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Chartism After 1848: The Working Class and the Politics of Radical Education

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David Renton

The nineteenth century saw the coming together of a coherent body of people who regarded themselves as workers, and whose attitudes towards culture and politics followed accordingly. The process is well documented and by no means restricted to Britain. But what was its significance, why did it happen, and what does it tell us about our society today? Labour history has been dominated by three partial narratives. One portrays the rise of labour as something inevitable, onwards and ever upwards, a constant accumulation of similar facts, starting with the Napoleonic wars and continuing to the present. Year by year, greater numbers of people could be judged working-class, in terms of who they were, how they dressed, their occupational life, and their cultural preferences. No longer plausible since the Conservative election victories of 1979 and 1983, this heroic narrative spawned a second approach, one that held that the forward march of labour continued indefinitely until some moment, 1951 say, or 1979, and then was halted. A third, quite different, history has had more recent influence. According to this model, there was never a working class at all. Nothing rose or fell. Britain was a society of the self-employed, or of artisans, or any other group other than those that Marx termed proletarians. In politics, too, there were only radicals and liberals. Whether in 1819, 1842, or 1889, the workers simply never formed a class and could accordingly have no class

consciousness.

For some years, historians have been inching towards a fourth possible position. This is one that treats class formation both as a historical reality and as a reversible fact; which sees classes as things capable of being made, unmade, and remade; which holds that while the historical conjuncture of the late-eighteenth century may have been particularly helpful towards the formation of a British working class, what was at stake in industrialization was never a one-off process, but depended in part on a particular generation of technological change. Thus, the formation of a trade of Lancashire cotton spinners was no more 'decisive' to class formation than the coherence of dock work a hundred years later, the demise of the Lancashire cotton industry after 1945, or the growth of the British car industry in the 1960s. Seen from this perspective, there is no reason why a history of British work written a hundred years from now would necessarily assume, as we still tend to do, that male miners were one and for all the single, true face of labour. Why not nurses in the public sector? Or call-sector workers? Or the recent strikers at Gate Gourmet?

Such insights cause us to re-evaluate the classic insights of writers such as Edward Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm. Their 'making' seems more contingent to us, less complete. Processes that mattered less to them may mean more to us. Decades that seemed quiet to them may come back to us as pregnant with possibility.

In this context Keith Flett's new book, *Chartism After 1848: the Working Class and the Politics of Radical Education*, takes on special significance. An extended dialogue with the insights of Thompson and his generation, it makes a case for seeing the two decades after 1848 as decisive in shaping the English working class. In marked contrast to Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class*, it emphasizes the significance of London over Yorkshire and Lancashire. It also has much to say about education and the traditions and symbolism of the post-Chartist workers' movement.

Taking the last point first, Flett portrays spectacle as one legacy of Chartism. The great demonstration of April 1848 is described as, 'a great popular festival where music and colourful banners mixed with political slogans'. There were musicians, women wearing the tricolour, and caps of liberty fastened to the ends of twigs. Cordwainers marched beneath a 'blue silk banner', inscribed with the words 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity'. The Irish Confederates were also at Russell Square and one group, the Emmett Brigade, 'displayed a silk banner of crimson, white, and green with the inscription 'What is life without liberty?'. Amongst many other banners present was a square shaped one with black writing on a white round which noted, 'Every man is born free and God has given men equal rights and liberties. May it please God to give man knowledge to assert those rights'. Other banners insisted, 'We are Millions and Demand Our Rights?' and 'Speak with the Voice? Not with the Musket?'. The idea of great and popular colourful demonstrations has not gone away since.

The issues of 1848, Flett argues, were revolution, land, emigration, and labour (four of the most popular words found in the titles of books published that year). Public banners and placards were a distinctive working-class form. Yet other Chartist habits were closer to those of the educated middle classes. Take, for example, the 'mass platform'. This had its hints of Peterloo and 1819. Yet meetings took place inside as well as out, and in an era of declining militancy after 1848, numbers were fewer, and independent class politics tended to make way for a more general emphasis on education and individual self-improvement. The mass platform gave way to the political meeting, the Chartist bookstall to the public library. Would it be right, then, to argue that former Chartists were forced to adopt the norms of 'civil society'; forms that gave less challenge to the dominance of the privileged?

Flett studies the content of meetings organized by Chartists after 1848. The most popular titles included, "the Labour Question", seen by many Chartists as central to the failure of the French Revolution, land colonization, emigration, "wealth and misery", "the cause of misery and the means of speedily removing it" and "labour's wrongs and labour's remedies?". Some historians have portrayed meetings as 'melodramatic narratives'. Flett argues that,

Such an analysis has the benefit of focusing closely on what people thought and how they understood what was happening and, hence, shaped it. It has the weakness however of failing to grasp that people were motivated to support Chartism in 1848 because of real grievances and a belief that these could only be addressed through collective activity.

After 1848, it is by no means true that political activity ceased. In London, true, the next three years saw very little specific agitation for the Charter. Yet in Rochdale, membership of the Co-operative Society quadrupled between 1848 and 1851. A sense of class continued, as did the search for collective strategies for change.

The continuing of Chartism, even as its formal structures tended to hollow out, provided opportunities for the state to intervene in a hostile fashion, closing off the spaces in which Chartists could meet. In Manchester, the Chartist Hall of Science became a public library. Other venues closed, leaving no trace.

The greatest innovation of Flett's book is to show that the decade after 1848 witnessed both a decline in Chartist activity and simultaneously a growing hegemony of language that marked the independence of workers. One of the striking features of the 1840s, in retrospect, is precisely the linguistic range used by speakers to identify their audience. Popular terms included 'the people', 'labourers' as against 'plunderers', the 'wage' or 'social slaves' as opposed to 'the aristocracy of class government', 'we, the English', 'we Saxons', Marx's term 'the proletariat', Engels's 'working class'. Then, and in previous generations, the rich had their own terms, 'the mob', 'the swinish multitude'. Behind these competing terms were different visions of the rich and the poor, the owners and the workers, and different strategies for struggle, implying different degrees of working-class independence.

Flett shows that Chartists were aware of some process of the recomposition of labour after 1848. Thus Julian Harney changed the name of his paper *The Red Republican* to *The Friend of the People* in 1850. Concentrating on Harney's strategy at the time, Flett writes,

The change and the reasons for it were significant. Firstly it focused on an emerging constituency for radical ideas, namely that of organized labour. Before 1848 Chartism had related to this area only sporadically and then, rarely, as workers with specific grievances, as The Red Republican had done with the typesetters during their 1850 strike. Secondly it recognized that there was now a new generation of workers who knew little or nothing of Chartism in 1838, and perhaps had not been particularly involved in the events of 1848. They too had concerns which could be focused and advanced by Chartist ideas.

Places of struggle, rarely noticed by Thompson or Hobsbawm, are restored in this account to a central position. One such is Copenhagen Fields, just North of Kings Cross. Flett cites a moving account of Ernest Jones lecturing at the spots where some of the great processions had been held.

I walked from a distant part of London through miles of streets to hear him ... The old fervour and the old eloquence were still to be noted. But the pinched face and the threadbare garments told of trial and suffering. A shabby coat buttoned close up round the throat seemed to conceal the poverty to which a too faithful adherence to a lost cause had reduced him. A year or two later even Ernest Jones had to confess that Chartism was dead.

The moral of the story is in fact upbeat?class decay and renewal were happening in precisely the same moment that older forms of struggle were decaying. Even as Jones's audience declined, elsewhere, new personalities were becoming important and new forms of protest were being born. The number of trades

unions branches in London rose sharply in the 1850s, with stonemasons, bricklayers, carpenters, and joiners to the fore.

If the approach is taken that a battle of ideas between working-class and middle-class in particular must be always present in one form or another in society, then it becomes impossible to sustain interpretations of post-1848 British history which contemplates only the collapse of Chartism and a total capitulation to the Liberal Party by former working-class radicals by the early 1860s. Rather what can be seen is a process of struggle for influence, for ideas and for political change.

The changing world of labour recreated in this book is a location of struggle and renewal: a society not so different from our own.

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[2]

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