Univerrsity of Tlemcen

Department of English

Module L2 ASCC:

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**Lecture three: The Chartist Movement**

**What Was Chartism**?

In very basic terms Chartism may be defined as “a working-class movement to obtain representation in Parliament” (Taylor, 386). Micheline Ishay states that Chartism was an attempt towards parliamentary reforms and that it focused on winning working-class representation in parliament, universal suffrage for all adult males, and the reduction of working hours” (332). It aimed at assuring further economic and social reforms. Chartism was, in the words of Joseph Rayner Stephens, a Chartist agitator in the North of England, 'a knife and fork question, a bread and cheese question' (qtd.in. Jones, 1975, 121); meaning that political power was only the means to achieving better living conditions for the working people and not merely an end in itself.

The Charter was the work of William Lovett, Henry Hetherington and, to a lesser degree, Francis Place. All three were members of the *London Working Men's Association* (LWMA) a group of skilled craftsmen who recognized the need to gain political representation for the working classes (Taylor, 386). These were mainly “working class activists who supported the drive to persuade Parliament to adopt the ‘People’s Charter’” (Morgan, 89). After discussing the issues with Thomas Attwood's Political Union in Birmingham, the six demands were made public in May 1838. The People's Charter had six main aims: universal manhood suffrage (all men over 21 to have a vote), the payment of MPs, the abolition of property qualifications rule for men wishing to stand for parliament, the holding of secret ballots at general elections, annual Parliament elections, and equal electoral districts (voting districts which were the same size).

**What were the main factors that encouraged the movement?**

The following factors were the most important in encouraging people to support the Chartist movement:

* **Disappointment with the 1832 Reform Act**: The working class had combined with the middle class and taken part in demonstrations for reform, but did not obtain the vote in this Act (Beechener, Griffiths, and Jacob, 50). Only an estimation of 700000 people of the middle class were given this privilege. Working classes then searched for a new way to get their demands.
* **The 1833 Factory Act was another disappointment**: it failed to achieve the goal of reducing the working hours to 10 hours per day (Taylor, 387).
* **Bitterness towards the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act:** Richard Oastler believed that the government had ‘made poverty a crime’. The situation was made worse as the decision to accelerate the building of new union workhouses (bastilles) coincided with a trade depression and high unemployment at the end of the 1830s (Taylor, 387).
* **The suppression of trade unionism**: Although trade unions could exist, their powers to hold a successful strike were in doubt. The government introduced measures to prevent collective action on the part of workers.
* **Fluctuations in trade**: The years of 1838-9, 1842, and 1847-8 were ones of trade recession and high unemployment, with thousands of working families in poverty and despair. In the words of Halevy, Chartism ' was not a creed. It was the blind revolt” (Halévy, 323) of hunger'. People also suffered from high taxation and high food prices when harvests were bad.

**What were the main events of the Chartist movement 1838-48?**

**The First National Petition of 1939**: This petition was the first act taken by the Chartists to seek political change. Lovett, Attwood, and O’Conner decided that a petition should be represented to Parliament with as many signatures as possible (Taylor, 392). The Petition was presented to Parliament by Thomas Attwood on June. It was almost three miles long and contained 1, 280,000 signatures of both genders. However, since Parliament was still dominated by the landowners who had deep fear of losing their privileged positions, the petition was rejected by 235 votes to 46 (Wagner, 3-4). This refusal made the Chartists very furious, going on numerous riots around the country including the Bull Ring Riots in Birmingham. A number of delegates favoured a General Strike (or Sacred Month) accompanied by a period of civil disobedience where the Chartists would not pay taxes.

***The Newport rising*:** The idea of the 'Sacred Month' did not materialize and the National Convention was dissolved in September while local groups started to take their own steps. Violence broke as the ‘Rising’ was the most serious manifestation of ‘physical force Chartism’. The Westgate battle was the bloodiest and 24 Chartists were killed by troops. Many leaders such as Henry Vincent were arrested. The aftermath of the Newport Rising was the further arrest of leading Chartists, including O'Connor and O'Brien (Taylor, 393).

***The second Chartist petition 1842****:* Between 1840 and 1842 Chartist activity was not so intense Trade had improved and more people were in employment. In autumn 1841 the Chartist leaders had been released and they each tried to reassert their authority on the movement. The result was public disagreement and bickering. With trade declining in spring 1842 there was once again a resurgence in interest in Chartism. A second petition was prepared, this time with 3 315 752 signatures. It was presented to Parliament by Mr T. Dancombe, who pointed out the gross inconsistencies in the electoral system. This time the petition was rejected by 287 votes to 49.

***The plug riots August 1842***: widespread rioting and strikes broke out in Yorkshire, Lancashire, Scotland, the West Midlands and South Wales. In many towns factories were brought to a standstill as mobs removed the plugs from the steam-engine boilers. At Bury 33 mills were idle. Eventually order was restored by troops and offenders were punished by the court. Lovett broke with the movement, leaving O'Connor as the main personality.

***O'Connor and land reform****:* O'Connor, assisted by Ernest Jones, founded 'The National Land Company'. The idea was to collect money from sympathizers and buy units of land that could be divided up into small plots and rented out. For a time the Land Scheme looked like being successful. Five estates were bought. In the end the scheme collapsed as many families could not afford the rent and moved away. The Parliament once more attempted to stop this process, claiming that O’Conner embezzled the funds.

***The third national petition 1848***:

In April 1848 a third and final petition was presented. A mass meeting of 20000 people gathered on Kennington Common in South London under the leadership of Chartist leaders, the most influential being Feargus O'Connor, editor of 'The Northern Star'. However, O’Conner told the crowds that he will personally present the petition that contained 5700000 signatures to Parliament since the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Mayne, told O’Conner that the crowd that a procession would not be allowed over Blackfriar’s Bridge to Westminister (Taylor, 395). Eventually, a special committee claimed that only 1975496 signatures were genuine and that numerous names were fictitious such as “No Cheese” and “Big Nose”. The petition was rejected amidst great hilarity by 222 votes to 17. This time anticipated unrest did not happen. Despite the Chartist leaders' attempts to keep the movement alive, within a few years it was no longer a driving force for reform.

**What were the main factors that led to the failure of Chartism?**

**Inherent weakness within the movement**: Chartism composed of many local organizations that had different aspirations. It was difficult to unite the interests of such groups that included craftsmen, factory-operatives, and domestic workers. Moreover, poor communications and “lack of funds made the problem worse” (Taylor, 396).

**Poor leadership**: the movement was divided into two groups that were at odds with each other:

* **Physical Force**: physical force tactics were most prominent in the north that witnessed the worst working conditions. William Lovett preferred “peaceful evolution” and then disassociated himself from the movement in 1842 when it started to take a violent path. Henry Hetherington and Thomas Attwood were also advocators of moral force.
* **Moral Force**: the method was preferred by Scottish Chartists where working conditions were less dangerous. Some historians also suggest that moral force Chartism happened because workers were not subject to the New Poor Law. Feargus O’Connor and James Bronterre O’Brien are believed to be “ardent” believers in physical force, despite the opposite claims of O’Conner. The Chartists also disagreed as to how much support they should seek from the middle classes. O'Conner and O'Brien were opposed to any merger with the middle classes, disagreeing with the opinions of Lovett.

**Lack of middle-class support**: Once violence started many of the middle classes scorned any association with Chartism. This lost the movement potential funding.

**Mid-Victorian Prosperity**: After the 1840s trade improved. Wages were increased, employment was high and people generally lost interest in political movements. Workers rather trusted trade unionism.

**Government Tactics**: The government seemed prepared to allow peaceful meetings of the chartists to go ahead. On the other hand, all kinds of violence were immediately met with serious responses. “Heavy punishments were given to the Newport men (1839) and the plug riots in 1842” (Taylor 397).

**Chartism was not a total failure**!

The Chartists' legacy was strong. By the 1850s Members of Parliament accepted that further reform was inevitable. Over the years five out of six of the Chartist’s demands have become law. These include: Abolition of property qualification 1858, secret ballot 1872, equal constituencies 1885, payment of members 1911, and Universal suffrage 1918. Annual parliament election never became a law because of its impracticality and because such a decision would cost the government much while not guaranteeing any continuity in running the country. Historians of the Labour Movement see Chartism as the forerunner of the socialist revival of the 1880s and as such it is important in the 'development of a working class'.