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Rethinking the Language of Chartism

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Abstract

For decades, the study of Chartism has been one of the most vibrant fields of modern British history. Indeed, this nineteenth-century radical movement was a major empirical focus for proponents of the so-called linguistic turn that has exerted such a major influence on the discipline. Interest in the Chartists does not abate, with valuable recent studies all combining—to greater or lesser extent—close attention to Chartist verbal and symbolic forms of communication with novel thematic concerns. However, more remains to be said about the language of Chartism, the topic that provided the original impetus for so much subsequent work. Specifically, the generally accepted argument that languages of constitutionalism and democracy were inextricably intertwined can be questioned, a task made easier by digitization of key organs of the Chartist press. This article revisits this intertwining in the pages of the *Northern Star* from the movement's beginnings in the late 1830s to its disintegration in the late 1840s. It commences with results of a quantitative analysis of Chartist discourse and reconsideration of the relationship between the constitutional and democratic idioms in the movement's early phase. Four factors are then discussed, which help explain the increasing prevalence of the language of democracy through the 1840s: heightened social conflict during the general strike of 1842; Chartist engagement in formal politics; international developments; and the crisis of 1848. However, despite the dominant linguistic trend, connections between democracy and social class, forged in the early 1840s, were not immutable but contingent.

The young Friedrich Engels considered Chartism a revolutionary movement, a view he put forward in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, first published in Germany in 1845 though not translated into English until over forty years later.[1] In this work, Engels argued that while the form of the People's Charter was "purely political"—comprising electoral reforms that could be traced back to the late eighteenth century— in reality it demanded no less than "a democratic basis for the House of Commons." In the context of Britain in the 1840s, and "harmless as they may seem," such reforms would be sufficient, Engels believed, "to overthrow the whole English Constitution." He went on to stress that the "English Chartist…sympathises with the republican parties of all countries, and calls himself in preference a democrat." In a crucial passage, Engels wrote:

[1] For the publication history and context, see Steven Marcus, *Engels, Manchester and the Working Class* (Random House, 1974); Gregory Claeys, "The Political Ideas of the Young Engels, 1842–1845: Owenism, Chartism, and the Question of Violent Revolution in the Transition from 'Utopian' to 'Scientific' Socialism," *History of Political Thought* 6, no. 3 (1985): 455–78. Useful recent studies can be found in Terrell Carver and Smail Rapic, eds., *Friedrich Engels for the 21st Century. Reflections and Revaluations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

> Therein lies the difference between Chartist democracy and all previous political bourgeois democracy. Chartism is of an essentially social nature, a class movement. The "Six Points" which for the Radical bourgeois are the beginning and end of the matter, which are meant, at the utmost, to call forth certain further reforms of the Constitution, are for the proletarian a mere means to further ends. "Political power our means, social happiness our end," is now the clearly formulated war-cry of the Chartists.[2]

Engels's interpretation here and elsewhere in the text is easily criticized. There is the inevitability of "class" confrontation between an impoverished Chartist "proletariat" and "bourgeois" reformers, and workers are predictably ticked off for their failure to fully embrace socialism and for being distracted by the Land Plan, though they are also praised on the grounds of their imputed republicanism. If youthful passion and a desire to quicken the pace of change may admittedly have clouded Engels's judgment on these and other specific points, nevertheless he was not alone in regarding Chartism as a profound challenge both to the existing status quo and to the direction of social and economic development, with such a view generating widespread anxiety among British elites during the "hungry forties."[3] Moreover, Engels was keen to separate out constitutional from democratic discourses, which he imputed to different social classes that held alternative conceptions of citizenship. For him, middle-class or "bourgeois" democracy was essentially individualist and bounded by respect for a fictive constitution, configuring the vote as a sign of independence and manly worth. Working-class or "Chartist" democracy, on the other hand, had moved beyond the bounds of the constitution, demanding enfranchisement to secure collective rights that would transform the lives of the majority.

Reality was far messier than Engels cared to admit, of course, as research on the language of Chartism has revealed. Gareth Stedman Jones's pioneering essay provided the initial impetus for the study of Chartist political discourse.[4] James Epstein's subsequent work lent broad, if qualified, support to Stedman Jones's key argument, confirming just how tenaciously attractive the "constitutional idiom" was for popular radicals.[5] Although more recent scholarship has bent the stick in the other direction—arguing for the saliency

[2] Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England: From Personal Observations and Authentic Sources* (Panther Books, 1969 [orig. 1845]), 261. Engels was most likely paraphrasing Feargus O'Connor in *Northern Star*, 15 April 1843, 1: "*political power* is but a MEANS, and SOCIAL HAPPINESS the END." The six points of the Charter, as many schoolchildren in Britain used to know, were universal (male) suffrage; secret ballots; no property qualification for MPs; payment of MPs; equal sized constituencies; and annual parliaments.

[3] Robert Saunders, "Chartism from Above: British Elites and the Interpretation of Chartism," *Historical Research* 81, no. 213 (2008): 463–84.

[4] Gareth Stedman Jones, "The Language of Chartism," in *The Chartist Experience: Studies in Working-Class Radicalism and Culture, 1830–1860*, ed. James Epstein and Dorothy Thompson (Macmillan Press, 1982). This essay, an extended version of which was later published as "Rethinking Chartism" in Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983) and which is cited here represented one aspect of Stedman Jones's attempt to settle accounts with Marxism. For other examples by Stedman Jones, which argued that Marx's interpretation of British capitalism was deeply flawed owing to Engels's abiding influence, see Gareth Stedman Jones, "Engels and the Genesis of Marxism," *New Left Review* no. 106 (1977): 79–104; Gareth Stedman Jones, "Some Notes on Karl Marx and the English Labour Movement," *History Workshop Movement* no. 18 (1984): 124–37. More recent elaborations have become shriller: Gareth Stedman Jones, "Engels and the Invention of the Catastrophist Conception of the Industrial Revolution," in *The Young Hegelians. Politics and Philosophy in the Hegelian School*, ed. Douglas Moggach (Cambridge, 2006), 200–19; Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (Penguin Books, 2017).

[5] James A. Epstein, "The Constitutional Idiom: Radical Reasoning, Rhetoric, and Action in Early Nineteenth-Century England," *Journal of Social History* 23, no. 3 (1990): 553–74.

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of democratic discourse—even historians critical of the idea that constitutionalism was a kind of "master narrative" in the first half of the nineteenth century accept that these idioms were invariably intertwined.[6] While social analysis of Chartism, which underscores the importance of class antagonism and industrial protest, has challenged the centrality of discursive analysis, it remains indisputable that Chartism was focused around a number of quintessential political demands, embodied from spring 1838 in the "People's Charter."[7] Recent histories of Chartism have advanced the field by focusing on consumer organizing, space and place, moral politics, popular memory, and emotion.[8] If these studies have drawn attention to Chartist verbal and symbolic forms of communication, more remains to be said about competing idioms.[9] The generally accepted idea that constitutional and democratic idioms were always intertwined should not be taken for granted; indeed, both how and when they unraveled deserves closer attention.

The relationship between the discourses of democracy and constitutionalism within the Chartist popular political movement was not only complex between the late 1830s and the early 1850s. It was also dynamic. Constitutionalism was not in fact dominant throughout this period. Nor were these competing idioms always intertwined. A close reading of the *Northern Star* throughout this period reveals that their relationship broke down at an increasing pace as the "constitutional idiom" waned in importance while the "democratic idiom" was on the rise in the 1840s, the latter's growing popularity indicative of Chartism's stridently independent "class" character. The search for continuities has led historians to underestimate this shift, making it harder to appreciate fully the movement's profound challenge to British capitalism and the British state. Yet the *Northern Star*, the leading radical periodical of its day, which ran throughout the movement's existence and has been almost entirely digitized, allows the polyvocality of the movement, the diversity of Chartist opinion and debate, and the shifts in Chartist discourse to be tracked.[10] Chartist ideas and their linguistic expression, however, cannot be divorced from practice, from what Chartists did regardless of what they said. Chartism was not, after all, a seminar in intellectual history

[6] Joanna Innes, Mark Philp, and Robert Saunders, "The Rise of Democratic Discourse in the Reform Era: Britain in the 1830s and 1840s," in *Re-imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland 1750–1850*, ed. Joanna Innes and Mark Philp (Oxford, 2013); Peter J. Gurney, "The Democratic Idiom: Languages of Democracy in the Chartist Movement," *Journal of Modern History* 86, no. 3 (2014): 566–602. Although published earlier, Innes, Philp, and Saunders had access to a draft of my article before they wrote their own essay. A recent treatment of democratic discourse across the long nineteenth century is Hugo Bonin, "Du Regime Mixte a la 'Vraie Democratie': Une Histoire Conceptual du mot *Democracy* en Grande-Bretagne, 1770–1920" (PhD diss., University of Quebec in Montreal and University Paris VIII Vincennes Saint Denis, 2021).

[7] Emma Griffin, "The Making of the Chartists: Popular Politics and Working-class Autobiography in Early Victorian Britain," *English Historical Review* 129, no. 538 (2014): 578–605; Malcolm Chase, *The Chartists: Perspectives and Legacies* (Merlin Press, 2015), 93–94.

[8] Peter Gurney, *Wanting and Having: Popular Politics and Liberal Consumerism in England, 1830–70* (Manchester, 2015); Katrina Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place, 1789–1848* (Manchester, 2016); Tom Scriven, *Popular Virtue: Continuity and Change in Radical Moral Politics, 1820–70* (Manchester, 2017); Matthew Roberts, *Chartism, Commemoration and the Cult of the Radical Hero* (Routledge, 2019); Matthew Roberts, *Democratic Passions: The Politics of Feeling in British Popular Radicalism, 1809–48* (Manchester, 2022).

[9] The best general studies of the movement say little about language per se: Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists* (Verso, 1984); Malcolm Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester, 2007). Important analyses of radical symbolism include Paul Pickering, "Class without Words: Symbolic communication in the Chartist movement," *Past & Present* no. 112 (1986): 144–62; James Epstein, "Understanding the Cap of Liberty: Symbolic Practice and Social Conflict in Early Nineteenth Century England," *Past & Present* no. 122 (1989): 75–118; Katrina Navickas, "'That Sash Will Hang You': Political Clothing and Adornment in England, 1780–1840," *Journal of British Studies* 49, no. 3 (2010): 540–65.

[10] James Epstein, "Feargus O'Connor and the *Northern Star*," *International Review of Social History* 21, no. 1 (1976): 51–97, at 84, 87, 89.

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but a dynamic popular movement,[11] and its efforts to influence the formal political sphere impacted discursive trends. In addition, the growing strength of democratic discourse and concomitant decline in constitutional talk among Chartists was historically contingent: it was aided by both the reception of liberation struggles in continental Europe and the experience of harsh state repression at home.

Untangling constitutional and democratic idioms

Historians who maintain that constitutional discourse dominated Chartism tend to rely on evidence from the movement's early phase.[12] The digitization of Chartist periodicals makes it possible to study linguistic changes diachronically and begin to untangle the constitutional from the democratic idioms more fully by considering how frequently these idioms were employed and how this may have changed over time. One way of addressing such issues is to track their usage quantitatively in the Chartist press, a task made possible by digitization. While such an exercise is not methodologically unproblematic, it is still useful.[13]

Taking three keywords that together could be considered to comprise, to a large degree, the "constitutional idiom"—namely, the nouns "British constitution" and "constitution," and the adjective "constitutional" —the incidence of each in the Gale version of the *Northern Star* was noted, from the first digitized edition in January 1838 to December 1850.[14] The same procedure was then carried out for the "democratic idiom," focusing on "democratic" used as adjective and noun, and the nouns "democracy" and "democrat." Unfortunately, this was not merely a case of counting "hits" in weekly numbers; different editions have been digitized, so each issue has to be looked at carefully to avoid overcounting. Context is also vital; most obviously, "constitution" often referred to bodily health, and such usages were necessarily ruled out. It was also decided to discount descriptive usages that were not part of a discussion of the British situation—in relation to "constitutional monarchy" in France and elsewhere, for instance—and names of parties were similarly excluded, such as the Democrats in the United States. While ruling out such usages was quite easy, albeit time consuming, other contextual problems were more intractable. Admittedly, counting "hits" of particular keywords can be somewhat crude, leading one to overlook instances where the meaning was implied though the term was not. Notwithstanding precautions, in light of these methodological issues it was inevitable that there were losses and gains as well as occasional errors, though these can be reasonably estimated at perhaps no more than 10 percent either way. The results are represented in Figures 1 and 2 below, where the vertical axes record numbers of times the key terms were mentioned in the newspaper.

Unsurprisingly, separating out idioms frequently proved difficult, as the keyword "constitution" was often used in relation to the process of democratic transformation, not only at home but also abroad, particularly in relation to Canada in the late 1830s and then France, Hungary, Poland, Austria, and Sweden throughout the following decade. Much of this coverage bore implicitly, if not explicitly, on the domestic situation. At the start of the period, there was much talk of "constitutional rights" in relation to the New Poor Law and the right

[11] Josh Gibson, "Natural Right and the Intellectual Context of Early Chartist Thought," *History Workshop Journal* vol. 84 (2017): 195; James Epstein, *In Practice: Studies in the Language and Culture of Popular Politics in Modern Britain* (Stanford, 2003).

[12] Stedman Jones, "The Language of Chartism"; Epstein, "The Constitutional Idiom"; Josh Gibson, "The Chartists and the Constitution: Revisiting British Popular Constitutionalism," *Journal of British Studies* 56, no. 1 (2017): 70–90. A similar point was made in Chase, *The Chartists*, 172.

[13] Matthew Roberts, "Labouring in the Digital Archive," *Labour History Review* 78, no. 1 (2013): 113–26.

[14] The Gale version of the *Northern Star* runs from the eighth edition of the paper, which was published 6 January 1838. The nouns "constitutionalist" and "constitutionalism" were hardly ever used so are therefore excluded.

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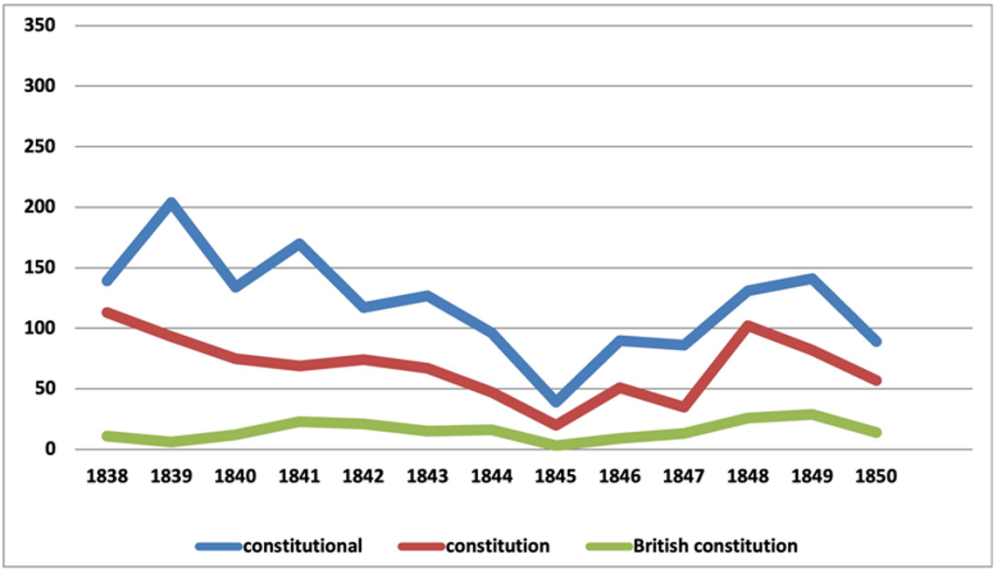

Figure 1. Constitutional discourse in the *Northern Star*, 1838–50.

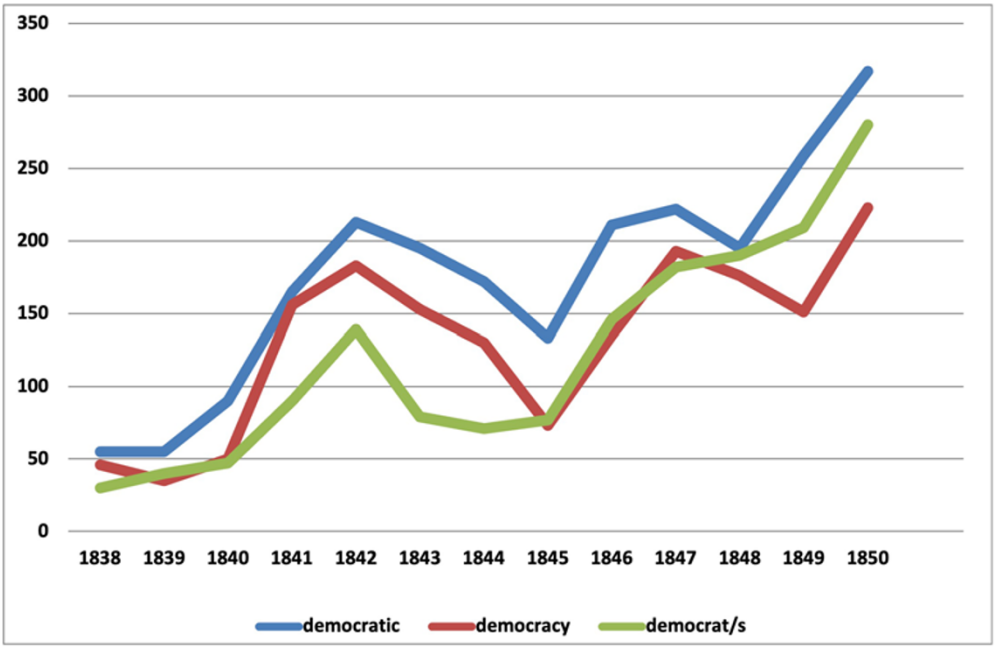

Figure 2. Democratic discourse in the *Northern Star*, 1838–50.

to bear arms. The latter was traced back by some commentators to the 1688 Bill of Rights and was a major topic of debate at the General Convention of the Industrious Classes at which Chartist delegates from throughout the country assembled in London in early 1839 to

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discuss the best means to secure political reform. Such concerns help account for the prevalence of the "constitutional idiom" during the early Chartist phase. The decline of both idioms in the mid-1840s is harder to explain but may have been caused by other issues being crowded out by discussion of the Land Plan, O'Connor's hugely popular scheme that aimed to resettle industrial workers on collectively financed smallholdings.[15] Sympathy for the "constitutional liberties" of people in Hungary and elsewhere helped inflate the discourse of constitutionalism toward the end of the decade, though the impact of European revolutions stimulated the "democratic idiom" to a greater extent. Regardless of such difficulties, the trend is clear: the "constitutional idiom" declined over the lifetime of the *Northern Star*, while the "democratic idiom" grew in importance. Why did this happen?

Overlapping discourses, alternative audiences

When the Chartist movement took off in the late 1830s, arguments for political change based on historical precedent and achieved through constitutional means were common, as Figure 1 illustrates. The speeches and writings of the Manchester Chartist and newsagent Reginald Richardson played a prominent role during this phase, and they consequently loom large in the work of those historians who stress constitutional talk. Addressing a meeting at Hanley in the Potteries in November 1838, for example, Richardson enlisted the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century jurists John Fortescue and John Seldon, as well as the more familiar eighteenth-century authority William Blackstone, to support a conception of the British constitution based on natural law, which he believed guaranteed the rights of the people. Richardson maintained that when "those reciprocal rights were defined and acted upon, no new-fangled doctrines disfigured the Statute Book—no bloody laws, like the Poor Law Amendment Act, drew galling lines of demarcation between the members of the human family. (Cheers.)"[16] Attacks on the New Poor Law as contrary to both divine and natural law were particularly apparent in the paper at this juncture and they came from "Tory radicals" such as Richard Oastler as much as they did from Chartists, with the "Factory King" regularly denouncing the legislation as going against "God and the Constitution."[17]

Preferring to be known as a "constitutional Radical Reformer," Richardson distanced himself from "ultra democrats" who grounded their claims for political power more definitively on natural rights. Thus, speaking at Brighton the following summer and leaning again on scriptural as well as natural law, Richardson criticized Chartists such as Henry Hetherington who considered that there was no written constitution, insisting instead that it was "drawn from the laws of Nature, and ratified by the laws of God, existing in the spirit of the English laws and in the hearts of the people." He went on to invoke the mythology of Anglo-Saxon liberties, concluding with the contention that universal suffrage (by which he presumably meant universal male suffrage) had existed until a property qualification was established under Henry VII.[18] The idea that fundamental principles of divine and natural law were expressed through the English common law and had been embodied in the constitution was shared by the first editor of the *Northern Star*, William Hill. According to Hill, the constitution was nothing less than "the very *soul and spirit* that has grown up, become interwoven with the Government, and formed a part of the national character, by the influence of those laws." Hill also enlisted Blackstone, wryly observing that it was not surprising that magistrates had allowed James "Bronterre" O'Brien a copy of Blackstone's

[15] Malcolm Chase, "'Wholesome Object Lessons': The Chartist Land Plan in Retrospect," *English Historical Review* 118, no. 475 (2003): 59–85.

[16] *Northern Star*, 17 November 1838, 5.

[17] For examples, see *Northern Star*, 20 January 1838, 7; 10 March 1838, 5; 14 April 1838, 7; Gibson, "The Chartists and the Constitution," 80–82.

[18] *Northern Star*, 1 June 1839, 8; Gibson, "The Chartists and the Constitution," 77, 86–87.

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Commentaries when he was in prison. Importantly, however, Hill's faith in the constitution was sorely tested by the wave of state repression that hamstrung the movement between the summer of 1839 and the spring of 1840. The persecution of John Frost and others led Hill to conclude that the common law now provided "no security" for the people's liberties: it was "little else than a name" and thoroughly subordinated to statute law deployed to uphold "that dominance which is called the 'freedom' of the middle classes."[19]

Appeals to the constitution as a defense of pre-existing rights were widely shared among Chartists in this initial phase of agitation. They cut across crude distinctions between physical and moral force that counterposed violent methods of achieving political change with peaceful forms of persuasion, a categorization that marked the earliest interpretations of the movement but has been questioned by subsequent scholarship.[20] Richardson's historical understanding of the constitutional rights of the British people, for instance, undergirded his firm belief in the legitimacy of the people to take up arms against arbitrary power.[21] The case for armed resistance was often couched in most threatening terms, and not only by typical firebrands such as Joseph Rayner Stephens. This became official strategy in May 1839 when the Convention published the "May Manifesto" that proclaimed the right of just resistance to tyranny, a document written mostly by the "moral force" Chartist William Lovett.[22]

Feargus O'Connor put forward similar arguments at this time. However, context is crucial to understand why and for what purposes he deployed the constitutional idiom. During this early phase, before class divisions had been exposed fully by debates at the Convention, O'Connor had been keen to maintain the fragile alliances that existed between different radical groups. Thus, at a meeting in Glasgow in July 1838, he sought to blur boundaries, pointing out that middle-class reformers such as Thomas Attwood, Daniel O'Connell, and even "slashing Henry Brougham" had advocated the use of "physical force" to achieve their objectives. O'Connor went on to declare that "the Constitution, as it was called … was, in fact, a mere matter of clouds" that could be altered by Parliament at will, but, significantly, he also harked back to the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688, which he fancifully suggested had given the people universal suffrage.[23] At a meeting of the Council of the Birmingham Political Union (BPU) chaired by the manufacturer Philip Muntz a few month later, O'Connor reassured his audience that Chartists were not "Destructives" but rather "revered and respected the constitution of the country … They wished it restored to its former vigour, and its full and entire rights extended to the people." Once again, O'Connor buttressed the demand for universal suffrage with historical precedent, on this occasion maintaining that voting rights had been enjoyed by the majority until the reign of Henry VI.[24]

[19] *Northern Star*, 13 June 1840, 4; 11 April 1840, 4.

[20] R.G. Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement, 1837–1884* (Kessinger, 1854; 1894 ed.), 83–86; J. F. C. Harrison, "Chartism in Leicester," in *Chartist Studies*, ed. Asa Briggs (St Martin's Press, 1959), 133–35; Chase, *Chartism*, 46–48.

[21] R. G. Richardson, *The Right of Englishmen to Have Arms: As Shown in a Speech Delivered in the National Convention* (J. Cleave, 1839). See also Hill's editorial in *Northern Star*, 7 September 1839, 3.

[22] Chase, *The Chartists*, 97. The "May Manifesto" advocated "ulterior measures" designed to increase pressure on the state for reform, including, besides arming, withdrawal of money from savings banks, abstention from taxed commodities (alcohol, tobacco, sugar, tea, coffee), "exclusive dealing" (a boycott of shopkeepers who refused to support the popular cause), and a "sacred month" or general strike. See Chase, *Chartism*, 60–69.

[23] *Northern Star*, 28 July 1838, 8; Rémy Duthille, "A Practical English Past: Commemorating the Glorious Revolution in England, from Tom Paine to T. B. Macaulay," in *Memory and Modern British Politics: Commemoration, Tradition, Legacy*, ed. Matthew Roberts (Bloomsbury, 2024), 15–34.

[24] *Northern Star*, 1 September 1838, 8. One of the Birmingham delegates to the Convention, as a local magistrate Muntz became a widely despised figure following the Bull Ring riots. See Clive Behagg, *Politics and Production in the Early Nineteenth Century* (Routledge, 1990).

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Context, however, was vital, with discourses tailored and nuanced for specific audiences, and strategically deployed in particular circumstances.[25] Thus in other contexts, before different audiences, O'Connor freely used democratic language. At a meeting of the London Working Men's Association (LWMA) in late December 1838, for instance, he assured his listeners that "while in the House of Commons and out of it, he had stood by the Ultra-Democratic principle. He had never yet in thought, word, speech, or writings, expressed a single sentence against the fullest measure of liberty for the people." The LWMA is often regarded as a moderate organization, as is the BPU, but some of their leaders were instrumental in popularizing democratic discourse in the 1830s. Lovett typically described himself as a democrat, and so too did the Birmingham Chartist John Collins. He, like many others, found in this idiom a way of eulogizing the movement and its ultimate ambition. Collins provocatively asserted at a meeting organized by the middle-class-dominated Leeds Reform Association in 1841 that was effectively highjacked by Chartists: "Democracy was immortal in its principles, because based on truth; and while the principles of ancient Greece and Rome were daily more and more honoured and revered, the pyramids of Egypt, and the pillar of Pompey (sic), the monuments of princely folly, were crumbling into dust, and being forgotten of mankind."[26]

The radical artisanal culture of the metropolis had been an important source of democratic discourse for years, producing some of its most vocal exponents.[27] The printer and publisher Henry Hetherington, who had chaired the meeting at which O'Connor spoke, was an indefatigable advocate. Mark Hovell, an early historian of Chartism, described Hetherington as a "downright, clear-headed, and trustworthy man," but he was also one of the most outstanding working-class intellectuals of his generation.[28] Published by Hetherington and edited by O'Brien, the *Poor Man's Guardian*, the most important title in the "war of the unstamped," had been a fountainhead of democratic language in the first half of the 1830s, and this was continued in the *London Dispatch*, which Hetherington established toward the end of the decade. Unlike many radicals, Hetherington had no patience for the idea of a "Norman Yoke"; workers had been slaves under the Saxons, he believed, and for centuries thereafter "the aristocracy have trampled upon the democracy of Britain."[29] He admitted that it could be argued that Britain had a constitution in the general sense, in as much as the country enjoyed a particular system of rule, but emphasized that so too did despotic regimes like Russia and Turkey. For Hetherington, only a country such as America could claim to have a constitution "in the *limited* and *best* meaning of the word," which guaranteed self-government by the people and fundamental liberties. He thought that the present political conjuncture was marked by stasis: Lords and Commons were at loggerheads and the political elite struggled to contain the challenge from below, hence even in the general sense a constitution was in effect absent. If "birth oligarchs" tried to "restore the ancient monopoly of feudalism," "money aristocrats" sought to "establish the despotism of the middle classes," Hetherington wrote. Nevertheless, the solution was now at hand: "We equally with them, oligarchs and aristocrats, want a constitution, but the constitution we

[25] For strategic uses of language in a later period, see Peter Bailey, "'Will the Real Bill Banks Please Stand Up?' Towards a Role Analysis of Mid-Victorian Working-Class Respectability," *Journal of Social History* 12, no. 3 (1979): 336–53.

[26] *Northern Star*, 29 December 1838, 3; 23 January 1841, 8. The influence of Volney's well-known text, *The Ruins of Empire* (1791), is apparent in Collins's remarks.

[27] Classic studies of this milieu are Iorwerth Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London: John Gast and his Times* (Dawson, 1979); David Goodway, *London Chartism, 1838–1848* (Cambridge, 1982); Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795–1840* (Cambridge, 1988).

[28] Mark Hovell, *The Chartist Movement* (Longmans, 1918; 1966 ed.), 57.

[29] *London Dispatch*, 21 May 1837, 284. The classic study of this theme is Christopher Hill, "The Norman Yoke," in *Democracy and the Labour Movement: Essays in Honour of Dona Torr*, ed. John Saville (Lawrence & Wishart, 1954).

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require is one for all the people—purely democratic—one of equality and liberty, where no other superiority is recognized but that of talent and worth." According to Hetherington, this ambition could only be realized if workers exercised political control: "This constitution we may attain (in the breaking up of the existing state of things, which is imminent), if working men will but learn to know their own power, to respect industry more, and wealth and birth less."[30]

There were other major sources of the democratic idiom in the capital at this time, notably George Julian Harney's East London Democratic Association founded in January 1837.[31] Estranged from Hetherington by this time, O'Brien shared this discourse, constantly lauding democracy in the pages of the *London Mercury*.[32] Despite this increasing saliency, the appeal of constitutional and democratic idioms remained finely balanced in the late 1830s, as scholarship has rightly emphasized, their usage frequently intertwined. The historically based constitutional rights of the "freeborn Englishman" were commonly defended by Chartists—especially freedom of speech and assembly, freedom from arbitrary arrest, and the right to petition—though constitutional support was commonly sought for more "direct" forms of activity too, including, besides the right to bear arms, mass meetings and torchlight demonstrations. Constitutional and natural rights arguments were also used interchangeably in debates during the first Convention over the so-called ulterior measures recommended in the "May Manifesto," especially the "sacred month" or general strike and exclusive dealing.[33] Chartists of all kinds were reluctant to downplay the language of constitutionalism and prioritize democratic discourse, then, during the movement's early phase. Indeed, attempting to separate idioms at this time is made more difficult and somewhat artificial by the fact that not only were they frequently intertwined, but they were also sometimes effectively fused.

Josh Gibson's work is helpful here, seeking as it does to understand better this fusion as "natural rights constitutionalism."[34] Chartists drew on an eclectic range of sources, including works on natural law by Hugo Grotius, Samuel von Pufendorf, Montesquieu, and especially John Locke to support demands for not only a remodeling of the existing constitution but also the substitution of a written constitution that would enable popular grievances to be addressed. It was widely believed that the "People's Charter" launched in May 1838 ought to be made "the basis of the British constitution."[35] In this, Chartist rhetoric and demands were consonant with principles laid out in the American constitution, which was widely referred to with admiration, as Gibson emphasizes. However, the case for "natural rights constitutionalism" should not be pushed too far. Although constitutional discourse could be employed in the most threatening manner and could cut across crude distinctions of physical and moral force, it was also true that those individuals that used it most readily, and who avoided the language of democracy, tended to be moderates. The Anglican minister Humphrey Price was fearless in his defense of striking Staffordshire potters and staunchly

[30] *London Dispatch*, 16 April 1837, 242. The word "industry" is obviously used as a synonym for "labor" in this passage.

[31] Jennifer Bennett, "The London Democratic Association 1837–41: A Study in London Radicalism," in *The Chartist Experience*, ed. Epstein and Thompson; David Goodway, *London Chartism, 1838–1848* (Cambridge, 1982).

[32] For a good example, see O'Brien's description of a radical meeting at the Crown and Anchor Tavern that attracted four thousand "democrats" organized entirely by "working men" and therefore exhibiting "the true democratic stamp": *London Mercury*, 5 March 1837, 1. O'Brien's falling out with Hetherington is discussed by Michael J. Turner, *Radicalism and Republicanism. The Career of Bronterre O'Brien* (Michigan State, 2017), 61–62.

[33] T. M. Parsinnen, "Association, Convention and Anti-Parliament in British Radical Politics, 1771–1848," *English Historical Review* 88, no. 348 (1973): 504–33.

[34] Gibson, "Natural Right," 198; Paul A. Rahe, "Montesquieu's Natural Rights Constitutionalism," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 29, no. 2 (2012): 51–81.

[35] *Northern Star*, 11 April 1840, 4; 22 May 1841, 7; 18 November 1843, 7; 10 August 1844, 8; Gibson, "The Chartists and the Constitution," 75–76.

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spoke up for the Charter, for instance, but he deeply lamented class antagonism, advising workers to put their faith in "the transcendent advantages of the British constitution" and educate their children in "constitutional schools."[36] Similarly, the dissenting lay preacher Charles Brooker, who campaigned unsuccessfully as Chartist candidate for Brighton in parliamentary elections in 1841 and 1842, traced many of the six points of the Charter back to a lost Anglo-Saxon constitution, including annual parliaments, a claim he reinforced with passages from Obadiah Hulme's *Historical Essay on the English Constitution*.[37] But Chartist respect for Brooker owed more to the way he regularly excoriated fellow landowners who had helped to establish the New Poor Law than it did to his constitutional rhetoric. Keen to avoid any misunderstanding, Brooker distanced himself from linguistic extremists, declaring in his nomination address that if "his principles might be considered as democratic … he was no farther democratic than the New Testament was."[38]

The crisis of 1842

There was a tendency toward a disaggregation of idioms after the traumatic early Chartist phase, heightened by the defection of delegates from the Convention as well as the Bull Ring riots at Birmingham in July, a violent conflict provoked by local magistrates who called on the recently formed Metropolitan Police to suppress Chartist activity in the city, where the Convention was then meeting. This was followed by the rejection by the House of Commons of the first National Petition in favor of the Charter that had been signed by more than one-and-a-quarter million supporters. Later that year mass arrests and an abortive insurrection in November at Newport contributed to disquiet. In a situation where class antagonisms became more pronounced, many Chartists concluded that their objectives would not be realized using emollient language and constitutional means alone. A future-oriented language of democracy proved increasingly attractive in this context, as the quantitative data from the *Northern Star* suggests. Yet it would be unwise to regard this shift as rapid or clear-cut. In an editorial on "The First Principles of Government" published in the *Star* in January 1841, for example, William Hill noted how in the heated public debate currently raging on the respective merits of republican and monarchical forms of rule, "arguments in favour of a pure democracy" had come more to the fore. Hill agreed that republicanism more fully recognized the fundamental principle that political power should emanate from "the people," but did not rule out a workable compromise so long as the constitution was "rendered sufficiently democratic." Hill concluded with an ominous flourish, warning that "the only means of avoiding a republic" was by "infusing the true spirit of rational democracy into our constitution."[39]

Notwithstanding such complexity, discourses continued to be teased apart during the crisis months that followed, as Chartism's erstwhile middle-class allies continued to first court and then distance themselves from the movement. Notable in this respect were the activities of the Birmingham Quaker Joseph Sturge and his supporters, who promoted what they termed "complete suffrage" as an alternative to the "People's Charter." The "Sturge Declaration" issued in November 1841, which outlined the demands of the National

[36] *The Champion and Weekly Herald*, 8 January 1837, 1; Thompson, *The Chartists*, 170–71; Leonard Smith, "The Working Man's Champion: Reverend Humphrey Price (1775–1853)," *Midland History* 40, no. 2 (2015): 243–63. See also Price's letter in *Odd Fellow*, 14 March 1840, 44.

[37] Obadiah Hulme, *An Historical Essay on the English Constitution: Or, an Impartial Inquiry into the Elective Power of the People, from the First Establishment of the Saxons in this Kingdom* (London, 1771), 4–5; Peter N. Miller, *Defining the Common Good: Empire, Religion and Philosophy in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 1994), 367–68.

[38] *Northern Star*, 17 July 1841, 2; Charles Brooker, *The Murder Den, and its Means of Destruction* (William Woodward, 1842), 26; Thomas Milton Kemnitz, "Chartism in Brighton" (DPhil diss., University of Sussex, 1969), 151, 191, 386.

[39] *Northern Star*, 2 January 1841, 3.

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Complete Suffrage Union (NCSU) and was signed extensively by members of the manufacturers's organization the Anti-Corn Law League as well as some "moral force" Chartists, rested its claims on Blackstone. Its critique was that "a large majority of the people of this country are unjustly excluded from that full, fair, and free exercise of the elective franchise to which they are entitled by the great principle of Christian equity and also by the British Constitution."[40]

Intense social and industrial conflict during the summer of 1842 temporarily derailed this initiative. The lockouts and serious civil unrest served to undermine appeals to the constitution and in this heated atmosphere, middle-class radicals like Richard Cobden as well as Tories regularly demonized democracy.[41] In October that year Lord Abinger, the presiding judge at the Chester Special Commission—one of the kangaroo courts hurriedly set up to summarily deal with those arrested during disturbances—warned the jury of the threat posed by Chartism. Observing how many radicals looked to America for inspiration, Abinger adumbrated the disasters that would befall the country if they were successful. "If such a system of democracy were established in England," Abinger warned, "the first consequence would be, that the security of property would be removed; the public creditor and all commercial accumulations would be destroyed; and, finally, or perhaps the first object aimed at, would be the destruction of property in land. There would be a universal agrarian law." Chartism clearly implied violent revolution for Abinger, and he went on to sketch its inevitable course: "The formation of such a Government in a country like this must work universal ruin and distress; and, after inflicting the most bitter of all tyranny, that of a democratic assembly, would terminate in a despotism."[42] In this context, the "People's Charter" became a synecdoche for democracy, understood as both a transcendent ideal and an ensemble of practices, now regarded more than ever as a defining feature of a specifically "working-class" movement.[43]

Immediately after the strike wave subsided, the NSCU renewed its efforts. The "Sturge Declaration" had emphasized constitutionalism, but the organization now appealed to democracy in an attempt to win converts, a quite audacious tactic. The Council of the NCSU issued an address, signed by Sturge, in September, which denounced the "liberty-hating aristocracy" and made the usual plea for Christian unity to overcome the "drag chains of monopoly." But it also declared that a national conference of middle-class and working-class reformers was urgently necessary in order to

> free ourselves from the grasping influence of faction, guard against the storm of anarchy, be secure against military despotism, and unitedly raising up the intelligence and virtues of democracy on the basis of free institutions, hasten the consummation of that happy period, when "our swords shall be beaten into ploughshares, and our spears into pruning hooks," and when every man shall sit down in peace and security to enjoy the fruits of honest industry.[44]

It seems unlikely that flattering references to "the intelligence and virtues of democracy" would have convinced the majority of Chartists of the NCSU's good intentions, certainly

[40] G. D. H. Cole, *Chartist Portraits* (St Martin's Press, 1941), 173; Alex Tyrrell, *Joseph Sturge and the Moral Radical Party in early Victorian Britain* (Christopher Helm, 1987), 122–23.

[41] "European History," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, October 1842, 432; Gurney, "The Democratic Idiom," 595–96.

[42] *Northern Star*, 15 October 1842, 1.

[43] Dorothy Thompson, "Who Were 'the People' in 1842?," in *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J. F. C. Harrison*, ed. Malcolm Chase and Ian Dyck (Aldershot, 1996) makes a related argument.

[44] *Northern Star*, 17 September 1842, 4.

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not the editor of the *Northern Star*, who drew attention to the secretive, underhand methods used in the election of representatives to the conference that was eventually held in Birmingham in late December. These were hardly the actions of "honest and good men, genuine democrats in heart" Hill wrote, and he advised Chartists to "do their duty in the choice of delegates." Suspecting (on good grounds) that the real aim of the NCSU was to subordinate the "People's Charter" to what he termed the "class crotchet" of free trade, trustworthy delegates would enable the proceedings to be thoroughly scrutinized so that, "every proposition containing a single expression calculated to harm or jeopardize the cause of straightforward, bold democracy will be at once negatived."[45]

The story of the way in which Chartists rebuffed the overtures of the NCSU is well known and there is no need to repeat it in detail. However, it is worth noting William Lovett's stand against the NCSU's attempt on the first day of the conference to replace the demand for the "People's Charter" with a more innocuous sounding Bill of Rights, on the grounds that many sympathizers now found the former too threatening. Lovett believed dearly in the necessity for cross-class cooperation among radicals and was very reluctant to be the cause of any discord. However, he objected in the most passionate terms, for which he received fulsome praise from his old antagonist O'Connor, as well as an abject apology for any past injury.[46] Defeated, Sturge and his followers quit the conference. Before they finally disbanded, delegates debated a resolution that summarized the disagreement and accused the NCSU of having "evinced a want of good *faith* and *honest purpose*." Lovett advised a less accusatory tone and spoke in support of a reworded resolution in this revealing manner: "The principles of democracy gave to every individual an opportunity of exercising his opinions fully and freely, and in his opinion the resolution moved by Mr Parry was a conciliatory one, and amounted to nothing more than this, that as democrats, they wished to do away with the intolerant spirit which had produced so much mischief in their ranks—(hear, hear)." Interestingly, it was O'Connor who proposed the resolution that was finally passed, which underlined how free expression by individuals or groups was fundamental to "the principles of democracy."[47] While the failure to build a cross-class radical alliance did nothing to make the language of constitutionalism more acceptable to working-class radicals, it did compel Chartist leaders dissimilar in so many respects to come together in defense of the "People's Charter" and democracy. Thus if the distinction Engels drew between "bourgeois" and "Chartist democracy" was shaped by such events, it was not a distinction that Lovett shared. Steeped in Enlightenment ideology via Owenism, for Lovett and many other Chartists, including far less moderate figures such as Harney, democracy was a universal, utopian ideal and was certainly not confined to any particular class, even if there was an elective affinity between democracy and the working class in the present historical conjuncture.[48]

Democratic practice

Like so many radicals, Lovett suffered imprisonment for advocating the "People's Charter" and the year he served in Warwick Gaol almost broke his health irrevocably. Little wonder that he refused to give it up then: for Lovett and the movement generally the Charter was not merely a text but a cause. That cause was the demand for self-government, a term

[45] *Northern Star*, 5 November 1842, 4; Chase, *Chartism*, 227–28.

[46] Northern *Star*, 31 December 1842, 1, 5; Tyrrell, *Joseph Sturge*, 129–31; Chase, *Chartism*, 228–29.

[47] *Northern Star*, 7 January 1843, 6.

[48] See Gurney, "The Democratic Idiom," 587–88. For another excellent statement of the utopian promise of democracy, see the remarks of the radical publisher John Cleave at a meeting organized by the middle-class dominated Leeds Reform Association in 1841, which drew tacitly on Volney's *Ruins of Empire: Northern Star*, 23 January 1841, 8.

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Chartists often used interchangeably with democracy, which ran like a connecting thread not only through the Chartist movement, but also through working-class organizations as a whole. Indeed, practices of self-government had been honed over generations by working people in their friendly and benefit societies, nonconformist chapels, trade unions, and co-operative societies. The published version of the "People's Charter" drawn up in spring 1838 by a committee of six sympathetic MPs and six members of the LWMA (including Lovett), unsurprisingly shied away from democratic discourse, no doubt hoping thereby to encourage class alliances. But it did emphasize "that self-government by representation is the only just foundation of political power—the only true basis of Constitutional Rights."[49] Others expressed this idea more forcefully, including the Leeds Working Men's Association, which issued a public address at this time that noted growing disillusionment with constitutional methods of "begging, and praying and petitioning," declaiming impatiently: "Self-government we *must* have. We will obtain it peaceably if we are suffered to do so; BUT WE WILL HAVE IT."[50] In short, Chartists generalized the desire for self-government, projecting it as democracy across an expanding working-class public sphere.[51]

The "People's Charter" represented the possibility of a better life for Chartists, who regarded the franchise as a social as well as individual entitlement that would enable them to improve conditions for the majority. They demanded not merely inclusion within the pale of the existing constitution, but an entirely new constitution, one based on democratic principles and "purified" political practices. O'Connor was among those who hoped to "live to see the Charter the basis of the British constitution," and while he considered Britain to be leading the way, many others looked to America and France for inspiration.[52] Although providing an important model, as many Chartists pointed out, the former was tainted by the persistence of gross inequality and the institution of slavery.[53] On the other hand, the French model appealed because there attempts had been made to use political power to effect social and economic change, an ambition that resonated with Owenite ideas, which enjoyed widespread popularity within the movement, functioning as a kind of ether that permeated Chartism to the core.[54] The Montagnard Constitution of 1793 held such fascination precisely because it had promised to usher in sweeping democratization *and* wealth redistribution. It was hardly surprising that Harney and O'Brien should hark back to this moment, though enthusiasm was widely diffused.[55] When serving as editor of the *Northern Star* in 1844, Joshua Hobson, for example, described the French Constitution

[49] *The People's Charter; Being the Outline of an Act to Provide for the Just Representation of the People of Great Britain and Ireland* (H. Hetherington, 1838), 3.

[50] *Northern Star*, 6 January 1838, 6.

[51] See Eileen Yeo, "Some Practices and Problems of Chartist Democracy," in *The Chartist Experience*, ed. Epstein and Thompson; Geoff Eley, "Edward Thompson, Social History and Political Culture: The Making of a Working-Class Public, 1780–1850," in *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland (Polity, 1990).

[52] *Northern Star*, 27 December 1845, 5.

[53] See, inter alia, Gregory Claeys, "The Example of America as a Warning to England? The Transformation of America in British Radicalism and Socialism, 1790–1850," in *Learning and Living*, ed. Chase and Dyck; Jamie Bronstein, "From the Land of Liberty to Land Monopoly: The United States in a Chartist Context," in *The Chartist Legacy*, ed. Owen Ashton, Robert Fyson and Stephen Roberts (Merlin Press, 1999); Michael J. Turner, *Liberty and Liberticide. The Role of America in Nineteenth-Century British Radicalism* (Lexington Books, 2014); Gibson, "The Chartists and the Constitution," 79; Tom Scriven, "Slavery and Abolition in Chartist Thought and Culture, 1838–1850," *Historical Journal* 65, no. 5 (2022): 1262–84.

[54] Edward Royle, "Chartists and Owenites—Many Parts but One Body," *Labour History Review* 65, no. 1 (2000): 2–21.

[55] Albert Schoyen, *The Chartist Challenge. A Portrait of George Julian Harney* (Heinemann, 1958); Alfred Plummer, *Bronterre: A Political Biography of Bronterre O'Brien, 1804–1864* (Allen and Unwin, 1971), 68–69.

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of 1793 as "the most democratic the world has ever yet heard of."[56] The following year another "moderate," the LWMA activist and shoemaker John Skelton, toasting the establishment on 22 September 1792 of "The Great Fact" of the French Republic that had passed this constitution, looked forward to a time when "Democracy (would) prepare the way for that social equality and general happiness which I have a fervent faith will yet prevail."[57] "We desire to snap our chains," declared the Barnsley Democratic Association, "and this we will be enabled to do by making the People's Charter the basis of a constitution, and carrying out the social system so as to make every man his own employed."[58] Describing such rhetoric as "natural rights constitutionalism" is unhelpful if it obscures the cause of democracy about which radicals so often spoke and for which they were prepared to sacrifice so much.

Chartists reflected deeply on questions of history and theory, and their thinking informed their political practice, though these aspects are typically treated separately by historians. As Miles Taylor noted: "The six points tend to be treated as 'popular constitutionalism' without any attempt being made to look at how the Chartist commitment to representative democracy … was actually put into practice in many urban constituencies."[59] Denied the means of self-government in so many areas of life, radicals sought to influence the political sphere using a variety of tactics. Despite frequent disillusionment, collecting signatures and organizing petitions to government remained a major focus of activity.[60] Moreover, marches and demonstrations that contested "public" space drew in huge numbers of participants, particularly in the movement's early years.[61] However, from the outset, Chartists also engaged closely with the mechanics of actually existing "representative democracy," including, most importantly, electioneering, supporting numerous candidates in by-elections and general elections. During these campaigns, the meaning of the constitution was debated in meetings and on the streets as well as in texts, lending practical form to demands for democratic change and encouraging the diffusion of democratic discourse. Elections were highly ritualistic affairs, and they were frequently rough.[62] O'Connor unsurprisingly reveled in recounting his personal experiences of the physicality of political campaigning, and he provided detailed advice to non-electors of how best they might maximize their impact at the hustings and win the show of hands.[63] Fuller appreciation of the relationship between the movement and those middle-class "friends of the people" who were successful at the polls and who represented Chartist interests in the

[56] *Northern Star*, 27 April 1844, 4; John Halstead, "The Charter and Something More! The Politics of Joshua Hobson, 1810–1876," in *The Charter Our Right! Huddersfield Chartism Re-Considered*, ed. John Hargreaves (Huddersfield, 2018), 94–95.

[57] *Northern Star*, 27 September 1845, 5; Thompson, *The Chartists*, 186.

[58] *Northern Star*, 27 July 1850, 7.

[59] Taylor, "Rethinking the Chartists," 493.

[60] Paul Pickering, "'And Your Petitioners &c": Chartist Petitioning in Popular Politics 1838–48," *English Historical Review* 116, no. 466 (2001): 368–88; Richard Huzzey and Henry Miller, "Petitions, Parliament and Political Culture: Petitioning the House of Commons, 1780–1918," *Past & Present* 248, no. 1 (2020): 123–64; Henry Miller, *A Nation of Petitioners: Petitions and Petitioning in the United Kingdom, 1780–1918* (Cambridge, 2023).

[61] Eileen Yeo, "Culture and Constraint in Working-Class Movements, 1830–1855," in *Popular Culture and Class Conflict, 1590–1914: Explorations in the History of Labour and Leisure*, ed. Eileen and Stephen Yeo (Harvester Press, 1981); Eileen Yeo, "Christianity in Chartist Struggle, 1838–1842," *Past & Present* no. 91 (1981): 109–39; Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place*.

[62] An influential study of the topic is Frank O'Gorman, "Campaign Rituals and Ceremonies: The Social Meaning of Elections in England, 1780–1860," *Past & Present* no. 135 (1992): 79–115. See also James Vernon, *Politics and the People* (Cambridge, 1993); Philip Salmon, *Electoral Reform at Work: Local Politics and National Parties, 1832–41* (Boydell, 2002).

[63] *Northern Star*, 26 June 1841, 1, 4.

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House of Commons has been aided by a number of recent studies.[64] Nineteen MPs sympathetic to Chartism were elected between 1837 and 1852, and while many of them did little for the popular cause when in Parliament, some did, particularly Thomas Slingsby Duncombe, dubbed by O'Connor "the Member for all England."

An aristocratic dandy, Duncombe did not merely "virtually" represent Chartists in the Commons as Jamie Bronstein has argued in an insightful article, he allowed himself to be *appropriated* by them.[65] Significantly, neither Duncombe nor any other "friends of the people" utilized the language of democracy—such was its explosive charge—but he was held in great affection nevertheless because of his steadfast adherence to the people's cause. Duncombe had been nicknamed "honest Tom" by his radical Finsbury constituents from as early as 1834 and he lived up to the sobriquet thereafter, defending in Parliament John Frost and other victims of the abortive Newport Rising, denouncing the mistreatment of Chartist prisoners like Lovett, arguing successfully against attempts to tighten the Master and Servant Act that constrained workers's bargaining position, and contesting the rate-paying clauses of the 1832 Reform Act that severely reduced the number of electors. Regardless of whether or not he described himself a democrat, Chartists regarded him as such because of his actions and they frequently told him so. The tribute accompanying the portrait of Duncombe that appeared in the *Northern Star* praised him thus: "Spurning to soil his hands with the misdeeds of the aristocracy, he has left their ranks, in which by birth he was placed, and he is now the pride and the hope of democracy."[66] An editorial celebrating his role in the defeat of the Master and Servants Bill ("Labour's Degradation Bill"), suggested that Duncombe deserved to be rewarded with a landed estate for his efforts, not the usual teapot or candlestick:

> Let us not forget that when *Radicalism* was unfashionable, and when the ultra-democratic principle was only known under that name, that even then DUNCOMBE was familiarly styled "RADICAL DUNCOMBE." And above all let us never forget that he alone of all our representatives has been the one, the only one, who has cheerfully obeyed the invitation of the working classes to appear before them, to give an account of his stewardship, and to cheer them on in the good fight.[67]

Hobson's final point was vital: Duncombe was well aware of the importance Chartists placed on self-government and always provided an account of his actions for public debate.[68] In accordance with Chartist ideas of democratic representation, he was careful to assume the role of delegate rather than representative, telling a meeting at Covent Garden in support of Ireland that "he would act as their organ in the House of Commons. He should have great pride in doing so."[69]

[64] David Nicholls, "Friends of the People: Parliamentary Supporters of Popular Radicalism, 1832–49," *Labour History Review* 62, no. 2 (1996): 127–46; Malcolm Chase, "'Labour's Candidates': Chartist Challenges at the Parliamentary Polls, 1839–60," *Labour History Review* 74, no. 1 (2009): 64–89; Tom Scriven, "Chartism's Electoral Strategy and the Bifurcation of Radicalism, 1837–1852," *Labour History Review* 85, no. 2 (2020): 99–126; Anthony Daly, "'The Most Consistent of Them All': William Sharman Crawford and the Politics of Suffrage," *Labour History Review* 89, no. 2 (2024): 95–125.

[65] Jamie Bronstein, "Thomas Slingsby Duncombe, the 'Member for All England': Representing the Non-voter in the Chartist Decade," *Labour History Review* 80, no. 2 (2015): 109–33.

[66] *Northern Star*, 19 November 1842, 1; Malcolm Chase, "Building Identity, Building Circulation," in *Papers for the People: A Study of the Chartist Press*, ed. Joan Allen and Owen Ashton (Merlin Press, 2005).

[67] *Northern Star*, 11 May 1844, 4; Christopher Frank, *Master and Servant Law: Chartists, Trade Unions, Radical Lawyers and the Magistracy in England, 1840–1865* (Routledge, 2010).

[68] *Northern Star*, 17 February 1844, 8, for one report of his "stewardship."

[69] *Northern Star*, 6 July 1844, 7; Miles Taylor, "The Six Points: Chartism and the Reform of Parliament," in *The Chartist Legacy*, ed. Ashton, Fyson and Roberts, 2.

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Little wonder, then, that Duncombe was repeatedly feted by the movement, presented with laudatory addresses and gifts (including silver and chinaware), celebrated at lavish dinners and public meetings, all of which simultaneously honored him publicly and bound him ever more closely to Chartism. Presenting Duncombe with a "congratulatory address" from the journeymen tailors of Manchester in the spring of 1844, the shoemaker-clergyman William Vickers Jackson gave the "sentiment," which read: "Our distinguished guest, T. S. Duncombe, Esq.; may his noble exertions in the cause of democracy and the undeviating consistency which he has manifested on all occasions, both in and out of Parliament be duly appreciated by a grateful people."[70] Duncombe knew very well that his political raison d'être *was* the movement and if he sometimes expressed his disagreement with Chartist tactics and language in Parliament, he was careful not to act on his own volition, without a mandate from the people.[71] To describe his relationship with the movement as intimate would be to underestimate its subtlety—"honest Tom" had to intuit correctly Chartist desires from the inside out. Duncombe's response to the overtures of the NCSU provides an excellent illustration here. The year after attempts to construct a cross-class alliance had failed, Duncombe's speech at a "monster" meeting of the Sheffield trades received a "multitudinous roar of enthusiasm," especially "his advice to the working men *to make the Charter the only object of their agitation*, and on NO ACCOUNT TO ABANDON EVEN ITS NAME."[72]

The international turn

Notwithstanding the fact that Chartists frequently found it difficult to disentangle absolutely natural law and natural rights arguments (as scholars still do), over the course of the 1840s the latter came more to the fore as linguistic idioms unraveled. One index of this shift was the way Chartists increasingly expressed affinity with thinkers whom they believed prioritized natural right over natural law, notably Rousseau and Paine, whose ideas had been shaped by the revolutionary ferment of the late eighteenth century. A search for Blackstone in the *Northern Star* resulted in just over 80 "hits," overwhelmingly in the early Chartist phase, a figure surpassed more than tenfold by those for Paine, which far outstripped references to all constitutional authorities combined. Paine was held in high esteem precisely because he had "explicitly linked natural right to universal suffrage."[73] We might usefully recall too how Paine and his legacy were celebrated within Chartist culture, his memory regularly toasted and his birthday commemorated at radical dinners throughout the country.[74] Blackstone's views may have been cited by Chartists during the movement's early years, but he was never memorialized in this way. Rousseau and Paine were also internationalist in outlook, of course, which appealed increasingly to certain sections of the movement, and which further helps explain the upsurge in democratic discourse in the second half of the 1840s.

Democracy was treated as an international phenomenon in the pages of the *Star*, long before Harney formally took over as editor in October 1845. It was likely Hobson who wrote excitedly about the growth of an indigenous Chartist movement in Sweden in editorials the previous autumn. If reactionary elites in that country attempted to "stay the march of democracy," he warned, thereby making it impossible to establish a "righteous constitution by peaceable means" as was hoped by the Tory press here, then revolution might well

[70] *Northern Star*, 13 April 1844, 7; Thompson, *The Chartists*, 171.

[71] Ann Pflaum, "The Parliamentary Career of Thomas S. Duncombe, 1826–1861" (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1975), 104–05; Bronstein, "Thomas Slingsby Duncombe, the 'Member for All England'," 119.

[72] *Northern Star*, 3 August 1844, 5.

[73] Gibson, "Natural Right," 198.

[74] See Roberts, *Chartism, Commemoration and the Cult of the Radical Hero*, ch. 5, for a detailed discussion of Paine's influence.

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result.[75] A few weeks later, Hobson suggested that radicals in Sweden were following a path pioneered by Norway that had prospered since 1814, from which time "a Constitution has existed which, if not purely Democratic, is the nearest thereto of any state in Europe, and the establishment of which has been followed by the happiest results."[76]

Signs from Germany were even more optimistic, at least according to the "zealous German patriot" engaged by the *Northern Star*, Friedrich Engels, who noted approvingly how, "The movement of the proletarians has developed itself with such astonishing rapidity, that in another year or two we shall be able to muster a glorious array of working Democrats and Communists—for in this country Democracy and Communism are, as far as the working classes are concerned, quite synonymous."[77] Deeply influenced by the heightened class conflicts experienced in Britain during the early Chartist phase, across Europe both Engels and Marx presented an overly simplified reading that elided ideas and languages unproblematically with specific social groups. In July 1846, the *Star* published an address signed by them on behalf of the German Democratic Communists in Brussels, congratulating O'Connor on his "splendid success at the Nottingham election." O'Connor had contested this ministerial by-election when John Cam Hobhouse stood for reelection following his promotion to a cabinet post in the newly elected Whig government. O'Connor withdrew before the poll, but won the show of hands, a highly symbolic moment according to Engels and Marx who praised O'Connor's "brilliant speech" on the hustings, especially "the striking delineation given in it of the contrast between working-class democracy and middle-class liberalism."[78] Perhaps inevitably, some of this was wishful thinking; channels of communication between classes were never entirely closed in Britain, a country where middle-class "friends of the people" supported the cause of democracy in Parliament, even if they refrained from employing the language of democracy themselves.

Under Harney's editorship, the *Star* identified with an explicitly "social democratic" agenda, reinforced by the coverage devoted to the Fraternal Democrats, who promoted proletarian internationalism, and those European exiles from continental oppression who found refuge in the metropolis.[79] This trend was also demonstrated in the reactions to revolutionary upheavals abroad, particularly the short-lived Cracow uprising in Poland in February 1846 that sent shock waves across Europe two years before the "springtime of nations." The struggle for national liberation in Poland—a country torn apart by the imperial ambitions of Austria, Prussia, and Russia—functioned, according to Marx, as a kind of "thermometer" for the European revolutionary temperature more generally, a view widely shared among radicals who supported this cause passionately. Along with the Fraternal Democrats, Chartist internationalists helped organize the Democratic Committee for Poland's Regeneration, through which they lent financial assistance and responded most enthusiastically to the Manifesto that was issued by Polish insurgents during the uprising, which demanded agrarian revolution and other measures of social reform, along

[75] *Northern Star*, 14 September 1844, 4–5.

[76] *Northern Star*, 28 September 1844, 4. Drawing on the "excellent work" of Samuel Laing, *Journal of a Residence in Norway* (London, 1836), Hobson emphasized the circumscribed nature of democracy in that country.

[77] *Northern Star*, 13 September 1845, 1.

[78] *Northern Star*, 25 July 1846, 1. Philippe Gigot was the other signatory of the address. Marx made the same point at a meeting of the Fraternal Democrats late the following year and praised the Chartists as "the real democrats...the moment they carried the six points of that Charter, the road to liberty would be open to the whole world." *Northern Star*, 4 December 1847, 1; Chase, *Chartism*, 289.

[79] See Iorwerth Prothero, "Chartists and Political Refugees," in *Exiles from European Revolutions: Refugees in Mid-Victorian England*, ed. Sabine Freitag (Berghahn Books, 2003); Christine Lattek, *Revolutionary Refugees: German Socialism in Britain, 1840–1860* (Routledge, 2006); Margot C. Finn, *After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848–1874* (Cambridge, 1993); Fabrice Bensimon, "Continental Exiles, Chartists and Socialists in London (1834–1848)," *History of European Ideas* 47, no. 2 (2021): 271–84.

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with sweeping political change. "Let us conquer a state of society, in which every man shall enjoy his share of the fruits of the earth according to his merits and his capacity," the Manifesto proclaimed, where "every man disabled by nature in the use of his bodily or mental functions will find without humiliation, the unfailing assistance of the whole social state." If it was unsurprising that Harney considered that the document "prepares the way for the destruction of class usurpation ... the social and political elevation of the people must now be the grand object of revolutionary struggle," we should note that many other Chartists were enthused by the sentiments expressed in the Manifesto.[80] At a meeting held at the John Street Literary and Scientific Institution a year after the uprising's bloody repression, the National Charter Association executive member Christopher Doyle, for example, proposed the first resolution that hailed "the Cracow Manifesto as an embodiment of the principles of Democracy," then went on to ask, "what are the Polish patriots seeking but the establishment of the same principles that the English democrats have been in search of for a series of years?"[81]

As the bodies of "martyrs" piled up across mainland Europe, constitution making was interpreted as evidence of the inexorable "onward march of democracy." In a context conducive to stark predictions, Harney prophesied in the summer of 1847 that the continent "is on the eve of that 'war of principles', in which the death struggle will take place between Democracy and Despotism."[82] Although somewhat critical of the internationalist turn, O'Connor was no less affected by wider currents, emphasizing "no country has a constitution now, and that the present struggle going on all over the world is for the continuance of those means by which the few may yet lord it over the many, but, thanks to the tyranny of the governments, the rule of the few is drawing to a close."[83] In autumn that year, he recommended the establishment of a new daily paper, to be named *Democrat*.[84] O'Connor had argued for years that England was no mere onlooker in this titanic contest but was instead in the vanguard of democratic change, the Chartist movement pointing the way to what might be achieved universally.[85]

Another important reason why oppositions were now drawn more sharply was that the "middle-class" ideology of free trade increasingly presented itself as an international threat. Liberal economics proved an almost insuperable obstacle between working-class and middle-class radicals, with the Anti-Corn Law League generally reviled by Chartists.[86] The free trade conference held in Brussels in the autumn of 1847 brought home the global nature of the free trade project. Here the British delegate, Dr John Bowring, had purported to speak on behalf of British workers, a claim ridiculed by Ernest Jones who reminded an audience at Tower Hamlets that Bowring had refused an invitation to attend the John Street meeting called in support of the Cracow Manifesto. "Where is Bowring, who announced himself at Brussels as the representative of the English working classes," Jones taunted, causing amusement, "but who at a previous democratic meeting held at John Street, refused

[80] *Northern Star*, 26 February 1848, 1. Henry G. Weisser, "The British Working Class and the Cracow Uprising of 1846," *Polish Review* 13, no. 1 (1968): 13–14. For Marx and Engels's warm reception, see Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago, 2010), 59, 77.

[81] *Northern Star*, 27 February 1847, 7. Thomas Cooper, however, rejected the Manifesto, pointing to the inconvenient fact that the Austrians had used Polish peasants to put down the uprising: Weisser, "The British Working Class and the Cracow Uprising," 15–17.

[82] *Northern Star*, 28 August 1847, 4; see also 30 January 1847, 4.

[83] *Northern Star*, 27 March 1847, 1.

[84] *Northern Star*, 4 September 1847, 1; Chase, *Chartism*, 289.

[85] *Northern Star*, 15 November 1845, 7; Gurney, "The Democratic Idiom," 591.

[86] In Finn, *After Chartism*, 58–9 and elsewhere, the author notes that Chartist's rejection of economic liberalism intensified in the late 1840s. A more harmonious view is presented by Paul Pickering and Alex Tyrrell, *The People's Bread. A History of the Anti-Corn Law League* (Leicester, 2000).

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to take the chair or attend, because the men calling the meeting, were not of influence sufficient." Jones closed with a call for them to organize their own cause internationally: "Let democracy, too, organize its European system. There has been a Free Trade Congress at Brussels—a conspiracy of the money bags (hear, hear,) why not a democratic congress too? (cheers)."[87]

State repression and linguistic polarization

Both democratic and constitutional idioms became more prevalent as the political temperature rose during the later 1840s, though usage of the former outstripped the latter, with the old Paineite critique finding forceful expression. In a public debate at the John Street Institution in February 1847, the barrister Archer Gurney argued that the "People's Charter" undermined the constitution, prompting Thomas Clark of the National Charter Association to ask him to produce that frequently hallowed but elusive text. Freely admitting "the errors of democracy," Clark continued: "If the People's Charter was the constitution, it might be produced, and at the same price as a 'play bill,' and he did not know why every man should not be in possession of the constitution. (Loud cheers.)"[88] Furthermore, although Chartists might still invoke the constitution for tactical reasons, especially when experiencing government persecution, the tone of such appeals grew increasingly ironic. An address issued to electors and non-electors in West Yorkshire prior to the 1847 general election that described the Chartist movement as the "Democratic party," asked rhetorically, "Will you support thundering standing armies to keep you in slavery, and an unparalleled national debt, and all to uphold 'the glorious constitution of church and state'" puffed by Tory and Whig politicians alike? It then quickly declared, "We trust we shall hear you exclaim in a voice of thunder that cannot be misunderstood: 'None shall have our support that will not give us the Charter; or, in other words, the power of self-government!'"[89]

The wave of state repression experienced in 1848 turned irony into anger and damaged the constitutional idiom immeasurably. However, we ought not to underestimate the continuing purchase it still enjoyed at the start of that year. Moving a resolution pledging "to use every constitutional means to procure the legal enactment of the People's Charter" at a public meeting at Southwark in March, Clark poked fun at the prime minister—"Lord John was such a constitutional man, and would be so happy to grant their constitutional request (laughter)"—then went on to assert that "class legislation was the cause of the miseries of the people."[90] The tone altered after the Kennington Common demonstration when a massive show of state power was deployed to intimidate a mass meeting of 150,000 Chartists in the capital, the ridicule poured on the third National Petition by the House of Commons, and, most important, following the Crown and Government Security Bill, which received Royal Assent on 22 April.[91] The latter measure, known as the Treason-Felony Act, made "open and advised speaking"—in other words, any utterance deemed unlawful by the state—an imprisonable offence. For some Chartists, this measure not only rescinded constitutional liberties, but it also killed the constitution. Little wonder allegories abounded at this time. O'Connor reached back to the 1680s and efforts to check monarchical power,

[87] *Northern Star*, 16 October 1847, 1; David Todd, "John Bowring and the Global Dissemination of Free Trade," *Historical Journal* 51, no. 2 (2008): 373–97. Jones's democratic imaginary is dissected in Miles Taylor, *Ernest Jones, Chartism, and the Romance of Politics, 1819–1869* (Oxford, 2003).

[88] *Northern Star*, 20 February 1847, 6.

[89] *Northern Star*, 3 July 1847, 8.

[90] *Northern Star*, 18 March 1848, 5.

[91] John Saville, *1848: The British State and the Chartist Movement* (Cambridge, 1987), 127, 170–71.

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referring explicitly to a Whig "martyr" implicated in the Rye House Plot against Charles II. He imagined the Bill to be enacting "THE DEATH OF LIBERTY," and wrote:

> On Saturday next the corpse of the Constitution will come in funeral attire to the House of Lords, to lie in state for a few moments, and thence to be conveyed to the sepulchre where the remains of the Lord William Russell now lies, and there will the friend of liberty, and liberty itself, rest entombed until the loud voice of an indignant people shall proclaim the honour of the one and the joyful resurrection of the other.[92]

This conjuncture was superheated by events in Ireland, which profoundly shaped the perception of radicals in Britain.

As John Saville observed in his dense study of this critical year, in May the trial of John Mitchell, editor of the *United Irishman*, "lifted political excitement to new levels" in the West Riding of Yorkshire, where there were clear signs of armed insurrection.[93] Weeks before the end of July when habeas corpus was suspended in Ireland in order to curb the nationalist Club movement, Harney was lamenting how the "vaunted privileges" supposedly conferred by "Our Glorious Constitution" had been stolen on the other side of the Irish Sea, including freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and the right to bear arms. Typically drawing parallels with the French Revolution, he described a recent ban on a Chartist meeting in the capital as an example of "Martial Law" and referred sardonically to those "constitutional authorities" who trumpeted popular liberties that no longer existed. "The unarmed working men relied upon 'the Constitution'," Harney wrote, "the Whigs put their trust in bludgeons, bayonets, sabres, muskets and cannon … Quotations from Blackstone and De Lolme had no chance against levelled muskets and loaded cannon. The Chartist Executive prudently gave way, and the Whigs, *à la Jack Ketch*, 'finished' 'the Constitution'."[94] In similar vein, accepting that popular liberties might be traced back to Magna Carta, Edwin Gill, another metropolitan Fraternal Democrat, declared the constitution "A FARCE," with neither real nor ideal existence:

> Now, however, the British Constitution does not exist even in name, for the liberty-professing, finality-loving, perfidious, "base, bloody, and brutal Whigs"—tired of being haunted by the spectre of the Constitution—have, and are now (by raking up obsolete acts never before enforced, and enacting a despotic Gagging Bill, for the suppression of public opinion) laying the spirit of the Constitution in the red sea of the blood of British subjects.[95]

We cannot be sure how far such views were representative of Chartist opinion, of course, and although constitutional talk declined precipitously in the *Northern Star* from this time, Chartists's faith in the common law was never entirely extinguished and the constitution never entirely laid to rest, even if the tendency was to look forward to the making of a new democratic constitution, rather than backward to an idealized model conjured from a mythical past. Even Harney resurrected it soon afterwards in order to criticize the latest "Coercion Bill" passed by the House of Commons ("Unlawful Oaths" [Ireland]), distinguishing between "the old English constitution" that "we honour and respect," which

[92] *Northern Star*, 22 April 1848, 1; see also 29 April 1848, 8.

[93] Saville, *1848*, 148.

[94] *Northern Star*, 3 June 1848, 4; 17 June 1848, 5; Saville, *1848*, 158–9. Harney was referring here to the well-known work of Genevan-British political writer Jean-Louis de Lolme, *Constitution de l'Angleterre* (Amsterdam, 1771), available in many English editions. John or Jack Ketch was appointed executioner by King Charles II and was notorious for the sadistic enjoyment he took in his work, including the botched beheading of Lord William Russell in 1683.

[95] *Northern Star*, 17 June 1848, 2.

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did not allow that "class should live upon class," but had been thoroughly undermined by the present government in order to hold "the most valuable" class "in a state of bondage, famine, destitution, and want."[96]

Conclusion

The foregoing study is admittedly limited in scope and is neither comprehensive nor definitive. Although the *Northern Star* was the only national Chartist newspaper published throughout the whole period and pursued a relatively open policy, it remains a single source whose editorial line reflected the views of Hill, Hobson, and Harney, respectively. The various radical constituencies that made up the Chartist movement changed over time, naturally, and both Chartism and the *Northern Star* were different things in the late 1840s than they had been in the late 1830s. Nevertheless, a close reading of the paper across the whole period sheds light on the complex interrelationship between constitutional and democratic idioms. Chartists deployed mythologized versions of the British constitution to support the rightness of their demands and criticize the machinations of a corrupt state early on, certainly, though they increasingly couched their ambitions using democratic discourse. The former remained strategically useful throughout the decade, however, providing ways to attack various encroachments on the "traditional" liberties of the people. It was unlikely, surely, that Chartists would have broken free from the burden of the past entirely, even if they had so wished. Notwithstanding this intertwining, the volume of constitutional talk decreased over the *Star*'s lifetime, while the volume of democratic talk increased.

Furthermore, democratic discourse was infused with hope for a better life, the keyword "democracy" being typically construed in a strategic fashion as the ultimate ambition or cause for which Chartists fought and suffered. As the 1840s wore on, the tone changed: appeals to the constitution might still be employed tactically, though with decreasing faith in their likely success, and "our glorious Constitution" was only ever invoked in order to mock Whig and Tory cant. A written constitution based on the blueprint of the "People's Charter" provided the focus for the campaign, although this should be understood not simply as a form of "natural rights constitutionalism" if the term masks the growing importance of democratic discourse. Democracy proved so attractive to Chartists because it carried a utopian charge before mid-century. After the defeats suffered during the early phase, Chartist political practice, informed by the desire for self-government, continued to power democratic discourse, which was further stimulated by upheavals in continental Europe and continuing domestic political and social conflict.

It was the practice and ideology of generalized self-government that Engels (and later Marx) reified in "class" terms from the mid-1840s, contrasting (working-class) "Chartist democracy" to "bourgeois democracy."[97] However, English radicals themselves had drawn a similar distinction over a decade earlier, and it seems not unlikely that Engels and Marx were reworking or simplifying the arguments of Chartist intellectuals in this respect, not merely imposing their views on the movement retroactively from without. One of the movement's early historians believed this to be the case: "In the cheap unstamped press before 1836, then afterwards in the main Chartist newspaper, we encounter from the pen of Bronterre O'Brien and his collaborators on the *Star*, the 'premarxist' theories and formulas that were suggested to Marx by Chartism."[98] Indeed, not only had O'Brien contrasted "that

[96] *Northern Star*, 26 August 1848, 4. For a later rejection of "the Constitution" as cant, see 10 February 1849, 5.

[97] See Sean F. Monahan, "The American Workingmen's Parties, Universal Suffrage, and Marx's Democratic Communism," *Modern Intellectual History* 18, no. 2 (2021): 379–402.

[98] Édouard Dolléans, "Karl Marx et le Chartisme," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 17, no. 6 (1912): 492–95, at 495; Kevin Morgan, "Édouard Dolléans: First Modern Historian of Chartism?," *Labour History Review* 89, no. 3 (2024): 191–228.

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glorious constitution, which has entailed upon you so much misery" to "the rising spirit of democracy" in the pages of the *Poor Man's Guardian*, but he had also elaborated a reading of French revolutionary history that distinguished between "the middle class constitution of 1791" and the one introduced by the Jacobin two years afterwards—"the famous Democracy of 1793."[99]

When Chartism was disintegrating in the early 1850s, the relationship between alternative radical idioms and social class became more variable and contingent. In this changed context, European nationalist leaders Giuseppe Mazzini and Louis Kossuth toured Britain, attracting huge crowds and prompting O'Brien to comment wryly on the secret to the latter's popularity: "had you not pitched your voice to the *bourgeois* key, had you not gilded your democratic pills with rich constitutional varnish, and talked of free trade and new markets, as well as of municipal and other popular rights, your voice would not have been listened to, your pills would not have been swallowed."[100] Despite O'Brien's sanguine expectations, but perhaps unsurprisingly, even middle-class radicals best disposed to an extension of the franchise, such as John Bright and Richard Cobden, continued to find "democratic pills" hard to swallow. Decades passed before the language of democracy could be "sterilized to innocuousness."[101]

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[99] *Poor Man's Guardian*, 27 October 1832, 577; 24 November 1832, 617–18.
[100] *Bronterre O'Brien's European Letters*, vol. 1 (1851), cited in *Northern Star*, 20 December 1851, 3.
[101] Frances Elma Gillespie, *Labor and Politics in England, 1850–1867* (Duke, 1927), 5.

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