

From Political to Symbolic Power: Shifting Patterns of Royals' Interactions with British Society, 1870-1920

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Historians and lay observers have long described how the role of the monarchy in British society evolved profoundly in modern history (e.g. Bagehot 1867; Cannadine 1990). Between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries in particular, power in Britain underwent a deep metamorphosis, with the British crown gradually relinquishing power as a ruling institution to instead become the keystone of the symbolic architecture of the British empire (Cannadine 1983). While British political and cultural history has examined this shift at a theoretical level, we know relatively little about what it looked like in practice. Concretely, what did it mean for the British monarchy to transform from an effective political elite into a symbolic one? How did royals' patterns of interactions with British society evolve as they morphed from a ruling elite to a symbolic one? What can this teach us more broadly about the exercise of political versus symbolic power? This paper takes one provisional step toward addressing these questions by examining the 1870 to 1920 years of a new database recording all public interactions between British royals and British society from 1803 to 2021.

Data

Since 1803, the official doings of the British monarchy have been continuously reported in the *Court Circular*, an official agenda listing all activities of the British monarch and royal family members, published daily, after approval by the sovereign, in *The Times*, *The Telegraph* and *The*

Scotsman (The Royal Household 2021). We use the *Court Circular*, which has never been studied before, as a window into the public interactions between the royal family and British society, as well as into the official image that the monarchy has looked to convey to the public over time. We used web-scraping techniques to download over 150,000 scanned images of the *Court Circular* that were published in *The Times* from 1830 to 2021. We then transformed these newspaper images into text with optical character recognition techniques using the Cloud Vision API platform. Finally, for each event recorded in the *Court Circular*, we used text parsing and entity recognition techniques in R's SpacyR package to extract a number of variables of interest, including the names of the royals and of other individuals or organizations that attended the event; royals' titles and individuals' honorifics and ranks in their respective organizations; and the type of event that they attended.

Findings

Cannadine (1983) has argued that until the 1870s, the monarchy continued to wield considerable political power through its embeddedness in ruling aristocratic circles, while its symbolic power as head of the British nation remained underdeveloped. It was only starting in the late 1870s that the Crown started managing its ceremonial image more systematically and gradually turned into what Bagehot (1867) described as the “fountain of honour” – that is, as an institution wielding mostly symbolic power as the head of the British empire. Here we document how this shift was translated in shifting patterns of interactions between royals and representatives of various strata of British society.

In figure 1, we find that throughout the period, the monarchy was primarily connected in public to aristocracy. In fact, over the course of the 1870s, when the aristocracy reached the peak of its economic and political power (Cannadine 1990), public connections between royals and aristocratic figures kept strengthening, reflecting the monarchy's embeddedness within the elite networks wielding effective political power. From the 1880s onward, however, our data record a gradual shift, with royals increasingly associating in public with commoners. This may have been because commoners were now increasingly part of government, or because the British monarchy pivoted from maintaining actual power through connections with governing circles to a softer, symbolic version of power that bypassed associations with governing elites to showcase a direct, “democratic” connection with more ordinary members of British society.

To better interpret this shift, we break down events into those that involved the discussion of government matters and the social space of royal dinners, which had a more honorific nature and therefore were more likely to reflect the exercise of royals' symbolic power (Davidoff 1973). We find that the proportion of commoners increased disproportionately among royal dinner attendees, suggesting that the monarchy's increasing public association with ordinary Britons was the form taken by its turn toward the exercising of symbolic over political power.

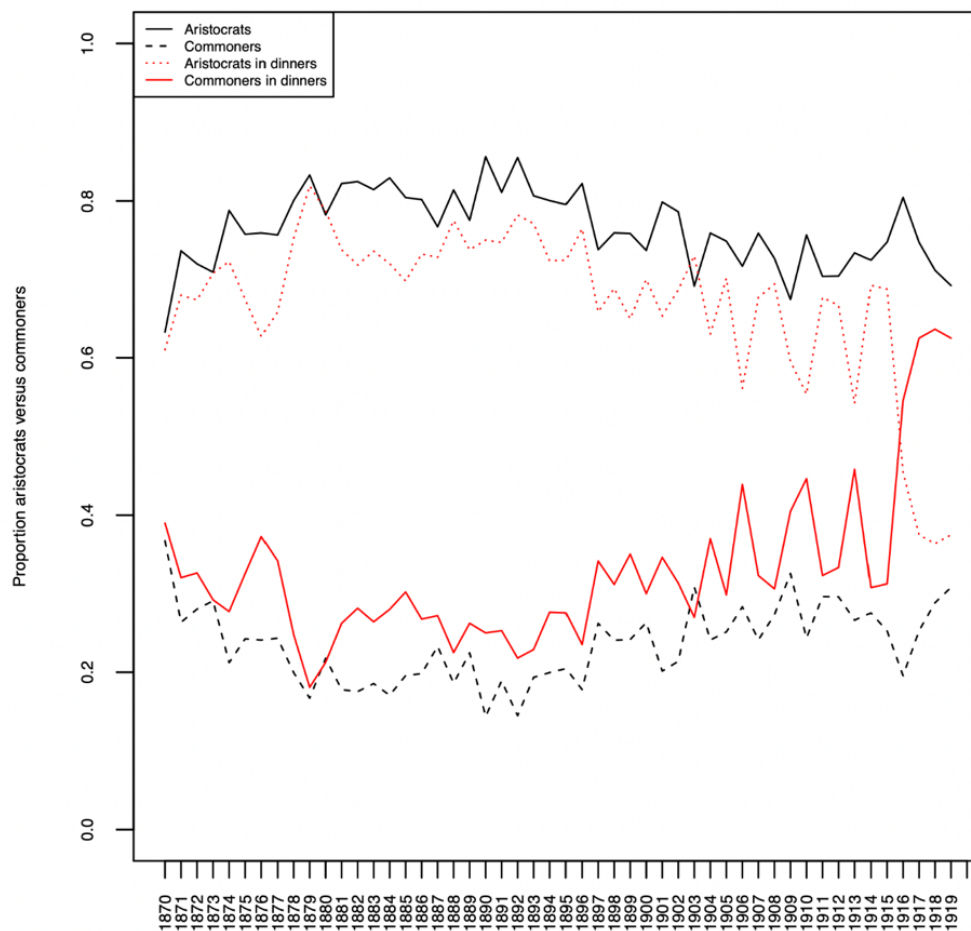


Fig. 1 – Proportion of aristocrats versus commoners among royal's public interactions

To confirm this analysis, we next examine the frequency of public associations of royals with various strata in the aristocratic pecking order (figure 2). The British peerage system is composed of five strata, whereby the highest-level title holders are dukes and duchesses, followed by marquesses and marquionesses, earls and countesses, viscounts and viscountesses, and finally barons and baronesses (Cannadine 1990). Following this hierarchy of titles in the frequency of

their associations with each was one way royals could symbolically uphold the British social order.

In fact, by looking at public associations between members of the royal family and different strata in the aristocracy, we find that up until the mid-1880s, the frequency of visits followed almost exactly the aristocratic pecking order: royals met dukes and duchesses more frequently than marquesses, marchionesses, earls, and countesses, who themselves were met more frequently than viscounts and viscountesses, while barons and baronesses were the group least often seen in public with royals. Over time, however, this hierarchy was increasingly ignored by royals when they publicly associated with members of the aristocracy. This we interpret as revealing a shift in how the British monarchy exercised symbolic power, from a logic meant on upholding an aristocratic status system that placed royals at its top, to a different logic, wherein the monarchy increasingly bypassed this system and derived its legitimacy from its direct connection with ordinary representatives of the British nation.

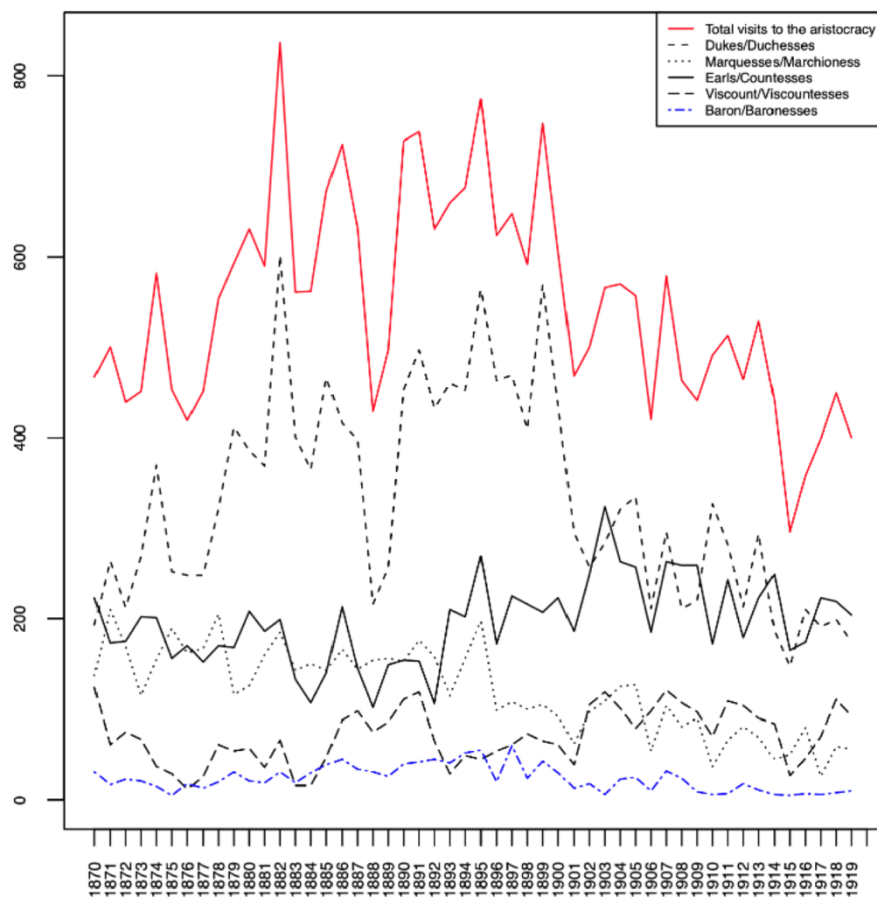


Fig. 2 – Connections of the monarchy to the aristocratic pecking order, 1870 – 1920

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