

Chartism

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Protest Movements in Britain, 1811-1914:
Historiography and Debates

Chartism

Le chartisme

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Chartism

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Introduction

- 1 At the height of its popularity, Chartism – the mass movement for democratic and social rights in the 1830s and 1840s – drew support from three million people out of a total population of some 18.5 million. The number of supporters would be even higher if we included those who were sympathetic to the movement but did not actually sign one of the petitions sent to parliament. The Chartists, who were mostly working-class people, risked their jobs and livelihoods – such as they had these to lose – some of them their lives, in campaigning for the coveted People’s Charter. The age of the Chartists was the heroic age of popular protest, of crowds meeting on moor-land summits, of nocturnal torchlight processions, of writing and reading poetry and of singing songs, as a means to demonstrate the collective strength and solidarity of the people, and of their determination to bring about political, social and economic reform. Not surprisingly, Chartism was – and remains – a controversial episode for historians trying to understand and explain it. Was it a movement with revolutionary aims and violent strategies and tactics? Was it the first working-class movement in history? How socially inclusive were the Chartists? Was the movement little more than irrational hunger politics, whipped up by unprincipled upper-class demagogues? In what ways did Chartism fail, and why? This essay begins by providing an overview of the movement, including definitions and the key debates among historians, before moving on to focus on the cultural dimensions of Chartism by looking at what it meant to be a Chartist. It will also explore the movement within the context of nineteenth century Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) and the wider world – the far-flung corners of which many Chartists found themselves banished as transported prisoners and immigrants. The essay concludes by examining some of the ways in which Chartism failed, and the reasons for this, as well as pointing to some of the successes achieved by the movement.

Definitions and debates

- 2 Chartism emerged in the 1830s when groups of radicals became increasingly disaffected by the political exclusion of the people at a time of renewed poverty and unrest. The movement dominated popular politics for a decade from the late 1830s to the 1840s, and during that decade there were three peaks of popularity when Chartism gained most traction: in 1839, 1842 and 1848. In these years, the movement organised three mass petitions demanding democratic rights, which were sent to parliament. Never before had Britain witnessed such a flowering of sustained extra-parliamentary agitation. On each occasion, the petitions were rejected and this led to a radicalisation as more militant elements came to the fore. Rebuffed by parliament, these physical force elements threatened, and in some cases resorted to, force: uprisings, strikes and all out demonstrations and riots on the streets. But these tactics also failed to bring about democracy, and so the movement began to decline after 1848.
- 3 We should begin with asking, why is Chartism important, and why has it generated enduring interest among historians and the public? In Britain, Chartism was a foundational movement for democratic rights. Although the Chartists failed to implement the People's Charter – the key statement of the aims and the document which gave the movement its name – it put the issue of democracy and social rights on the political agenda, where it would remain until concessions were eventually granted in the later 19th and early 20th centuries. Unsurprisingly, the flourishing of radical ideas and practices within Chartism would prove hugely inspirational to future reformers, including Marxists and other left-wing political movements: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were friends with a number of Chartists, and although they were critical of the movement's limitations, there is no doubt that it served a generative purpose for their emerging socialist ideas.¹ Finally, the study of Chartism is also important because the movement's historians have often been at the forefront of debates about how to understand the relationship between politics, state and society, class formation and collective action, and gender politics.²
- 4 What was Chartism? Was it, primarily, a socio-economic protest movement, or a political movement campaigning for democratic rights? Historians have been divided. To take the first view, until the 1970s, Chartism used to be seen by many historians as a hunger protest movement, that is, a reaction to the poverty and exploitation of the masses who were suffering from the effects of the Industrial Revolution. In the hands of the improving and respectable London artisans who established Chartism through their organisation, the London Working Men's Association (LWMA), the movement might initially have been a political one campaigning for democratic rights, but it soon outgrew these origins and became a social protest movement. As the fiery Methodist preacher Joseph Rayner Stephens – who for a time was sympathetic to the Chartists – famously declared in 1838: "*This question of universal suffrage was a knife and fork question*".³ What Stephens meant was that the demands of the Chartists were simply a political means to secure a social end – improving working-class standards of living. This interpretation was also shared by some of the propertied classes who were sympathetic to what Chartism was trying to achieve – including novelists such as Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Benjamin Disraeli, even if they rejected the strategies and tactics of the movement. Sometimes this view of Chartism as social protest is

referred to as the “Tory” interpretation of Chartism (as Royle and Thompson have termed it), which implies that the movement was essentially a non-ideological movement responding to popular distress. It is also called the Tory interpretation because some of the more prominent figures who put forward this view were, broadly defined, on the political right, e.g Disraeli.⁴

- 5 There are parallels between the Tory interpretation and the liberal-labour interpretation of Chartism, particularly associated with later generations of left-liberals (Mark Hovell) and Fabian-socialists (Julius West and G. D. H. Cole). These historians and political activists were inclined to emphasize those aspects of Chartism that reflected their own gradualist and peaceful approach to politics. This view traces its origins all the way back to the Chartist period, and is associated with the Charing Cross radical tailor Francis Place (1771-1854), not a Chartist himself, but an influential advisor behind the scenes. This interpretation was also put forward by Robert Gammage – a Chartist activist who wrote the first full length history of the movement, and in the autobiography of William Lovett – author of the People’s Charter. According to this view, Chartism, though originally a moderate pressure group led by the LWMA, was taken out of the hands of these respectable artisans and hijacked by irresponsible demagogues, notably the Irish radical Feargus O’Connor. This was an emotional politics of hunger and hatred, forged in the previous campaigns of the factory and anti-poor law movements, which had failed to achieve their objectives of improving conditions and wages in factories, and in securing a more generous poor law to relieve the impoverished. The northern masses had little knowledge, much less understanding, of the underlying principles of the People’s Charter. Rather, as Asa Briggs suggested in 1959, the People’s Charter was merely a symbol around which the masses could rally.⁵
- 6 Turning to the second interpretation of Chartism – that it was a political movement – this view has gained ground since the 1970s and is most closely associated with the historians Gareth Stedman Jones and Dorothy Thompson, albeit in very different ways.⁶ In this portrait, Chartism was a rational response by a politically informed working class. For Thompson it was the class consciousness of the workers that explained the rise and character of Chartism; for Stedman Jones it was the long-standing radical critique of political monopoly exercised by the idle and parasitic classes at the expense of the productive classes (both working and middle class) that resonated. Both agreed that it is too simplistic to reduce Chartism to a knee-jerk hunger protest movement which rose and fell in response to the state of the economy. After all, there is no reason why someone who is hungry should demand abstract political reforms such as those contained in the People’s Charter.
- 7 These two overarching interpretations of Chartism are not as incompatible as their adherents might suppose. While the growing social tensions of the period created a favourable context for the movement, it was left to the Chartists to relate their political programme to the grievances of the people. In other words, the core Chartist message was that workers would remain poor and exploited while ever parliament was dominated by propertied interests who would enact legislation in their interest at the expense of the workers. Thus, Chartism can be defined as a popular radical movement that campaigned for more representative, accountable government as an end in itself, and as a means to bring about a fairer society. For some Chartists such as Bronterre O’Brien and George Julian Harney the vision here was undoubtedly socialist, though not of the kind that would be envisaged by Marx and his followers. Private landownership

might be abolished (though many Chartists did not support this), but capitalism was to be reformed rather than abolished, and the role of the state envisaged by most Chartists was a small, and therefore cheaper, one.

- 8 The People's Charter contained a number of demands. Most textbooks state that there were six points to the People's Charter: universal manhood suffrage for men over the age of 21; the secret ballot (voting at this time was open, and thus voters were often intimidated and bribed); parliamentary constituencies of the same size (these varied hugely with some having only a handful of electors, while others had thousands); no property qualification to stand for parliament and payment for MPs to enable working men to become representatives; and annual parliaments, that is, general elections every year instead of every seven.⁷ It is important to distinguish between the Charter itself and the petitions that were sent to parliament (1839, 1842 and 1848) in support of the Charter as the number of points demanded depends on the specific petition.⁸ Strictly speaking, only the 1848 petition demanded all six points. The original document, drafted by the LWMA in May 1838, had actually contained nine points – the six points plus three others concerned with the reform of election procedure. The 1839 petition only contained five points (it left out equal electoral districts), and the 1842 petition called for eight points – the six points plus repeal of the Act of Union with Ireland and a requirement that MPs seek regular approval of their conduct from their constituents.⁹
- 9 The strategies and tactics that the Chartists employed were varied and imaginative, if seldom novel, and there was often disagreement over which tactics should be used, and in what order. Most textbooks state that Chartists were irrevocably divided into two groups over strategy and tactics, a fatal flaw which played its part in the failure of the movement. The first group advocated the use of physical force, that is violence, to achieve their objectives; while the second group pursued moral force – peaceful, constitutional, gradual change. To engage properly with this question it is important to appreciate how, in the hands of contemporaries and even historians, these can be loaded categories, denoting assumptions about the movement. What the state regarded as constitutional and what the Chartists saw as constitutional could be poles apart. At the more constitutional end were the extra-parliamentary tactics of holding public meetings, signing and sending petitions to parliament, using the press to put their case forward, and by setting up a range of organisations to further their cause with a high premium placed on education. These tactics are often seen as the “moral force” wing, which was thought to prioritise rational argument and persuasion through constitutional means.¹⁰ At the other extreme there was arming, drilling (military-style parading and practising of arms), strikes, riots and even insurrection as happened famously at Newport in South Wales in early November 1839. These violent tactics collectively denote the physical force wing of the movement.¹¹ Between these two extremes, though, were various shades of grey (where, for example, do we place mass outdoor, nocturnal meetings – meetings that were meant to be intimidating?) and it is for this reason that some historians of the movement have questioned the accuracy of dividing the movement into two separate camps. For most Chartists, it was not so much a question of whether violence, or at least the threat of it, was needed, but when and in what context? Even the quintessential moral force Chartist William Lovett believed that the people had a right to arm themselves in defence against a state willing to use violence to put down constitutional protest.¹²

Class, leaders and culture

- 10 Chartist debates about strategy were also bound up with questions of class, perhaps the most controversial issue of all in the historiography. Chartism used to be seen as marking a breakthrough in working-class politics; it was a novel kind of movement both in terms of its ideology and sheer scale. Chartism, it was argued by several generations of labour and social historians, was a working-class political movement with a distinctive anti-capitalist ideology.¹³ To these historians, all the Chartist rhetoric which attributed the misery of the people to the elitism and corruption of the existing political system missed the fundamental issue. The defects of the existing political system were merely a symptom of a deeper, underlying problem: that is the profound sense of conflict between the forces of capital and labour which the Industrial Revolution had brought about, a view which was first stated by a French historian of Chartism, Edouard Dolléans.¹⁴ It was the tyranny of capital, as exemplified most dramatically in the new harsh factory regime, that was the cause of working-class exploitation, alienation, and which fuelled their demands for political reform as a means to curb the exploitative power of capital. As previously noted, it was no coincidence that the Chartist period did so much to shape the emerging ideology of Marxist socialism.¹⁵ By the early twentieth century Chartism had achieved iconic status in Marxist thinking. For no lesser person than Lenin, Chartism amounted to “*the first broad, genuinely mass, politically systematic, proletarian-revolutionary movement*”.¹⁶
- 11 While few historians today would fully subscribe to Lenin’s view of Chartism, many of the movement’s most prominent historians still interpret it as the political expression of working-class consciousness. Yet other historians have rejected this interpretation, pointing out, for example, that Chartism was led mainly by upper-class leaders, that it also drew support from many middle-class reformers, while Chartists focused most of their ire not on the evils of capitalism but political elitism. This attack on the class basis of Chartism received a substantial boost in the 1980s from Gareth Stedman Jones and the “new political historians”. They argued that Chartism was not a class movement in a Marxist sense, that is, it was not a proto-socialist movement, but the latest in a long line of radical movements (stretching all the way back to at least the late 18th century, if not before) that located the source of oppression and exploitation in the political system, rather than in the means of production. Chartism was part of the radical tradition of parliamentary reform that attributed a variety of popular grievances to, in the words of Stedman Jones, “*the corrupting effects of the concentration of political power*” in the hands of the crown and its aristocratic placemen – and after the First Reform Act of 1832, the propertied classes – who were impoverishing the masses by overtaxing them and contriving to keep down wages. It followed, therefore, that the political system would have to be reformed. But more than this, Stedman Jones challenged head-on the Marxist interpretation of Chartism by arguing that in radicalism “*the fundamental dividing line between classes was not that between employer and employed, but that between the represented and the unrepresented*”.¹⁷ There are parallels here with the debates on the French Revolution.
- 12 The question of whether Chartism was a class-based movement is thus a central issue, but the issue of class goes a lot deeper than historiographical debate; it goes all the way back to Chartism itself. Some Chartists, notably the LWMA, believed that Chartism had

to be an independent working-class movement – one led by working men themselves on the grounds that middle-class leadership of the parliamentary reform movement in 1830-32 had ultimately sold out the workers. In other words, the middle classes had used the workers as political muscle to put pressure on parliament to grant them the vote, only to discard them once they – the middle classes – had been admitted into the political nation in 1832. Thus, as E.P. Thompson argued, Chartism really began, not in the later 1830s when the LWMA was established and drew up the Charter, but at the moment when the 1832 Reform Bill was enacted.¹⁸ This made Chartists like William Lovett, secretary of the LWMA, deeply suspicious of upper-class demagogues such as O'Connor.¹⁹ Some historians who have followed this interpretation have sought to further the attack on O'Connor by suggesting that he was, in reality, little more than a Tory-Radical, like his mentors Richard Oastler and Joseph Rayner Stephens – hence his divisive obsession with the Land Plan – a plan designed to get workers out of the factories and squalid towns and back on the land.²⁰

13 This raises the question of whether Chartism was, in fact, a backwards looking movement which idealised pre-industrial society. While the Chartism of O'Connor and his supporters may have been backward looking, moral force Chartists had a much clearer and forward-looking vision of what a post-Charter society would look like – a social democratic world in which a truly representative and accountable political system would end class legislation, tackle social inequality and eradicate class conflict. Unfortunately for Lovett and his ilk, the tradition of the gentleman radical – of the masses and radical movements finding co-ordination and legitimacy in the voice of upper-class leaders – died hard and there can be little doubt that O'Connor was by far the most popular of the Chartist leaders.²¹ It wasn't that Lovett and the LWMA wanted absolutely nothing to do with upper-class radicals. While formal power had to be kept in the hands of the working class, Lovett believed that it was quite appropriate to form strategic alliances with other reformers of whatever social class. But this, in turn, led to accusations that the LWMA were collaborators with the bourgeoisie – an argument put forward, ironically, by O'Connor who was himself upper class. It was not uncommon for Chartist leaders to use the language of class as a way of attacking rivals. But there was a more fundamental issue at stake. As Robert Hall has argued in his study of Chartism in Ashton-Under-Lyne, “*there was a constant source of tension in Chartist politics between class antagonism and a longing for class conciliation*”.²² While many Chartists resented the privileged political position of the middle class (and often their wealth), others nonetheless took the strategic view that the support of the middle class was necessary to get the government to enact the People's Charter. Thus, the Chartist attitude towards the middle class was a lot more complex and contingent than a simplistic model of class conflict might suggest.

14 Chartism, of course, was always a movement that drew most of its support from the working classes. It was the skilled working class – artisans – who formed the backbone of the movement, groups such as handloom weavers and other textile workers, shoemakers, tailors, bakers, compositors and printers, cutlers and metal workers. In short, the English equivalent of the *sans-culottes*, though like the French revolutionaries, the Chartists drew support from the wider working class – the *menu peuple*. There are many reasons why artisans were to the fore – reasons that are common as to why artisans were often to the fore of radical movements throughout Europe and beyond: there was a tradition of artisan radicalism; artisans were usually better educated men who could read and write; they tended to work in places –

workshops – where it was possible to discuss current affairs while they worked (workshops tended to be quieter places than noisy factories), and it was common for one of the artisans to read aloud from newspapers while the others were working; artisans were a group of workers who were increasingly threatened by the development of industrial capitalism, even where the transition to factory-based production was not rendering traditional handicrafts obsolete. Growing competition, the employment of unapprenticed labour – often women and children; the rise of exploitative “middle men” who inserted themselves in the productive and exchange process, all conspired to threaten artisan privileges. In other words, artisans were not necessarily an impoverished group – though some were, such as handloom weavers and other textile workers – but they perceived a threat to their status and livelihoods and they saw in radical politics a means to protect their independence. Like the *sans-culottes* of the French Revolution, they subscribed to the moral economy of the just price, that is engaging in the labour process should provide workers with a living wage, the chance for promotion to a master in their trades, and that prices should be agreed through negotiation with employers, not dictated by free market economics.²³

Beyond class: new perspectives

- 15 What many of the revisionist historians have usefully drawn attention to is that Chartism cannot be reduced to class. Even when class appears to be the dominant explanatory category, it was often a co-constituent. For example, it was not just a sense of class unity among workers that made them Chartists, important though that was, but also links forged by community, kinship, and friendship. Chartism was shaped by other facets of social and cultural identity: notably gender, religion and nation. While earlier scholarship did not entirely ignore these other facets of the Chartist experience, there can be little doubt that the widespread attack on class has led to the opening up of other areas of Chartism to new methodologies (though it should be said that some of these methodologies are far from undermining the class interpretation of Chartism and have reinforced it). The debate on the role of language, led by Stedman Jones, has focused attention on the neglected area of Chartist communication, which was about so much more than the printed and spoken word. Recent work on visual and material culture has begun to show just how three-dimensional the Chartist experience really was: banners, processions, clothing, medallions, symbols and icons were all important mediums not just for communicating the ideology of the movement, but as a means to give voice to the otherwise “faceless” millions who went to Chartist meetings and signed petitions.²⁴ While interesting work continues to be done on the Chartist press,²⁵ we now know a lot more about other forms of the printed and spoken word. As recent work by Mike Sanders on poetry and Paul Pickering on song is showing, studying these forms of communication can shed unique light on the Chartist experience. Studying visual and material culture, for example, allows us to penetrate a world that, until relatively recently, we knew little about: the mental world-view of the Chartist rank and file.²⁶ As late as 1986 Edward Royle could write that it was “*simply not possible for historians to penetrate any deeper than ‘lesser leaders’ of the movement for that is all the evidence permits*”.²⁷ With advances in visual and material culture such a conclusion is no longer sustainable.

- 16 The (re)discovery of these aspects of Chartism has been fuelled by developments in the recent present – the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of Soviet Communism, and the postmodernist challenges that this posed to the intellectual credibility of Marxism and its displacement or reconfiguration by feminism, and the revival of nationalism. Take women and gender as an example. Influenced by the rise of women's and gender history since the 1970s, itself a product of the rise of second-wave feminism and women's activism in contemporary British politics and society in the 1970s and 1980s, interventions by these historians have further undermined traditional class interpretation of Chartism by highlighting the gender-blindness of older historiography. After all, if Chartism was genuinely class conscious, what place was there for working-class women in the movement? Did the movement preach and practice a gender-based ideology that included or excluded women? What opportunities were there for women to participate in Chartism? Did those opportunities begin to lessen as the movement developed, and if so, why? For much of the 1980s and 1990s, the answers to those questions were largely in the negative as historians concluded that the movement was underpinned by a gendered ideology that attempted to subordinate women to hearth and home. Many Chartist men, it was argued, wanted women banished from the public sphere, where they competed for jobs and undercut the once privileged position of male artisan workers. This led Chartists to promote domesticity – women should be in the home and not concern themselves with politics and work.²⁸ More recent work has begun to question the extent of this gendered exclusion of women. While there were certainly some Chartist men who wanted to subordinate women, not all did and some were open to the idea of votes for women. More importantly, even if the overall ideology of the movement promoted domesticity and subordination, there were many Chartist women who refused to accept this diminished role. They set up their own organisations and led them, and while some of these were set up to assist the men in achieving their goals, in some places this limited goal was soon exceeded as women turned these bodies into vehicles for advancing the interests of working women, including their enfranchisement.²⁹
- 17 Similarly, the rise of Celtic nationalism and the questioning of the constitutional status of the United Kingdom in the last twenty years or so has served to remind historians just how much of a national movement Chartism was, and one that transcended the historic divisions between England and Wales, England and Scotland, and England and Ireland.³⁰ Chartism was far from being an insular movement, preoccupied only with the fate of the British working class. From the very beginning they drew inspiration from, corresponded with and encouraged, like-minded movements in other countries. Chartism was book-ended by revolution in Europe – in 1830 and again in 1848, and although Britain escaped revolution these tumultuous events impacted on the Chartists. By the mid-1840s some Chartists were forging links with continental and socialist movements, especially in France.³¹ As Fabrice Bensimon has shown in his research, there was a regular cross-Channel flow of people and ideas between French and British radicals and reformers, as well as working people more generally. There were communities of emigrant British artisans in northern France, and these groups maintained links with their families, communities and radical politics back in Britain. This explains why some subscribers to the Chartist Land Plan were resident in France and why the lists of monies sent in to support the movement included donations from workers living in France.³² There are also reports of continental radicals and reformers attending Chartist meetings in the north of England, and Chartists often passed

resolutions in support of kindred movements in Europe and beyond. European radicals and reformers from earlier periods of history, especially the French Revolution, were admitted to the Chartist pantheon of heroes who were invoked and celebrated by Chartists at anniversary dinners and events.³³

- 18 In addition, Chartists were also keenly aware of imperial issues and saw the British empire as a wider stage on which oppression of the working classes at home and abroad took place. Many were anti-imperial in the sense that they viewed the empire as little more than outworks of “old corruption”, that is, outdoor relief for the aristocracy and other exploitative and parasitic groups within Britain who saw in the empire a means to satisfy their rapacity.³⁴ One of Chartism’s greatest legacies was to the “British world” where many Chartists emigrated and took their democratic beliefs with them.³⁵ Thus, the current of Chartist internationalism which historians have long known about, but for a long time tended to interpret as a diversionary preoccupation of an unrepresentative minority, was, in fact, much more central to the Chartist experience. This was underpinned by international networks which, though understandably stronger in London and the south of England, was by no means confined to those metropolitan places. At the very moment of its birth the Chartists were corresponding with and encouraging rebels in Canada who had risen up against British rule.³⁶
- 19 One of the reasons why some Chartists voluntarily emigrated was the search for a better life, and that often included access to the land so that they and their families could become more self-sufficient and independent. This desire for land was not just registered in emigration. Land was a long-standing radical concern, and Chartism inherited this preoccupation.³⁷ The radical agrarian strand would culminate in the Chartist Land Plan, a hugely successful but controversial part of the movement. The Land Plan was set up in May 1845 and was the brainchild of O’Connor. It was a scheme designed to resettle urban workers on smallholdings. Workers subscribed, many by weekly instalments, eventually becoming a full shareholder: one share entitled the holder to enter a ballot for a two-acre holding (subsequently raised to two shares), one and a half shares for three acres (raised to three), and two shares for four acres (raised to four shares). These shares also entitled the holder to a cottage and a monetary advance (the amount dependent on the acreage of the smallholding). The allocation was by periodic ballot: once the company had amassed sufficient capital, an estate was purchased, plots laid out and cottages built, a lottery was held, in which paid up subscribers were entered into the requisite ballot. The winners in the lottery could then take up residence – not, in the first instance, as owner-occupiers, but as lessees who were required to pay rent. Lessees then had the option to buy the allotment on favourable terms and become a freeholder, and thereby eligible for the franchise, which was another purpose of the scheme. A single share cost £1 6s, though it was possible to pay in instalments, initially of threepence, sixpence or a shilling. In total, five estates were purchased: Herringsgate (or Heronsgate) in Hertfordshire (renamed O’Connorville), Minster Lovell in Oxfordshire (Charterville), Lowbands and Snigs End in Gloucestershire (originally in Worcestershire), and Great Dodford in Worcestershire.
- 20 Clearly, a lottery scheme that held out the possibility of winning a cottage and some land, must have appealed to some who were not Chartists, or at least had not been until the Land Plan came along. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that the Plan was not integral to Chartism. After 1845, Chartism proper and the Land Plan were intertwined and local branches of the latter became the *de facto* organizational expression of

Chartism in some places. Further, as Malcolm Chase has argued, the difficulties in securing legal recognition of the Plan, with the political connection to Chartism being cited as one of the reasons for its illegality, meant that taking out a subscription “became 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”.³⁸ The Land Plan ultimately failed to deliver what it had promised. Only 250 of the c.42,000 shareholders were settled on one of the estates before the company was wound up by an act of parliament in 1851. The overwhelming response was part of the problem, so popular was the scheme that the numbers taking out shares meant that it would take many years for all shareholders to win an allotment. The failure to secure legal status, internal problems relating to the finance and running of the Land Company, in particular the inability of the allottees to pay rent, and legal and practical problems encountered by the allottees, each played a part.

- 21 Parallel to this preoccupation with the land, and in some sense a part of it, was Chartism’s attempt to gain access to public space, often denied by the authorities. Another area of recent focus has been space and place. As Katrina Navickas has shown, the locations in which protest took place can tell us much about the nature of that protest – space might determine what could be said and by whom; protesters often announced their challenge to the authorities by occupying public places; radicals often found particular spaces closed off to them, and so had to resort to what Navickas has termed spaces of “*making do*”.³⁹ The question of space raises the related issue of place. There is no denying that Chartism was much stronger in some places than others – in the manufacturing communities of industrial Britain, though even that description fails to do justice to the precise geography of Chartism. As Dorothy Thompson observed many years ago, Chartism was strongest – not in the large urban centres, but in the villages and satellite towns around those centres where artisans and domestic outworkers tended to be concentrated.⁴⁰ This was especially the case in places such as Lancashire and Yorkshire. By contrast, Chartism struggled to penetrate agricultural regions – because of the dispersal and isolation of working people, their relative lack of education and the greater social control exercise by the landed classes in the countryside, and agricultural labourers had their own traditions of protest, which were often much more immediate, violent and covert. As Roger Wells has shown in a study of southern Chartism, it certainly penetrated into the countryside but never commanded mass support and what existed was covert.⁴¹ Yet Chartism had much more success in rural communities where manufacturing was present – in Wales, for example.
- 22 The final area which has attracted increased attention from historians in recent years is the relationship between Chartism and the body. While the corporeal dimensions of the Chartist experience have long been a part of the historiography, it is surprising that the study of a movement which aimed to ameliorate working-class suffering has seldom foregrounded working-class bodies as an explicit and theorised object of attention. The new political history of the 1980s and 1990s, with its almost exclusive preoccupation with language, made for a somewhat desiccated portrait of the movement populated by disembodied people’s thoughts and ideas. More recent work has begun to redress this through a return to biography, and through renewed studies of two key antecedent movements which fed into Chartism – the campaigns for factory reform and opposition to the New Poor Law and their politicisation of workers’ bodies. Similarly, a new emphasis on embodied spaces of protest, and on the improvement culture, self-help and alternative medicine that was an important strand in Chartism, as well as the place

of emotion in popular radicalism, have, collectively refocused attention on the bodies of the working classes.⁴² Particular attention has been paid to the impact of prison and other disciplinary institutions such as the workhouse on working-class bodies. The rationale for this focus is twofold. First, such institutionalisation was a defining and often debilitating experience for many Chartists. Second, there exists a rich body of testimony written by Chartists and others detailing their experiences, testimony long known to historians of popular radicalism, but one only recently returned to in light of renewed interest in nineteenth-century prison regimes and the experiences of the incarcerated. As a growing body of research has begun to show, “Dungeon radicalism” exerted a profound impact on working-class bodies.⁴³

Conclusion

- 23 By way of conclusion we need to return to the question of why Chartism failed. In fact, this question should be rephrased because Chartism was not, by any set of criteria, an unmitigated failure. We should ask, in what ways did Chartism fail, and why? Despite the heroic deeds of the Chartists, the movement did not succeed in pressuring the government to enact the People’s Charter. Many, though by no means all, historians have thus concluded that Chartism failed. Without getting too philosophical, this partly depends on how one defines failure. The sympathetic like to point out that barring the demand for annual parliaments, all of the points in the Charter were eventually conceded: the abolition of the property qualification (1858); the secret ballot (1872); payment for MPs (1911); universal manhood suffrage (1918); and since 1885 the House of Commons has moved towards the principle of constituencies of equal size, though to this day equal electoral districts have not technically been conceded. As is so often the case in British political history, these reforms were conceded by the elite largely at times of their choosing and in ways that did little to dislodge them from power, but there can be no doubt that Chartism put them on the agenda.
- 24 If we take a synoptic view of Chartism in its last decade (the 1850s), we can see that it had become a pressure group rather than a mass movement, and one that was divided. The return of some economic prosperity, the crushing of revolutionary hopes on the European continent in 1848-9, the willingness of the state to pass some measure of reform – the repeal of the Corn Laws and factory reform – the state clampdown on Chartism including the arrest and transportation of key leaders, as well as debate and division within the moribund movement, each played their part in that decline. The question of why Chartism failed has been a controversial one. Most of the other areas of historiographical debate discussed during the course of this essay – leadership and organisation; class; whether Chartism was a political movement or a hunger protest movement – all of these debates are, at some level, about why Chartism failed. For those sympathetic to Lovett and the type of politics associated with the LWMA, Chartism failed because it was hijacked by O’Connor whose tactics of the mass platform and threats of physical force played into the hands of the movement’s enemies. Those who subscribe to the class interpretation of Chartism often take the view that it was the overwhelming power of the state that ultimately destroyed the movement, allied, perhaps, to economic recovery and less strained class relations in the mid-Victorian years.⁴⁴ For those who argue that Chartism was the latest in a long line of radical

attacks on political exclusion, it was the mellowing of the state in the 1840s under Sir Robert Peel and the Conservatives that explains the demise of Chartism.⁴⁵

- 25 But all was not lost. In the 1850s, 1860s and beyond, former Chartists secured some of the victories they had laboured for, especially in the arena of local government. Sheffield was one of the most shining examples of municipal Chartism where a group of Chartist councillors were able to pass a series of reforms that began to improve the lives of the working class, for example in the fields of public health and in relieving poverty. There were other places, too, where Chartists made a significant impact on local and municipal politics.⁴⁶ But there is a sense in which the greatest Chartist legacy was not local but international. As previously mentioned, Chartists were transported to the penal colonies; many others emigrated to Australia, New Zealand and the USA and brought their Chartism with them and were able, especially in Australian states to form part of democratic campaigns that secured the type of reforms that had eluded them in Britain. But even in Britain, memories of Chartism endured and would play an important part in legitimating later reforming organisations and political parties. Chartism is now part of the democratic heritage of Britain.⁴⁷

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ABSTRACTS

The Chartist movement continues to occupy a central place in the history and historiography of modern Britain. As the first mass working-class movement for democracy in Britain, Chartism remains a controversial episode for historians trying to understand and explain it. Was it a movement with revolutionary aims and violent strategies and tactics? How socially inclusive were the Chartists? Was the movement little more than irrational hunger politics, whipped up by unprincipled upper-class demagogues? In what ways did Chartism fail, and why? This essay begins by providing an overview of the movement, including definitions and the key debates among historians, before moving on to focus on the cultural dimensions of Chartism by looking at what it meant to be a Chartist. It will also explore the movement within the context of nineteenth century Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) and the wider world – the far-flung corners of which many Chartists found themselves banished as transported prisoners and immigrants. The essay concludes by examining some of the ways in which Chartism failed, and the reasons for this, as well as pointing to some of the successes achieved by the movement.

Le mouvement chartiste continue d'occuper une place centrale dans l'histoire et l'historiographie de la Grande-Bretagne moderne. Premier mouvement de masse de la classe ouvrière en faveur de la démocratie en Grande-Bretagne, le chartisme reste un épisode controversé pour les historiens qui tentent de le comprendre et de l'expliquer. S'agissait-il d'un mouvement aux objectifs révolutionnaires et aux stratégies et tactiques violentes ? Dans quelle mesure les Chartistes étaient-ils socialement inclusifs ? Le mouvement n'était-il rien d'autre qu'une politique irrationnelle attisée par des démagogues sans principes issus de la classe supérieure ? En quoi le chartisme a-t-il échoué, et pourquoi ? Cet article donne tout d'abord une vue d'ensemble du mouvement, ainsi que des définitions et des principaux débats historiographiques, puis explore les dimensions culturelles du chartisme en s'interrogeant sur ce que signifiait être chartiste. Il étudie également le mouvement dans le contexte de la Grande-Bretagne du XIX^e siècle (Angleterre, Écosse et pays de Galles) et du reste du monde, en particulier les endroits reculés où de nombreux chartistes furent envoyés comme prisonniers ou immigrés. L'article se conclut par une analyse des échecs du chartisme et de leurs causes, ainsi que par une mise en évidence des succès remportés par le mouvement.

INDEX

Mots-clés: radicalisme, contestation, politique des classes populaires, culture ouvrière

Keywords: radicalism, protest, working-class politics, working-class culture

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