Who were the Chartists? The Chartists’ own view was stated by Thomas Duncombe, introducing the 1842 Petition: ‘those who were originally called radicals and afterwards reformers, are called Chartists.’ But this was never accepted by the great bulk of contemporary opinion. From the moment that Chartism first emerged as a public movement, what seized the imagination of contemporaries were not the formally radical aims and rhetoric of its spokesmen, but the novel and threatening social character of the movement. A nation-wide movement in the ‘working classes’ brandishing pikes in torchlight meetings in pursuit of its ‘rights’ was an unprecedented event and, whatever Chartism’s official self-identity, contemporary observers could not refrain from projecting onto it deeper, unacknowledged motives and sentiments. Thomas Carlyle’s distinction between the ‘distracted incoherent embodiment of Chartism’ and its ‘living essence … the bitter discontent grown fierce and mad, the wrong condition I should like especially to thank Sally Alexander, Steven Hunt and Raphael Samuel for the critical help and encouragement they have given me to the development of this essay. I should also like to thank Dorothy Thompson for generously putting at my disposal her own work and knowledge about Chartist history.

Samuel, J.R., 1836, 19-50; cf. O’Connor’s observations. The movement party was known, had become strong and united under the political term Radical, when, in 1848, and to draw there is wide in a sense, one political opponents was, giving us the name of Chartist. Now although there was no notable difference between the principles of a Radical and of a Chartist, yet did the press of both parties … continue to claim the prejudices of the week, the timid and the unassuming, small as large they accomplished their desired object – a split between parties seeking one and the same end. ‘The True of Fugitive O’Connor (1842), is. The left wing of the movement tended to describe itself as ‘democratic’ rather than radical, and J. Rennert, ‘The Democratic Association: 1837–51: A Study in London Radicalism’, in J. Espirit and D. Thompson (eds.), The Chartist Experience, Studies in Working Class Radicalism and Latin America 1820–1880 (1986).

therefore or the wrong disposition, of the Working Classes of England’, with its implied gulf between the real and formal definition of Chartism, set the terms of the predominant response, whatever the precise definition given to these terms.2 Chartists in vain protested their respect for property.3 Macaulay, debating the 1842 Petition, deduced the Chartist position on property from the social composition of its constituency. To accept the Petition would be to commit government to a class which would be induced ’to commit great and systematic injuries against the security of property. How is it possible that according to the principles of human nature, if you give them this power, it would not be used to its fullest extent? Even the more sympathetic middle-class observers virtually ignored the political case of the Chartists. Mrs Gaskell’s novel, Mary Barton, for instance, analysed Chartism solely in terms of anger, distress and the breakdown of social relationships. Thus, from the beginning, there was virtual unanimity among outside observers that Chartism was to be understood not as a political movement, but as a social phenomenon.

From the continental communist left, the young Engels, also deeply impressed by Carlyle’s depiction of the ‘Condition of England’ problem, made a similar assumption. ‘The middle class and property are dominant; the poor man has no rights, is oppressed and fleeced, the constitution repudiates him and the law misreats him.’ Thus, in Engels’ view, the form of democracy represented by Chartism was not that of the French Revolution whose antithesis was monarchy and feudalism, but the democracy whose antithesis is the middle class and property … The struggle of democracy against aristocracy.

5 T. Carlyle, Chartism (1839), C.W.
30 Mr. Peel: But where is the cause for the redistribution of property? Have you forgotten that?
Radical. That is a base and abominable column which those who profite by things as they are have forced to damage our cause. There never was the slightest foundation for such a charge, although judges on the benches and parliaments have not accepted to give currency to the fabrication.

The Question: ’What is a Chartist?’ Answered’, Parliamentary Report (1839), reprinted in D. Thompson (ed.), The Early Charter (1971), 92. Given the Chartist definition of property, however, it is not surprising that the property class should feel threatened.31 Samuel, J.R., ed. series.
cricy in England is the struggle of the poor against the rich. The democracy towards which England is moving is a social democracy. 1 Engels' picture of Chartistism, developed in 'The Condition of the English Working Class in 1844', was seen retrospectively as a major empirical confirmation of the later Marxist conception of 'class consciousness', elaborated in such works as the German Ideology, the Poverty of Philosophy and the Communist Manifesto. The premise of this position was, in Marx's words, that 'the struggle' against 'capital in its developed modern form, in its decisive aspect' is 'the struggle of the industrial wage worker against the industrial bourgeoisie'. 2 Thus, applied to Chartistism, whatever its formal professions, its living essence was that of a class movement of the proletariat born of the new relations of production engendered by modern industry. Its real enemy was the bourgeoisie, and the revolution it would have to effect would amount to the overthrow of this class. As Chartistism disencumbered itself of its middle-class allies—a process which Engels considered to have culminated in 1849—3 the proletarian character of the struggle would assume an ever more conscious form.

While Engels' optimistic conclusions have, for obvious reasons, not been accepted, many of his basic ways of seeing this period have been incorporated into the subsequent historiography of Chartistism. The relationship between Chartistism, modern industry and class consciousness has remained a prominent theme of labour and socialist historians. His contrast between Manchester and Birmingham, between the class relations of the factory town and that of a city of small workshops, has been amply developed by social historians and sociologists. But it is important to insist that Engels' emphasis upon the social character of Chartistism, however brilliantly argued, was—as the testimony of Carlyle and Macaulay suggests—in no sense the peculiar property of a proto-Marxist position. The social interpretation represented the predomin-

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discontent was expressed and the consequent tendency to elide the Chartist language of class with a range of Marxist or sociological notions of class consciousness. What has not been sufficiently questioned is whether this language can simply be analysed in terms of its expression of, or correspondence to, the putative consciousness of a particular class or social or occupational group. If an analysis of this language does not confirm such a relation of direct manifestation or correspondence, what implication does this have for the interpretation of Chartist as a whole? The language itself has seldom been subjected to detailed examination. But even in cases where it has been, the gravitational pull exercised by the social interpretation has generally been powerful enough to inhibit any major revision of the conventional picture of the movement.

The intention of this essay is to suggest the rudiments of such a reinterpretation. In contrast to the prevalent socialist-historical approach to Chartist, whose starting point is some conception of class, or occupational consciousness, it argues that the ideology of Chartism cannot be constructed in abstraction from its linguistic form. An analysis of Chartist ideology must start from what Chartists actually said or wrote, the terms in which they addressed each other or their opponents. It cannot simply be inferred — with the aid of decontextualized quotation — from the supposed exigencies, however plausible, of the material situation of a particular class or social group. Nor is it adequate, as an alternative, to adopt a more subjective approach and to treat Chartist language as a more or less immediate rendition of experience into words. This way of interpreting Chartist possesses the virtue of paying more serious attention to what Chartists said. But it too ultimately resolves problems posed by the form of Chartist into problems of its supposed content. Against this approach, it is suggested that the analysis of the language itself precludes such a directly referential theory of meaning.

What is proposed instead is an approach which attempts to

...
by which that crisis was resolved. The type of explanation which ascribes the movement to distress or the social changes accompanying the Industrial Revolution never confronted the fact that the growth and decline of Chartism was a function of its capacity to persuade its constituency to interpret their distress or discontent within the terms of its political language. Chartism was a political movement and political movements cannot satisfactorily be defined in terms of the anger and discontents of disaffected social groups or even the consciousness of a particular class. A political movement is not simply a manifestation of distress and pain, its existence is distinguished by a shared conviction articulating a political solution to distress and a political diagnosis of its causes. To be successful, that is, to embed itself in the assumptions of masses of people, a particular political vocabulary must convey a practicable hope of a general alternative and a believable means of realizing it, such that potential recruits can think within its terms. It must be sufficiently broad and appropriate to enable its adherents to interpret its language in confronting day to day problems of political and social experience, to elaborate tactics and slogans upon its basis, and to resist the attempts of opposing movements to encroach upon, reinterpret or replace it. Thus the history of Chartism cannot satisfactorily be written in terms of the social and economic grievances of which it is argued to be the expression. Such an approach does not explain why these discontent should have taken a Chartist form, nor why Chartism should not have continued to express the changing fears and aspirations of its social constituency in new circumstances. It is with these questions that this essay is concerned. But before embarking upon such a discussion, we must first attempt to demonstrate more concretely what the interpretative costs of the social approach have been.

One major consequence of the social interpretation of Chartism is that when the actual demands of the movement have been discussed, they have been treated more as a legacy from its prehistory than as a real local point of activity. Given the assumption that Chartism represented the first manifestation of a modern working-class movement, there has appeared something paradoxical in the fact that such a movement could have come together behind a series of radical constitutional demands first put forward over half a century before. But, even in works in which no strong assumptions are made about the modernity or class character of Chartism, little effort is made to explain why distress and unemployment should find expression in a movement for universal suffrage rather than more immediate pressure for relief from the state. Instead, ever since 1943 when Edouard Delbriex first suggested that the cause of Chartism was to be discovered in the working-class reaction against the Industrial Revolution, historians have tended to downplay the political programme of the Chartists as merely expressive of discontents whose true sources and remedies lay elsewhere.

Such an approach has been compounded by another emphasis in Chartist historiography, originally unconnected to the social interpretation, but which in the course of the twentieth century has increasingly coalesced with it. From the time when Chartism first began to be written about, attention was focussed on the divided nature of the movement. The first generation of Chartist historians, embittered ex-Chartists like Garmagne, Lovett and Cooper, concentrated disproportionately upon rifts in organization and the angry and divisive battles between leading personalities. In subsequent historiography, concentration upon the social character of the movement lent itself easily to the analysis of these divisions in social and economic terms. Divergencies of personality and cultural formation were now made to correspond to divergencies of economic situation and locality. The antagonism between Lovett and O’Connor was given a sociological colouration. It became a symbol of the supposed incompatibility between the non-industrialized constitutionally-minded artisans of London and Birmingham—followers of Lovett, Attwood and Sturge, inclined to class alliance and moral force—and northern factory workers or declining handloom weavers—followers of O’Connor, hostile to the middle class, ill-educated and quasi-something like a real local point of activity. Given the assumption that Chartism represented the first manifestation of a modern working-class movement, there has appeared something paradoxical in the fact that such a movement could have come together behind a series of radical constitutional demands first put forward over half a century before. But, even in works in which no strong assumptions are made about the modernity or class character of Chartism, little effort is made to explain why distress and unemployment should find expression in a movement for universal suffrage rather than more immediate pressure for relief from the state. Instead, ever since 1943 when Edouard Delbriex first suggested that the cause of Chartism was to be discovered in the working-class reaction against the Industrial Revolution, historians have tended to downplay the political programme of the Chartists as merely expressive of discontents whose true sources and remedies lay elsewhere.

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insurrectionary. Later and more sophisticated versions of this approach, freed from some of the Fabian assumptions which had originally structured it, shifted arguments about Chartism even further from the battles and ideas of the leaders to the differing social textures of protest in different regions, and these regions, themselves were arranged along a scale of progressive class polarization determined by the extent of industrialization. Such polarities, however, have been weakened by more recent research. Despite Birmingham’s well-publicized reputation for harmonious inter-class radicalism in the nineteenth century, its Chartists rejected the BPU (Birmingham Political Union) leadership and for four years after 1838 looked mainly to O’Connor and stressed class independence. It has similarly been shown that London Chartism in the 1840s was neither particularly weak, nor particularly moderate, as the old interpretation supposed. By 1848, it had become one of Chartism’s most militant centres. Conversely, factory and heavy industrial areas like south Lancashire and the north-east, distinctly militant centres in the early years of Chartism, were far less prominent in 1848. Moreover recent occupational analysis of Chartist adherence in its early years appears to suggest that the extent to which certain trades were disproportionately represented—shoe-makers or handloom weavers, for instance—has been exaggerated, and that Chartism attracted a more representative cross-section of the main trades in each locality than has usually been assumed. If this is the case, it implies that too much attention to local or occupational peculiarities can obscure the extent to which Chartism was set a local or sectional movement. Chartism was a national movement. Yet this more surging phenomenon—the extent of unity in the early Chartist movement and the enduring loyalty of a sizeable minority over more than a decade to the remedies of the Charter, despite all disagreement and difference—has been left in the realm of common sense assumption.

Thus the stress upon division and local differences has tended to accentuate the weak points in the social interpretation of Chartism: its tendency to neglect the political form of the movement and thus to render obscure and incoherent the reasoning that underlay the demand for the Charter. Mark Howel, still perhaps the most influential historian of Chartism, set the terms of the predominant approach when he argued that by 1838 the Radical Programme was recognised no longer as an end in itself, but as the means to an end, and the end was the social and economic regeneration of society. This was a seemingly unexceptionable statement and something like it had been said on occasion by Chartists themselves. But Howel’s amplification of it betrayed a basic misunderstanding, which rendered the Charter an oddity and the ‘end’ incoherent. ‘The most optimistic of Chartist enthusiasts’, he wrote, ‘could hardly have believed that a new heaven and a new earth would be brought about by mere improvements of political machinery.’ ‘But’, he continued, ‘social Chartism was a protest against what existed, not a reasoned policy to set up anything in its place. Apart from machinery, Chartism was largely a passionate negation.’ Subsequent landmarks in the historiography of Chartism have, if anything, only strengthened the impression of incoherence at the core of the movement. For G. D. H. Cole, ‘the Chartist movement was essentially an economic movement with a purely political programme’. A common idea might have held them together; the Charter, a mere common programme, was not enough to prevent them from giving their

20 Ibid., 11.
mutual dislikes free rein. For Ann Briggs, writing in Chartist
Studies in 1959, the Charter was not so much a focus as 'a
symbol of unity'. But it concealed as much as it proclaimed –
the diversity of local social pressures, the variety of local
leadership, the relative sense of urgency among different
people and different groups.

In the face of this interpretative consensus, it is worth citing
the position of the first historian of Chartism, R. G. Gam-
mage, writing in 1894. Gammage certainly did not deny the
social origins of political discontent in the sense that 'in times
of prosperity there is scarce a ripple to be observed on the
ocean of politics'. Nor did he deny that the people, once
victorious, would adopt 'social measures' to improve their
condition. But, significantly, he does not talk of 'political
machinery', 'a mere common programme' or 'a symbol'. He
states, on the contrary, that 'it is the existence of great social
wrongs which principally teaches the masses the value of
political rights'; and his explanation of the thinking behind
the Charter places the emphasis quite differently from Howell
and the historians who have followed him. In a 'period of
adversity', he wrote:

The masses look on the enfranchised classes, whom they behold reposing on
their couches of opulence, and contrast that opulence with the misery of their
own condition. Reasoning from effect to cause there is no marvel that they
arrive at the conclusion that their exclusion from political power is the
cause of our social anomalies.

Political Power is the cause. Opulence is the effect. But to
subsequent historians, whether liberal, social democratic or
Marxist, it has been axiomatic that economic power is the
cause, political power the effect. If this axiom is read back into
the political programme of the Chartists, there is no marvel
that that programme should have appeared incoherent.

Not all historians have assumed that Chartists must have
meant the economic and social, when they spoke about the
political. The underestimation of the political character and
context of the popular struggles in the pre-Chartist period has
been magnificently remedied by Edward Thompson's The
Making of the English Working Class. As he demonstrates, the
experience of the plebeian movement between 1760 and 1830
was not simply that of intensified economic exploitation, but
also of sharp and semi-permanent political repression. More-
ever, the attitude of the government and the unreformed
Parliament to customary trade practices often seemed yet
more cavalier than that to be found in the localities. Thus he
can argue with some force that 'the line from 1830 to Chartism
is not a haphazard pendulum alternation of "political" and
"economic" agitation, but a direct progression, in which
simultaneous and related movements converge towards a
single point. This point was the vote.'

The great achievement of Thompson's book is to have freed
the concept of class consciousness from any simple reduction
to the development of productive forces measured by the
progress of large-scale industry and to have linked it to the
development of a political movement which cannot be re-
duced to the terminology of incoherent protest. To have
established this connection is vital advance. But we must go
further. Thompson's concept of class consciousness still
assumes a relatively direct relationship between 'social being'
and 'social consciousness' which leaves little independent
space to the ideological context within which the coherence of
a particular language of class can be reconstituted. A simple
dialectic between consciousness and experience cannot ex-
plain the precise form assumed by Chartist ideology. A
highlighting of the experience of exploitation and political
oppression would not in itself account for Gammage's state-
ment. It was not simply experience, but rather a particular
linguistic ordering of experience which could lead the masses
to believe that 'their exclusion from political power is the
cause of our social anomalies' and that 'political power' was
the cause of 'opulence'. Consciousness cannot be related to
experience except through the interpretation of a particular
language which organizes the understanding of experience,
and it is important to stress that more than one language is
capable of articulating the same set of experiences. The

20 Ibid., 120
21 Briggs, Chartist Studies, 92.
23 Ibid.
language of class was not simply a verbalization of perception or the raising to consciousness of an existential fact, as Marxian and sociological traditions have assumed. But neither was it simply the articulation of a cumulative experience of a particular form of class relations. It was constructed and inscribed within a complex rhetoric of metaphorical association, causal inference and imaginative construction. Class consciousness - 'a consciousness of identity of interests between working men of the most diverse occupations and levels of attainment' and 'consciousness of the identity of interests of the working class or productive classes as against those of other classes' as Thompson defines it - formed part of a language whose systematic linkages were supplied by the assumptions of radicalism: a vision and analysis of social and political evils which certainly long predated the advent of class consciousness, however defined.

In England, radicalism first surfaced as a coherent programme in the 1770s, and first became a vehicle of plebian political aspirations from the 1790s. Its strength, indeed its definition, was a critique of the corrupting effects of the concentration of political power and its corrosive influence upon a society deprived of proper means of political representation. As such, in variant forms, it could provide the vocabulary of grievance to a succession of political and social groups. Elements of this vocabulary went back to the revolutions of the seventeenth century and were referred to by those who felt excluded by the settlements of '1688 or '1714 or by the so-called 'country party' during the years of Walpolean or Pelhamite dominance. The particular resonance, still alive in the Chartist period, of words like 'patriot' or 'independent', and the demonological associations of fractholding and stock-jobbing, dated back to this time.

From the 1790s, the tenancy of this language tended to pass from right to left. Country Toryism receded - though it never disappeared - in the face of radical Whiggery. New components of the vocabulary were added by the Americans and their English supporters, and echoes of a less decorous seventeenth century radicalism could again be detected. With the Wilkesite controversy, a radical movement in a full sense began. The focus was no longer simply upon court and city coteries and the corruption of patronage and place, but more consistently and determinedly upon the constitution and the means of representation. The unbalanced and disordered constitution could only be restored to health by drawing upon the 'people', and at the same time the definition of the people was widened, with a shift of emphasis from property to person. In the 1790s, radicalism became plebian and democratic and successes in America, Ireland and, above all, France lent it a revolutionary edge. It was accordingly repressed, a condition which, given its survival, bestowed upon it a yet more intransigent sense of its righteousness and the accuracy of its diagnosis. After the end of the Napoleonic Wars, radicalism found itself forced to stretch its vocabulary to encompass new sources of distress and discontent within its terms. For not only did it find itself confronted by a new economic situation, it also found its moorings challenged, though in quite different ways, by the novel emphases of political economy and Owenism, both of which cut across its premises. In response, radicalism attributed a growing

number of economic evils to a political source and in the
following thirty years managed to withstand these rival
analyses with some success. It accommodated many of the
preoccupations of the Owenites, while rejecting with less
and less equivocation any compromise with political economy.
The cost of this process was an increasing distance from the
bulk of its former middle-class constituency. But however
much radicalism extended its scope during this period, it
could never be the ideology of a specific class. It was first and
foremost a vocabulary of political exclusion whatever the
social character of those excluded. Thus if it became de facto
more and more the exclusive property of the 'working classes'
in the 1830s and 1840s, this did not lead to a basic
restructuring of the ideology itself. The self-identity of rad-
icalism was not that of any specific group, but of the 'people'
or the 'nation' against the monopolizers of political repres-
tation and power and hence financial or economic power.

It is in this sense that the growing political hostility between
the middle and working classes after 1832 must be under-
stood. In radical terms, in 1832, the 'people' became the
'working classes'. Explaining the emergence of Chartism in
1838, for instance, the Northern Star considered:

The attention of the labouring classes—the real 'people'—has been more extensively
(and yet to a certain degree simultaneously) aroused by the injuries they have
sustained by the operation of a corrupt system of patronage hanging around
their necks a host of burdens, in the shape of idle and useless penances and a
swarm of henchmen, in the form of miscellaneous placemen and commission-givers
to support whom they are weighed to the earth by the prevalence of taxation; by the
operation of the Corn Law, which made rents high and bread dear; by the
iniquitous protection of the landholders which made money dear and labour
cheap; by the hoardings of the factory system which immolated their progeny
and counsels the blood of their children in tinfoil, for merciless grasping millionaires
and by the abominations of the poor law act which virtually and practically denies
them the right toil. All these and one hundred more grievances, subordinates
to the same grand and (of making the working classes bear the burden of the
wood of wood and draw of water—to the aristocracy, Jewellery, Millinery,
Shopocracy, and every other class of industry which feeds on human misery
alarmed the feelings of the people and prompted the respective parties to seek a remedy
for the maiming of their wounds.27

By the same token, as a group, the middle classes had ceased to
be part of the 'people'. For they had joined the system of oppres-
sion and were henceforth answerable for the actions of the legis-
lateur. Indeed, rigorously speaking, government now became
that of the 'middle classes'. Speaking of the Reform Bill, the Poor
Man's Guardian wrote a year later: 'By that Bill, the government
of the country is essentially lodged in the hands of the middle
classes; we say the middle classes—for though the aristocracy
have their share of authority, it is virtually absorbed in that of the
middlemen who form the great majority of the constituency.'28

Now, it is true that the language of class—at least in its
usage by the popular movement—was the language of radical-
ism, then a number of consequences follow. The most
obvious one is that the political demands of the popular
movement should be placed at the centre of the story of
Chartism, rather than treated as symbolic or anachronistic;
and not only the demands, but also the presuppositions which
underlay them. For these were neither the superficial en-
forcement of proletarian class consciousness, nor a simple medium
of translation between experience and programme. If the
history of Chartism is re-analysed in this manner, then the
chronology of its rise and decline can be made more precise.
The central issue of radicalism—the attribution of evil and
misery to a political source—clearly differentiated it both from
a Malthusian-based popular political economy which placed
the source of dissonance in nature itself,29 and from Owenite

27 Poor Man's Guardian, 17 Aug. 1832.
28 Malthus' Essay on the Principles of Population began, and continued to be seen by
Malthus himself, as a polemic against radical egalitarianism. In the first instance,
William Godwin's Enquiry Concerning Political Justice. The direness and sxmptoms
of Malthus' attack was strongly reinforced by his influence with the radical
demagogues and 'country' tradition, from which Godwin's work in large part
sprung. It was a tradition in which he himself had been brought up, and the diver-
ence of 1790 represented the moment at which he decisively rejected it. The bitter
hostility of radicals against Malthus and the isolated position of these like Francis
Burke who attempted to combine Malthusian and radicalism is scarcely surprising.
Thus, for example, B. Fontana, J. Hone and M. Smith, 'The Politics of
Malthus' First Essay and the Social Tradition', Paper given to the Malthusian
Colloquium, Paris (May 1980). The incorporation of Malthusian propositions into
the emerging discipline of political economy, at least by some of its best-known
practitioners, also explains, more than any other single factor, the anachronisms
in which political economy was held by the great majority of the radical movement.
By the late 1830s those who combined radicalism and Malthus were generally
referred to as 'damp radicals'. Adam Smith was not included in this hostility. For
the use of Smith to buttress Chartism arguments, see the remarks of Peter Reass,
socialism which located evil in false ideas which dominated state and civil society alike. But it also suggested that the success of radicalism as the ideology of a mass movement would depend upon specific conditions, those in which the state and the property classes in their political and legal capacity could be perceived as the source of all oppression. The programme of Chartism remained believable so long as unemployment, low wages, economic insecurity and other material afflictions could convincingly be assigned political causes. If, for instance, lack of political representation and a corrupt system of power rather than economic phenomena were responsible for the misery of the working classes, then it followed from this that partial reforms like the Ten Hours Bill or the repeal of the Corn Law could not bring real improvement, indeed were more likely to hasten deterioration, since they left the system intact. Nor could trade unionism be considered a realistic alternative since, if the labour market was politically determined, then differences of bargaining power between different groups within the working classes were largely illusory. So long as the empirical forecasts which followed from radical premises appeared to be borne out, Chartists had little reason to expect widespread defections from their ranks. Once, however, the evidence suggested that real reform was possible within the unformed system, that the state did not wholly correspond to the radical picture and conditions changed in such a way that differences in the fortunes of various classes became clearly visible, despite the identity of their political situation, then radical ideology could be expected to lose purchase over large parts of its mass following. Such an approach suggests a different way of looking at the period of mid-Victorian stabilization from that prevalent among social historians. In radical discourse the dividing line between classes was not that between employer and employed, but that between the represented and the unrepresented. Thus hostility to the middle class was not ascribed to their role in production, but to their participation in a corrupt and unrepresentative political system, and it was through this political system that the producers of wealth were conceived to be deprived of the fruits of their labour. Once therefore the conviction of the totally evil character of the political system itself began to fade and distress became less pervasive, there was no independent rationale within radical ideology for antagonism towards the middle class as such. If this is the case, there is then little need to introduce ambitious sociological explanations, such as the emergence of a labour aristocracy, co-option by the middle class or the invention of new and subtle means of social control, in order to explain the disappearance of Chartism. Such approaches ignore the more elementary point that, as a system of belief, Chartism began to fail when a gulf opened up between its premises and the perceptions of its constituency. Local and everyday awareness of difference of social position, of course, remained, but it was no longer linked across the country through the language of radicalism to a shared conviction of a realizable institutional and political alternative. Thus, if expressed hostility to the middle classes declined, despite the continuation of capitalist relations of production, this should be no occasion for surprise. For it was the product of the decline of a political movement whose expressed reasons for hostility to the middle class had had little to do with the character of the productive system in itself.

We have so far argued for an analysis of Chartism which assigns some autonomous weight to the language within which it was conceived. If the language of Chartism is interpreted not as a passive medium through which new class aspirations could find expression, but rather as a complex rhetorical binding together, in a systematic way, shared premises, analytical routines, strategic options and programmatic demands, we can then introduce some notion of a limit beyond which radical analysis could not be stretched without abandoning its basic tenets and thus losing coherence as an interrelated set of assumptions. But before attempting to suggest some of the points at which these limits were reached, we must first explore what were the interrelated assumptions...
of post-1830 radicalism and Chartism and show how the language of class was tied to radical premises.

It is best to begin with the simple question: why was the Charter considered desirable? According to Lovett who framed the Charter, 'the end and object of all despotism being to uphold monopolies, there can be no escape from it, so long as the exclusive power of law making shall be suffered to abide with the monopolists.' From the ultra-left of the movement, although the vocabulary certainly differs, the mode of reasoning is similar. According to the Manifesto of the London Democratic Association, which aspired to emulate the Jacobins in the coming revolution, 'because the institutions of the country are in the hands of the oppressors, because the oppressed have no voice in the formation of the laws that rule their destiny - the masses are socially - because they are politically slaves. To put an end to the present cannibal system - we must! We will! have universal suffrage.'

Huntington similarly attributed the major cause of poverty to the 'monopoly of the power of legislation in the hands of the few.' The monopoly of land and the monopoly of machinery as instruments of production were basically attributable to 'the still more glaring injustice of the monopoly of law making as an instrument of distribution.' For law-making, as O'Brien put it, was a 'monopoly by virtue of which property owners are enabled to keep continually augmenting their property out of the labourer's plundered wages.' The case for universal suffrage was not generally argued on an abstract plane as a universal right inhering in every citizen. The case was more usually put in practical and corporate terms and closely tied to the Chartist analysis of the cause of the condition of the working classes. While outside observers often regarded Chartism as an assault on the property by the propertyless, Chartists did not regard the working classes as propertyless. For since the only legitimate source of property was labour, labourers were therefore in possession of the most fundamental form of all property. As Cobbe had stated in his Address to

18 London Mercury, 4 March 1831, reprinted in Thompson, Early Chartist, 58.
19 Northern Star, 15 Oct. 1832.
20 Ibid., 20 April 1833.
21 Ibid., 6 Oct. 1833.
22 Ibid., 8 March 1831.
23 Cobbe, Worthy Political_Region, 5 Nov. 1816, 545-6; see also on this, Thompson, Making, 771; Prothero, 'Rebel', 170.
24 Northern Star, 19 June 1830.
26 See, for instance, O'Connell's speech in Glasgow, Northern Star, 28 July 1833.
'artificial'. It was not the product of labour, but literally the creation of law. The growing polarity between the poverty of the working classes and this 'artificial wealth' could therefore be seen as the result of a process of legal robbery, made possible by the monopoly of law-making. It was in this sense that O'Connor argued that all such laws were a fiction, 'because they have been made for the protection of fictitious money, which represents nothing but the produce of your wealth while in a state of transition from one pack of moneymongers to another pack of speculators'.

It is certainly possible to discover differences of tone and emphasis between Chartist spokesmen in the discussions of these issues, but what emerges most clearly in the late 1830s was the remarkable unanimity of reasoning that lay behind the demand for the Charter. There was no discussion on this score between O'Connor, Lovett, Harney and the countless speakers up and down the country reported in the Northern Star. Poverty and oppression could only be removed with the abolition of the monopoly of law-making or, as O'Connor put it, 'there was no vice in the people for which he could not assign a legal reason'.

The spectrum of positions between moderate and extreme lay within radicalism, not between radicalism and something else. If this was the general sense in which Chartists could concur in attributing the oppression of the working classes to their exclusion from political representation, it suggests a far greater continuity between Chartism and preceding forms of radicalism than most historians have admitted. For if oppression was conceived as legal and political in character, then the Charter became far more than a symbol or a mere means to an end. To support this argument, however, it is necessary to ask whether there were no other arguments of a more recognizably class conscious character which had emerged from the experience of movements supported by the 'working classes' between 1815 and 1839, and which might have formed the real, if not explicit, basis of working-class support for Chartism. Such an inference can be drawn, for instance, from all those interpretations of the period, whose material is organized around the twin themes of the Industrial Revolution and the growth of a working-class movement. In this scenario, the period between 1815 and 1839 can be viewed as one in which the popular movement became a working-class movement with distinctively working-class ways of looking at politics and society. Trade unionism, co-operation, Owenism, 'Ricardian socialism', the unstamped press and the experience of the parliamentary reform movement can then be viewed as stepping-stones in a learning process through which class consciousness was formed. Confirmation at an ideological level can be provided by the argument that Paine or Cobbettite radicalism, which placed its emphasis upon the state and taxation as the sole source of oppression, gave way to a more class-based conception of exploitation of workers in their role as producers rather than consumers, and thereby to an emphasis upon the class character of the popular movement. Thus radicalism in its initial form is conceived as receding as class consciousness advances, and the political division between the middle and working class established in 1832 is seen as ratifying a process that had already been long in maturation.

Whatever the validity of this picture, it will be argued here that, at least at the level of utterance, it is not confirmed by evidence of ideological change of an appropriate kind. Certainly, changes took place in radicalism between 1815 and 1840 and Chartism incorporated many of the new themes which became prominent in the 1820s, but not in such a way as to breach its basic presuppositions, nor necessarily in directions which drew it closer towards a later class-based language of socialism. We shall argue that the evidence of the Charter suggests that radicalism in a strict sense remains the predominant ideology of the popular movement, defining both the understanding of oppression and the popular vocabulary of class, and further that rival perspectives, so far as they could be situated beyond the horizons of radicalism, offered if anything a less class-oriented mode of viewing society and politics than the radicalism to which they were counterposed. In order to test the argument, we shall look at the social and political conceptions developed within trade unionism, Owenism and 'Ricardian socialism', and attempt to suggest in what ways they did reflect the radicalism of the post-1832 period.
The first and most obvious place where one might expect to find some kind of challenge to radical analysis is in the arguments and pronouncements that accompanied the development of trade unionism in the 1820s. The implications of a Fair or Collective radicalism were that civil society and the relations between masters and men would function harmoniously, but for the parasitic plundering of the state and its beneficiaries. Yet, in the post-1815 period, expressions of discontent by members of the working classes arose most directly from their experiences as wage earners—overwork, falling wages, unemployment, the threat of machinery and new forms of the divisions of labour which afflicted customary expectations. Furthermore, these affiliations were accompanied by the rise to prominence of a new type of employer, principally, as it seemed, attuned to the foreign market rather than home consumption, and hitherto, or contemptuous of, traditional workshop practices and the informal moral economy which had actually or allegedly underpinned them. In this situation, in which behaviour originally associated with particularly 'grinding' employers was apparently becoming the norm in whole trades, journeymen were impelled to formalize their unofficial practices and assumptions, to form unions and even make alliances across different trades, different districts and different gradations of skill.

How could these developments be considered compatible with the assumptions of radicalism, in which the political system rather than civil society was conceived to be the original source of oppression? The fate of the rural cottager, evicted or expropriated by the process of enclosure could easily enough be attributed to the arbitrary legal and political violence of the ruling aristocracy and thus could fill without difficulty a pre-prepared place within radical rhetoric. But the situation of the artisan, the overworked and the factory operative fell under no such obvious entry in the radical lexicon. It was a state of affairs which had apparently grown up within the people, rather than between the people and the engines of 'force and fraud' or the machinations of 'old corruption'.

The trade unionist press and trade unionist speeches were certainly full of complaints about the new situation which had developed from the time of the Napoleonic wars, but it is difficult to discover the development of either a trade union practice or a trade union theory which contradicted or went beyond radical assumptions (except in so far as they derived from Owenite positions, which will be discussed separately). In a strict sense trade union practice by its very nature posed a potential challenge to radicalism in that it presupposed that trade organization could maintain customary wage levels and work conditions despite the arbitrary and oppressive character of the law-making class. But in the period before 1835—this difference never became very explicit because virtually all active trade unionists were also radicals. Nor was the development of trade unions in this period as novel as it was once thought. The attempt to establish a general union of all trades was not a quasi-syndicalist deduction from ideas to be found in Owenism or 'Ricardian socialism', nor was it an invention of the 1829–34 period. There had been previous attempts in Manchester and London in 1818 and 1825. The practice of inter-trade co-operation in a particular district was a well-established one. What was new, was the formalization of this idea combined with a growing sense of similarity of position in different trades and different places, made possible by the diffusion of a newly legalized trade union press.

Moreover, the context of the development of the idea of a general union was not that of an offensive drive to capture the whole product of labour, as was once thought, but a heightened sense of vulnerability among weaker trades in the face of the encroachments of a hostile economic environment. The General Association of London Trades in 1827, associated with the shipwright, John Gast, emerged from the threat of a re-imposition of the Combination Laws in 1825–6. The Manchester-based National Association for the Protection of Labour (NAFL), associated with the spinners' leader, John Doherty, was formed after the defeat of his union in the strike of 1829. The formation of the Grand National Consolidated...
Languages of class

Trades' Union (GNCTU) in London in 1833 arose from the tailors' preparations for an all-out struggle to halt the decline of their trade after the failure of their strikes in 1827 and 1828. It is indicative that the constitution of the NAPL allowed support to affiliated unions only in the case of strikes against reductions in wages. 'The object they ought to obtain', Doherty stated, 'was that freedom and independence which had long been the characteristic of Englishmen, but of which at present only a small remnant was left.' Goast thought similarly that 'the "bold peasant" must again become his country's pride', parasitism become hateful in the minds of labourers, the dead weight cut adrift, then (and not till then) England will again be a pattern for the world and the envy of surrounding nations. In answer to radicals, Owenites and followers of political economy, all of whom were for different reasons sceptical of the capacity of trade societies to affect wage levels and working conditions, trade unionists at this time had little answer beyond the desirability of re-establishing a world governed by customary expectations and just agreements regulating the conduct of masters and men.

Just as developments in trade union practice developed mainly out of the exigencies of the situation, so perforce did a trade union stance on the economy develop in response to the offensive of popular political economy. The crucial factor here was the growth of a trade union press, made possible by the repeal of the Combination Laws and the attempts of utilitarian radicals like Francis Place to win over the trade societies to the teaching of political economy. Thus, in the London Trades Newspaper and the NAPL's United Trades Cooperative Journal and its successor, Voice of the People, a specifically trade society position on problems of economics and politics began to be formulated. But here again there were no ideas which went beyond radical conceptions of the relationship between employer and employed. Indeed the basic stance was in fact identical to that espoused by radicals and Chartist through to the end of the 1840s. Although the Trades Newspaper attempted to popularise Hodgskin's Labour Defended, and Doherty's journals reprinted extracts from William Thompson, the most popular and widely diffused position was that enunciated by trade unionists themselves—a straightforward belief that increased home consumption would remedy the evils of unemployment, fortified by the conviction of the right of every operative to good wages and a constantly reiterated alarm about the development of a 'new aristocracy of wealth' and the progressive deterioration of the condition of the producers of that wealth. 'Mutthian' first became an abusive epithet, both among trade unionists and radicals in the 1820s, and a position which was to become standard—connecting excessive competition, abuse of machinery, overwork, declining wages and unemployment with the mushroom growth of large capitalists and the promotion of the export trade—which was well established by the end of the decade. A characteristic statement of this view was put forward by Thomas Single in the Trades Newspaper:

Were we, at once, to leave off all our machinery, and lose some (may almost all) of our foreign trade, and give working men the necessary of life for a day's labour, our home trade would increase, quite as much, or more, than our foreign trade decreased. At all events, we should not then be living in the midst of starvation in a land of plenty. What are thousands and millions in this country to starve for the sake of commerce— for the sake of enabling a few great capitalists to carry on a system of trading with foreigners by machinery, which has no other earthly tendency than to enrich hundreds and starve millions?

The evil role of foreign trade remained a constant feature of the Chartist analysis of the deterioration of the condition of the working classes and a significant portion of the middle classes. It had led to the destruction of any natural relationship between production and consumption and its replacement by a gambling speculative system which gave large capitalists excessive profits at the expense of small capitalists and produced a constant lowering of wages. Its origin was to

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66 Kirby and Morison, Voice of the People, 169.
67 Prothero, Antimemo, 297.
68 Ibid., 298.
be derived from the lack of taxation on machinery. According to the *Northern Star* in 1839:

Our modern foreign trade owes its existence to the privilege, accorded to manufacturing capitalists of lessening gradually and unequally, by the agency of untaxed machinery, the value of human labour — the heaviest profit of all trades depending for their returns on the found market — as well as the value of the soil of England.39

Or as it had written a year before:

Thus labour, which ought to be the regulator of commerce has been subjected, for want of laws to regulate the profit on machinery, to a parcel of gambling speculators, who have placed the foreign market with the proceeds of cheap labour, till at length we have lived to see the English labourer's produce, stored in foreign countries, and offered by the gambler at a less price than the same article can be had for at home.31

The Chartist solution was the same as that offered by trade unionists and radicals in the 1820s. According to Lovett, writing on behalf of the London Working Men's Association:

We would urge them not to forget the superior advantage of a profitable home consumption. For if wages are to be continually reduced to meet foreign competition there will be a gradual lessening of our home trade, the respectable class of shopkeepers and tradesmen, who are somewhat prosperous by reason of the present wages of the working classes — if these wages were reduced down or anyways approximating to those of our unfortunate Irish brethren — would soon be driven from the country, or sink into some degraded class would all be reduced to — the more starving conductors of the splendid machinery of England.32

And it was basically the same case that was put to shopkeepers and the uncorupt part of the middle classes by O'Connor, McDowell and Jones in the months leading up to the presentation of the third Chartist Petition in 1848.32

Trade unionism, therefore, was certainly indicative of divisions that had grown up within the people, but it did not contradict the notion of the people as radicals envisaged it. Gaskell blamed the shipwright's position upon the national debt.

39 *Northern Star*, 27 March 1839.
40 Ibid., 27 March 1839.
41 Ibid., 14 March 1839.
42 Ibid., 11 March 1848.
43 See J. Birkham, "Fergus O'Connor and the Collapse of the Manchester Association", in *Epstein and Thompson*, *The Chartist Experience*.

and taxation. Doherty considered that support for the NAPL should not bring operations into conflict with honourable employers, since the latter pressed down by excessive taxation and the Corn Laws were the creatures of circumstance as much as their workmen. Even in 1849 he hoped that masters could be weaned from dependence on the "internal philosophy" of the "high priests", Malihon and MacCallum, teaching them that distress was the result of overpopulation and monopolies, rather than taxation, paper money and excessive competition.33 Political economy was not seen as the ideology of a class, but a false, selfish and inhuman view of human nature which had captured the support of many masters, but which the journeymen's counter-case might successfully undermine. Similarly, it strikes themselves and the battle for public opinion that surrounded them, the enemy was not the employers as a class, but rather the grinding and tyrannical employers in contrast to their honourable associates. A strong trade society maintaining an agreed rate of wages for agreed stint of work would be a benefit to masters by preventing excessive competition between them. High wages would stimulate home demand and hence secure a fair rate of profit. In unorganized trades, on the other hand, good masters were forced to follow bad masters in lowering wages, since competition left them no option. There was certainly a consistent hostility expressed towards "capitalists". But they, unlike masters, tended, as we shall see, to be thought of as part of the political system rather than the class structure, for they were the engrossers of what radicals considered to be "artificial" wealth.

If trade unionism did not represent an extraneous alternative to radicalism in its conception of class and oppression, what about Owenism, which was so clearly connected to trade union and co-operative activity between 1820 and 1850? In general, it may be suggested that Owenites certainly broadened the conception of oppression prevalent in the radical movement through their critique of distribution and the competitive system, but that their position remained fundamentally incompatible with any development of a
produce of their labour. The real income of the country, he concluded, 'is taken from its producers, chiefly by the rent of land, by the rent of houses, by the interest of money, and by the profit obtained by persons who buy their labour from them at one price and sell it at another'. This notion or something like it cropped up frequently in the next twenty years. Doherty supposed that three-quarters of the produce of agricultural and manufacturing labour was taken by the government and the employers. One of the Oppressed wrote from Manchester to the Poor Man's Guardian in March 1832: 'I have told you that the evils under which you labour are not produced by taxation. I have shown you that the whole expense of the government, from the king to the common soldier, does not amount to more than one halfpenny a day upon each individual in the two kingdoms; and that the abolition of the whole of the government would relieve you to the amount of only one halfpenny a day ... and I have told you that the immediate cause of your poverty is the exorbitant rents, tithes, interests on money, profit of labour, and profits on trade, which are imposed on you by laws made by the landlords, the merchants, the manufacturers, and the tradesmen in that house from which you are excluded, and by which exclusion you are prevented from making laws to regulate your wages.'

The Poor Man's Guardian itself thought taxes were a 'mere hangstelle', while the idea that the productive classes received only one-fifth of their earnings became part of the standard repertoire of the speeches and articles of Brontë O'Brien in the early Chartist period. O'Connor thought that labourers consumed only one-quarter of their earnings, and even Atwood, introducing the 1839 Chartist Petition of Parliament, stated that: 'the first thing sought for by these honest men, everyone of whom produced by his labour four times more to the country than they asked for in exchange, was a fair subsistence — and yet their country refused them one fourth the values of their labour.'

This broadening of the conception of the evils faced by the
producer was generally accompanied in Owenite literature by the notion of a rise to prominence of 'capitalists' or a new 'aristocracy of wealth'. Such an idea was not so much a theoretical innovation as a systematization of an idea which was anyway becoming common currency. Doherty, for example, talked about the master spinners as Cobbett had talked about farmers. In the beginning they had been 'plain industrious men' disposed to mix socially with their workmen, but they had been transformed by massive profits into a 'new race' of 'cotton lords';54 and his *Voice of the People* considered that the gulf between rich and poor had never been wider since the aristocracy of title had been replaced by an aristocracy of wealth which had 'established a slavery more hideous in its effects and has ground down its victims to the extreme verge of poverty'.55 Or, again, more formally, Thomas Hodgskin considered that capital and capitalists:

have long since reduced the ancient ienate of the soil to comparative insignificance, while they have inherited the power over all the labouring classes. It is, therefore, now time that the reproaches so long cast on the feudal aristocracy should be heaped on capital and the capitalists; or on that still more oppressive aristocracy which is founded on wealth, and which is nourished by profit.56

William Thompson, on the other hand, thought that it was not so much that one class had reduced the other, but rather that:

The feudal aristocracy and the aristocracy of wealth have coalesced; and those last admitted into the unshady coalition against the happiness of the great majority of their fellow creatures, are frequently the most bitter enemies — the slaves selected for slave drivers in the slave-held districts — of the Industrious Classes, of whose hardships they so calmly partake.57

What the Owenite and co-operative movements, in particular, contributed to these ideas, was to interpret this process of broadening oppression and growing polarization as products of a system of competition. As John Gray put it:

There is not a man in this country who depends, in any way, on commerce for subsistence, who has not a thousand commercial enemies. The labourer who seeks employment, frequently finds competitors in his interest even among his own mates.58

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those who would otherwise be his friends ... The merchant, the wholesale dealer, the retail tradesman, the mechanic, each of these finds an enemy to his commercial interest in every individual engaged in the same line of business as himself.59

'The present system of human affairs', he concluded, 'is calculated, in almost all its parts, to bring the principle of self-love into competition with beneficence.'60

It was above all William Thompson, a co-operator who accepted the desirability of universal suffrage, who put the co-operative argument about competition in a form which radicals and trade unions were most likely to accept. For, unlike Owen, he used Paine or Godwin's imagery to put the case. The language of corruption and deceit which had developed in the early eighteenth century as a response to the new financial practices associated with parliamentary parties and the growth of public debt, and which had been broadened by Paine and Cobbett into a juxtaposition between the people and 'old corruption' or the forces of 'force and fraud', was now extended into the fabric of civil society itself. 'In former times', wrote Thompson:

The feudal and theological systems, the systems of force and fraud, sometimes at war, sometimes at peace with each other, ruled the affairs of men, and consumed all the products of labour that were not necessary to keep the labourers in existence and in working condition. In the midst of these contrivances of force and fraud, the system of Industry working on knowledge has been gradually working its way. In every part of Europe the system of Industry is partly established. In no part of Europe, or of the world, is the system of Industry, as it ought everywhere to be, predominant over the systems of force and fraud. Wars were formerly waged for rapine or superstition. During the latter ages they have frequently been waged under the sincere ignorant belief of procuring commercial advantages by them. So much, however, are the old systems of force and fraud intertwined in our present social arrangements, that there is scarcely a transaction of life in which every at the present day, force and fraud do not take a share.61

64 Gray, *Human Happiness*, 45. It should be noted, however, that there were gradations of position on competition within the Owenite movement, as well as outside it. Owen himself was the most openly opposed to competition but William Thompson. For instance, was more concerned with elimination of force from exchange than with the effects of competition as such — an emphasis which he derived from Godwin. For a discussion of these issues, see G. Claps, *The Owenite Theory of Exchange*, Unpublished ms (1981).

64 Ibid., 46.