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Back on Cotton

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History 400

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Introduction

The British Cotton Trade kicked off the Industrial Revolution in Britain. It has been explored in depth how and why this occurred, but one thing that has long been discounted or disregarded was how the cotton trade was once almost completely banned by Parliament. From 1701-1721 Parliament passed two acts that sought to halt the importation of cotton into Britain and revive the wool and silk industries¹. Cotton was imported from India by the East India Trading Company (EIC) and was mostly in the form of calico, a dyed or printed textile that could be used for things like drapes, bed sheets, dresses, and other clothing. Cotton textiles were hugely popular in Britain as they were much more comfortable than traditional wool clothing and much cheaper than silk. Aside from the comfort cotton provided it was also wildly fashionable among the people and many people, especially women, bought cotton clothing in order to emulate the upper class.² In order to further stimulate the market the EIC provided Charles II with around 325,000 pounds between 1660-1683.³ This “voluntary contribution” created a new market among the upper class, whereas previously cotton had only been popular among the lower and middle classes. The new cotton fashion had a catastrophic effect on the wool and silk industries and the House of Commons tried several times to pass a bill banning cotton textiles. Eventually they succeeded and passed a bill in 1700 that banned “all calicos painted, dyed, printed or stained”⁴ from importation into England. This didn’t end up having the desired effect and only resulted in un-dyed cotton being imported and then dyed in England and sold. This circumvention of the law continued for twenty years until the passing of the second Calico Act in

¹ Beverly Lemire, *Fashion’s Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain 1660-1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 21.

² *Ibid.* 15.

³ *Ibid.* 15.

⁴ Beverly Lemire, *Part II: International Trade and the Politics of Consumption*, vol. 2, *The British Cotton Trade 1660-1815*, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 9.

Technically they could be brought into English ports if they were used as a temporary holding area for the cloth to be exported to other European countries. The point of the Act was to stop them from coming into England, but trade with other countries was acceptable.

1720 which banned not only the importation, but also the use and sale of most cotton items.⁵ The question this paper seeks to answer is why the Calico Acts were created and passed by Parliament. Traditional scholarship looks to the Wool Industry for the sole reason for the creation and passage of the Acts, but primary sources indicate that a number of arguments in favor of the Acts were put forward and not all of them were about the economic interests of the Wool Industry. The Calico Acts were created and passed in part because of strong national sentiment that viewed the cotton trade as a threat to the nation.

Most historians looking at the British Cotton Trade gloss over the Calico Acts and focus more on the industrialization of the cotton industry. Those that do acknowledge the Acts like Alfred Wadsworth in his celebrated work *The Cotton Trade and Industrial Lancashire 1600-1780* (1935) don't spend much time on them and attribute their creation and passage solely to lobbying by the Wool Industry. More recent scholarship has gone into greater depth on why the Calico Acts were passed, and Beverly Lemire goes into detail in her book *Fashion's Favourite* (1991). In her book Lemire argues that the Calico Acts were passed by an alliance of people who hated the EIC and wanted to hurt it anyway they could, a desire to save the wool industry due to fear of high unemployment and unrest, and conservative forces who decried what they saw as decadent luxury.⁶ Lemire also talks about how the landed gentry had personal financial reasons for passing the Calico Acts as they owned the flocks of sheep that provided the wool industry with the raw material it needed. This was much of the support in the House of Commons came from. Lemire argues that the anti-calico forces were "united in defence of

⁵ Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite*, 41.

The first Act was passed in 1700 and the second in 1720, but they didn't take place until a year after they were passed and thus the time period of the Calico Acts is usually referred to as 1701-1721.

⁶ *Ibid.* 30.

traditional industries, established interests, and existing hierarchies.”⁷ This paper does not disagree with these points, but uses primary sources to identify deeper reasons on why the Calico Acts were passed. The primary sources used in this paper are found in a multivolume collection by Lemire called *The British Cotton Trade 1660-1800* which contains a variety of sources from poems to petitions to political pamphlets. The idea of nation expressed in these sources is exceedingly complex due to a radical shift in 1707 when Scotland joined with England and Wales to form Great Britain. Before 1707 when authors talk about the country they use terms like “England” or “the Kingdom.” After 1707 these terms are still commonly used, but are occasionally joined by the term “Britain.” Nation meant different things to different people at this time and this is reflected in the sources. While some considered the nation to be defined the people living in England, others defined using important institutions like the monarchy. Regardless of how the nation was viewed, all of the opponents to the cotton trade agreed that it was a threat.

National Economy

Some people thought of the cotton trade as not just an economic threat to the wool industry, but as an economic threat to the entire nation. These people were staunch supporters of mercantile theory, which believed that the accumulation of gold and silver should be a country’s ultimate financial goal. If gold and silver were flowing into a country this was a good thing and if gold and silver left their country this was seen as something dangerous that could lead to economic distress. Gold and silver were obtained or lost through trade and as a result mercantile theory stated that a positive balance of trade was necessary for an economically healthy state. This led states to enact tariffs or even forbid some products from being imported, in order to keep gold and silver within their country. It was England’s large trade imbalance with India that

⁷ *Ibid.* 20.

led to some people to fear that the cotton trade might cause irreparable economic damage to the nation.

One political pamphlet which was submitted to the House of Commons, called *A Brief State of the East India Trade* (1715), gave a detailed explanation of what the ideal trade practices were for a state are and why the cotton trade was a violation of those practices. The pamphlet claimed that trade had to fulfill one of three purposes

1. In its carrying out, or exporting. Things profitable to be exported: OR, 2. In its importing Things needful and profitable to be imported. OR, 3. In the Value of what they import exceeding their Export, or, in fewer Words, the Returns increasing upon Adventure.⁸

These were the three basic tenants of trade in mercantilist Britain. Exporting of goods was always encouraged, importing was acceptable as long as the imports were necessary⁹, and importing was acceptable if the goods were then re-exported to other countries for a profit. For example, it was acceptable to import cotton cloth from India if it was then sold to France at a profit, which result in a net gain of bullion. The pamphlet uses these laws as a basis for looking at the EIC and determining whether the importation of cotton abides by at least one of them. It decides that the first tenant doesn't apply to the EIC as the Company serves mainly as an importer.¹⁰ There is no further mention of the second law in the pamphlet despite the fact the EIC did import raw cotton to be used in England's thriving new dying and printing industry. It is unclear why the author, who is anonymous, disregarded these industries. While clearly an opponent of the cotton trade the author makes no mention of the wool industry and thus is

⁸ "A Brief State of the East India Trade, as it relates to the other Branches of British Commerce" (1715) in *Part II International Trade and the Politics of Consumption, 1690's-1730*, ed. Beverly Lemire Vol. 2 *The British Cotton Trade, 1660-1815* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 45.

⁹ The British colonies were in part founded so that they could export raw materials to Britain in order to feed its industry.

¹⁰ *A Brief State of the East India Trade*, 45.

unlikely to have been hired by them as a propagandist. More likely the author simply didn't consider the cotton industry to be "needful and profitable" and thus ignored it in his work.

It is the third point that the pamphlet spends most of its time addressing. The author argued that even though the EIC claims to re-export most of the cotton, he found that most of it was either consumed in Britain or its colonies.¹¹ The author concluded that the EIC "will have so small a Quantity of their Goods fairly exported and consum'd Abroad, as they will never be able to balance the Bullion they export, and consequently their Trade is a Loss to the general Stock of Nation."¹² This pamphlet was made from a political economy standpoint and argued that the cotton trade was bad for the nation because it resulted in a net loss of bullion. To the author it was not *what* was being imported, but rather the effect the imports had on the nation's economic health. The pamphlet makes some brief mentions of Tea, Coffee, and Pepper as problems,¹³ but because these were imported at such a low rate they were not nearly as much of a problem as cotton was. It didn't matter whether or not the wool industry was dying, what mattered was the nation's finances. From the author's three tenants on trade it is clear he cared about trade as tool to benefit the nation and he thought if trade was hurting the nation by breaking these rules, the situation needed to be rectified.

Another political economy pamphlet called *Observations* (1719) argued that the proper question to be asked when discussing the cotton trade was whether "the NATION GAINS OR LOOSES by these *India Calicoes*."¹⁴ The author concluded that the trade "drains our Coin and

¹¹ *Ibid.* 46.

¹² *Ibid.* 47.

¹³ *Ibid.* 46.

¹⁴ Claudius Rey, *Observations on Mr. Asgill's Brief Answer to a Brief State of the Question between the Printed and Painted Calicoes* (1719) in *Part II International Trade and the Politics of Consumption, 1690's-1730*, ed. Beverly Lemire Vol. 2 *The British Cotton Trade, 1660-1815* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 206.

our Bullion,”¹⁵ but unlike the previous pamphlet, the author also goes a step further and argued that cotton also causes unemployment and domestic discontent. He argued that although the cotton industry does employ the poor, it does so on a much smaller scale than the wool industry.¹⁶ The author believed that the cotton industry and wool industry were incompatible and if one or the other had to go, then the cotton industry should go for “THE COMMON GOOD of the *Whole Body Politick*.”¹⁷ However, the author also argued that cotton used in products not associated with wool, like aprons and drapes, should continued to be manufactured in order to ensure the Nation doesn’t have to import those products. The author was not defending the wool industry or condemning the cotton industry because he thought one was inherently better than the other, but because he was worried about the potentially negative consequences it could have on the Nation as whole through the trade deficit and the large scale unemployment that would occur if the wool industry would collapse. The author’s main problem with the cotton industry was that it did not create as many jobs, however he did encourage parallel growth with the wool industry, arguing that it would be best for the nation as it would result in a net gain in manufacturing capability. He pointed out that the nation can draw some benefit from cotton as long as only raw cotton is imported, manufactured, then sold to a different market than the one the wool industry targets. This is essentially a fulfillment of rule two mentioned in the previous political pamphlet; the author wanted cotton to be an import which “is necessary or provides profit.” This, the author argued, would be the preferred result because as “Manufactories have increased, and flourished; the Strength and Grandeur of the Nation hath increased in proportion.”¹⁸ The cotton trade then in its contemporary form represented a threat to the nation in the opinion of the author because he believed along with a trade imbalance draining the

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 206.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 209.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 209.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 212.

country of its money; it would also cause an overall decrease in manufacturing capability. It is likely that the author was not hired by either the wool or cotton industries as he takes a middle road in his pamphlet. He argued that there is space for both industries and thought that while there were problems with cotton there was a place for it in the nation, a stance the wool industry did not support.

The second Calico Act, which was passed in 1720, mentions several of these national economic issues as justifications for its creation and passage. The Act forbid the importation, selling, and wearing, of most cotton textiles. It justified itself by saying that the importation of calicoes would cause “excessive Increase to the Poor, and, if not effectually prevented, may be the utter Ruin and Destruction...of many Thousands of your Majesty’s Subjects and their Families.”¹⁹ Although there were many reasons, which were unstated in the law, for the passage of the 1720 Calico Act, national economic reasons ranked very highly for Parliament. The law was not just the result of rent seeking on the part of the wool and silk industries. In fact there were several exceptions in the law, such as muslins²⁰ and all blue Calico, that allowed the cotton industry to not only continue, but eventually thrive, as they no longer had to face any competition from Indian imports. The economic reason for these exceptions were muslins were worn rarely and by the rich, and thus were unlikely to cause large trade imbalances or large-scale unemployment, as they targeted a different market than the wool industry. All blue calico had similar reasons for its exception. However, there were also important social reasons why these

¹⁹ “An Act to Preserve and Encourage the Woollen and Silk Manufactures of this Kingdom, and for more Effectual Employing the Poor, by Prohibiting the Use and Wear of all Printed, Painted, Stained or Dyed Calicoes in Apparel, Household Stuff, Furniture, or otherwise, after the twenty-fifth Day of December one thousand seven hundred and seventy two (except as therein excepted)” (1720) in *Part II International Trade and the Politics of Consumption, 1690’s-1730*, ed. Beverly Lemire Vol. 2 *The British Cotton Trade, 1660-1815* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 301.

²⁰ Muslins were a high quality cotton textile worn by the upper class and thus were not a threat to the Wool Industry, while all blue calico was worn occasionally by the very poor. Although these products did prove to be a threat to the Wool and Silk industries they were nonetheless allowed.

two items in particular remained legal, which is covered in a later section of this paper. These exceptions allowed for a huge explosion in the manufacturing of cotton textiles to such an extent that they soon dwarfed the wool industry. In a little over 50 years the Calico Acts were repealed, as the justification for them no longer existed, cotton now employed more people than both wool and silk. The Calico Acts acted as effective trade barriers, which allowed Britain to build up its cotton industry without the threat of foreign competition. Indian calicoes were cheaper and more efficiently made than British textiles, but the trade barriers allowed for British industry to grow and learn to make cotton textiles as efficiently as the Indians did. The threat cotton posed to the national economy proved to be an important factor in getting the 1720 law passed.

Xenophobia

These national economic reasons were persuasive to Parliament, but the common people turned against calico for other reasons. Xenophobic reactions against the cotton trade began to occur not long after the first Calico Act came into effect. The act banned the importation of completed textiles, but didn't stop raw and uncompleted ones from being imported, thus the dying and printing industries began to grow. The cotton trade was banned in most parts of Europe and as a result people who specialized in cotton related industries, like printing or dying, before the practice was banned in their country, began to immigrate to England. Thus the common people in England saw that the cotton trade not only threatened their nation's prosperity, but also represented an existential threat to the country's sense of self. England was just beginning to come together as a nation and a large influx of foreigners threatened to disrupt the nation they were trying to create.²¹ Many of the new immigrants were Huguenot artisans from France who specialized in printed calicoes. They would take un-dyed or un-printed cotton and create their own patterns, which was expressly forbidden in France and thus why so many

²¹ Beverly Lemire, *International Trade and the Politics of Consumption*, 31.

immigrated to England. Interestingly most of the immigration took place after the passing of the first Calico act in 1701 which forbid the importation of printed calicoes, but not un-dyed cotton. This of course created a new English industry of dying cotton since printers could now make their products without fear of competition from cheap Indian imports. Rather than destroying the cotton trade, the first Calico Act strengthened the domestic cotton industry by acting as a protectionist measure.

After large-scale immigration began, many authors began to point to the influx of foreigners as a threat to the Kingdom. A list called *The Case of Several Thousand Poor of the Wooll Manufacture* (1701) listed several reasons why the cotton trade should be banned, and the threat of foreigners was listed early on and was by far the largest section.²² The list goes on to describe how the French are destroying traditional English wool manufacturing and even suggests they “seem to be sent here only to ruine so many Thousands of our *Wooll Manufacture*.”²³ One poem written in 1704 wrote that “And shall such Heathens steal their Trade away”²⁴ when referring to the arrival of French printers in England. It is clear during this time there was a conception that the cotton industry was leading to an influx of undesirable foreigners. This influx reflected poorly upon the cotton trade. On one hand there was the wool industry, which employed a large amount of English traders, and on the other hand the cotton industry seemed to be not only destroying English jobs, but also replacing them with jobs for foreigners. Many who might have been otherwise sympathetic to the cotton industry looked upon it with

²² “The Case of Several Thousand Poor of the Wooll Manufacture, Ruined by Printing, Staining and Dying of Linnens in England” (1701) in *Part II International Trade and the Politics of Consumption, 1690’s-1730*, ed. Beverly Lemire Vol. 2 *The British Cotton Trade, 1660-1815* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 34.

²³ *Ibid.* 34.

²⁴ R.L., *Pride’s Exchange Broke Up: or Indian Calicoes and Silks Expos’d* (1703) in *Part II International Trade and the Politics of Consumption, 1690’s-1730*, ed. Beverly Lemire Vol. 2 *The British Cotton Trade, 1660-1815* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 38.

disdain and viewed it as something foreign and a threat to England²⁵. The cotton industry's connection with immigrants hurt the industry's image and strengthened the idea that the wool industry was quintessentially English and therefore required protection.

Xenophobia was directed not only to the foreigners drawn in by the cotton trade, but also the cotton itself. Many English thought of cotton as foreign and undesirable and one author, Daniel Defoe, even related the cotton trade to the Spanish invasion in the 1500's in order to stress how cotton was a foreign object that sought to destroy England.²⁶ Defoe argued that just as the country rallied together to fight the Spanish, they needed to do so again in order to fight off "the Calico invaders."²⁷ Defoe was not a well-known novelist at the time, as he didn't publish *Robinson Crusoe* until a year later, but he was a well-known pamphleteer. It was likely that he was hired by the wool industry in order to make the cotton trade look bad, as hiring writers to bolster political campaigns was a common practice in this time.²⁸ Although the work is clearly biased this does not mean it did not affect public consciousness. The riots in London clearly prove that xenophobia directed towards the cotton trade had spread among the common people. In 1719 there were a series of riots in the calico quarter of London, which was mostly inhabited by people of Huguenot ancestry,²⁹ the rioters claimed that they were fighting an "Invasion of their Trade, by the printed Calicoes."³⁰ It wasn't just weavers in the wool industry that feared the cotton trade; it was also some of the common people who thought foreigners were a threat to

²⁵ *A Brief State of the East India Trade*, 45.

²⁶ Daniel Defoe, *The Just Complaint of the Poor Weavers Truly Represented, with as much Answer as it Deserves in Part II International Trade and the Politics of Consumption, 1690's-1730*, ed. Beverly Lemire Vol. 2 *The British Cotton Trade, 1660-1815* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 110.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 111.

²⁸ Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite*, 38.

²⁹ Beverly Lemire, *International Trade and the Politics of Consumption*, 277.

³⁰ "Weekly Journal or Saturday's Post, 22 August 1719" in *Part II International Trade and the Politics of Consumption, 1690's-1730*, ed. Beverly Lemire Vol. 2 *The British Cotton Trade, 1660-1815* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 285

their country. Their fear of foreign goods was so strong they viewed calicoes as invaders attacking their nation. The last of the Calico Acts was passed in 1720 and was no doubt in part a reaction to the rioting taking place in London at the time. Until the rioting took place the House of Lords was stubbornly refusing to pass the act which they viewed as too radical, but the rioting convinced them to pass it in order to maintain order, along with the other reasons outlined in this paper.³¹

The xenophobic reaction to the cotton trade was based on two factors, increasing immigration to the country and the sense of cotton as an alien foreign good. The foreign workers making up the English cotton industry simply gave credence to the idea that the cotton trade was entirely foreign and not wanted in England. Although many people bought and wore calicoes which was, of course, the center of the problem, there were still many others who felt passionately that cotton was a dangerous foreign good. It is important to note that England imported many products in this time period so the negative reaction to cotton was somewhat unique. Unlike wine from France, cotton was displacing, on a wide scale, the wool industry, which was closely associated to the idea of England. In their minds cotton had taken on the form of an invader and wool came to represent England. Thus these people came to fear and hate cotton and the people who wore it which in turn caused the riots.

However, xenophobia wasn't as strong as one might think and many writers against the Calico Acts actually praised France for their cotton trade laws. These writers would hold up France as a shining example of what England should do to halt cotton importation.³² Xenophobia usually means someone despises a foreigner's culture yet that was clearly not the case for these authors, as they saw what France was doing and recognized that it would be good for their

³¹ Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite*, 40.

³² "The Case of Several Thousand Poor of the Wooll Manufacture, Ruined by Printing, Staining and Dying of Linnens in England," 34.

country. Their willingness to take ideas from France and praise them while at the same time viewing French immigrants with disdain seems to be at odds. However, it does seem to fit in with Kumar's idea that English identity was focused around the King.³³ So while immigrants may have been looked down on because they had suspect loyalty to the King, other countries cultures were not held in similar disdain. It was a dislike for immigrants rather than culture that drove their xenophobic reactions. Or possibly it is the much more simple explanation that the English believed immigrants were taking their jobs and didn't extend dislike of a group to dislike of a culture. Regardless the English peoples' dislike of immigrants in the cotton industry and cotton imported from India was a contributing factor to the Calico Acts.

Women and the Calico Acts

During the time period between the two Calico Acts women became a symbolic target for the anti-calico forces. The colorful patterns calico provided became very popular among women who spent a lot of their money buying calico dresses and other cotton textiles. Towards the end of the anti-calico campaign riots broke out in London and women began to be attacked if they were seen wearing any cotton. To the anti-calico forces women defined everything they had been fighting against. They were almost seen as traitors to the nation and were treated as such. Women's relation with calico was seen as evidence that cotton brought with it luxury and decadence. One source that attacked women was a poem *Pride's Exchange*. The author accused women of pawning "their Watches, Rings, & Souls"³⁴ to obtain the calicoes they desired. According to the author, women sacrificed not only their possessions for a chance to wear cotton, but also the thing that makes them human, their souls. This line is used symbolically for the whole of England. The poet implied that the English were using all of their money to buy

³³ Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 123.

³⁴ R.L., *Pride's Exchange*, 38.

calico and were so eager for it they would even willingly sacrifice the soul of their nation, which the author believed to be the wool industry. The poet made a clear connection between the Wool Industry and the Monarchy. He ended his poem by asking that “*God save the QUEEN, and Bless the Weaver’s Trade.*”³⁵ Thus the author made a definitive connection between national identity and the textiles someone chooses to wear. If someone wore wool they were connected to the monarchy, but if someone wore silk or calico they had adopted the identity of something foreign. To the author women were symbolic of everything that was wrong with the cotton trade. However, women also bring in a new angle that has not yet been examined, and that is the decadence some believed cotton had created. The author further accused women of wanting to “buy a hoard up for their wanton Pride.”³⁶ The author was claiming cotton was causing a breakdown in traditional values and resulted in women acting immorally. The decadence that cotton created among women was at odds with the modest Protestant values England had.

Another poem called *Ladies Dressing* (1705) by Daniel Defoe also attacked the decadence of women as a result of their wearing cotton. Unlike his earlier work, which was created because the Wool Industry hired him, this poem was more likely written because of Defoe’s own personal beliefs. At the time the poem was written there was no official campaign going on like there was in 1719-21 so it is highly unlikely anyone hired him to write the poem. The poem described in detail how women bedeck themselves in gold and diamond and how they are “Silver-lade from top to Toe.”³⁷ The author described women as corrupted by this luxury and accused them of having “greedy hands.”³⁸ Like the previous poem, Defoe made an effort to

³⁵ *Ibid.* 39. Weaver’s trade refers to the wool industry.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 38.

³⁷ Daniel Defoe, *The London Ladies Dressing-Room: or, The Shop-Keepers Wives Inventory, a Satyr, Written by the Author of the True-Born Englishman* (1705) in *Part II International Trade and the Politics of Consumption, 1690’s-1730*, ed. Beverly Lemire Vol. 2 *The British Cotton Trade, 1660-1815* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 260.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 263.

connect cotton to luxury and then luxury to decadence and greed. These two poets used women as caricatures in order to accuse England of putting its interests in fashion and wealth above the interests of the state and traditional national ideals. As women were corrupted by cotton they become symbolic of England being corrupted in the same way. Defoe also accused women of being “So Proud, so Wanton and so Mad.”³⁹ Similar to *Pride’s Exchange*, Defoe thought of women as being prideful and wanton. This imagery was consistent because it represented the opposite of what a woman was supposed to be in early 18th century England. Defoe and *Pride’s Exchange* were not only using women as a symbol to reflect on what they believe to be England’s corruption, but also accusing cotton of undermining the social fabric of England.

The words in these poems seem to have been taken to heart by the common people and as a result many women and some men were attacked on the streets for wearing calico. These calico riots took place 1719-1720 just before the last Calico Act was passed. The attackers on the street weren’t just weavers in the Wool Industry, but also included common folk who had no vested interest in the cotton trade.⁴⁰ For them, cotton had become a national threat and they demonstrated their opinions by inflicting violence on women, who, as previously mentioned, became symbolic for the entire cotton trade. One incident in London had ballad singers making songs encouraging a mob of people to tear and burn any calicoes they could get their hands on.⁴¹ Incidents ranged from women having their clothes ripped off to calico shops being burned, and in some cases women were raped or killed. The Wool Industry saw how out of hand the riots were becoming and encouraged people to not “insult or molest any of your Fellow Subjects on

³⁹ *Ibid.* 264.

⁴⁰ Newspaper clippings from the time mention in at least one case that singers composed songs encouraging people to attack others wearing calico. Often the attackers are described as “tradesmen” which seems to imply they are not part of the wool industry, who are usually called weavers.

⁴¹ “Weekly Journal or British Gazetteer, Saturday, 20 June” (1719) in *Part II International Trade and the Politics of Consumption, 1690’s-1730*, ed. Beverly Lemire Vol. 2 *The British Cotton Trade, 1660-1815* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 281.

any Account whatsoever⁴², but their pleas for peace went unheeded as the issue for many people had gone beyond the Wool Industry, it had become a matter of national importance. They saw a threat not to Wool, but to England and they reacted violently whenever they spotted a woman wearing calico.

Given this understanding of the social backlash to cotton we can now see why muslins and all blue calico were permitted in the 1720 Calico Act. The economic reasons were mentioned previously, but they also matched the desire of social conservatives. Muslins were only worn by the rich so the poor and middle classes couldn't wear in order to mimic their betters. In this way muslins acted like silk and instead of breaking down the social order they actually enforced it. All blue calico was worn only by the lower classes so wearing it wouldn't imply luxury and decadence the same way other calico patterns might. Like muslins all blue calicoes reinforced the social order instead of upsetting it. These two products, aside from being economically non-threatening, were also not a threat to the established order. Thus the exceptions in the act were acceptable to almost everyone.

Pro-Calico Arguments

It wasn't just the anti-calico forces that used nationalist rhetoric to argue their case. The pro-calico forces also used nationalist rhetoric in order to argue that the cotton trade was in fact beneficial for Great Britain. Looking at the arguments the pro-calico forces put forth is important because it not only helps us see both sides of the argument, it shows how the pro-calico side accepted the narrative that cotton was a threat to the nation. Even though they were arguing it was in fact beneficial, the framework within which they were arguing was about calicoes and whether it was helping or hurting the nation. Like the anti-calico forces the pro-

⁴² Weavers Hall, *Daily Courant, Thursday, 9 July* (1719) in *Part II International Trade and the Politics of Consumption, 1690's-1730*, ed. Beverly Lemire Vol. 2 *The British Cotton Trade, 1660-1815* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 283.

calico forces saw the issues surrounding the cotton trade as something greater than just the Wool Industry.

Many of the arguments the pro-calico forces used can be seen in their petitions, which stressed that the cotton industry employed many people involved in printing, dying, and spinning, and that the ban would end up hurting families who relied on cotton for their trade.⁴³ The pro-calico forces used the anti-calico arguments against them in order to portray the cotton industry as being as necessary to the country as the wool industry was. For each argument the anti-calico forces fielded against the cotton industry, the pro-calico forces tried to turn that argument against them. When people complained that the cotton trade was causing unemployment among the weavers, the pro-calico forces argued they were in fact providing many new jobs in the countryside. When they were accused of bringing in foreigners they tried to embrace the idea of Great Britain and how the creation of a new state was tied in with the creation of a new industry. They wanted to become an important institution for Great Britain the same way the wool industry was important to England. Finally they tried to counter accusations of trade imbalance by stressing how much revenue the trade was giving to the government⁴⁴ as cotton products and the EIC were heavily taxed by Parliament.

One mercantilist argument in favor of wool was that it was made entirely within England. All of the wool came from sheep herds that resided in England, which was then turned into a textile by the English weavers. No outside labor, or materials were used to create the final wool product. Although cotton was imported at the beginning of the cotton trade, later on it began to be grown in the colonies. This proved to be favorable for the cotton industry as it fit in with their

⁴³ "Mayor and other of Weymouth" (1720) in *Part II International Trade and the Politics of Consumption, 1690's-1730*, ed. Beverly Lemire Vol. 2 *The British Cotton Trade, 1660-1815* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 64.

⁴⁴ "Cotton Manufacturers of London" (1721) in *Part II International Trade and the Politics of Consumption, 1690's-1730*, ed. Beverly Lemire Vol. 2 *The British Cotton Trade, 1660-1815* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 65.

narrative of Great Britain being more important than England, and the pro-calico forces could point to the cotton and brag about how they were giving jobs to poor farmers in the colonies. This also allowed the cotton industry to argue that they were just as in line with mercantilist practices as the wool industry was. In *Review of the State of the British Nation* this benefit was pointed out and the review claimed that cotton from the colonies was as good as wool from England.⁴⁵ These pro-calico arguments did have some effect and during passage of the 1720 Calico Act exceptions were made for specific cotton items, as previously mentioned. Eventually the pro-calico forces proved to be correct and the cotton industry did become dominant within fifty years of the last Calico Act. They had managed to become as essential to Britain as the wool industry used to be in England. The pro-calico forces wanted to show that they were not a threat to the nation, but in fact the start of a new one.

Conclusion

It is not wrong to say that the wool industry was at the center of the Calico Acts. What is important to note is what role nationalism played in the debate. While the plight of the wool industry may have been at the center of both Calico Acts this doesn't mean national arguments played no part in swaying the legislators or the common people. The status of England's national economy was of great importance to many political commentators at the time that thought that the cotton trade was a violation of accepted trading policy. These people also worried about large-scale unemployment and believed the wool industry needed to be protected, not for the sake of the wool industry, but rather for the protection of the country. Some people were less concerned about the fate of the wool industry and were more concerned about the kind of people the cotton trade was bringing into the nation. Foreigners were attracted from all over

⁴⁵ *Review of the State of the British Nation*, no. 12, Saturday, 8 March (1707) in *Part II International Trade and the Politics of Consumption, 1690's-1730*, ed. Beverly Lemire Vol. 2 *The British Cotton Trade, 1660-1815* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), 3.

Europe to England on account due to its lack of restrictions on the cotton trade which made cotton unpopular in the eyes of the common people as it seemed like foreigners were finding employment as more and more English laborers couldn't find work. Others were also concerned about the effect of cotton on women who came to be seen as decadent when they wore cotton clothing. They saw the use of cotton as antithetical to traditional English values. All of these things made cotton a threat not only to the wool industry, but also to England itself.

While there was a great deal of concern when it came to the wool industry it was often mixed with fear of what would happen to the nation if the wool industry were to fail. The cotton industry seeing these fears tried to calm the nation by explaining how they weren't a threat to England, but were in fact helping it become the new nation of Great Britain. They provided work in printing, dying, and spinning as well as creating a new demand for cotton in the agricultural sector of the colonies. The Calico Acts reflected the concerns both sides had. Parliament banned most cotton items, but still allowed a select few to be made and worn. This was a compromise between the complete ban sought by the pro-calico forces and the new manufacturing created by cotton. The second Calico Act tried to solve everyone's problems. They banned the importation of almost all cotton into the country, thus solving the concern of trade imbalances, and banned people from wearing most cotton items, except for a select few items worn by the upper class and some items worn by the lower class. This solved the problem of decadence and luxury amongst women. Muslins could still be worn, but only the rich could afford them, and it was not considered decadent for rich women to wear such items. Blue calico was also allowed as it was worn by the poor and did not carry with it the pretensions of wealth and luxury and thus it was not socially destabilizing for a person to wear it. Parliament also tried to solve the potential large scale unemployment issues by allowing what they thought would be a small scale cotton industry to survive, while at the same time saving the larger wool industry.

The act also tried to balance English national concerns with those of the Irish and the Scottish, specifically most of the items not banned were not made in England, but in those two places.

The second Calico Act seemed like a great compromise to everyone's problems and was thought to have solved the issue of cotton being a threat to the country.

The traditional historiography fails to properly assess the reasons why the Calico Acts were created and passed. Alfred Wadsworth in particular pays no attention to the nuances of the calico debate. According to his book the Calico Acts were simply the product of lobbying by the wool industry. He argues that the wool industry controlled the House of Commons while the EIC controlled the House of Lords.⁴⁶ According to Wadsworth the Calico Acts were simply the result of one industry pursuing state protection. This fails to take into account mercantilist practices, xenophobia, or conservative social backlash. Most importantly it fails to say why the House of Lords eventually passed the two acts, which can be explained by exploring the debate in depth. Wadsworth's work is accurate superficially and no doubt the EIC did influence the House of Lords, but it fails to capture the nuance of why the common people turned against cotton and how they influenced the House of Lords. Beverly Lemire does a very good job in her interpretation of the Calico Acts as being a conservative backlash, but it fails to account for the importance of mercantilism. Mercantilism was not a social backlash at the time of the Calico Acts. It was simply how European nations viewed economics. Not a single source disputes mercantile theory, rather the pro and anti-calico forces disagree whether the cotton trade violates mercantile theory or upholds it. However, there is never anyone arguing that mercantile theory itself is wrong and should be replaced with free trade.⁴⁷ Mercantile opposition was not a conservative backlash so although Lemire does an excellent job analyzing the social aspects of the Calico acts, she misses the importance of economics. Both Lemire and Wadsworth, while

⁴⁶ Alfred Wadsworth, *Cotton Trade*, 125.

⁴⁷ This term is never used in any of the sources.

accurate are deficient in their explanations. Seeing the cotton trade as a national threat and the Calico Acts as a response to that threat can help us gain a greater understanding of why the Acts were created and passed.

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