To what extent did economic motivations influence the outcome of the Salem Witch Trials?
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Section A: Plan of Investigation

The Salem Witch Trials which occurred from 1692 to 1693, has been a major research topic for historians throughout the years. Even though there were less than 30 people massacred by this event, this circumstance lead to considerable changes in the American way of living and government. To understand the situation one must examine different perspectives, and this investigation thus, will focus specifically in the economic spectrum answering the question: To what extent did economic motivations influenced the outcome of the Salem Witch Trials? To answer this, research was done by examining memoirs, secondary sources such as books, academic papers and the writings of economic historians. The three main sources focus mostly in the personal lives of the victims as well as the economic development during the time and as such, will be referenced thoroughly. By going from a general point of view to a specific point of view, the historical knowledge combined with the focused research, gave the necessary information to answer why did economic motives influenced the results of the Salem Witch Trials.

Section B: Summary of Evidence

During the time of the Salem Witch Trials, indian attacks were a predicament which caused much instability, most notably economic (Foulds, 2010). Due to the frequent indian raids in the village, wealth was highly volatile. This previous situation, allowed for the transfer of property that often went to the female of the home, if the husband were to die. Accusers such as Richard Carrier and Sarah Churchill, managed to end up with properties that weren’t owned previously after the trials were done (Foulds, 2010) hence making reference to the easy way wealth fluctuated. Ironically, 14 victims had large fortunes and/or vast pieces of land under their possession prior to their arrest and subsequent trial. For
example Martha Carrier: “After her brothers and father died because of the pox she became heir to one of the richest farms in Andover” (Foulds, 2010, p. 54), Elizabeth Howe: “She was also the subject of envy, being in line to inherit a third of her father’s substantial state.” (Foulds, 2010, p. 79), and finally Ann Pudeator: “Perhaps they resented how easily she came into wealth or suspected her of hastening her good fortune by arranging her two husbands’ deaths.” (Foulds, 2010, p. 102). Most of the victims owned farms that went from 130 acres to 700 acres like Rebecca Nurse, Sarah Osborne and John Proctor, causing envy and motivation between their neighbours. As most of them were female, the religious belief in which they believed, which was Puritanism, had a complex that made women, not only inferior but also “...the embodiment of evil.” (Boyer and Nissenbaum, p. 65, 1974). Thus, creating a bit of havoc between the males in the lowest economic position of the era. Besides, after victims were caught, (Foulds, 2010) their properties were confiscated and many of the possessions were taken either by the people who accused or by the officers or magistrates.

The magistrates had an important role during the process and as it is known, much of their power came from their own personal wealth. (Foulds, 2010, p. 181). Foulds (2010) stated that during that time there was an economic crisis, which lead to financial losses between the different magistrates in charge of the case, and according to them, it was caused because of the “witches” and thus they sympathized with the afflicted girls (p.183). There were even magistrates, whose power and wealth rose after the events happened and never proclaimed themselves guilty. An example of this would be William Stoughton, who according to Foulds (2010): “... even rose to the pinnacle of power, standing in for two royal governors who died...” (p. 253)

One of the most valuable resources during this time was the production of rye. Aside from having an important role in Salem’s economy, it was a staple in the daily inhabitants’ diet (Bellows, 2006). This was important because about twenty years earlier, a disease called
ergotism, which came from rye and bread, was found and basically what it did was to cause paranoia, anxiety attacks and hallucinations within the afflicted person. This, of course, would explain why the girls acted in such a weird manner. However, as rye was one of the most important sources of income to declare that it caused a type of food poisoning, it would damage the already unstable economy in the town” (Mixon Jr, 2000).

Finally, the religion had also its economic impact in society. As Mixon Jr. said (2000), Puritan ministers employed harsh methods to maintain and perhaps strengthen the church’s monopoly. There was one important and peculiar minister during this event called Samuel Parris. As he came to Salem Village in 1960, he found it hard to cope with the inhabitants (Foulds, 2010). Thanks to his daughter being the one that started the whole catastrophe, many historians question the reason why it all began; Mixon Jr. (2000) stated, “Parris, a former businessman who had often preached of the importance of economics and commerce, had been experiencing difficulty in filling the village meethouse for weekly worship and even in persuading the congregation to pay his salary. However, most villagers turned to him for explanation and guidance ... Parris’s stature in the village soon soared.” (p. 181)

Section C: Evaluation of sources

The book, *Death in Salem* was one of the main sources used for the research paper. Foulds, a well known researcher who also published *A Guide to Czech and Slovak Glass* is an established author who began a research over this topic since an ascendant of her was directly affected during the event. The purpose of her investigation is to give an emphasis in the private lives of the people involved during the trials, and to know why were the accusations made. It has a certain value as it comes from someone who has “directly” involved by it. The author lives in the Massachusetts area and she interviewed people and researched through the
years with different sources. It is somewhat limited, as it possess valuable information regarding the private lives, which is important while analyzing historical events; however, as it is a modern source, the information may not be as precise as other older documents, since information is always changed as time passes by.

The second main source was the article “Homo Economicus and the Salem Witch Trials”, which was published in 2000. The author Franklin G. Mixon, Jr. is a professor of public economics, mathematical and quantitative methods, and labour and demographic economics at the Columbus State University and an associate of the University of Southern Mississippi. The purpose of the paper is to explain how economics worked during that time and how did it affect the ongoing crisis between the towns and cities of Massachusetts. Since it is published in an academic journal and it is written by a professor, the source has value and it shouldn’t be underrated. Furthermore, Mixon Jr. undertook his research by analyzing different economic articles and books about Salem such as The Devil in Massachusetts showing that there was both a historical and economic context in the investigation. However, it is limited as it only focuses on the economic situations and not the social side of the Salem Witch Trials, so it doesn’t give a full panorama on the event and it should not be used on its own.

Section D: Analysis

According to the evidence provided by the different sources, economic reasons were an important factor that affected the Salem Witch Trials. Whether to assert people in a new social-economical position or to get rid of fellow competition, some of the accusers who backed up the accusations made by the afflicted girls may have had other motivations to undertake part during the trials. This is proven by analysing the cases of the victims Mary
Parker and Reverend George Burroughs, who were role citizens in Andover and Maine, respectively, and owners of prosperous farms, ended up being accused and executed because of false information given by the witnesses as Foulds agrees (2010). Another important factor is that according to Karlsen, people convicted of witchcraft in Europe were usually poor people, while during the hysteria in Salem convicted mostly wealthy and powerful people (1987) and were “...some of the most prominent people in Massachusetts.” (Boyer and Nissenbaum, p. 48, 1974). Although some have argued that the accusations were done simply because of the witch hysteria of the time (Campbell, 2013) due to the trials done 30 years before, it is not clear as to what were the exact causes for this event. Karlsen also argues that independent woman who had inherited big fortunes, such as Martha Carrier (Foulds, 2010) posed a distinct threat to an already fragile economic system that aside from relying heavily on the transfer of property within the male spectrum of the family, was also continuously affected by the Indian raids.

Another economic issue that was obvious during the event, were the job opportunities, that can be seen with the Roger Toothaker case (Foulds, 2010), who was the physician in the Salem Village area. He was accused of practicing witchcraft after a new physician came, possibly to take his job, henceforth emphasising the need of removing business competition. Another important factor that is also debatable as to what were the incentives to accuse others, was to increase the church’s monopoly, or otherwise individual wealth (Mixon Jr, 2000). A clear example of this is as Mixon Jr. states, how ministers were “...very effective in shaping popular conceptions of witchcraft” (2000, p. 181).

Even though, after the chaos was over and the properties of those who were accused or killed return to their relatives, during the confiscation of the houses, possessions such as valuable item and cattle were taken, either by people who took advantage of the confusion or
by the officers who “officially” took the stuff to be deported to the crown, although this is still unclear due to the lack of records about the victim’s properties.

As such it can be seen that there were three important aspects within the economic side of the situation: to remove competition, assert themselves in a new socioeconomic position and to maintain the economic power in balance. Due to the common Indian raids in the area, villagers had trouble harvesting their crops and selling them for profit. This in turn had two consequences: one, were women had to inherit their spouses properties due to them being killed or two, for a harsher competition against their neighbours due to the small amount of harvests.

Section E: Conclusion

“A man died today because he opposed you. Opposing you is not a crime before God!” (Ryan & Sargent, 2002). It can thus be said that besides the fact that economic motivations were part of the Salem Witch Trials, they were one of the main components for the hysteria to happen as well. As seen and proved by the different sources, even if some of the victims were beggars and led a different lifestyle than that of the Puritans, most of the victims held large properties of land or were prosperous in their business, while others were role citizens. The economic situation was unstable and competition was fierce, and so witchcraft accusation proved to be an incentive to secure personal resources and/or a sphere of influence. It is also highly debatable whether religion only served with a “dutiful” purpose, or if the ministers forwent their role as community helpers and decided to develop a stronger monopoly. Nonetheless, in a time where the pillars of power equalled having a stable economic life, the end did justified the means, at least according to those who did the accusations and never saw an immediate drawback because of it.
Section F: List of Sources

Books


Articles


Webpages


Film