

Introduction: Chartism – a question of interpretation

Between 1838 and 1858, large sections of the working classes of Britain were involved in the Chartist movement. On three occasions during that time – in 1839, 1842 and 1848 – extensive national campaigns took place and signatures were collected for national petitions calling for universal suffrage. These were presented to parliament and on each occasion they were rejected. Understanding Chartism seems deceptively simple: it was a widespread campaign among working people between 1838 and 1858 which failed to achieve any of its political demands. In their work, *The bleak age*, J. L. and Barbara Hammond wrote that the history of the Chartist movement was ‘confused and perplexing’. Yet, as J. F. C. Harrison, a more recent historian, said: ‘For nearly twenty years after 1837, Chartism was a name to evoke the wildest hopes and worst fears, like Bolshevism in a later age.’¹

Why did the movement fascinate its contemporaries and later writers alike? Firstly, the Chartists wanted to reform society by changing the way in which they were governed. Chartism maintained that the lives of ordinary people could not be improved without their right to vote. Secondly, Chartism addressed questions that were later to challenge the modern labour movement. How, for example, is it possible to implement particular political principles? What methods should be employed? Is change something that could be better achieved dramatically through revolution or by more gradual means? How can the support of working people be obtained and, more importantly, retained over time? Finally, there is a crucial historiographical dimension: many who have written about the movement have either been looking for the origins of their personal political beliefs or have used Chartism as a means of assessing their own historical theories. As a result, the interpretation of Chartism is closely connected with the understanding of events in the writers’ own worlds. This has affected their perception of Chartism and its influence.²

Contemporary writers and early historians, 1850–80

Nineteenth-century society unquestionably saw itself as a society of different ‘classes’. What this meant in practice was a cause of considerable contemporary debate. Some people argued that there were two classes: William Cobbett, for example, saw society in terms of ‘masters and slaves’; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels recognised the proletariat and the bourgeoisie;³ Benjamin Disraeli saw ‘two nations’, the rich and the poor.⁴ Other writers perceived three or more classes. The crucial point is that, whether modern historians like it or not, we

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cannot get away from the fact that the contemporaries of Chartism regarded their society as one based on class and that contemporary definitions of class were imprecise and remarkably fluid. Class provided cultural definition and self-identity rather than determining political allegiance. Its value lies in its describing of contemporary attitudes and behaviour rather than its analysis of them. Certainly, the language of class was central to both contemporary writing on Chartism and the analyses of later historians.

In 1854 R. C. Gammage, irritated by his experiences during the later years of the movement, started to publish the first history of the Chartist movement.⁵ A revised edition appeared in 1894, some six years after Gammage's death, including some corrections and observations from others in the movement. Gammage's account was regarded rather uncritically as an objective account until, in the early 1950s, John Saville pointed to distortions in his work on the Chartist leader Ernest Jones. In reality, Gammage's book is both a partisan contribution to the movement and a reflection on Chartism.

Gammage stressed the political nature of the movement, an emphasis that is found in many of the large number of contemporary accounts that have survived. The main issue was the vote. However, an alternative view of Chartism was stressed at the time in many middle-class novels on the subject and was put forward dogmatically by Thomas Carlyle in his 1839 pamphlet, *Chartism*. Chartism, he argued, was motivated not by demands for political reform but by the need to improve social conditions. Chartism was, in Carlyle's analysis, the result of 'an abdication on the part of the governors', a breakdown in relations between the classes and a destruction of the 'bond of connection' between the poor and their social 'betters'. What was needed was genuine social understanding and justice. Four years later, in 'Past and present', Carlyle restated the point:

We have more riches than any Nation ever had before; we have less good of them than any Nation ever had before. Our successful industry is hitherto unsuccessful; a strange success, if we stop here! In the midst of plethoric plenty, the people perish; with gold walls and full barns, no man feels himself safe or satisfied.⁶

This 'condition-of-England' question influenced such novelists as Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Kingsley, who largely accepted Carlyle's interpretation. Gaskell, in *Mary Barton*, and Kingsley, in *Alton Locke*, created sympathetic Chartist characters, which led many readers – some Chartists but most not – to consider the authors as being receptive to the movement. This is to misread their novels. Neither author had any real warmth for either the Chartist leaders or their political ambitions. *Mary Barton* aroused the sensitivities of Gaskell's novel-reading, middle-class audience by combining sentiment with naturalism and hard facts with deathbed tears. Published in 1848, it seemed to touch the right nerve at the right time. Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (published in 1850) is the story of a young working man who is led by his experience of poverty and distress into following certain immoral and dishonest Chartist

leaders who are pursuing political answers to what are moral questions. Kingsley's vivid reconstruction of the Kennington Common 'fiasco' of 10 April 1848 established a negative picture – which was accepted by historians later in the century – of Feargus O'Connor as an ineffective leader and of the whole movement's collapse into chaos and dejection. Spencer Walpole, writing later of 1848, decided that the discovery of fraudulent signatures on the National Petition 'had turned the whole thing into ridicule . . . [and that] the cause of Reform was for years arrested by the abuse of the machinery devised by the Reformers'.⁷

The growth of labour history, 1880–1940

By the 1880s, most British historians had made a link between the political and social interpretations of Chartism. This approach fitted well with the dominant 'Whig' interpretation of history.⁸ The Chartist autobiographies published between the 1870s and 1900 with their emphasis on 'respectability' did much to invent the tradition of Chartism as a forerunner of Victorian liberalism. The debate between the old Chartists and the early labour historians was over what Chartism had become. Did the radical Chartist tradition continue into the second half of the century? Had it evolved into socialism, or was Gladstonian liberalism its logical beneficiary?

The confidence of the mid-Victorian economy was undermined by growing foreign competition from the mid-1870s, and the increasing awareness of the extreme poverty that existed in Britain's cities led to a shift in emphasis in the writings on Chartism. The struggling British labour movement moreover became susceptible to charges that socialism was a doctrine of disorder imported from the continent. The result was the development of two major schools of thought – Fabian and Marxist – both of which looked to Chartism for their intellectual origins. The Fabians emerged in the 1880s as a radical 'think-tank' committed to an interventionist solution to the economic and social problems facing society. By contrast, Marxists sought a revolutionary change in society by shifting all the means of economic production, distribution and exchange to democratic government, by establishing working-class power and by recognising the common interests shared by workers across the world. The two approaches may have overlapped, but also led to significantly different perspectives on the history of Chartism. In Beatrice and Sidney Webb's *History of trade unionism* (1894) and Graham Wallas' *The life of Francis Place* (1898), Chartism was accorded a place of some importance – for the Fabians emphasised a radical artisan tradition. By contrast, the Marxists, and especially Marx himself, marginalised the role of artisans within the proletariat. The preoccupation of artisans with changing the political rather than the economic system, and their insistence on a political programme that differed little from that of middle-class radicals in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, posed a fundamental dilemma. Were the Chartists irrelevant in the process of changing the capitalist system, or were they in fact the first proletarian political party? The innumerable references to the Chartists in Marx and Engels' writings meant that Marxist historians paid

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particular attention to the movement, especially to those Chartists who sought revolutionary solutions.

The first scholarly histories of Chartism appeared between 1895 and 1920. From Germany, John Tildersley explained, in 1898, how the social and economic background of the 1830s and 1840s had affected the course of the movement. In 1914 Edouard Dolléans published *Le Chartisme, 1831–1848*, which came to the single, comprehensive conclusion that Chartism was the reaction of the working class against the Industrial Revolution. Two years later, three studies were published by Columbia University: F. F. Rosenblatt, *The Chartist movement in its social and economic aspects*; P. W. Slosson, *The decline of the Chartist movement*; and H. U. Faulkner, *Chartism and the churches*. Two other writers, both of whom died young, worked on general narrative accounts of Chartism, using the Place manuscripts in the British Library – Mark Hovell of Manchester University was killed in 1916 but Professor T. F. Tout completed his work.⁹ Hovell largely followed Francis Place's London-centred, artisanal interpretation of events, arguing that the London Working Men's Association (LWMA) sought, through peaceful campaigning, to achieve its political objectives but that Feargus O'Connor wrenched the initiative from its hands; middle-class opinion was, as a result, alienated. Hovell drew a stark contrast between the rational behaviour of William Lovett and the LWMA, on the one hand, and that of the provincial radicals who were motivated by distress rather than reason, on the other. Julius West's work is more extensive than Hovell's, especially in its examination of the later years of the movement that Hovell did not have time to reach. He too focused on the role of the LWMA, comparing its tactics to those used by the Fabians. He was less hostile to O'Connor, but was still inclined to see him as a would-be dictator.

These works made a similar distinction between the rational, 'moral-force' ideas of Lovett and the LWMA and the 'physical' and potentially explosive outlook of O'Connor and the provincial radicals, a position that dominated the concerns of Chartist historiography until well after 1945. This emphasis derived largely from the use of the Place collection and his judgement that provincial radicals were illiterate and impatient and that their leaders were 'wicked and designing men'. This perspective was of particular value in explaining why Chartism failed to achieve its objectives: the movement was destroyed by divisions within the working class – that is, between the more affluent skilled artisans and the less economically secure factory workers and outworkers. This division between what G. D. H. Cole in 1941 respectively called 'rational Chartism' and 'hungry Chartism' is too convenient a solution, however, and reflects the gradualist approach of the Fabians and liberals rather than the historical record. There is, for example, little to support Hovell's argument that sufficient voters might have been persuaded to support a rationally argued case for the Charter had it not been for the violent rhetoric and behaviour of O'Connor and his supporters.

There was a widening gulf between those who advocated gradualism and the supporters of armed revolution in the aftermath of the 1917 revolution in Russia. Marxist writers declared that Chartism was part of a revolutionary tradition

rather than a gradualist movement. Two authors – Theodore Rothstein and Reg Groves – are of particular importance in this respect, because they emphasised the ‘class’ dimension of the movement. Rothstein’s *From Chartism to labourism* was published in 1929. It focused on the recognition by some Chartist writers, especially James Bronterre O’Brien and George Julian Harney, that bourgeois institutions (like the existing parliamentary system) needed to be destroyed more comprehensively than later leaders of the labour movement believed they should be. Rothstein, however, had difficulty in reconciling his views with levels of Chartist agitation that were higher amongst artisans and small masters than they were amongst proletarians in the factories. The Marxist perspective was certainly a useful alternative to the ‘Whiggish’ views of the Fabians (especially their view that Chartism was the forerunner of the twentieth-century labour movement), but the two approaches did agree on one thing: both were highly critical of the role played by Feargus O’Connor. To the Fabians, and especially to Hovell, O’Connor had destroyed Chartism by his insistence on using a violent rhetoric that prevented the peaceful growth of a rational movement that might otherwise have convinced the authorities of the argument for further reform. For the Marxists, and particularly for Reg Groves in his *But we shall rise again* (1938), it was not O’Connor’s violence but his lack of revolutionary vision and his opposition to socialism that deprived the movement of its success.

Biographies and local studies, 1940–80

The general history of Chartism began to be fleshed out after 1939 with the development of two new lines of enquiry: biographies and local studies. The publication of David Williams’ study of John Frost in 1939 and G. D. H. Cole’s *Chartist portraits* in 1941 opened up a new, biographical dimension to Chartism. The publication of *Chartist studies*, edited by Asa Briggs, in 1959, altered the focus from leaders to localities and resulted in the emergence of sociologically based regional and local studies of the Chartist movement in different parts of the British Isles. These studies underlined the diverse nature of the movement and therefore the difficulty of making generalisations about Chartism as a whole. This point was well made by F. C. Mather in 1965:

Because Chartism was a product of diverse social forces, the movement itself lacked unity. The division in the Chartist ranks of which historians have been most acutely conscious is that between the advocates of rival methods of winning the Charter – moral force and physical force. This distinction has often been made to appear too clear-cut. What existed was not two schools, but a range of opinions which shaded into one another, and individual Chartists often shifted the emphasis of their views so markedly as to give the impression of having changed sides.¹⁰

The result of these biographical and local studies was a more rounded, although fragmented, picture of the movement. This is evident in Dorothy Thompson’s *The Chartists: popular politics in the Industrial Revolution*, published in

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1984. It is an analysis rather than a history of Chartism, and provides a multi-dimensional account of its social composition and values.

By the late 1970s, three types of writing about Chartism had clearly emerged – the generally narrative approach, biographical studies and studies of regional and local events – within two historiographical traditions: the broadly Fabian approach and that of Marxist analysis, grounded particularly in the class dimension. These provided a picture of considerable richness and diversity. There were, however, important questions that had still not been resolved satisfactorily. The emergence of local studies, for example, led historians to question how far Chartism was a movement. Mather quoted an American journal which described Chartism as ‘a series of responses, not a movement’.¹¹ The unity of 1839, it suggested, did not endure, so that the history of Chartism ‘must contain not one story, but several interwoven stories’. This kaleidoscopic view of Chartism is important in broadening the understanding of what happened in particular areas of Britain, and of the experience of Chartists in those areas: their concerns, their priorities and their particular political, social and economic agendas. It did, however, thereby pose a challenge to those who saw Chartism as a united campaign at the forefront of an emergent labour movement.

Class, politics and language, 1980–96

The debate over the nature of Chartism in terms of class has lasted for decades, and historians seem to be no closer to resolving it. The problem lies with the word ‘class’ itself. Many historians derive their understanding of class from the Marxist definition: classes acquired their economic definition from the relationship of their members to the means of production. Inherent in this definition is the notion of class struggle between the owners and non-owners of capital. Some studies demonstrate this class dimension: Ivor Wilks’ and D. J. V. Jones’ studies of the Newport Rising of 1839, published respectively in 1984 and 1985, for example, show south Wales to have been a society that was deeply divided by perceptions of class and the rising as having been driven by strong class feeling. Malcolm Thomis, by contrast, suggests that only a minority of workers became Chartists, that their enthusiasm was short-lived, and that the norm was widespread working-class apathy to the efforts of their would-be political leaders.¹² Harold Perkin sees class conflict as an expression of an ‘immature’ rather than of a ‘mature’ class system.¹³ The problem that historians face is that while most in the Chartist movement saw themselves as ‘working people’, many did not fit into the neat Marxist class category. There may have been a unity of interest within the working population but there were also significant conflicts of interest: artisans had little in common with unskilled workers in industrial towns; the aspirations of Scottish Chartists were not the same as those of Manchester or Birmingham. A strong case can be made that these divisions were of greater significance within Chartism than the potentially unifying effects of class. Richard Dennis sums up the present position: ‘Evidently

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the road to class analysis crosses a minefield with a sniper behind every bush . . . it may not be possible to please all the people all of the time.¹⁴ The traditional focus on class meant that other societal divisions, such as ethnic and gender groupings, were excluded from serious study.

The answer to this perennial problem may lie in looking at how Chartist contemporaries construed 'class', rather than in relying on later, often politically motivated, definitions. During the 1830s and 1840s, 'class' was a far cruder and flexible concept, used in different ways on different occasions. The underlying effect of the Marxist interpretation of class has been to impose a homogeneity upon the members of the working class, as well as on their class-consciousness, that does not correspond to contemporary experience.

The publication of *The Chartist experience: studies in working class radicalism and culture, 1830–1860*, a collection of essays edited by James Epstein and Dorothy Thompson, marked an important stage in the historiography of Chartism. It contained the paper by Gareth Stedman Jones entitled 'The language of Chartism', which he republished in extended form the following year; this reasserted the centrality of politics in the Chartist agitation. He argued that Chartism inherited from earlier radical movements not only their essentially political programme of the mass platform but also their analyses of oppression and distress. He suggests that there was little hostility between employees and capitalists as such, and that the basic causes of exploitation were seen as being political rather than economic. The crucial dividing line between the classes was not determined by their respective economic roles but by the division established by the 1832 Reform Act between those who possessed political power and those who were denied it. Chartism, in this analysis, was a populist political movement of 'the people', rather than an economic 'class' movement. The 'class' argument, it appears, has fallen from favour. Revisionist historians have become increasingly suspicious of the priority that previous historians of Chartism gave to social and economic considerations. New political and cultural agendas are now being explored.¹⁵

One of the main reasons for this process of revision has been the recent reappraisal of the concept of the 'Industrial Revolution'. Historians are increasingly recognising the fact that urban artisans, rural domestic workers and factory operatives co-existed within a complex and fluid economic structure, and that the move towards factory production was cautious and far from complete by the late 1830s. There was little common national experience among workers, and, however much they may attract historians, appeals to working-class unity at anything more than the level of particular communities were not a major facet of contemporary experience. Such a diverse and pluralistic nature of social identity and relationships has led some post-structuralist historians to focus on the 'representational': the construction of identity and social reality through language and discourse. This post-modern approach regards the ways in which language is used, rather than class, as a means of uniting workers whose surrounding physical conditions and experience of industrialisation significantly differed.¹⁶

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The cultural approach to Chartism is important. Indeed, historians have identified a ‘Chartist culture’: there were networks of schools, discussion groups, libraries, churches and other meeting places where politics could be debated and views shared. These served to inform, if not to define, the development and reception of the Chartist programme during the 1830s and 1840s. Radical rhetoric was language in action, a cultural expression of deep-seated political, economic and social grievances. It was vibrant, highly ritualised, grounded in the streets as much as in the discussion halls, and essentially oral. Reading the ‘texts’, as post-structural historians would have us do, reinforces notions of the continuity of radical action across the nineteenth century and neglects the dynamism and unpredictability of the movement. Although the Charter may have provided a unifying programme, locally and nationally the debate was a confused combination of rhetoric, organisation, agitation, constitutional culture, rituals, symbols, iconography and personalities. The Chartists may have found it difficult to establish a distinct identity but those historians who write Chartism off as simply a failure have not recognised the feelings, perceptions and aspirations of working people of the 1830s and 1840s and, arguably, also those of today.

Notes and references

- 1 J. F. C. Harrison, *The common people*, London, 1984, p. 261.
- 2 Useful summaries of the historiography of Chartism can be found in Dorothy Thompson, ‘Chartism and the historians’, in *Outsiders: class, gender and nation*, London, 1993, pp. 19–44; Miles Taylor, ‘Rethinking the Chartists: searching for synthesis in the historiography of Chartism’, *Historical Journal*, vol. 39 (1996); and John Charlton, *The Chartists: the first national workers’ movement*, London, 1997, pp. 90–95.
- 3 The literature on Marx and Engels is immense. Of particular importance in understanding how they viewed industrial and urban society are F. Engels, *The condition of the working class in England in 1844*, Leipzig, 1845; K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Communist manifesto*, 1848, London, 1850; and K. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, London, 1867. See also Charlton, *The Chartists*, pp. 87–89, for a brief discussion of Marx and Engels on Chartism.
- 4 Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil or the two nations*, London, 1845. See also the discussion of Disraeli as ‘industrial’ novelist in Raymond Williams, *Culture and society, 1780–1950*, London, 1958 (Penguin edn, 1963, pp. 99–119). Louis Cazamian, *The social novel in England, 1830–1850*, Paris, 1903 (first published in translation in London, 1973) is still, despite its age, perhaps the clearest discussion of the genre.
- 5 R. C. Gammage, *The history of the Chartist movement, from its commencement down to the present times*, 1st edn, London, 1855, 2nd edn, Newcastle, 1894, reprinted 1969. A useful discussion of Gammage and his *History*, especially the differences between the two editions, can be found in Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville (eds.), *Dictionary of labour history*, vol. 6, London, 1982, and in Saville’s introduction to the 1969 reprint.
- 6 ‘Past and Present’, printed in Alan Shelston (ed.), *Thomas Carlyle: selected writings*, London, 1971, p. 263.
- 7 Quoted in J. T. Ward, *Chartism*, London, 1973, p. 7.
- 8 On the historiographical framework for the development of labour history, see Christopher Parker, *The English historical tradition since 1850*, Edinburgh, 1990.

Notes and references

- 9 Mark Hovell, *The Chartist movement*, Manchester, 1918.
- 10 F. C. Mather, *Chartism*, London, 1965, p. 15.
- 11 *Victorian Studies*, vol. 5.3 (1962), p. 266.
- 12 Malcolm I. Thomis, *Responses to industrialisation: the British experience, 1780–1850*, Newton Abbot, 1976, and M. I. Thomis and Peter Holt, *Threats of revolution in Britain, 1789–1848*, London, 1977, pp. 100–16, contain the best summary of Thomis' position.
- 13 Harold Perkin, *The origins of modern English society, 1780–1880*, London, 1969, especially chapters 6 and 7.
- 14 Richard Dennis, *English industrial cities of the nineteenth century*, Cambridge, 1984, pp. 184–85.
- 15 John Belchem, 'Beyond Chartist studies: class, community and party in early Victorian popular politics', in Derek Fraser (ed.), *Cities, class and communication: essays in honour of Asa Briggs*, Hemel Hempstead, 1990, is a useful summary of some of the debates of the 1980s. Neville Kirk, 'Setting the standard: Dorothy Thompson, the discipline of historical context and the study of Chartism', in Owen Ashton *et al.* (eds.), *The duty of discontent: essays for Dorothy Thompson*, 1996, is invaluable for following up these debates, as well as providing a vital analysis of a seminal figure in the development of how historians view Chartism.
- 16 The post-modern approach is best explored in Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the people: industrial England and the question of class, 1840–1914*, Cambridge, 1991; Patrick Joyce, *Democratic subjects*, Cambridge, 1994; James Vernon, *Politics and the people: a study in English political culture, 1815–1867*, Cambridge, 1993; and James Vernon (ed.), *Re-reading the constitution: new narratives in the political history of England's long nineteenth century*, Cambridge, 1996. At a theoretical level, see Alan Munslow, *Deconstructing history*, London, 1997, and the papers in Keith Jenkins (ed.), *The postmodern history reader*, London, 1997. Richard J. Evans, *In defence of history*, London, 1997, is a blistering attack on all things post-modern.

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The emergence of Chartism

Radical politics during the 1830s was a confused and confusing jumble: it lacked cohesion and had little unity. If it is possible to identify its one overwhelming characteristic, it was fluidity. Radicals moved freely from one agitation to another: from campaigning for an unstamped press, to supporting the Tolpuddle Martyrs, to resisting the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. Economic demands merged into calls for political reform and for a fairer society.

Chartism first appeared in the spring of 1838 with the publication of the People's Charter. This document was produced following consultation between such leading radical MPs as John Arthur Roebuck and representatives of the LWMA, which had been established in 1836 to campaign for 'an equality of political rights'. The implementation of the 'six points' of the Charter – universal manhood suffrage, vote by secret ballot instead of public voting on the hustings, the abolition of property qualifications for MPs, payment of MPs, equal electoral districts of constituencies of roughly equal size, and annual parliaments – were considered necessary to secure this equality.

A 'mass platform'

The 'mass platform' was central to working-class radicalism during the first half of the nineteenth century. The key figure in its promotion was Henry 'Orator' Hunt. Under his leadership, between 1815 and the passage of the Reform Act in 1832, this popular movement developed a political discourse and programme that defined its beliefs and analysis, as well as its tactics and class interests, all of which remained largely unchallenged until the final breakdown of Chartism during the late 1840s.¹ Hunt argued that radicals must maintain the interests of the hard-working sections of society against the grasping plunderers that were representative of the 'Old Corruption'. What separated the rich from the poor, he believed, was an aristocratic monopoly over effective political power. So what was needed was a constitutional solution through parliamentary reform and a redistribution of power. This political analysis was simple to understand and quickly came to dominate radical discourse; economic distress was thereby politicised. Hunt's was an eminently practical ideology, which lacked the abstract, philosophical language of the theory of natural rights put forward by writers like Thomas Paine in his *Rights of man* in the 1790s, and was grounded in the brutal realities of life for most working people.

Hunt's message was also constitutional. He was determined that there should be no compromise with any parliamentary allies and no dilution of the