

The elusive “threads of historical progress”

The early Chartists and the young Marx and Engels

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THE FIRST EVER REACTION by the Victorian ruling class to “Marxism” is found in a *London Times* leader of September 2, 1851 on “Literature for the Poor,” “only now and then when some startling fact is brought before us do we entertain even the suspicion that there is a society close to our own, and with which we are in the habits of daily intercourse, of which we are as completely ignorant as if it dwelt in another land, of another language in which we never conversed, which in fact we never saw.”¹

The “startling fact” in question was the “evil teachings” contained in the Chartist weekly, *The Red Republican*, founded in 1850 by George Julian Harney. The *Times* chose not to name the paper—“we are not anxious to give it circulation by naming its writers or the works to which it is composed”—but did extract some of Helen Macfarlane’s translation of the *Communist Manifesto*, serialized by the *Red Republican*. The selection included this passage:

Your Middle-class gentry are not satisfied with having the wives and daughters of their Wages-slaves at their disposal—not to mention the innumerable public prostitutes—but they take a particular pleasure in seducing each other’s wives. Middle-class marriage is in reality a community of wives.²

The perceived threat was overestimated. With Chartism in terminal decline, Harney’s semi-legal press was on its last legs, and he himself was about to emigrate to the United States. Also soon



Plans for a Chartist land settlement named after Feargus O'Connor, 1847. From the British Library.

to disappear from British shores was Macfarlane, Harney’s most talented contributor and the first English commentator on Hegel to translate any of his writings (in Harney’s monthly *Democratic Review*). The publication of the *Manifesto*, which Harney presented as “the most revolutionary document ever given to the world,”³ was the *last* great act of Chartism. The *first* was the founding of the National Convention of 1839. Actually called the General Convention of the Industrious Classes, so as not to scare off the moderates, the bourgeois press, who wanted to portray the Chartists as the harbingers of French-style Revolutionary terror, called it the “National Convention.” The Chartist radicals, like Harney, favored that name anyhow, so it stuck.

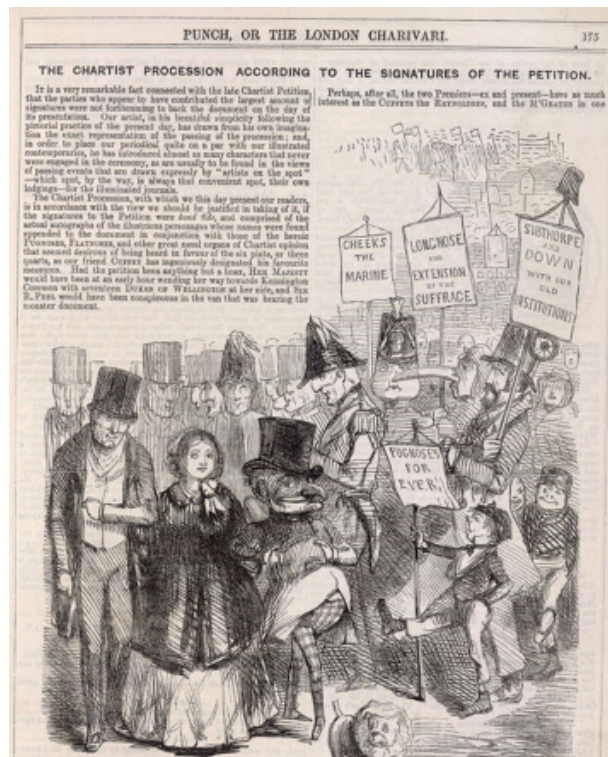
In France the bourgeoisie had to fight a revolutionary war to extirpate the old order, but in England the Civil War and “Glorious Revolution” of the 17th century made possible what came to seem a compromise. The Whigs’ Reform Act of 1832 extended the electoral franchise to a good section of the middle class, but the working class, who supported the Whigs’ Reform agitation, remained excluded from the franchise. Throughout the 1830s the radical press was persecuted, trade unionists transported, Ireland subjected to paramilitary police terror, and the hated workhouse system established by the New Poor Law.

Bronterre O'Brien, editor of *The Poor Man's Guardian*, saw Owenite socialism and Thomas Spence's program for land nationalization as giving the working classes the aspiration that they should "be at the top instead of at the bottom of society—or, rather that there should be no bottom at all." Babeuf's *Conspiracy for Equality*, which O'Brien translated and published, showed that because the American and French Revolutions had left the "institutions of property" intact as "germs of social evil to ripen in the womb of time," the great democratic gains had been subverted by counter-revolution from "within and without."⁴ The next revolution, therefore, had to be social as well as political.

In 1838 the five-point *People's Charter* was drawn up by the London Working Men's Association and the Birmingham Political Union. It was essentially a program for universal male suffrage. Delegates to the National Convention were elected at mass meetings promoted by Feargus O'Connor's mass-circulation weekly, the *Northern Star*. On February 4, 1839, a permanently sitting Convention assembled in London with fifty-five delegates. By the spring, huge demonstrations were taking place; muskets and pikes were being procured in large numbers. Even though the male leadership of the movement had decided that a demand for the female franchise would impede the enfranchisement of men, female Chartist associations were being formed.

In July 1839, after Parliament debated and rejected the Chartist petition bearing 1.2 million signatures, massive rioting broke out in Birmingham and Newcastle. By this time, the "moral force" delegates of the Convention had resigned and many of the "physical force" delegates had been arrested. The Convention voted for a general strike, but there was little agreement on how to make it effective. In September, the Convention, having lost all credibility, voted to dissolve itself. But in its last days, resolutions arrived from the miners of South Wales calling for armed struggle as well as the strike. A "Secret Council" was formed by Convention delegates favoring revolutionary action, which the Welsh were to initiate as a signal for other areas to follow. But on November 4th the Newport Uprising, led by the "reluctant revolutionary," John Frost, was met by the armed force of the state: Twenty-four Chartists were shot dead and fifty more were wounded. The follow-up rebellions in England were hastily called off. Hundreds of Chartists were imprisoned, transported to Van Dieman's Land, or driven into exile.

When Seymour Tremenheere, a government agent, was sent to South Wales in the aftermath of the Rising of November 1839 to investigate its causes, he was beset by a rumor that he had been sent to "take account of the number of children, and that the government intended to have one in ten put out the way." Tremenheere seemed to be unaware of the provenance of this "theory." The year before the rising, a mischievous Swiftian pamphlet entitled *On the Possibilities of Limiting Populousness*, written by "Marcus," drove the arguments of Thomas Malthus's political economy to what he saw as their logical conclusion: a "rational" argument for mass extermination. When Marcus put out a follow-up along the same lines in 1839, entitled *The Book of Murder*, many of those who had only heard of the pamphlet were prepared to regard it as proof of a nefarious government agenda. In 1839 the Female Chartist Association of Ashton, Lancashire called on women "to do all that in



Cartoon appearing in *The Illustrated London News*, 1848, mocking the Chartist petition presented to parliament in April of that year. From the British Library.

you lies, to prevent the wholesale murder of your new born babies, by the Malthusian method of painless extinction."⁵

In fact, questions of political economy exercised Chartists' opinions from the beginning. The London Working Men's Association had been founded by William Lovett as "a political school of self instruction... to examine great social and political principles." An important ally of Lovett was Francis Place, who acted as a parliamentary lobbyist for trade unions. Place, having made the transition from Jacobinism in the 1790s to moderate radicalism in the 1820s, was of a generation of artisans who were self-educated in the political economy of Adam Smith and David Ricardo. Indeed, some of the radical liberals in the parliamentary Whig Party had supported the New Poor Law of 1834 on Ricardian "principles"; in the project of securing "just" rewards for labor, workhouses and representative democracy were not necessarily incompatible. Place accepted the Malthusian argument that pauperism was simply a product of population growth, but differed on the remedy. Malthus wanted to impose sexual abstinence by separating husbands from wives in the workhouses, whereas Place advocated sex education and contraception. William Lovett, for his part, had less faith than Place in the laws of the market, according to Malthus, and believed that "surplus labour is at the mercy of surplus wealth."⁶ Others, such as Harney and O'Connor, were suspicious of Lovett's associations with Place and his friends in Parliament, whom they despised as "Whig-Malthusians." These Chartist radicals were equally hostile to the Ricardian free-traders, for whom the main obstacle

to Parliamentary reform was the landlord class, whose political dominance could only be broken by the repeal of the protectionist Corn Laws.

Shortly after the failed General Strike of 1842, Friedrich Engels met the Chartists in England and found a lifelong friend in George Julian Harney. In embracing the proletarian cause Engels began to criticize the bourgeois ideology expressed in political economy. His 1843 article, "Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy," bowled over a young Karl Marx and set him on the path to writing *Capital*. In it, Engels wrote, "Political economy came into being as a natural result of the expansion of trade, and with its appearance elementary, unscientific huckstering was replaced by a developed system of licensed fraud, an entire science of enrichment." And, "The nearer the economists come to the present time, the further they depart from honesty... This is why *Ricardo*, for instance, is more guilty than *Adam Smith*, and *McCulloch* and *Mill* more guilty than *Ricardo*." Just as inconsistency in theology forced it to "either regress to blind faith or progress towards free philosophy," so inconsistency in the economy of free trade would produce regression to mercantilist-monopolism on the one hand and socialism on the other. The English Socialists, Engels believed, had long since proved the case, both practically and theoretically, for the abolition of private property, and were "in a position to settle economic questions more correctly even from an economic point of view." In a socialist economy, "The community will have to calculate what it can produce with the means at its disposal; and in accordance with the relationship of this productive power to the mass of consumers it will determine how far it has to raise or lower production, how far it has to give way to, or curtail, luxury."⁷

Since the 1970s, Left historians have debated whether Chartism was a forerunner of working-class socialism or merely the tail end of the bourgeois popular radicalism espoused by Thomas Paine and William Cobbett. Gareth Stedman Jones, in arguing the latter position, sees the former as taking the same ground as the "progressivist" Whig theory of history. Stedman Jones correctly says that, "as a coherent political language and a believable political vision," Chartism really disintegrated in the early 1840s, not the early 1850s. But Stedman Jones's Althusserian, post-structuralist method rules out any analysis of the birth of Chartism as an expression of the capitalist crisis that Ricardian political economists feared would bring social development to a standstill, or the 20-year history of Chartism (1838-1858) as the history of its failure as a conscious attempt to resolve the problems of capitalism by breaking forever the power of "Old Corruption." Stedman Jones reduces the entire history of Chartism to an ideology of "popular radicalism," held together from the 1770s to the 1860s by the grievance that too much power lay in too few hands.⁸

Contra Stedman Jones's position, Chris Ford and I argue in our new book, *1839: The Year of Chartist Insurrection*, that what existed in 1839—and ceased to be thereafter—was a mass working-class, democratic movement with revolutionary and socialist tendencies, of which its political language was an expression.⁹ After 1839, the industrialized working class, in a huge swathe of territory stretching from South Wales to North East England, would never again be as united and armed in the cause of democracy as it was that year;

and never again would the ruling class, its army, and its police be so unprepared for revolution. In 1839 the revolutionary bourgeois ideas of Thomas Paine, William Godwin, Adam Smith, and David Ricardo stood in dialogue with the socialist thinking of Spence, Owen, and Babeuf. After the defeat of the General Strike of 1842, Chartism became a fractious coalition of interest groups: Teetotal Chartism, Free Trade Chartism, Co-operative Chartism, Land Scheme Chartism, and Christian Chartism.

Prior to his piece on political economy, Engels had reported from England to the *Rheinische Zeitung* in 1842 that, whereas on the Continent the revolution was talked about as almost inevitable, in England popular wisdom held that, "even the lowest class of the nation is well aware that it only stands to lose by a revolution, since every disturbance of the public order can only result in a slow-down in business and hence general unemployment and starvation." This "national English standpoint of the most immediate practice, of material interests" also stood in contrast to German Hegelian philosophy, which sought the "motivating idea" behind political phenomena and held that, "the so-called material interests can never operate in history as independent, guiding aims, but always, consciously or unconsciously, serve a principle which controls the threads of historical progress." Engels concluded that, although he thought revolution was "inevitable" for England, he was convinced that "as in everything that happens there, it will be interests and not principles that will begin and carry through the revolution; principles can develop only from interests, that is to say, the revolution will be social, not political."¹⁰

Certainly the Chartist radicals of 1839 believed that "immediate practice and material interests" made revolution rational and necessary rather than foolish and impossible. They told their supporters that the Charter would be won in a very short space of time, and the practical issues immediately addressed. But as Marx would later argue, in modernity the threads of historical progress were underpinned by a dialectic of labor and capital which, in the absence of an immediately practical alternative and a revolutionary subject to implement it, had its own "principle" of development—as it still has.

British historians writing on Marx, Engels, and the 1848 Revolution have tended to concentrate on their concerns with the events taking place in Continental Europe rather than in England. However, according to a seminal study by historian John Foster, the various stages of class consciousness outlined in the *Communist Manifesto* do reflect the history of the Lancashire workers movement from the 1790s to the 1840s.¹¹ The *Manifesto* states, "This proletarian class passes through many phases of development, but its struggle with the middle-class dates from its birth."¹² In the nineteenth century, the struggle passes from individual workplaces to "those of an entire trade in a locality against the individuals of the middle-class who directly use them up." In the "Luddite" phase, the workers "attack not only the middle-class system of production; they destroy machinery and foreign commodities which compete with their products; they burn down factories and try to re-attain the position occupied by the producers of the middle ages." In opposition to Old Corruption and the Corn Laws, the bourgeoisie encourage the workers to form "a more compact union," but do so

for “their own political ends.” At this stage, “the proletarians do not fight their own enemies but their enemies’ enemies.” But the alliance of worker and factory owner is constantly eroded by the class struggle at the point of production. In due course, “the incessant improvements in machinery make the position of the proletarians more and more uncertain,” and collisions “assume more and more the character of collisions between two classes.” The trade unions organize strikes and “here and there the struggle takes the form of riots.” Eventually, the *Manifesto* contends, with the spread of railways, steamship lines, and other new means of communication, the working-class unites, nationally and internationally, as a political party. Clearly, the *Communist Manifesto* could never have been written if its authors had not been engaged with English Chartists and following their fortunes very closely.

In 1848 the news boards at London’s Charing Cross Station announcing the February Revolution in France sent Harney running through Soho “like a bedlamite” to tell his friends in the German Communist League and the other exile groups. As the revolutionaries returned to their homelands to put their ideas to the test, Harney led a Chartist delegation to Paris as guests of the revolutionary government at the Tuileries. Harney playfully sat on the emptied throne of Louis Philippe, and looked forward to performing a similar ceremony at Buckingham Palace. In April 1848 the Chartists assembled en masse at London’s Kennington Common, with the intention of marching on Parliament to present the third Chartist petition. But this mobilization, which has been mythologized by “Labour Historians” as “historic,” was met by a huge government deployment of police and special constables, and dispersed by a rainstorm. Thirty years after the event, Harney recalled that, compared with the great days of the Chartist Convention of 1839, when the masses were energized and insurrection was “in the air,” the English 1848 was a “fiasco.”¹³ **IP**

1. “Literature for the Poor,” *London Times*, February 9, 1851.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *The Red Republican*, December 19, 1850. Quoted in A. R. Schoyen, *The Chartist Challenge: A Portrait of George Julian Harney* (London: Heinemann, 1958), 204.

4. Quoted in E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), 903.

5. Jutta Schwarzkopf, *Women in the Chartist Movement* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), 93.



Daguerreotype of the Chartist meeting at Kennington Common, April 10, 1848. From the British Library.

6. Joel Wiener, *William Lovett* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 40–47.
7. Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher 1843. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/df-jahrbucher/outlines.htm>
8. Gareth Stedman Jones, “The Language of Chartism,” *The Chartist Experience*, eds. Epstein and Thompson (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), 3–57; “The Poverty of Empiricism” in *Ideology and Social Science*, ed. R. Blackburn (London: Fontana, 1972), 96–115; “Utopian Socialism Reconsidered” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 138–145.
9. David Black and Christopher Ford, *1839: The Year of Chartist Insurrection* (forthcoming), Bank House Books (www.bankhousebooks.com).
10. *Rheinische Zeitung* nos. 343 and 344, December 9–10 1842. MECW vol. 2.
11. John Foster, *Class Struggle and Industrial Revolution: Early Industrial Capitalism in Three English Towns* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1974).
12. *Manifesto of the Communist Party of Germany* (Macfarlane translation), published as an appendix to David Black, *Helen Macfarlane: a Feminist, Revolutionary Journalist and Philosopher in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004).
13. G. J. Harney, “The Tremendous Uprising, in Three Parts,” *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, December 27–January 30, 1889.