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The Chartist Revolution*

I would like to begin this lecture with a few autobiographical reflections. John Halstead would not have minded I think because one of his many admirable qualities was that he gave you the feeling that he was always genuinely interested in what you had to say, not only about 'History' in the abstract but also one's personal relationship to the discipline. Besides this, and despite having some misgivings about the fashionable tendency among some historians to bring their own subjectivities into their work, my most recent research on oral testimony has confirmed for me the view that, like memory, all historical writing is inextricably bound up with selfhood.¹ Unsurprisingly perhaps, Chartism did not feature on the history syllabus at the grammar school I attended in Worcester during the early 1970s, but after leaving school and working for a few years, I encountered the subject at the college of further education where I took my 'A' levels. I was lucky: one of my lecturers introduced me to History Workshop at Ruskin College in Oxford (the notorious one where Edward Thompson launched his ill-tempered and ill-judged attack on the structuralists), and he invited Dorothy Thompson to talk to our year group about the Chartist movement. A great deal of all this went over my head at the time, naturally, but some of it must have made an impression. Dorothy argued the case for a social interpretation of Chartism I remember, against historians who were endeavouring to restrict its meaning to more narrow political ends. As an undergraduate at Sussex University a few years later taking the 'Special Subject' on Chartism established by Asa Briggs and J. F. C Harrison and taught by

*This is a lightly revised and slightly extended version of my John Halstead Memorial Lecture delivered at the John Rylands Library, Manchester, 14 June 2025. Many thanks to the executive committee of the Society for the Study of Labour History for inviting me to give this annual lecture.

¹ Peter Gurney, Matthew Grant, and Joel Morley, *National Service Life Stories: masculinity, class and the memory of conscription in Britain* (Oxford, 2025).

Eileen Yeo, I realised that Dorothy Thompson's target had been Gareth Stedman Jones' research, especially the paper published as 'The Language of Chartism' that was to prove so influential, helping to launch the so-called linguistic turn that questioned fundamentally many of the bedrock assumptions and analytical categories of a 'materialist' or Marxist 'history from below'.² This split between social and linguistic approaches has bedevilled Chartist historiography and much more ever since: we need both, of course.

Let me state at the outset that I became interested in Chartism and remain interested in the subject because the movement demonstrated how the world could be radically different. As Édouard Dolléans – hardly the most left-wing historian – once remarked, Chartism constituted a 'grand mouvement révolutionnaire.'³ My family background and developing political awareness were no doubt influential here. That other readings of the movement are possible hardly needs stating. Matthew Roberts has shown how Fabians in the early twentieth century approached Chartism as an example of class collaboration; while latterly they have been regarded as proto liberal democrats and even incorporated – God forbid! – into Tory narratives about national evolution.⁴ Individuals and groups further to the left of the Labour Party have frequently portrayed Chartism as revolutionary in a narrow sense, moreover, including vanguardists from the Bolshevik émigré Theodore Rothstein writing just after the First World War to contemporary Trotskyists.⁵ I have some sympathy for the latter readings, as Chartism it seems to me

² Gareth Stedman Jones, 'The Language of Chartism', in James Epstein and Dorothy Thompson (eds), *The Chartist Experience: Studies in Working-Class Radicalism and Culture, 1830-1860* (London, 1982), extended and republished in *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge, 1983).

³ Édouard Dolléans, 'Karl Marx et le Chartisme', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 17/6 (1912), 495; Kevin Morgan, 'Édouard Dolléans: First Modern Historian of Chartism?', *Labour History Review*, 89/3 (2024), 191-228.

⁴ Matthew Roberts, 'Popular politics, heritage and memories of Chartism in England and Wales, 1918-2020', *Historical Research*, 96 (2023), 386-404.

⁵ Theodore Rothstein, *From Chartism to Labourism; historical sketches of the English working-class movement* (London, 1929); Rob Sewell, *Chartist Revolution* (London, 2020).

represented a fundamental challenge to British capitalism during a crucial phase in its historical development, a phase marked by tectonic reconfigurations of power between political and economic elites. However, Chartist ambition was more complex and wide-ranging than such appropriations allow. Although the movement certainly had its insurrectionary moments, such as those which occurred at Newport, Sheffield and Bradford in November 1839 and January 1840, these 'risings' were poorly organised, short-lived and not mainstream Chartism's main focus or significance.⁶

In this lecture, I want to argue that between the late 1830s and the early 1850s Chartists were attempting to check and regulate one increasingly hegemonic way of life based on principles of individualism and competition – namely, market capitalism – and substitute for it a different way of life, which as yet was only vaguely imagined but which was nevertheless prefigured by the social solidarity and co-operation that characterised the culture of the movement. To put this another way, and despite the emphasis on continuities between Chartism and liberalism made by 'currents of radicalism' historians and 'postmodernists', Chartism was diametrically opposed to liberalism and the future that it envisioned, in relation to economics, politics and social life.⁷ My overall intention, then, is to question the dominance of 'liberal' readings of Chartism. However, the transformation Chartists envisioned cannot simply be grasped as an abrupt break with the past, a leap into a different world. This was a long revolution, which like all revolutionary movements in fact, involved a good deal of restoration and atavistic longing for an imagined past. Chartist

⁶ On these see John Baxter, *Armed Resistance and Insurrection: The Early Chartist Experience* (London, 1984).

⁷ See Brian Harrison and Patricia Hollis, 'Chartism, liberalism and the life of Robert Lowery', *English Historical Review*, 82 (1967), 503-35; Eugenio Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: popular liberalism in the age of Gladstone* (Cambridge, 1992); Eugenio Biagini and Alastair Reid (eds), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain, 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 1991); Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1840-1914* (Cambridge, 1991); James Vernon, *Politics and the People: a study in English political culture, c. 1815-1867* (Cambridge, 1993).

ambition also needs to be grasped in its totality, as a transformation dependent on linguistic and cultural as well as political and social change, which if successful would have gone far beyond the capture of state power.⁸

Although I recognise the danger here is that the label can be used to denigrate all those historians with whom I disagree, liberal interpretations still dominate our profession and the general society I think, with the common line being that those Chartist demands which proved feasible eventually found their way onto the statute book, which is what I was taught at FE college, not by the lecturer who took me to Ruskin I must add, but by his colleague who had no doubt picked it up from Mark Hovell's early history.⁹ I intuited then and know now that this is a gross misunderstanding of the movement's historical importance. The broad approach I want to take in this lecture may serve too as a counterweight to the recurrent tendency of the subject to fragment.¹⁰ While important recent studies have illuminated the movement in new ways by considering conflicts over consumption issues, space and place, moral and affective politics, and popular memory, its wider significance is sometimes underplayed perhaps.¹¹ Hopefully, an argument about Chartism as cultural revolution will make its radical alterity more apparent. My talk divides into three parts. First, I will say something about language and politics, then move on to talk about culture, and finally I will discuss economic themes.

Language and Politics

⁸ See Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London, 1961).

⁹ Mark Hovell, *The Chartist movement* (Manchester, 1918).

¹⁰ Miles Taylor, 'Rethinking the Chartists: Searching for Synthesis in the Historiography of Chartism', *Historical Journal*, 39/2 (1996), 479-95.

¹¹ 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* (Abingdon, 2019).

I had thought to call this lecture not ‘The Chartist Revolution’ but ‘the Charter and something more’, as Chartist attitudes to the concept of revolution were ambivalent, and the latter was the suitably vague but ominous term Chartists often employed themselves to hint at their wider ambitions, especially from the early 1840s. Indeed, John Halstead used this phrase as the title of an excellent essay on Joshua Hobson, printer and publisher of the *Northern Star*, though John’s take on its meaning was somewhat different to mine as he sought to rescue Hobson from the charge of political apostasy, linking Hobson’s later activities in local government with his earlier radicalism.¹² My understanding of the term also differs from that of Malcolm Chase, who considered it merely an adaptation of the traditional Chartist slogan ‘The Charter and nothing less’, which I find somewhat misleading.¹³ It is a great sadness that John and Malcolm are not here today to argue this through. I will return to the phrase later but would like to start with Joshua Hobson’s words, or rather those of the Leeds Working Men’s Association in which he was most active, from the address it issued in January 1838. Like many of these texts, it is a marvellous rhetorical achievement, balancing in this case the threat of physical force with the logic of rational persuasion.

Oscillating between these twin poles, the address invokes the concept of ‘revolution’ in a way that was quite typical among Chartists, that is, negatively, something that would inevitably result in ‘the shedding of rivers of blood’, therefore, to be avoided. The committee that drafted the text, which included Hobson, invoked in apocalyptic terms the clash that would ensue unless ‘the Democratic and common-sense practice of capability determined and elected’ was not substituted in the near future for ‘the Aristocratic principle

¹² John Halstead, ‘The Charter and Something More! The Politics of Joshua Hobson, 1810-1876’, in John Hargreaves (ed.), *The Charter Our Right! Huddersfield Chartism Re-Considered* (Huddersfield, 2018).

¹³ Malcolm Chase, *The Chartists: A new history* (Manchester, 2007), 205

of hereditary perfectibility'. The patience of the people could only be stretched so far, the authors' warned, for 'men become tired of eternally begging and praying and petitioning for those political rights which are theirs by the very condition of existence'; and they go on to cite instances when the 'boundary beyond which human endurance of oppression cannot go' had been breached in the past, notably in America in 1775 and France in 1793, but also contemporaneously in Canada, where 'the triumphant establishment of Democracy upon the ruins of Aristocracy in that country, must be the inevitable result.' The authors of the address referred to constitutional methods that they maintained were nearly exhausted, and while their discourse did not preclude collaboration with middle-class reformers (the National Convention and subsequent riots in Birmingham were more than a year away), targeting as it did the aristocracy, the language of democracy was threaded throughout in what could only have been a deliberately provocative and threatening manner. The text closed with a powerful peroration:

From knowledge of the prevalence of these opinions and desires, and a perception, likewise, of the incalculable evils which a revolution would inflict upon the people of this country, we would draw attention from the remedy of force to the remedy of reason. We would urge our fellow reformers of all classes again to form extensive unions and associations, for the purpose of obtaining those five great essentials to self-government...until these be obtained, agitation shall know no rest, dissatisfaction can never cease, revolution will show its dark side to us in vain. Self-government we *must* have. We will obtain it peaceably if we are suffered to do so;

BUT WE WILL HAVE IT...Popular liberty and a restricted franchise cannot co-exist; nor can Democracy win the race, while the reins are held by the Aristocracy.¹⁴

The only antidote for the horrors of revolution, then, is democratic control of the system of political decision making, expressed significantly in the broadest and most emphatic terms as an affirmation of both human dignity and natural right: 'Self-government we *must* have. We will obtain it peaceably if we are suffered to do so; BUT WE WILL HAVE IT.'

Chartist leaders like George Julian Harney or James 'Bronterre' O'Brien – who translated Philippe Buonarroti's *History of Babeuf's Conspiracy for Equality* in 1836 – famously liked to draw inspiration from the world-changing events in late eighteenth century France and used the keyword more positively, though the ambivalence towards revolution apparent in the Leeds Working Men's Association's address was widely shared within the movement. One might have expected Chartists to refer to British experience in the 1640s as a model of revolutionary change close to home, but most preferred to pass over this phase as too bloody and traumatic. If Oliver Cromwell's name was occasionally evoked, it was as a warning about the dangers of dictatorship. Thus John Watkins, in a lecture delivered in London following the general strike of 1842: 'Cromwell at the head of a veteran and victorious army like Caesar of old and Bonaparte in modern times, used his power not to free the nation, but to establish his own dominion over it.'¹⁵ While the history of America as well as France was frequently drawn on, the other example of revolutionary change that resonated in the early Chartist phase was the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688. At a large public meeting at Glasgow in July 1838, Feargus O'Connor treated his audience to a sparkling lecture on the history of the union between the three nations of England, Scotland

¹⁴ *Northern Star*, 6 January 1838, 6.

¹⁵ *Northern Star*, 24 September 1842, 7; Roberts, *Chartism*, 60, 91, 117.

and Ireland, maintaining that national liberation of Ireland was fundamental to breaking the power of ruling elites. He went on to question the growing distinction between 'physical' and 'moral' force, arguing that even moderate middle-class radicals such as Thomas Attwood, Daniel O'Connell and 'slashing Henry Brougham' had advocated direct action in the past. O'Connor continued, invoking the memory of 1688:

He did not know whether his or their ancestors had bled in that Revolution, but this he knew, that it gave the people Universal Suffrage – that Universal Suffrage of which they were now deprived. (Great applause.) Now, there was not a feature of this in the Constitution, as it was called, with which they were at the present time favoured. The Constitution was, in fact, a mere matter of clouds – an Act of Parliament changed at any time. The Reform Bill was an emphatic declaration that the Parliament of that day was corrupt; it abrogated the Constitution under which this corrupt Parliament existed, and all that the Radicals now wish for is a return to the old and comparatively pure Constitution. (Great cheering.) He was satisfied that the poverty which met them at every turn, and which had so depressing an influence on the people, was chiefly – he might almost say solely – the result of foolish and wicked legislation. (Hear, hear.)¹⁶

O'Connor had imaginative ideas about the origins of universal suffrage, claiming a few months later at a meeting of the Birmingham Political Union that it 'was part of the

¹⁶ *Northern Star*, 28 July 1838, 8. Speaking at the same meeting, the Scottish surgeon Dr John Taylor deployed the language of revolution with far less circumspection.

constitution of England, and up to the time of Henry the Sixth, every man possessed the right of voting for members of Parliament.¹⁷

But at Glasgow he dated it to 1688 and it is worth noting how the meaning of the ‘Glorious Revolution’ had been and continued to be malleable; although Thomas Paine had curtly dismissed its achievements, other radicals in the 1790s found it to be a practical past, legitimating revolution at the very least.¹⁸ More often, however, it was the constitutional right to bear arms and petition the king enshrined in the Bill of Rights to which they referred, and the theme of constitutionality was prominent in O’Connor’s speech too, seeking as he was to keep open the possibility of an alliance with middle-class radicals. Many historians have placed great emphasis on the so-called constitutional idiom, regarding it as no less than the master code of nineteenth century political discourse.¹⁹ However, even in this context O’Connor deployed constitutional discourse only to pull it down, in a manner that would have won approval from anyone familiar with Paine’s famous exposure of the British constitution in the *Rights of Man*: it was no more than ‘a mere matter of clouds’. Moreover, in different contexts O’Connor could be far more forthright, employing the language of democracy as readily as Harney or O’Brien did. At a meeting of the London Working Men’s Association towards the end of 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

¹⁷ *Northern Star*, 1 September 1838, 8.

¹⁸ See Rémy Duthille, ‘A Practical English Past: Commemorating the Glorious Revolution in England, from Tom Paine to T. B. Macaulay’, in Matthew Roberts (ed.), *Memory and Modern British Politics: Commemoration, Tradition, Legacy* (London, 2024), 15-34.

¹⁹ See James A. Epstein, ‘The Constitutional Idiom: Radical Reasoning, Rhetoric and Action in Early Nineteenth-Century England,’ *Journal of Social History* 23 (1990): 553-74; *idem*, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (Oxford, 1994); *In Practice: studies in the language and culture of popular politics in Modern Britain* (Stanford, 2003); Miles Taylor, *The Decline of British Radicalism, 1847-1860* (Oxford, 1995), 100; James Vernon, *Politics and the people: a study in English political culture, 1815-1867* (Cambridge, 1993), 296-7, 320.

principle. He had never yet in thought, word, speech, or writings, expressed a single sentence against the fullest measure of liberty for the people.²⁰

The conflict between languages of constitutionalism and democracy is important because changing politics depends so much on changing language. The democratic idiom was employed across the movement, helping to unify groups that were frequently divided over particular issues or tactics.²¹ It emanated from various sources, though the milieu of metropolitan radicalism proved vital: Henry Hetherington was a key figure. 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 Despatch*, which Hetherington established towards the end of the decade. In its pages, he articulated and defended democracy in numerous editorials and articles, even translating for readers the discussion of the relative merits of democratic, oligarchic and monarchical forms of government found in Herodotus, on which Hetherington provided a sharp commentary. Leaning on Paine, Hetherington demystified 'that supposed "el-dorado" of politics, "the British Constitution"', arguing that it was no more than a piece of trickery with which British people had been indoctrinated since childhood.²²

Scholarship has shown that languages of constitutionalism and democracy were frequently intertwined, but the saliency of the democratic idiom has often been underestimated and its usage increased over time.²³ Historians eager to assert the backward-looking nature of Chartist discourse and ideology tend to rest their argument on

²⁰ *Northern Star*, 29 December 1838, 3.

²¹ Peter J. Gurney, 'The Democratic Idiom: Languages of Democracy in the Chartist Movement', *Journal of Modern History*, 86/3 (2014), 566-602.

²² *London Dispatch*, 16 July 1837, 345.

²³ Evidenced in my recent article, 'Rethinking the Language of Chartism', *Journal of British Studies*, 64 (2025), e121 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10140>>

evidence from the early years of Chartism, though even here the evidence is often contradictory and context dependent as we have already seen.²⁴ If we take a longer view and track the shifts in language over time, it becomes apparent that democratic discourse was on the rise across the 1840s, while appeals to the constitution declined. It seems reasonable to assume that the rise of the democratic idiom within the Chartist movement increased anxiety amongst the dominant classes.²⁵ By the summer of 1842, with lockouts and serious civil unrest spreading across industrial districts, to many onlookers democracy had become synonymous with revolution. It was hardly surprising that a leading Tory periodical such as *Blackwood's* should demonise democracy perhaps, a contributor thundering in November that year,

*Democracy must not be tampered with; it must be trampled on. It must be met by an open, unhesitating, uncompromising resistance. The man who in Parliament avows himself a democrat, ought to be instantly driven out by impeachment: the man who in print dares to insult the ears of England with the doctrine, ought to be instantly sent to take his trial at the Old Bailey; the man who attempts to poison the rabble with this most deadly of all nostrums, ought to be instantly sent to work out his guilty life, in chains, at the antipodes. The doctrine should be declared to be treason, and the teacher punished as a traitor.*²⁶

²⁴ See Stedman Jones, 'The Language of Chartism'; Epstein, 'The Constitutional Idiom'; Josh Gibson, 'Natural Right and the Intellectual Context of Early Chartist Thought', *History Workshop Journal*, 84 (2017); 'The Chartists and the Constitution: Revisiting British Popular Constitutionalism', *Journal of British Studies*, 56/1 (2017), 70-90. Malcolm Chase made a similar observation in 'The Chartist Movement and 1848', *The Chartists: Perspectives and Legacies* (London, 2015), 172.

²⁵ See Robert Saunders, 'Chartism from Above: British Elites and the Interpretation of Chartism', *Historical Research*, 81 (2008), 463-84.

²⁶ *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, October 1842, 432.

An extreme example, admittedly, but revulsion was widely shared among elites at this moment of crisis, regardless of political affiliation: middle-class leaders of the Anti-Corn Law League were as alarmed as any landowner, their response almost as vicious. In this conjuncture, the 'People's Charter' as symbol as well as text became a synecdoche for working-class self-government or democracy.²⁷

Struggles over language were crucial aspects of Chartism, but so too were related struggles over political practice. While there is no time to go into this theme in much detail, I want to make a few comments regarding Chartist electoral participation, about which excellent work has appeared in recent years. Chartists did not merely seek inclusion within existing political forms or amendments to the existing constitution; instead, they desired a new written constitution – whose basis was provided by the 'People's Charter' – as well as new ways of practicing politics. In terms of the central apparatus of state, the key issue was whether MPs should be representatives, able to act entirely on their own initiative, or delegates, subject to the will of the people through scrutiny and recall. Chartists insisted on the latter, of course.²⁸ The movement's relationship with those MPs sympathetic to Chartism – the 'friends of the people' as they were known – helps us better appreciate the ways in which Chartists attempted to influence existing political structures.²⁹ They supported various candidates in general elections throughout the country from the late 1830s and the movement could count on a number of MPs to put their case in parliament, most famously Thomas Slingsby Duncombe, the aristocratic dandy who presented the

²⁷ Dorothy Thompson, 'Who were "the People" in 1842?' in Malcolm Chase and Ian Dyck (eds), *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J. F. C. Harrison* (Aldershot, 1996).

²⁸ Miles Taylor, 'The Six Points: Chartism and the Reform of Parliament', in Owen Ashton, Robert Fyson and Stephen Roberts (eds), *The Chartist Legacy* (Woodbridge, 1999), 2.

²⁹ David Nicholls, 'Friends of the people: parliamentary supporters of popular radicalism, 1832-49', *Labour History Review*, 62/2 (1996), 127-46; Malcolm Chase, "'Labour's Candidates": Chartist Challenges at the Parliamentary Polls, 1839-60'. *Labour History Review*, 74/1 (2009), 64-89.

second national petition in 1842 and who was dubbed the ‘Member for all England’ by O’Connor. Jamie Bronstein has described the relationship between Duncombe and the movement as ‘virtual representation’, which is useful but worth developing further.³⁰

This is a large subject and here I wish only to consider the origins of what is better understood as a *strategy of appropriation*. Tom Scriven has written informatively about how Chartists sought to exercise a measure of control over sympathetic middle-class candidates during the general election in the summer of 1837, though we can trace this strategy to a by-election in Westminster held earlier that year.³¹ This contest was precipitated by the MP for the borough and erstwhile radical reformer, Sir Francis Burdett, offering himself for re-election after he had crossed the floor of the Commons and joined the Tories. Burdett had moved inexorably to the right after the Reform Act, earning the ironic nickname ‘Old Glory’ among plebeian radicals. John Temple Leader, the philosophic radical and son of a wealthy London merchant who had been elected MP for Bridgwater in 1835, resigned his seat so that he could stand against Burdett. Leader had already proven his radical credentials, seconding George Grote’s resolution in favour of the ballot in his first parliamentary session. Although Leader won the show of hands during the by-election he lost the poll, by just over 500 votes. The following month Leader was one of the six MPs who, along with six members of the London Working Men’s Association, formed the committee that drafted the ‘People’s Charter’.³² At the general election in August later that year he headed the poll in

³⁰ Jamie Bronstein, ‘Thomas Slingsby Duncombe, the “Member for All England”: Representing the Non-voter in the Chartist Decade’, *Labour History Review*, 80/2 (2015), 109-33.

³¹ Tom Scriven, ‘Chartism’s electoral strategy and the bifurcation of Radicalism, 1837-1852’, *Labour History Review*, 85/2 (2020), 99-126.

³² Hovell, *The Chartist Movement*, 73.

Westminster, a seat which he held until 1847, though Leader effectively quit politics in 1844 to pursue the good life in Italy.³³

Hetherington deserves much of the credit for Leader's discursive appropriation and therefore for inventing this strategy, using his newspaper the *London Dispatch*, the unofficial organ of the London Working Men's Association estimated by Thomas Cooper to have a circulation of 25,000 a week, to back Leader's campaign.³⁴ Like other middle-class 'friends of the people', Leader was careful to avoid the confrontational language of democracy during the election as well as thereafter, but that did not deter Hetherington who portrayed him as a 'young champion of democracy' from the start, arguing that the contest revealed the hopeless state of both major parties; the Tories lacked sufficient confidence to put up a candidate unequivocally aligned to their own principles but had to support an 'apostate democrat' instead, while the Whigs had been 'compelled to ally Westminster to 'a real democrat'. Believing that there was an elective affinity between the excluded majority and democratic principles and practices or, rather, seeking to forge such an affinity, Hetherington declared that 'our profession is DEMOCRACY' and called on non-voters or 'the working classes' to get behind Leader, who had already proven himself 'an unflinching assertor of democratic rights' in parliament. The choice, then, was clear:

On the one side is the DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLE (that is, the nation's rights), asserted by John Temple Leader, and on the other is aristocracy represented by a coterie of Tories, Whigs, and money-mongers, headed by an apostate Radical, who has the

³³ J. T. Leader, *Rough and rambling notes, chiefly of my early life* (Florence, 1899).

³⁴ G. J. Holyoake, *The Life and Character of Henry Hetherington* (London, 1849), unpaginated.

effrontery to declare, that the existing abuses, which he calls THE CONSTITUTION, are such perfection as to be incapable of improvement.³⁵

Sympathetic members of other classes could be co-opted, though they had to be carefully scrutinised and kept up to the mark. Such individuals were useful allies, whether or not they used democratic discourse, so long as their conduct won approval – even Richard Oastler, for instance, who deserved working-class support in Huddersfield. ‘Whig, Radical, and Tory are words: we look to acts’, Hetherington wrote, and whatever Oastler’s own view of the matter he was in fact ‘a democrat...if he chooses to tinsel over the pure god of democracy with the glittering of a Tory name, we do not see that any cause of objection against him thence arises.’ The key issue was support for the vote, soon to be codified as the central demand of the ‘People’s Charter’, around which class alliances were possible: ‘We feel, that so important is the exercise of universal suffrage, that we should be content to vote for any man who supported that principle’, Hetherington wrote, ‘however adverse he may be to us in other respects’. The reason was simple: ‘we look upon universal suffrage to be the handle to the political axe.’³⁶

Compared with Leader, Duncombe’s appropriation by the Chartists was more successful and sustained, and deserved fuller treatment. A final aspect concerning politics worth noting, however, is raised by the sobriquet Duncombe was known by within the movement – ‘honest Tom’. Duncombe was honoured by this nickname, but he was also defined and constrained by it. Honesty was one of the key qualities of the identity of the democrat in the Chartist imaginary, which had a strong romantic coloration as scholarship

³⁵ *London Dispatch*, 7 May 1837, 268.

³⁶ *London Dispatch*, 21 May 1837, 284.

has shown.³⁷ Democrats were expected, by their deeds and not only their words, to remain true to the noble cause for which they were fighting and be resolute and steadfast in its defence, regardless of consequences. This was no easy task, surrounded as they were by 'false friends' like Daniel O'Connell, labelled a traitor because of his attitude towards trade unionism and his support for free trade, a man that often said one thing and did another. Again, authentically democratic moral qualities were not the monopoly of a particular class; individual members of any social group could qualify for inclusion and respect, so long as they demonstrated their worthiness: O'Connor liked to say that he had 'been promoted from the ranks of the aristocracy to a commission in the democracy.'³⁸ Chartists often contrasted the honesty and directness of their political language with the sophistry used by their oppressors. Delivering the funeral oration at Hetherington's graveside in autumn 1849, the Owenite George Jacob Holyoake (who was learning to speak politely to his social superiors), summarised the older radical's character in this revealing manner:

Hetherington was an exemplar of the school of politicians amid which he was reared. We are now verging on a phase in which we chiefly affirm positive principles. The school of politicians (to which indeed we owe our present liberty) now going a little out of fashion, was that which asserted a right, and antagonised it. Of this school Hetherington was the most perfect type which remained among us. He did not look upon a political victory as something to be won by *exposition* as much as by *assault*. Hence, he was more soldier than advocate; and it must be admitted that political corruption never had a more resolute opponent, nor popular right a more doughty champion...Hetherington shrank from the rich and bland, and wrapped himself up in

³⁷ Miles Taylor, *Ernest Jones, Chartism, and the romance of politics, 1819-1869* (Oxford, 2003).

³⁸ *Northern Star*, 6 July 1839, 6.

the integrity, and poverty, and ruggedness of his own order. He seemed to feel that to reciprocate blandishments with wealth was to betray his cause...Those, however, who approached him on his own ground, who had the honour of working or suffering with him, never knew a more genial nature allied to so stout a spirit. He was a personification of good-humoured Democracy. The very tones of his voice bespoke the fullness of honesty and pleasantry.³⁹

Holyoake's tribute is touching, but typically replete with half-truths, his discourse shaped no doubt by the increasing liminality of his social position.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the conflation of honesty with the democratic cause was on the mark.

Culture

Democracy was on the rise across the 'hungry forties', but not only as discourse but also as signifying practice, as culture. Although Chartism produced a significant body of cultural production in the narrow sense of imaginative texts – partially recovered by some outstanding scholarship in recent decades – full assessment of its achievement needs also to attend to the culture of the movement more broadly.⁴¹ Malcolm Chase captured this well: 'Committed Chartists', he wrote, 'effectively *inhabited* Chartism: decorating their homes with *Northern Star* prints; purchasing their food from a Chartist store; educating themselves

³⁹ Holyoake, *The Life and Character of Henry Hetherington*, no pagination.

⁴⁰ See Peter Gurney, 'Working-Class Writers and the Art of Escapology in Victorian England: the Case of Thomas Frost', *Journal of British Studies*, 45/1 (2006), 66-7.

⁴¹ Anne Janowitz, *Lyric and Labor in the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge, 1998); Ian Haywood, *The Revolution in Popular Literature: Print, Politics and the People* (Cambridge, 2004); Mike Sanders, *The poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, politics, history* (Cambridge, 2009); Margaret A. Loose, *The Chartist Imaginary: Literary Form in Working-Class Political Theory and Practice* (Columbus, 2014); Simon Rennie, *The Poetry of Ernest Jones: myth, song, and the 'mighty mind'* (London, 2016); Greg Vargo, *An Underground History of Early Victorian Fiction: Chartism, Radical Print Culture, and the Social Problem Novel* (Cambridge, 2018).

and their children in its schools, in its meetings and from its newspapers.⁴² In an important sense, the movement culture was self-government in action: Chartists attempted to construct an 'emergent' culture or way of life that represented not just an alternative to the dominant culture but stood in opposition to it.⁴³ Chartist culture represented an uplifting alternative to commercialised cultural forms such as the 'penny gaffs' that were mushrooming in the metropolis and elsewhere which peddled highly sexualised, alcohol-fuelled entertainment, censured by both middle-class observers like Henry Mayhew and working-class moral revolutionists like William Lovett.⁴⁴ Chartists by contrast politicised culture, constructing a way of life from which they drew sustenance, and which could be mobilised to oppose their oppressors, notably through fund raising to support families of Chartist democratic 'martyrs' imprisoned fighting for the cause.

The basic building block of this culture was the local branch. In the aftermath of the internal divisions and state repression experienced from 1839 onwards, Chartists constructed a vibrant local branch life. Although not all localities joined the National Chartist Association after the establishment of this formal structure in the summer of 1840, hundreds did. Adopting the class system of organisation, this body was 'highly innovatory, the first national political party in history.'⁴⁵ Local Chartist groups organised a packed repertoire of activities for members, including public meetings, lectures and demonstrations, tea parties, soirées and festivals, which mixed educational with social attractions. From the outset they often faced hostility from their political opponents who

⁴² Chase, *Chartism*, 148-9.

⁴³ For these categories, see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977); *Culture* (London, 1981).

⁴⁴ Henry Mayhew, 'Of the "Penny Gaff"', in E. P. Thompson and Eileen Yeo (eds), *The unknown Mayhew: selections from the 'Morning Chronicle', 1849-1850* (London, 1971), 36-42; William Lovett, *Life and Struggles of William Lovett, in his Pursuit of Bread, Knowledge, and Freedom* (London, 1876), 32. On Chartism and moral revolution see Scriven, *Popular virtue*.

⁴⁵ Chase, *Chartism*, 163. Chase estimated around 400 branches and about 50,000 members. Some localities (in the midlands especially) were suspicious of the NCA and few joined from Scotland.

denied them access to appropriate venues, provoking struggles over space and place that Eileen Yeo highlighted in her pioneering research, developed more recently by Katrina Navickas.⁴⁶ The Salford carpenter and newsagent Reginald Richardson was acutely aware of difficulties encountered elsewhere when he praised the unusually sympathetic High Constable of Brighton for allowing public meetings to be held in the town in the summer of 1839.⁴⁷ Frequently denied meeting places by local elites, it was little wonder that Chartists prioritised self-government in the cultural as well as the political sphere. They made efforts to support their own bookshops that stocked radical literature.⁴⁸ Where possible they established their own institutions, such as the ‘Democratic Chapel’ opened in spring 1841 at Arnold near Nottingham, where it was noted, ‘The principles of the People’s Charter have taken deep root in the hearts of the people.’⁴⁹ The chapel provided a hub for local activity, including a Sunday school, library, co-operative store and benefit society. Formal lectures and debates reinforced such mutualism. A lecture on the ‘prospects of the labouring classes’ at the ‘Democratic Institution’ at Lockwood in Huddersfield in November 1844 was followed by a discussion on ‘education and co-operation, or the self-supporting system’ – in other words, the Owenite utopia.⁵⁰

Owenism saturated radical culture. Indeed, when they spoke of ‘something more’, Chartists were often indicating a debt to Owenism, a body of knowledge that they actively appropriated rather than slavishly followed, applying the principle of co-operation variously

⁴⁶ Eileen Yeo, ‘Culture and Constraint in Working-Class Movements, 1830-1855’, in Eileen and Stephen Yeo (eds), *Popular Culture and Class Conflict, 1590-1914: Explorations in the History of Labour and Leisure* (London, 1981); Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place*.

⁴⁷ *Northern Star*, 1 June 1839, 8. Contests continued throughout the period, the *Star* reporting (3 April 1847, 1), churchwardens’ refusal to allow Chartists to hold a public meeting in Croydon Town Hall. A general study is Richard Huzzey, ‘Public Meetings, Respectable Requisitions, and Popular Politics in Great Britain and Ireland, c.1769–1850’, *English Historical Review*, 138 (2023), 185-221.

⁴⁸ Robert G. Hall, ‘A Bookshop of Their Own: Reading and Print in Chartism, 1838–1850’, *English Historical Review*, 136 (2021), 894-917, is a rich account of Chartist print culture.

⁴⁹ *Northern Star*, 24 April 1841, 1.

⁵⁰ *Northern Star*, 9 November 1844, 1.

in different localities, as we shall see. Owenism had shaped profoundly the views of Hetherington and O'Brien on the *Poor Man's Guardian*; the Huddersfield Chartist Joshua Hobson worked closely with George Alexander Fleming, publishing the *New Moral World* before he took over the *Northern Star*.⁵¹ And Harney conjoined French revolutionary politics with Owenite utopianism, on his own terms: 'Did he mean that they all should have their food dressed alike, their houses built in parallelograms, their coats having one uniform cut? God bless you, no such thing. He only meant that all men should have what they earned, and that the man who "did not work, neither should he eat".'⁵²

So often exposed to religious and educational bodies dominated by their social superiors, Chartists sought both intellectual and spiritual independence, and whenever possible they clubbed monies together to achieve this. A 'Democratic Seminary' was started by radicals in the Vale of Leven in Scotland, for example, 'for the joint purpose of preaching the gospel, and instructing the younger portion of the community in the principles of education.'⁵³ At Nottingham, reading matter 'opposed to the welfare of working men and the rights of labour', such as *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* (the Whig answer to *Blackwood's*), was expressly forbidden by members of the 'Democratic Library' in a city with a local Chartist branch that boasted a vibrant cultural life.⁵⁴ Schools, chapels, libraries, reading and temperance rooms and at least one store (run by Harney in Sheffield), explicitly calling themselves 'Democratic' were established throughout the country, mostly in the early

⁵¹ Margot C. Finn, *After Chartism. Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848-1874* (Cambridge, 1993), 58; Gregory Claeys, *Machinery, Money and the Millennium: From Moral Economy to Socialism, 1815-1860* (Princeton, 1987), 132-65; Edward Royle, 'Chartists and Owenites – many parts but one body', *Labour History Review*, 65/1 (2000), 2-21; Halstead, 'The Charter and Something More!', 94-5

⁵² Cited by A. R. Schoyen, *The Chartist Challenge. A Portrait of George Julian Harney* (1958), 29.

⁵³ *Northern Star*, 19 December 1840, 2.

⁵⁴ *Northern Star*, 24 December 1841, 1; James Epstein, 'Some Organisational and Cultural Aspects of the Chartist Movement in Nottingham', in James Epstein and Dorothy Thompson (eds), *The Chartist Experience*.

1840s: the *Northern Star* records twenty, probably an underestimation.⁵⁵ Chartists could meet in fellowship in such places, which were particularly vital in times of special adversity. A Chartist from Dumfries described the pastimes, conversation and debate enjoyed each evening by ‘the flower of our democracy’ in the reading and clubroom supported by the local Working Men’s Association, which fulfilled a range of functions:

The importance of such a rendezvous, or *howff*, to use an expressive Scotticism, must be plain. There is an outpost of the democratic phalanx constantly in the field and on the watch; every movement of the adversary is marked, and the means of instant action always at hand. Not to speak of the immense saving of means and health which such a substitute for the attractions of the tavern offers.⁵⁶

Soon after its establishment in January 1838, the Dumfries Association had experienced an attempted take-over by middle-class supporters of the Anti-Corn Law League.⁵⁷ This was resisted and the organisation that emerged was proudly democratic; it had no president or vice-presidents, but a chairman elected weekly from the membership, a secretary and treasurer being appointed every three months. According to the writer, it was this feature,

⁵⁵ They were: Vale of Leven Democratic Seminary (19 December 1840); Gorbals Democratic Seminary, Glasgow (30 December 1843); York Democratic Chapel (12 November 1842); Liverpool Democratic Coffee House (24 July 1841); Salford Democratic Chapel (2 September 1843); Lockwood Democratic Institution, Huddersfield (23 December 1843); Thurstonland Democratic Chapel, Huddersfield (11 February 1843); Hebden Bridge Democratic Chapel, (24 September 1842); Sheffield Democratic Temperance Rooms (29 March 1845); Sheffield Democratic Store (5 February 1842); Arnold Democratic Chapel (23 July 1842); Nottingham Democratic Chapel (4 April 1840); Nottingham Democratic Library (24 December 1841); Leicester Democratic Hall of Science (29 July 1843); Birmingham Democratic Debating Society (24 August 1844); Redditch Democratic Gift Society (12 November 1842); Gloucester Democratic Assembly Rooms (18 September 1841); Bristol Democratic Chapel (27 May 1843); Trowbridge Democratic Chapel (21 December 1839); Deptford Democratic Academy (12 June 1841).

⁵⁶ *Northern Star*, 30 January 1847, 2; Ian Gasse, *Something to Build On. The Co-operative Movement in Dumfries, 1847-1914* (Dumfries, 2021).

⁵⁷ Briefly touched on by Alexander Wilson, *The Chartist Movement in Scotland* (Manchester, 1970), 154-5.

as well as the convivial and intellectual attractions of the reading and clubroom, which helped explain the continuing appeal of radicalism in the town.

If this description from Dumfries conjures up an essentially masculine space, in other places Chartist culture was more deliberately inclusive, encouraging a sense of family belonging. The many soirées and festivals organised by local branches testify to this emphasis, moments of sociability marked by their own symbolic language and distinctive ritual. One held in Sheffield in January 1842 provides an excellent example. The Charter Association Room in the city ‘was elegantly decorated with banners and devices emblematic of the principles of democracy’, a report of the event noted, including portraits of O’Connor, Emmett, Frost, McDouall, Cobbett, Byron and ‘others of the great and the brave, who have struggled and suffered in the cause of right and justice’, as well as branches of laurel, holly and mistletoe. The portraits referred to were undoubtedly some of those that were distributed freely by the *Northern Star*, while the greenery connoted victory, Christmas celebration, love and peace. Packed to capacity, 150 sat down to tea, then made numerous ‘patriotic toasts’.⁵⁸ Singing and recitations of poetry followed, before ‘the entertainments terminated to the satisfaction of all, by singing the Chartist anthem.’⁵⁹ Typically, this was a temperate affair designed to encourage the widest participation: ‘full half of the company consisted of the fair sex’, readers were informed, ‘whose bright eyes and smiling faces did much to promote the pleasures of the evening.’⁶⁰ Such occasions served to strengthen social bonds between members and did much to promote a distinct identity, informing what it meant to be a Chartist as much as any pamphlet or lecture, lending a particular emotional

⁵⁸ These prints have been dissected by Malcolm Chase in his essay, ‘Building Identity, Building Circulation’, in Joan Allen and Owen Ashton (eds), *Papers for the People: A Study of the Chartist Press* (London, 2005).

⁵⁹ Discovered and analysed by Michael Sanders, ‘“God is our guide! our cause is just!” The National Chartist Hymn Book and Victorian Hymnody’, *Victorian Studies*, 54/4 (2012), 679-705.

⁶⁰ *Northern Star*, 8 January 1842, 1; Yeo, ‘Culture and Constraint in Working-Class Movements’.

quality to the culture of the movement.⁶¹ Little wonder then that music and song featured so prominently at these events.⁶²

Appreciation of the spiritual and religious dimensions of Chartist culture has been enriched by various studies.⁶³ The appeal of the Lancashire preacher Joseph Rayner Stephens is best known perhaps, whilst the influence of nonconformity on the movement in general has been frequently acknowledged. Chartists routinely appropriated Christ to their cause and lectures on ‘the democracy of Christianity’ featured in the programmes of local branches.⁶⁴ Moreover, the tendency of Chartists to exert control over members’ rites of passage has been widely acknowledged; naming children after national leaders was common, and the Chartist funeral was another important, carefully choreographed ritual.⁶⁵ The social bonds that held together this culture were meaningful and durable. A tantalising glimpse of grassroots commitment is provided by an obituary for a 79-year-old ‘persecuted patriot’ that appeared in the *Northern Star* in 1847. Betty Scott settled in Rochdale after immigrating to England following the failed uprising by the United Irishmen in 1798. She had

⁶¹ For some other examples that foreground the ‘democratic’ meaning of these events see *Northern Star*, 13 March 1847, 1; 5 January 1850, 5. The role of emotion in the radical movement is explored in Matthew Roberts, *Democratic Passions: The Politics of Feeling in British Popular Radicalism, 1809-48* (Manchester, 2022).

⁶² Kate Bowman and Paul Pickering, ‘“Songs for the Millions”: Chartist Music and Popular Aural Tradition’, *Labour History Review*, 74/1 (2009), 44-63; David Kennerley, ‘Strikes and Singing Classes: Chartist Culture, “Rational Recreation” and the Politics of Music after 1842’, *English Historical Review*, 135/576 (2020), 1165-94; ‘“O! awa wi sic sangs as aft hae been sung”’: radical songwriting and the rethinking of Chartism, *Social History*, 49/3 (2024), 316-41. Although I have been unable to locate a copy, the *Star* carried advertisements for *Campbell’s Political Democratic Song and Recitation Book* in the autumn of 1842.

⁶³ Notably Eileen Yeo, ‘Christianity in Chartist Struggle’, *Past and Present*, 91 (1981), 109-39; idem, ‘Chartist Religious Belief and the Theology of Liberation’, in Jim Obelkevich, Lyndal Roper and Raphael Samuel (eds), *Disciplines of Faith* (London, 1987); Eileen Groth Lyon, *Politicians in the Pulpit. Christian Radicalism in Britain from the Fall of the Bastille to the Disintegration of Chartism* (Aldershot, 1999); Chase, *Chartism*, 50-52, *passim*; Michael Sanders, ‘God’s Insurrection: Politics and Faith in the Revolutionary Sermons of Joseph Rayner Stephens’, in Joshua King and Winter Jade Werner, (eds), *Constructing Nineteenth-Century Religion: Literary, Historical, and Religious Studies in Dialogue* (Columbus, 2019).

⁶⁴ Michael Sanders, ‘The Godlike Nazarene and the People-Christ: the figure of Christ in the Chartist Imaginary’, in Elizabeth Ludlow (ed.), *The Figure of Christ in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cham, 2020); *Northern Star*, 13 March 1841, 1.

⁶⁵ Chase, *Chartism*, 145, 156; Manon Nouvian, ‘Defiant Mourning: Public Funerals as Funeral Demonstrations in the Chartist Movement’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 24/2 (2019), 208-226.

participated in the reform demonstration held in 1819 at St Peter's Field, Manchester, where she was cut down by 'that ever-execrable band of murderers, the Peterloo butchers.' Undaunted, the notice continued, she 'struggled on under the banner of democracy, until the Charter was born, when she was one of the first to enrol her name, and remained to [the] last true to the good cause.' Her final request, the obituary remarked, 'was that she might be carried to the grave by Chartists.'⁶⁶

Despite such efforts to promote and sustain good fellowship in the wider sense, Chartist culture had its less inclusive aspects, with masculine drinking rituals persisting within the movement. Following meetings in the Town Hall and Democratic Chapel called to promote unity among Nottingham radicals in the winter of 1843, for instance, large numbers retired to the Peacock Inn, 'once more arousing the sleeping inhabitants of Nottingham in the dead hour of the night, or rather early in the morning, with the sound of "We'll rally around him again and again," "Spread the Charter," and other democratic songs.'⁶⁷ Such evidence reminds us that we should not be entirely rosy eyed about all aspects of this culture, for as feminist scholars have shown, Chartism was deeply riven by gender divisions and inequalities. The subordination of women within the movement was inscribed in their 'militant domesticity' according to Anna Clark, and although this view has been subsequently nuanced it remains the case that the male leadership usually regarded female Chartists as 'glorious auxiliaries.'⁶⁸

⁶⁶ *Northern Star*, 4 September 1847, 8.

⁶⁷ *Northern Star*, 2 December 1843, 5.

⁶⁸ Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley, 1995); Michelle de Larrabeiti, 'Conspicuous before the World: the political rhetoric of the Chartist women', in Eileen Yeo (ed.), *Radical Femininity: Women's Self-Representation in the Public Sphere* (Manchester, 1998); Helen Rogers, *Women and the People: Authority, Authorship and the Radical Tradition in Nineteenth-Century England* (Aldershot, 2000); Emmanuelle Morne, "'Glorious Auxiliaries"? Gender, Participation, and Subordination in the Chartist Movement (1838-1851)', *Labour History Review*, 85/1 (2020), 7-32.

Economics

Finally, to turn to economics. When Chartists used the term economy it was almost invariably in its older sense, referring to the careful management of resources, particularly of the household, though they did of course talk a great deal about ‘political economy’, which they criticised as the ideological creed of their class enemies. Such linguistic choices tell us much about what the Chartists hoped to achieve, and more perhaps about what they endeavoured to resist. Karl Polanyi’s seminal work *The Great Transformation*, published towards the end of the Second World War, is helpful here. In it, Polanyi wrote:

When the Chartist movement demanded entrance for the disinherited into the precincts of the state, the separation of economics and politics ceased to be an academic issue and became the irrefragable condition of the existing system of society. It would have been an act of lunacy to hand over the administration of the New Poor Law with its scientific methods of mental torture to the representatives of the self-same people for whom that treatment was designed...the more the labour market contorted the lives of the workers, the more insistently they clamoured for the vote.⁶⁹

Polanyi went to the crux of things: the most revolutionary aspect of Chartism was the challenge it posed to the seemingly ineluctable historical tendency to divide the political or moral realm from what came to be called the economic realm, as if making a living can be

⁶⁹ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation. The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (1944; Boston, 2001), 233.

separated from life.⁷⁰ Such splitting was referred to by Polanyi as the ‘disembedding’ of the economy from the rest of the social world, a violent process of abstraction fundamental to the rise of market capitalism.⁷¹ Although he intuited what was at stake and provided a brilliant theoretical sketch of the main vectors of change, Polanyi lacked the evidential support to enable proper historical appreciation of how this process was resisted, evidence that generations of scholars have subsequently provided. Chartism I would suggest represented a profound challenge to this great transformation, which is why the movement was so despised and feared by elites.

Here I can only scratch the surface of what is obviously a huge theme. Formative to Chartism, the New Poor Law was designed to hammer the labouring poor into both workers, or ‘hands’, and consumers, or ‘stomachs’ – the latter more purposefully than the former perhaps, as a ‘free’ market for labour was already fast maturing by 1834, as Larry Patriquin has observed.⁷² The ‘scientific methods of mental torture’ it elaborated, particularly the dietary and confiscation of ‘comforts’ from the poor, were intended to function as a deterrent by lowering the ‘social norm of consumption’, that is, the socially accepted minimum standard of life guaranteed by the wider community. Chartists contested the New Poor Law on various grounds, and the separation of families was particularly resented as anti-Christian, but the workhouse regime and ‘coarser food’ provoked deep and lasting outrage. The key figure in the early Chartist phase was the radical preacher Joseph Rayner Stephens, who as many students used to know described Chartism as a ‘knife-and-fork

⁷⁰ Plebeian radicals were not alone in contesting this separation, romantic conservatives did too. The writer Robert Southey, for example, opposed Adam Smith on these grounds, referring to ‘MORAL versus political economy’. David Eastwood misunderstands Southey on this point in his article, ‘Robert Southey and the Intellectual Origins of Romantic Conservatism’, *English Historical Review*, 104/411 (1989), 323. A better guide is Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958), 24.

⁷¹ For an insightful contextualisation see Hannes Lacher, ‘Karl Polanyi, the “always-embedded market economy,” and the re-writing of The Great Transformation,’ *Theory and Society*, 48/5 (2019), 671-707.

⁷² Larry Patriquin, *Agrarian capitalism and poor relief in England, 1500–1860: rethinking the origins of the welfare state* (Basingstoke, 2007).

question', though by this he did not mean that the majority were motivated solely by their empty bellies as if they were animals, but rather that the politics of consumption lay at the heart of the common people's wrongs.⁷³

Most important, Chartists contested the abstract idea or myth of 'the Market' as a singular natural form rather than a complex web of social institutions and relations. Owenites and Chartists sharpened their arguments against those propounded by political economists such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo and J. R. McCulloch, as the work of intellectual historians Gregory Claeys and Noel Thompson has demonstrated.⁷⁴ After the Napoleonic Wars, Owenite thinkers developed a sophisticated critique of the developing capitalist economy and this fed directly into Chartism, colouring alternative conceptions of the economy in the popular mind. Drawing on this rich tradition, working-class radicals insisted that ways of selling, distributing and buying had not fallen fortuitously from the skies but had been historically created and were subject therefore to political control and regulation. This was why they found it impossible to collaborate in a sustained way with the Anti-Corn Law League and the Complete Suffrage Union, middle-class bodies whose leaders naturalised market relations. Although Chartist demands for 'pure democracy' made figures such as John Bright and Joseph Sturge anxious, their response was to court the movement and find common ground with those whom they considered moderate. While a number of historians have argued that there was sympathy among Chartists for free trade – many signed petitions for the abolition of the Corn Laws, for instance, – this is largely beside the

⁷³ Gurney, *Wanting and having*, 29, 36, 76.

⁷⁴ Noel Thompson, *The People's Science: the popular political economy of exploitation and crisis, 1816-34* (Cambridge, 1984); *Social Opulence and Private Restraint: the consumer in British socialist thought* (Oxford, 2015); Gregory Claeys, *Machinery, Money and the Millennium: from moral economy to socialism, 1815-60* (Cambridge, 1987); *Citizens and Saints: politics and anti-politics in early British Socialism* (Cambridge, 1989).

point.⁷⁵ Chartists wanted rid of protectionist legislation that inflated prices for basic goods, certainly, but they loathed Free Trade as a creed or religion that sanctified the separation of the economic from the political domain, which its middle-class prophets believed would deliver a cornucopian future for the mass of consumers. The leaders of free trade were routinely described as ‘extension of commerce’ men that promoted ‘freebootery’ and hoped to commodify the world.⁷⁶ O’Connor himself was keen to assert that moral and economic realms had interpenetrated in a pre-existing ‘moral economy’. At a meeting in support of the persecuted Glasgow cotton spinners in early 1838 he contrasted the way combinations of the rich were supported by parliament, while those of the poor had been made illegal, apparent in the way statutes against forestalling, regrating and engrossing had been repealed: ‘while they thus slip the statute and common law nooze from the neck of the capitalist; observe how they at the same time tie the knot upon the defensive combinator.’⁷⁷

Reflecting the popular mood, O’Connor remained an uncompromising critic of free trade, though keenly aware how labourers were exploited both as workers and consumers, playfully remarking at a public meeting in Lancaster just before the general strike broke out in 1842 that,

The working-classes had been spoken of as wealth-producers, but he hated to apply that term alone to them, for they were equally valuable as consumers – (hear, hear).

⁷⁵ Paul Pickering and Alex Tyrrell, *The people’s bread: a history of the Anti-Corn Law League* (Leicester, 2000); Henry Miller, ‘Popular petitioning and the Corn Laws, 1833–46’, *English Historical Review*, 127 (2012), 882–919.

⁷⁶ Gurney, *Wanting and having*, 53-4, 112, 134, 173.

⁷⁷ *Northern Star*, 10 February 1838, 3. Notions of moral economy persisted in the radical imagination, far beyond the period discussed in E. P. Thompson’s classic study: ‘The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century’, *Past and Present*, 50 (1971), 76-136.

They had had arrayed against them the three ocracies – the aristocracy, the smokeocracy, and the shopocracy; but he would back his own ocracy, democracy, against the other three – (laughter and cheers).⁷⁸

Things came to a head after the strike, towards the end of 1842, at a conference where the Complete Suffrage Union attempted to get Chartists disillusioned by violence to back calls for ‘complete suffrage’. The portents were not good. Many distrusted this body as undemocratic and because so many of its supporters had swallowed the new political economy, the editor of the *Northern Star*, William Hill, warning readers to be wary as he considered the real aim was to subordinate demands for the Charter to the ‘class crotchet’ of free trade.⁷⁹ Hill’s fears proved well founded and the conference collapsed after moderate figures who nevertheless considered themselves ‘true democrats’, such as William Lovett, refused to give up the ‘People’s Charter’.⁸⁰

Chartists not only contested the abstractions of bourgeois political economy, but they also constructed their own practical alternatives to capitalist economic forms. Although Marx and Engels famously took Owenites such as William Thompson to task for failing to root exploitation sufficiently in the sphere of production, focussing mistakenly, they believed, on the way workers were exploited within the spheres of distribution and exchange, the marketplace and shop were crucial sites of exploitation. Moreover, working people felt they could still directly shape relations of consumption in ways that were more human. This explains the of Chartist co-operatives, which developed out of ‘exclusive dealing’ – that is, political shopping or boycotting shopkeepers opposed to the democratic

⁷⁸ *Northern Star*, 9 July 1842, 5.

⁷⁹ *Northern Star*, 5 November 1842, 4.

⁸⁰ Chase, *Chartism*, 228-9.

cause – recommended by the May Manifesto issued by the first National Convention.

Hundreds of co-operative stores had been established throughout the country by Owenites from the late 1820s, and such forms continued to spread and were politicised explicitly a decade later.⁸¹ The Newcastle Chartist Robert Lowery had utopian ambitions for Chartist co-operatives, believing that they would,

change the face of society: we may become builders, cultivators, merchants, and producers for ourselves, and sit under our own vine and fig-tree, none making us afraid...We shall no longer be under the galling bondage we are under at present, with want continually before us, while we toil for profit-mongers who value neither men's bodies nor souls, except as materials to barter for gain; who hold us in political bondage, and arrogantly claim dominion over our minds, denying to us the right to think for ourselves, and to express our opinion.⁸²

Co-operation was another keyword in the Chartist lexicon, synonymous with socialism before mid-century and the antithesis of competition, the lodestar of their political and economic oppressors.⁸³

These innovative forms of collective ownership were hamstrung through lack of legal protection, and the activities of the 'Chartist Co-operative Land Society', to give it its proper

⁸¹ G. D. H. Cole, *A Century of Co-operation* (Manchester, 1945), 25-6; Alexander Wilson, *The Chartist Movement in Scotland* (Manchester, 1970), 126-32; Peter Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, 1870-1930* (Manchester, 1996), 13-14; 'Exclusive Dealing in the Chartist Movement', *Labour History Review*, 74/1 (2009), 90-110; *Wanting and having*, Ch. 5.

⁸² Robert Lowery, *Address to the fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, of the working classes, on the system of exclusive dealing, and the formation of joint stock provision companies, shewing how the people may free themselves from oppression* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1839), reprinted in Brian Harrison and Patricia Hollis (eds), *Robert Lowery, radical and Chartist* (London, 1979), 202; Peter Gurney. 'Exclusive Dealing in the Chartist Movement', *Labour History Review*, 74/1 (2009), 90-110.

⁸³ A. E. Bestor, 'The Evolution of the Socialist Vocabulary', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 9/3 (1948), 259-302.

title, were also circumscribed by law from its inception in spring 1845, mass shareholding contravening the capitalist norm. Neither the common law nor the constitution provided protection against the many disabilities that constrained Chartist ambition.⁸⁴ No longer regarded by historians as an atavistic oddity borne of frustration, the Land Plan tapped into working people's desire to escape urban squalor and insecure, poorly paid employment.⁸⁵ Moreover, becoming a subscriber was 'a political act in itself, a gesture of defiance in the face of class legislation and government hostility, and a vote of confidence in O'Connor's leadership of Chartism as a whole.'⁸⁶ Individuals won places on estates by means of a lottery and although only 250 were eventually settled, the Land Plan was hugely popular before it was wound up in 1851, with around 42,000 shareholders in total. Women were attracted to the scheme, not necessarily because they had internalised O'Connor's patriarchal views on their innate domestic roles, but rather because they hoped it would allow them more independence and control over their lives.⁸⁷ Once again, ambitions of self-government in the broadest sense were vital. Soon after the Land Plan was launched, for example, an anonymous correspondent in the *Star* declared, 'nothing can be more serviceable to the cause of democracy than that the people should be taught the value of the land as the means of affording social happiness, and democratic institutions, as the only guarantee for the continuance of that independence which is inseparable from the free possession of the soil.'⁸⁸ O'Connor later described the Land Plan as practical manifestation of 'the growing

⁸⁴ See Eileen Yeo, 'Some Practices and Problems of Chartist Democracy', in Epstein and Thompson (eds), *The Chartist Experience*; Donna Loftus, 'Capital and community: limited liability and attempts to democratize the market in mid-Nineteenth Century England', *Victorian Studies*, 45/1 (2002), 93-120.

⁸⁵ Malcolm Chase, "'Wholesome object lessons": the Chartist Land Plan in retrospect', *English Historical Review*, 118 (2003), 59-85.

⁸⁶ Chase, *Chartism*, 259; see also Jamie L. Bronstein, *Land Reform and Working-Class Experience in Britain and the United States, 1800–1862* (Stanford, 1999).

⁸⁷ Matthew Roberts, 'Women, Late Chartism, and the Land Plan in Nottinghamshire', *Midland History*, 48/2 (2023), 213-15.

⁸⁸ *Northern Star*, 24 May 1845, 6.

power of the spirit of Democracy'; and Harney linked it to the ultimate goal too, as it represented for him 'the pure principle and true spirit of the Charter. It is the image of that happiness which the country would enjoy under a democratic government.'⁸⁹

Conclusion

To briefly restate the main argument. It seems inconceivable to me that the millions of men, women and children who read and discussed the radical press, signed petitions, attended public meetings and lectures, participated in demonstrations, torchlight gatherings, church occupations and the round of branch activities – that is, made the culture of the Chartist movement – were inspired by the vote for its own sake, as an emblem of individual worth or respectability. The slogan 'the Charter and something more' implied rejection of competition and market capitalism; people were drawn to Chartism because it promised to change for the better the lives of their families and communities by radically transforming social and economic relationships. The dominant classes correctly perceived this as a revolutionary threat. After the defeat of Chartism, the system of representative democracy that gradually evolved between the late 1860s and late 1920s bore little resemblance to the 'pure democracy' advocated by Chartists: John James Bezer had called it a '*holy principle*' and desired to be 'a democrat in my Sunday School, everywhere.'⁹⁰

It is deeply misleading, therefore, to over-emphasise linkages between Chartism and liberalism. Liberalism meant acceptance of the separation of the political from the economic realm, in reality as well as in theory, a separation that Chartists passionately rejected. In recommending Chartists turn their attention to the land question immediately after the

⁸⁹ *Northern Star*, 15 May 1847, 4; 20 November 1847, 7.

⁹⁰ John James Bezer, 'Autobiography of One of the Chartist Rebels of 1848', in David Vincent (ed.), *Testaments of Radicalism: Memoirs of Working-Class Politicians, 1790–1885* (London, 1977), 187.

crisis of 1842 and the class injustice that followed, for instance, O'Connor noted 'the growing belief that the want of political power was the grand cause of the social inequality by which the nation was distracted', that he continued had, 'led to the wholesome conclusion, that *political power* is but a MEANS, and SOCIAL HAPPINESS the END.'⁹¹ A few years later, the young Friedrich Engels made the same point in the *Condition of the Working Class in England*, also distinguishing between what he termed 'bourgeois democracy' and 'Chartist democracy', the former limiting itself to constitutional reforms narrowly conceived, the latter demanding the franchise in order to transform social and economic circumstances.⁹² In this respect (as well as in others), Engels was learning from the Chartists here, not imposing an erroneous reading from outside.⁹³

That certain working-class radicals made their peace with the new order after Chartism's defeat is hardly surprising. Some managed to find common cause with middle-class radicals on a range of single issues including taxes on knowledge, temperance, women's rights, and legal reform to protect working-class associations. Holyoake and others came to accept free trade and the separation of the political and economic domains it entailed as a kind of bargain.⁹⁴ Free trade finance simultaneously constrained working-class ambitions *and* helped facilitate the expansion of voluntary organisations that improved the lives of many working people in the second half of the nineteenth century by guaranteeing that the state left workers' associations alone.⁹⁵ It is important, nevertheless, to recognise

⁹¹ *Northern Star*, 15 April 1843, 1.

⁹² Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England: from personal observations and authentic sources* (1845: London, 1969), 261.

⁹³ See my article, 'Rethinking the Language of Chartism', 1-2, 21.

⁹⁴ For continuing tensions see my chapter, 'George Jacob Holyoake: Socialism, association and co-operation in nineteenth century England', in Stephen Yeo (ed.), *New Views of Co-operation* (1988).

⁹⁵ Ross McKibbin, 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?', *English Historical Review*, 99 (1984), 322-3

what had been lost – for the foreseeable future at least – namely the ambition to replace market capitalism with a humane, authentically democratic alternative.

Chartism continues to generate passion, both within and outside academia, because like the debate on the standard of living during the industrial revolution, the subject raises profound questions about the nature of capitalist society, questions that cannot be properly resolved this side of the cultural revolution that the Chartists practiced and hoped to generalise. Like other great anti-capitalist movements that have suffered defeat over the last two centuries, Chartism's collapse generated a good deal of introspection and melancholy, feelings that were as important a legacy than conversion of certain individuals to popular liberalism.⁹⁶ One wonders how many ex-Chartists lived in quiet hate after its defeat and felt the same way as the author of an anonymous poem of 1851 entitled 'The Hermit', which may serve as an appropriate ending:

For years, upon a mountain's brow,
A hermit lived – the Lord knows how.
Hardships and penance were his lot;
He often prayed – the Lord knows what.
A robe of sackcloth he did wear.
And got his food – the Lord knows where.
At last this holy man did die;
He left this world – the Lord knows why.
He's buried in this gloomy den,

⁹⁶ There are fascinating reflections on this theme in Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia. Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York, 2016).

And he will rise – the Lord knows when.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ *Notes to the People*, v. 1 (1851), 423.