

Chartism: a failed success



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British children born into farming families in the early nineteenth century stood little chance of remaining in agriculture their entire life. The society in which they lived was changing in large ways. Industrialization was slowly creeping into the countryside as men implemented new technology alongside the old. “ The domestic market grew markedly as income per head of population expanded and a ‘ consumer revolution’ percolated down from the richer classes to the middle ranks and artisans.” People began moving to the city. It remains debatable as to whether individuals and families were compelled to move searching for work or if they were compelled to move due to enclosure. Villages such as Styal and Cromford were constructed to house some of the workers moving to factory towns. A quick journey down these village streets today provides some glimpse of the crowded conditions people endured. The rear alleyway below bedroom windows reserved for swine and human refuse reminds visitors of the intimacy working class people had with their animals and waste. Today birds singing from the chimneys are a far cry from the high volume of soot once produced by the coal burning within. No matter the motivation for moving, migrants found life in the industrial English city or town in the 1800s quite grim.

Westminster played little role in the regulation of cities. “ England was still a country with very little government from the center, and almost all the local responsibilities, health, housing, education, police, that are now subject to strict inspection and control, were left to the unchecked discretion and pleasure of magistrates and borough rulers.” Unfortunately for members of the working class many of the magistrates and rulers were sympathetic to factory owners or were owners themselves. It was an incredibly unjust

system of governance presided over by men such as Cromford industrialist Joseph Arkwright. Therefore the Chartist movement was likely to fail. This is a vital reminder that those with power rarely surrender it to those without unless they feel compelled by the threat of physical harm or superior moral authority.

Chartists arose from Britain's working class determined to gain a voice in their destiny through democratic participation. Their goals were admirable but their strategy weak. The working class lived in squalid conditions and was used repeatedly as political leverage by the merchant class. The Reform Bill of 1832 was one such example. Harold Faulkner wrote of the event:

When the smoke of the struggle cleared away, the great class disfranchised discovered that not only had they reaped no benefit from the reform they had so largely helped to win, but that their lot under a reformed Parliament dominated by the doctrines of the Manchester School seemed to be worse than ever.

Economic thought of Manchester School politicians was that of laissez faire capitalism. Clearly their policies were not designed to aid the abused workers of Britain. However, determined Chartists planned to overcome the lockout workingmen had long endured in the political arena. Unfortunately, time would prove they were not the well-organized army the working class so desperately needed. The movement functioned far better as a social, emotional, and even religious agent than one of political change. Chartists failed to achieve their stated goals due to their nature as an emotionally

fuelled reactionary coalition bound only by their six simple objectives articulated in the People's Charter of 1838.

Life was absolutely miserable for the working class. “ The idea of the town as a focus for civilization, a center where the emancipating and enlightening influence of the time can act rapidly and with effect, the school of social arts, the nursery of social enterprise, the witness to the beauty and order and freedom that men can bring into their lives, had vanished from all minds.”

Industrial change allowed powerful capitalists to dominate life in small towns across England. Discontent was not unique to Chartism. Social angst in the period existed in several forms. Eric Hobsbawm identifies unhappy segments of the population including: Luddite and Radical, trade unionist and utopian-socialist, Democratic and Chartist. The largest class of people was unhappy with life and increasingly conscious of their group identity. It could have been caused by the changes slowly eliminating traditional trades, shift in power from landed nobility to the capitalist class, or movement of people from the soil to the city. Nevertheless the sheer number of protest movements demonstrates a clear unhappiness in nineteenth century Britain.

“ All that was needed to turn consciousness into conflict was an economic or political crisis.” For the working class that outrage first occurred on the moors at St. Peter's Fields and combined with the knowledge of revolutionary France.

The so-called 1819 massacre at Peterloo in which eleven were killed struck an emotional chord among the working class. They had rehearsed the event repeatedly. Men, women, and children donned their Sunday best and marched in columns to show their non-violent nature. The working class

intended to prove it too could be an orderly component of society. However the government feared anarchic results akin to those in France at the Bastille. The local military contingent was intimidated by the workers discipline and a magistrate became alarmed and ordered the march on the field outside Manchester be stopped. The event turned bloody!

The cartoon in Appendix A reveals the attitude often attributed to the middle class of the day. Hefty cavalry members sit atop sturdy steeds with swords raised to mutilate men, women, and even children. The caption reads, in part: “ remember the more you kill the less poor rates you’ll have to pay...” The viewer cannot help but sympathize with the skinny-likely hungry-mother whose baby clings to her breast as she stares at a sword raised to strike them by a man who has had far too much for dinner. The cartoonist does an excellent job portraying wealth and power through weight and garb. State-condoned murder on St. Peter’s Fields near Manchester by those in positions of authority contributed to the sense of class-consciousness Kenneth Morgan identifies in *The Birth of Industrial Britain*.

The Peterloo tragedy further energized by the pang of unhappiness deep within the workingman’s gut finally pushed a number of radical groups to join forces as the Chartists. They offered a simple-albeit difficult to enact-political solution to mend England’s social and political ills. They rallied around a platform of six reforms, which they published as the People’s Charter on 8 May 1838. The resolution called for: universal suffrage, no property qualifications for the electorate, annual parliaments, equal representation, salary for MPs, and implementation of the secret ballot. A number of historians argue that this was a major peak of the movement.

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D. G. Wright argued that the movement was not unilinear but had three peaks, one being 1839-40, the others included 1842 and 1848.

Coincidentally, each of the identified peaks in the movement closely mirrors low points economically for Britain when poverty was greatest. The unmistakable correlation reminds us that Chartism was fuelled by passions of the impoverished. Most participants of Chartist events were neither intellectual nor bourgeois. Politically the movement never firmly gelled; it remained a movement of regional organizations guided by a single unifying document and no clear agreement among leaders. The Chartist paper called *The Northern Star* published accounts from numerous leaders. The best known was Feargus O'Connor.

The Chartist movement required leadership. Vocal leaders traveling throughout England took turns masking and exacerbating the divisions within Chartism. The leading men did not always concur on political issues, social goals, or Chartist strategy. Leader George Julian Harney exemplified this in a mid-1840s letter to his friend Friedrich Engels. Harney a national leader of Chartism thrice imprisoned for disobeying the stamp laws wrote:

As to what O'C [onnor] has been saying lately about " physical force," I think nothing of it. The English people will not adopt [Thomas] Cooper's slavish notions about peace and non-resistance but neither would they act upon the opposite doctrine. They applaud it at public meetings, but that is all.

The absence of unified strategy allowed politicians to employ a divide and conquer strategy. This proved fatal to the underdog movement.

Feargus O'Connor was the most virulent of Chartist leaders. He was quite self-absorbed, a pompous self-promoter. His charisma captivated the working classes in a way few other movement leaders could. "What O'Connor did do was to link the various aspects of Chartism, and while dividing the leadership he united the movement." The unstable nature of the working class coalition united behind the People's Charter needed strong leadership in order to be successful. O'Connor derived authority from his physical appearance and charismatic character. Historian R. G. Gammage described O'Connor in his 1854 account of Chartism. There he wrote:

Upwards of six feet in height, stout and athletic, and in spite of his opinions invested with a sort of aristocratic bearing, the sight of his person was calculated to inspire the masses with a solemn awe. So true is it that despite the march of civilization, and the increase of respect for mental superiority, men are generally impressed with a veneration for superior physical power.

The Irishman's physical presence alone demanded some confidence from the crowd. Unfortunately for Chartism physical dominance of one charismatic man could not carry the agenda of an entire class of people.

The average working class individual did not spend every waking hour attempting to make Chartism successful. Nor did the workingman await every word or message spewed from the fractured leadership. Chartist rallies were spectacles during which the working class nodded and applauded. That was the strongest action most Chartist men and women took! One imagines tired men and women attending a great open-air speech by O'Connor much like those of Methodism's John Wesley. It was an uplifting experience, but

there was limited ongoing dedication to the crusade. It was a periodic commitment with robust bursts of energy during times of severe hunger and unemployment.

Many of the regional units-such as London Working Men's Association and the Birmingham Political Union-associated with Chartism sought to satisfy people's needs for community, especially through entertainment. There was a need to "engage the imagination" in order to raise important questions of the day. Men and women were engaged socially through events sponsored by working class groups. The camaraderie built by the work environment and common belief that they were fundamentally mistreated went a long way in maintaining the loose confederation of regional movements that had differing interests outside the Chartist platform.

Religion also found its place as an energy source for the Chartist movement. The established Church of England was of little use to the working class. High church was not the place for the working class. After all, "...the typical Chartist was a horny-handed son of toil." Anglicanism made no attempt to appeal to men with "fustian jackets, unshorn chins, and blistered hands." The Wesleyan Methodists were more accommodating than the established church. However, during the nineteenth century Methodism was dominated by a forbidding clerical autocracy-Chartists wanted democracy! Therefore many Chartists made their Christianity personal.

The favorite scriptural teaching of Chartist Christians is found in the Gospel of Matthew. The verses are quite elementary and committed to memory by Christians worldwide:

Jesus replied: ‘ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘ Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

Jesus conveys basic teachings in only a few lines, which the workers could easily interpret. By this Biblical standard they knew they were being wrongly treated. On this issue Chartists could claim the moral high ground. The religious experience was part of a much larger Chartist movement. “ Chartist branches at the local level, like those of the Owenites, provided a substantial menu of recreational, educational, and religious activities which amounted to an alternative culture, within which members could move freely during their leisure hours.” This further reinforced the ideas promoted by the People’s Charter. And, it gave the middling class supporters a place of refuge. “... Being a Chartist was a risky business that invited abuse and threatened career, reputation, and liberty.” However the support offered by the working class to members of the intelligentsia or bourgeoisie supporting Chartism on moral grounds was minimal given the non-existent social influence of the laboring class.

The six-point People’s Charter faced an intense battle from its inception. The platform would have been difficult to enact even if all conditions were stellar. Had Chartists been the ideal protest movement of outraged, politically astute, impoverished masses, guided by unified leadership and common interests across regions, motivated by a deep sense of moral justice, supported by the middle class, and determined at all costs their demands-or should we say requests-would have had a better chance of parliamentary

ratification. In addition, the failure of the 1832 Reform Act to address working class needs was a demoralizing shock to its labor advocates. The Whigs used labor to gain a greater say in British government by using, then marginalizing, the working class. Hindsight reveals the situation was far from ideal for Chartists.

The 1849 Punch cartoon by John Leech found in Appendix B is far more indicative of reality. The cartoonist is likely poking fun at the Chartist failures of 1848 which included London riots, a Day of Protest, a failed Irish rising, and a planned British uprising all in the month of June. Not to mention the failed petition submitted to Westminster in April 1848, which a parliamentary committee found rife with fraudulent signatures. Leech drew an unidentified Chartist leader with before and after frames juxtaposed. When confronted by a constable, the ragged leader who had called for a march on the palace suddenly cowers changing his tune to “ God Save the Queen.” This is an accurate depiction of Chartist fervor. It was lukewarm at best!

Chartists failed to achieve their six goals due to their nature as an emotionally fuelled reactionary coalition of regional labor groups dedicated to different social agendas. Divided and sometimes self-absorbed leaders who failed to meld the various labor organizations of the north and south into a truly unified movement compounded the difficulty of their task. The issues for laborers in the various regions of England remained quite diverse due to varying stages of industrialization. It is unlikely they could have ever formed a strong unified bloc. Chartism was forced to remain an uneasy coalition of regional interests with a leadership of diverse opinion advocating peaceful and militant tactics simultaneously.

The movement further lacked the motivation to sustain itself consistently. There was little talk of reform when the economy was doing well. The masses were mollified when there was plenty of bread in their bellies and a stable government at Britannia's helm. Chartism began in the 1830s, an era that experienced no fewer than five national elections. And Wright reminds readers that the movement peaked with public disorder and petitioning on three occasions when the economy ebbed. Workers were motivated by the desperate situation in which they and their families were stuck.

Contemporary scholars should resist temptation and refrain from being overly critical of Chartists. There is a need to overlook the megalomania of O'Connor and the mediocre dedication to the charter by the exhausted working class. The People's Charter articulated six issues on which its adherents could agree. As it turned out those were the only six items about which they could agree. James Epstein and Dorothy Thompson expressed this perfectly in *The Chartist Experience*. According to these authors:

For all its failings, the mass platform [People's Charter] had given shape and protection to working-class radicalism rendering it impervious to any diluting. Following the abandonment of the mass platform, Chartism was permeated by a miscellany of reform groups all of whom repudiated confrontation, intimidation, and exclusive nature of working-class protest.

The charter established a common cause for the working class. However the movement stood little chance no matter how unified it became. Chartists faced a powerful national government of aristocrats and capitalists with a

well-equipped military at its command. The Chartist movement had ceased to exist by 1858. But its ideas live on in various splinter reform groups.

Universal suffrage, no property qualifications for the electorate, annual parliaments, equal representation, pay for MPs, and the secret ballot all exist in today's Britain and most of its former possessions. "The historian of Chartism might dwell on the dark side, and select those aspects of working-class life which prompted political concern and social protest, but these need to be set against the broader canvas of what urban life could be." Chartists successfully shaped the political conversation of their day. Try as they might, leading politicians in the government could not eradicate the ideas of Chartism. The legacy of beliefs enshrined in the People's Charter lived long after Chartism ceased to exist.

Appendix A

Cartoon. Text in upper right: "Down with 'em! Chop em down my brave boys: give them no quarter they want to take our Beef & Pudding from us! — & remember the more you kill the less poor rates you'll have to pay so go at it Lads show your courage & your Loyalty"

Available at: 31 Jul 2006.

Appendix B

John Leech. "Great Chartist Demonstration 9" from Punch, 1849. Available at: 31 Jul 2006.