Nativism and Social Closure: A Comparison of Four Social Movements

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ABSTRACT

The study of nativism needs more attention than it has been given by sociologists concerned with religious, ethnic and racial intolerance. Nativism is a nineteenth century form of bigotry. The concept came into use in the United States around 1840 signifying the opposition of America’s white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants (WASPs) to the massive influx of Irish Roman Catholics to the eastern seabord of the United States. For the WASPs, Roman Catholicism was un-American in that its adherents allied themselves with the Pope who was a foreign leader. (Higham, 1975: 106) However, while nativism was more of a nineteenth century phenomenon associated with the United States, a comparative study of nativism between the United States and Canada might help to uncover the similarities and differences in intolerance between the two nations.

This paper is a comparison of four major nativistic social movements of the United States and Canada in the nineteenth century. The two American movements are the Know-Nothings Movement (1850-1853) and the American Protective Association (A.P.A.) Movement (1890-1896). The two Canadian movements are the Orange Movement (1870-1896) and the Protestant Protective Association (P.P.A.) Movement (1892-1898). These movements are compared in terms of their organization, ideology, activities and impact in an attempt to assess their similarities and differences. It is argued throughout the paper that the movements in the United States and Canada are similar in that they each sought to invoke social closure against Roman Catholics but their methods differed. The Americans were much more blatant than the Canadians, who were more subtle. This distinction is important in that the difference still exists in the manner in which Americans and Canadians receive their new immigrants from Asia, Central and South America and the Caribbean. Although Canadians are more outwardly tolerant towards minorities than Americans, it appears that intolerance is deeply embedded within both cultures and it must be addressed before true equality can flourish in either nation.

Social closure is the process by which the dominant group defines its boundaries by excluding those foreign to it as it strives to monopolize power and wealth. The term was first utilized by Max Weber in his essay, “Class, Status, Party” (1922). Weber noted in that study how power struggles occur among collectivities other than social classes and that status groups also attempt to monopolize power and wealth by “setting themselves apart by means of ... characteristics and badges to usurp status honour”. (1978: 190) It is our contention that the nativistic movements of the United States and Canada are supportive of Weber’s assumption, despite differences between the two nations.

Organization of the Social Movements

The Know-Nothings Movement and the A.P.A. Movement in the United States were organized for direct political action against Roman Catholic immigrants. One

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indication of this is that the Know-Nothing Movement emerged following the mass migration of Roman Catholics to the eastern seabord of the United States during the Irish Potato Famine of the 1840s (Leonard and Parmet, 1971: 65); while the A.P.A. emerged in Clinton, Iowa as many Catholics moved to western states in the 1880s (Kinzer, 1964: 35). Another indication is that both movements developed systems of localized councils, national headquarters and held national conventions in order to exert political influence throughout the United States. Know-Nothingism generated 1.25 million members in ten thousand councils at its peak in 1857 (Maizlish, and Kushma 1982: 160); while the A.P.A. recruited 2.4 million members into local councils and were very politically active in 1896 (Kinzer, 1964: 44). A final indication of political motivation is that although each movement appeared to be merely a collection of local councils characterized by symbols and ceremonies, most of their activities and discussions within the local and national councils revolved around taking direct political action against Roman Catholics. For example, the annual national convention of the A.P.A. involved “matters of ritual, agitation and education, political goals and action ... for antagonism against political Romanism”. (1964: 40-42).

The Orange Movement and the P.P.A. Movement in Canada, on the other hand, evolved from the Orange Order which was organized around fraternal and communal activities. Although both the Orange Movement and the P.P.A. are generally thought of as “movements” in nineteenth century Canada, they evolved in three steps from the Orange “Order” in Canada. First, the Orange Order was founded in Upper Canada based upon the British concept of the Orange Order by Ogle Gowan in 1830, to create a self-help, mutual-aid society based upon traditions “familiar to Irish Protestants coming to Canada”. (Houston and Smyth, 1980: 112) Some symbols used by the Order included an all-seeing eye, the sun, moon and stars and King William of Orange riding a white horse carrying the Holy Bible. Second, the Orange Order spread rapidly throughout Ontario, the Maritimes and Western Canada from 1830 to 1870. In Peel County, Ontario, for example, there was an Orange Lodge in almost every village and town which Protestants utilized for recreational and social activities. (Bull, 1936) It was only on sporadic occasions between 1870 and 1896, as Canadian political life became more definite and factionalized, that the Orange Order took nativistic stands on issues. It is because of their activities during this period that scholars such as Hereward Senior refer to the order as a movement. (Swainson, 1972: 140) The final step in the evolution of the Orange Movement was then a radical faction of Orangemen became disenchanted with the moderate attack on Roman Catholics by the Orange Lodges. These radical Orangemen formed the P.P.A. in the 1880s based upon a conservative model of the A.P.A. in the United States. However, the P.P.A. was limited to southwestern Ontario with a membership of only three thousand. (Watt, 1967: 58, 59) Thus, although the Orange Order and the P.P.A. would later be considered nativistic movements, they initially served to promote fraternity and community.

The organizations of nativistic social movements in the United States and Canada are both similar and distinctive. They are similar in that both sets of movements sought to generate social closure for their membership. They achieved this by utilizing various rituals, ceremonies and symbols in order to define their group and to distinguish themselves from Roman Catholics. Each movement contained a certain amount of “honorific preferences resting upon distance and exclusiveness”. (Weber, 1978: 191) However, the methods of closure used by Americans and Canadians were distinctive. Both of the American nativistic movements were directly political. They