series of conflicts and accumulated resentment. When the crisis was driving to the bursting point, they had to resort to force because of not forming the habit of communicating and there never existed effective communicative channels.

Because of miscommunication, British authorities failed to grasp the essential truth : the American colonists were in the habit of managing their home affairs and leaving commercial and diplomatic matters to the Crown. According to Barnes, "the significant fact about the colonial administrative system is that for a century the colonists were becoming familiar with and attached to a system of representative local political institutions which enabled them to curb and often to control the representatives of British authority." (1918, p683) This passion to manage their own businesses was formed over 150 years of struggling with harsh natural environment to survive and to develop. The hardship shaped their self-reliant characters and also fostered a kind of individualism which obviously alien to the sophisticated, self-glorified heirs of Bacon.

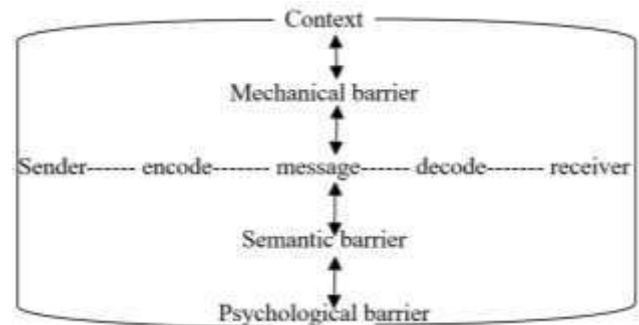
The British side "did not appreciate the extent to which the thirteen colonies had developed a highly independent attitude" to their mother country's authorities. The British governors in the Colonies tended to downplay the potential for revolution, and dispatches from the colonies to Britain often took weeks to arrive — and were disregarded when they did. (Bunker, 2015) ^[3] British ministers also underestimated the capacity and resourcefulness of the colonists. (Langford, 2008, p461) ^[13] Thus, the failure of all these acts—Sugar Act (1764), Stamp Act (1765), Declaratory Act (1766), Townshend Revenue Act (1767), and Tea Act (1773) was doomed.

Not knowing the colonies at first hand and lacking effective channels of communication, the British solicited views and information from royal officials in the colonies and others with special interests to protect or advance. For example, before signing the notorious Tea Act, Lord North, the prime minister during the time, also the central figure viewed as the "debacle" of the British loss of the Colonies had not consulted any of the Americans. Ironically, in the 18th century, all the colonies maintained agents in London to present the colonial point of view before the members of the Board of Trade.

Communication Was Blocked by Three Kinds of Barriers

There are four barriers to intercultural communication, namely, ethnocentrism, stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. (Hybels & Weaver, 2009) ^[6], but for American War of Independence, which many scholars of history believed was "a mere incident", (Van Loon, 1942)

the four barriers do not reflect the communication reality between the British mother country and its 13 colonies in the 18th century. And IC communication shares similarities with interpersonal communication. Thus, this article explores the cause of the revolution by combining the two perspectives and finds that underneath the surface of failed communication lurked three kinds of barriers which blocked the effective communication.



Mechanical Barrier

Mechanical barriers are the physical factors that might block communication. The British Empire and its colonies were 3,000 miles apart from each other. The vast Atlantic Ocean was the greatest geographical barrier in the era when telephone was still a luxurious dream. The length of time it took for information to travel from the colonies to England and back played a role. In the 18th century, it could take three months to get information across the Atlantic — and another three months to respond to that news — while the colonists could transmit information from Boston to Virginia in a matter of just a few weeks. Thus, some of the mother country's concessions to the colonies in the wake of their expressed disapproval of taxation, like when the mother country repealed the Townshend Revenue Act, were on the way in the midst of colonial protests and increasing animosity toward the British Empire being stirred up by the rapid spread of information across the 13 colonies. When the seeds of revolution began fermenting and sprouting, it took the mother country 6 months to respond. Had the real-time communication means were made available in the 1770s, the trajectory of the relationship between the colonies and their mother country may have followed a totally different path.

Semantic Barrier

Semantic barriers exist in the formulations and interpretations of the message. Communication is blocked when the sender and the receiver cannot attach meanings to words used because conventions of the code are broken or because the two sides do not know the code and its conventions in the first place.

In this vein, semantic barriers highlighted the degree to which the British and American outlooks had drifted apart or being misinterpreted. They were using the same words but giving them different meanings. Words like "God," "liberty," "patriotism," and "law" had acquired different meanings on each side of the ocean, so that, as they slid toward war, often each nation simply misunderstood what the other was saying (Bunker, 2015) ^[3]. Especially contentious were politically loaded words like "representation", "Constitution" and "independence".

The slogans the colonists used to fight against those

coercive acts was “taxation without representation”. To this argument, the British replied that even at home not all Englishmen were actually represented in Parliament by their own representatives. As an example, they cited the people of Manchester and Birmingham who sent no members to the House of Commons at that time. Yet these Englishmen, the British firmly believed, and the colonists as well, were “virtually” represented by members chosen by their fellow-Englishmen. However, this argument left the colonists unimpressed, for they did not see how their interests were or could be represented by men sitting in the Parliament 3,000 miles away, who never knew them at first hand. To them, so called “virtual representation” was no representation.

To the British, the Constitution meant the totality of laws, customs, and institutions that had developed over time and under which the nation functioned. In the colonists’ point of view, the word meant a written document or contract spelling out, and thus limited the powers of government. This was partly because at the very beginning their government was based on specific charters ; partly because of the deep influence of John Locke and his *Two Treatises of Government* ; also most of the 13 colonies were established by royal charters ; and lot of people in American colonies came to the “New World” as indentured servants. Given these ideas and the long tradition out of which they had been nurtured, the importance of dialogue and debate should have not been ignored.

The expansive definition of independence and its long existence was very American. Even though as late as May 1774, the Pennsylvania Committee of Correspondence would say, as the vast majority of colonists would have, that “the idea of an unconstitutional independence on the parent state is utterly abhorrent to our principles,” the spirit of being independent of the Crown as a patriarchal force was a central tension between the British Empire and its American colonists for 150 years and defined the conflict that led to the War for Independence. For most Englishmen, “colonists which declined to accept the full extent of the parliamentary supremacy were not merely worthless, they were positively dangerous.”(Morgan, 2001, p462) ^[10] The colonists claimed their independence based on political principles imbedded in spiritual beliefs and experiences to survive and thrive in the “New World”, which led them to be less respectful of hierarchy than their monarch demanded, so when British officials accused Americans of being independent, they used the term pejoratively, meaning chronically rebellious and insufficiently attentive to the greater good of the Empire. According to attorney Charles Bowler of Newport, Rhode Island, who wrote in 1758, “Many of these people think themselves Independent, that the King and Parliament of Great-Britain, have no more Right to make Laws for us, than the Mohawks.” And yet, they considered themselves loyal subjects of the British Crown. Colonists continued to strive for independence within the Empire, while British administrators continued to believe that the colonists were aiming at independence from the empire. New York’s Governor Thomas Tryon believed as late as August 1773 that it would be a “great injustice to America were I to hold up an idea that the bulk of inhabitants wishes an independency” from the British Empire. The tipping point came in 1774 and 1775, when a critical mass of colonists started to believe that they were losing their independence, while the imperial ministries were fighting to keep the colonies from becoming independent, from separating from

the empire. It is safe to say the semantic confusion about independence had never been clearly discussed.

Psychological Barrier

Psychological barriers exist in people’s emotional processes, which shows communication may be filtered or blocked by attitudes, beliefs and values. They are the most common causes of difficulties in IC communication. And among them the kind of biased attitude or prejudices played unique role in that specific historical juncture. Most British held a strong prejudice that the colonists were inferior to them. The colonists were merely an expedient. According to Bunker, from the British point of view, the American colonies existed to serve one purpose alone, which was crudely economic (2015). The colonies existed for the sake of the mother country which had founded, nourished and protected them. The colonists’ interests could never be allowed to take precedence over mother country’s ones. Parliament didn’t even discuss the problems of the 13 colonies in 1772. The theoretical foundation of the British law which governed the trade of the American colonies was based on the unquestionably biased assumption that “colonies were commercial and financial ventures planned and executed for the benefit of the mother country and her citizens.” Thus, it was impossible for the British authorities, the Tory, to understand the position and argument of the colonists “replete with sentiments and general liberty” (Barnes, 1918, p683, p687) ^[11]. These, out of question, was the biggest psychological barrier.

The Past-Oriented Vs. Future-Oriented Time-Concepts

In Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s (1961) ^[8] seminal work *Variations in Value Orientations*, the key values of different societies that impact the behaviors of their people were identified. Among the proposed concepts were how cultures value the past, present and the future (Maznevski *et al.*, 2002) ^[9]. Cultures with a past orientation tend to place more focus and value on tradition, elder members of society, and positive aspects of their history, communities, or organizations (Ji *et al.*, 2009; Spadone, 1992) ^[7, 11]. Whereas, individuals from future-oriented societies focus on the long-term consequences of their actions, and tend to focus more on tasks such as saving for the future and delaying gratification (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961) ^[8]. Past-oriented British placed emphasis on tradition and were reluctant to change. They would rather indulge in their magnificent past for as long as possible. While the future-oriented Americans were constantly planning for the future, they were never afraid of embracing changes, risks and unknown challenges ahead.

Based on different time-concepts, the British authority and the American colonists easily plunged into clashes of ideas and their future of their relationship. For instance, when Lord North enacted Tea Act in 1773, he was intended to save the financially troubled East Indian Company which represented and was connected with British Empire’s glory. This just indicated that Lord North put traditional order in the first place. Also, when the British parliament repealed duties on various products, saving the duty on tea, imposed by Townshend Act of 1767, the Parliament wanted to demonstrate its presumed right to raise such colonial revenue without colonial approval, which was an emphasis on tradition. Whereas, the American colonists did not stand on the same basis with him, and they dumped 342 chests of

tea belonging to the British East India Company to protest both a tax on tea and the perceived monopoly of the East India Company. From the American colonists' perspective, if the British parliament could bestow a tea monopoly on the East Indian Company, what was to stop it from granting similar monopolies on other commodities? They resisted the attraction of short-term interests of compliance out of worrying about their long-term interests. In the same vein, when the Americans protested against the Stamp Act, they argued that if our trade could be taxed, why not our land? Why not the produce of our lands and everything we possess or made use of (Hofstadter, 1984) ^[5]? So, the colonists were in revolt for they thought if they accepted this unfair act, they had to accept more rigid ones in the future.

Likewise, the proposal put forward by American colonists to settle the disputes with the mother country was also based on the future-oriented time concept. The Americans were trying to work out a political system similar to federalism, with certain powers centered in London and others in colonies. Some even pointed out the colonies should be completely independent of British Parliament and united to British Empire only by their loyalty to the Crown. Such a solution, almost constituted granting dominion status to the 13 colonies, was unthinkable in the mother country at that time. For the British authorities, parliamentary supremacy was one of the 18th century's most cherished doctrines (Morgan, 2001) ^[1]. It took almost 100 years for the British Parliament to adopt such a policy for the newly united Canada.

Conclusion

History always has twists and turns. To the United Kingdom, perhaps the American War of Independence was the greatest twist in its modern history, or else it would boast a country of the sun-never-sets for much longer periods. Understanding the causes of the American War of Independence from the perspective of IC communication, this research finds lacking of a clear set of communication strategies and effective communication channels as well as communication largely blocked by mechanical, semantic and psychological barriers and making decision based on different time-concepts, the British Empire lost its largest source of wealth. Had successful communication been conducted, the war might have never broken out ; even if it had occurred, it would probably have followed a different path.

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