The Dawn of the Cheap Press in Victorian Britain: the End of the ‘Taxes on Knowledge’, 1849-1869

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Martin Hewitt’s study is a meticulously researched account of the mid-Victorian phase of the campaigns against press taxes. It spans the formation of a minority pressure group, the Association for the Promotion of the Repeal of the Taxes on Knowledge in 1849; the key developments in the removal of the taxes on advertising, newspapers and paper; and culminates in a discussion of the often overlooked legislation that removed the registration and securities requirements on newspapers in 1869.

Taxation on newspapers, pamphlets and paper were introduced in the reign of Queen Anne to raise money for war with France. By the end of the 18th and in the early 19th century, their purpose was political as well as revenue-raising, however. They were used as part of a range of measures to suppress the dissemination of revolutionary ideas in the cheap press following the French Revolution. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, media historians have focused on the turbulent period before 1836, known as the ‘war of the unstamped press’, rather than the ‘rather anodyne’ campaigns of the 1850s (Hewitt, p. 4). Studies by Joel Wiener and Patricia Hollis demonstrate how the early phase of the campaign was dominated by working-class radicals in defiance of government attempts to crack down on what it defined as sedition, particularly in the wake of the 1819 ‘Peterloo’ demonstration amid the growing campaign for parliamentary reform. Despite the repeated arrests and imprisonment of printers and vendors, and the seizing of presses, the penny weeklies produced by the unstamped radical press enjoyed sales in excess of those of The Times. Faced with rising calls from the stamped press to repeal the newspaper stamp, the Whig government responded in 1836 by cutting it from 4d to 1d. The commercial impact was a rise in cheaper publications but it effectively wiped out the unstamped penny press since, as Hewitt notes, tighter penalties for avoidance of stamp duty and the regulations for registration and securities payments accompanied the tax reduction. Radicals such as Henry Hetherington and John Cleave, were forced to raise prices and lose circulation, or cease publication altogether.

Historians have generally depicted the second phase of the campaign, between 1849 and 1861, as the continuation of the process of eliminating press taxation, relying largely on Collet Dobson Collet’s two-volume account of the campaign, published over 100 years ago. (1) Collet’s narrative stressed continuities in the struggle against advertising tax, the newspaper stamp duty and duties on paper and foreign books. Hewitt
seeks to dispel some of the misconceptions that arise from too close adherence to Collet’s partisan account. He shows that the second phase of the campaign was characterized by a diverse range of special interest groups representing publishers, printers and paper makers among others, who opposed the commercial limitations of the taxes and rejected the radical terminology of ‘Taxes on Knowledge’. Furthermore, Hewitt notes that the names of campaign groups are often misidentified, with names being interchanged, causing further confusion.

Comparisons have often been drawn between the taxed and regulated British press in the 19th century and the rise of the high circulation penny press in America. A major strength of Hewitt’s study is its focus on the economic reasons for this difference and the importance of campaigns for tax reform and the British fiscal framework before and after the Crimean War. The mid-century debate about press taxation was not only a question of regulating what was printed but, Hewitt demonstrates, was also embedded in parliamentary debates about the contribution of print taxes to the national revenue.

Hewitt sets the scene by outlining the shortcomings of Collet’s account, with its focus on a close-knit group of campaigners, including Chartist veterans in London and middle-class ‘Manchester School’ radicals such as Richard Cobden, who formed the Association for the Promotion of the Repeal of the Taxes on Knowledge (APRTOK) in 1849. According to Hewitt, Collet ignored the campaign’s context within the Manchester School’s broader political and economic agenda and significantly played down the strength of Cobden and John Bright’s hostility to The Times. Hewitt also analyses the impact on the British press following the 1836 stamp cut, noting that one impact of the taxes and associated costs was that the circulation of news itself was ‘fragmented and fractured’ (p. 14), though readers had access to newspapers in newsrooms. The stamp also conferred free distribution of newspapers through the postal system though this was widely abused since readers would forward papers to friends for no extra charge. Hewitt shows that as well as hindering the timely dissemination of news nationally, the taxes were also a significant brake on profitability.

The second chapter identifies the connections between the mid-Victorian campaign from the 1840s and emerging campaigns to reform the national taxation system. The Manchester radicals became involved with veterans of the ‘war of the unstamped press’ who formed the People’s Charter Union in 1848 and began a new campaign against newspaper duty. Cobden included newspaper taxes in his radical ‘National Budget’ at a meeting of the Liverpool Financial Reform Association but was also looking for a post-Chartist reform movement. This led to the formation of the Newspaper Stamp Abolition Committee, a cross-class movement that became APRTOK in 1849. Hewitt stresses that, despite the NASC’s campaigning skill and its national network-building, support for the removal of the newspaper stamp even within the press was small, and the papers that supported repeal were in a minority. In contrast, there was widespread antipathy to advertising duty, which directly affected profitability. In effect, it created monopolies since advertisers tended to favour one large-circulation title rather than paying tax on a series of advertisements in multiple publications. Paper duties were opposed by publishers of titles aimed at lower-income readers – Charles Knight (publisher of the Penny Cyclopaedia and the Penny Magazine) and the Chambers brothers were among publishers who complained about the impact of the duties on their ability to produce literature for a mass audience.

APRTOK differed from these self-interested groups since it had an ideological opposition to the duties. Its name invoked the radical construct of ‘taxes on knowledge’, an interpretation that highlighted their impact on opportunities for working men to educate themselves through the cheap press. In chapter three, Hewitt explores the activities of APRTOK, the prime mover of the newspaper stamp campaign. He highlights the strengths and strategies of this minority pressure group that, armed with parliamentary representation and formidable campaigning experience from the Anti-Corn Law League, attacked the taxes on several fronts. Thomas Milner Gibson, the President, secured a Select Committee to investigate the newspaper stamp. As Hewitt notes, this committee was packed with supporters of deregulation. It exposed anomalies in the way the law was interpreted by the Board of the Inland Revenue. At the same time, APRTOK deliberately sought out opportunities for a legal challenge in the hope that public opinion would swing against government policy. Hewitt argues that APRTOK broke new ground in the determination with which it pursued a war of attrition against the government bodies that implemented the laws. Its message was that the law was
implemented unfairly and inconsistently and the timing of this campaign was crucial, coming, Hewitt says, at a point where ‘the construction of the liberal or neutral state was being conceived as fundamental to strategies of social and political stabilization’. A prime example of inconsistency was the question of how the law defined newspapers. The test case was the 1851 prosecution of Charles Dickens’s *Household Narrative*, a monthly supplement to his popular weekly magazine *Household Words*. His publishers, Bradbury and Evans, assumed, as was generally thought, that a monthly publication was not required to pay the stamp even if it was publishing news, since the original legislation stipulated publishing frequencies of less than 28 days. The Board of the Inland Revenue, however, argued that any publication containing news should pay the stamp. Dickens eventually won the case, to the chagrin of APRTOK, which would have benefited from a public outcry should the novelist have lost.

Chapter four considers the impact of the Manchester radicals in the campaign in the context of Whig and Liberal politics in the 1850s, particularly the question of reducing indirect taxes. In 1851, Lord Russell agreed to Gibson’s calls for a Select Committee inquiry but press reaction to the committee’s findings, outside of the Liberal *Daily News* and some provincial papers, was unenthusiastic. Disraeli’s 1852 budget, formed against a backdrop of calls for increased military expenditure, was also not encouraging. The following year, however, Gladstone was under pressure to reconcile different demands – to reform income tax and reduce the burden of indirect taxation. Meanwhile, Gibson successfully argued that repealing advertising duty would be compensated by increased revenue from the expansion of the number of publications sent through the mail. In July 1853, Gladstone abandoned attempts at a compromise (to reduce rather than abolish advertising duty) and confirmed he would cease to oppose repeal. Hopes that the abolition of the newspaper stamp would follow were dashed by the onset of the Crimean War.

By 1855, however, it was clear that the stamp duty was being widely flouted as ‘war sheets’ and other unstamped publications sprang up in defiance of the law. Gladstone drafted a reform of the legislation that included repeal of the duty and reform of the postal charges. Hewitt shows that in the ensuing political negotiations, the repeal of the newspaper tax in 1855 owed much to parliamentary political manoeuvring, in stark contrast to the radical campaigns of the 1830s. A similar story of campaigning and political strategy follows in chapter five, which considers the debates around the paper duties and Gladstone’s struggle to get the repeal bill, which passed the House of Commons, through the House of Lords. Following defeat on his bill, Gladstone’s masterstroke was to include paper duty repeal in his 1861 budget, which successfully cleared the upper chamber.

Subsequent chapters investigate the impact of repeal on the cheap press. Hewitt comments that much existing comment on the impact of the 1855 and 1861 legislation focuses on the creation of new titles and the numbers of papers published. There was a clear and sustained increase from the mid-1850s for at least a decade. However, there was little change to the metropolitan daily newspaper market. The established daily and Sunday newspapers held their positions and Hewitt shows how the (Cobden and Bright-backed) *Morning Star* discovered how difficult it was to shake up the daily newspaper market, despite being priced at just 1d. However, he perhaps underplays the extent to which the Star’s fortunes reflected the fact that the *Daily Telegraph* re-launched at the same price a few months before the *Morning Star* appeared in March 1856. The case study of the *Morning Star* in chapter seven indicates it had particular financial and management problems that were not characteristic of the *Daily Telegraph*. The latter attracted considerably more advertising and had around five times the circulation of the *Morning Star* at its peak. Outside London, however, the picture was different. Using digitized newspaper resources for a quantitative analysis, Hewitt contrasts the staid metropolitan market with the explosion in the number of titles and frequency of publication in the regional press. This is an example of how London papers lagged trends elsewhere in the country. Hewitt concludes that the newspaper stamp abolition in 1855 intensified competition from the cheap press, including the rise of new provincial papers and cheap weeklies and that during the 1860s, these trends consolidated.

An often-ignored coda to the press tax campaign is considered in chapter eight. This was the final removal of the securities and registration requirements for newspapers. It was important to the ex-Chartist wing of
APRTOK that these were tackled, since they viewed them as symbolic of government attempts to curb cheap, working-class publications. Moreover, publishers were required to indemnify themselves against charges such as libel or blasphemy before they had printed anything. APRTOK objected on these grounds but also revived the argument that the government selectively implemented the law by only targeting radical publications for prosecution. In 1868, Charles Bradlaugh was prosecuted for failing to register the weekly National Reformer. Since its main purpose was to campaign for secularism, Bradlaugh was understandably unwilling to pay the blasphemy security on this title; moreover, he argued that it was the organ of an advocacy group and not a newspaper. The prosecution was suspended when legislation to remove the securities came before parliament and ultimately dropped altogether when it became clear the legislation would be passed. Hewitt notes, however, that the extent of this deregulation was short-lived as fresh restrictions, such as libel laws, were passed later in the century.

Hewitt’s study makes fresh and insightful connections between the mid-Victorian phase of the campaign against press taxes, the broader fiscal context of tax reform, and the role that these played in the emergence of Gladstonian Liberalism. It makes a powerful case for arguing that the removal of the taxes was intrinsically bound to the fiscal concerns and debates of the Liberal and Whig parties rather than the ideological positions of the working-class campaigners of the 1830s. As such, it is primarily a political history of the campaign. It draws on a wealth of archive material, in particular the recently discovered APRTOK papers, as well as the private papers and letters of the main campaigners.

In the light of contemporary debates about the regulation and definition of news, as well as issues of copyright in an internet age, it would be interesting to hear the author’s views on the symbolic capital of the newspaper stamp campaign. Working-class radicals made specific claims about the importance of timely access to news for readers who were largely excluded from the franchise and had no guaranteed educational opportunities. Moreover, the legislation controlled what could be printed for whom and this was visible in the fact that every newspaper bore the mark of central government control – the ‘stamp’ – before a word had been printed on it. John Cassell’s Working Man’s Friend in the 1850s referred often to the ‘taxes on knowledge’ in the context of access to a form of education. Cassell’s publication contained fiction but made clear that it regarded this as frivolous, whereas non-fiction was a higher form of literature.

The other question to consider is the extent to which the newspaper stamp campaign was a gendered one. Newspapers traditionally were the repository of political news aimed at those who were able to participate in the political process. Since the assumed reader of the high-priced metropolitan press was male, did the process of deregulation that led to cheaper weekly and daily newspapers, and the rise of New Journalism, also signal the increased participation of women as newspaper readers and, much later in the century, as newspaper journalists?

Notes


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