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Lecture Three: Chartism

1.1 Introduction

The Industrial Revolution brought significant changes through new technologies, allowing for mass production of goods at lower costs. This led to the emergence of new social classes: the wealthy middle class and the working class. However, both groups lacked voting rights and felt unrepresented in Parliament. Life for the working class was challenging, as machines replaced well-paid trades, leading to job losses and lower wages. In rural areas, machines also caused unemployment and low wages. Poor working conditions and diseases like cholera were prevalent in overcrowded towns. Ordinary people had little support if they lost their jobs or suffered injuries, as there was no welfare state. Economic hardships fueled demands for political reform, influenced by the American and French Revolutions. People questioned why landowners should exclusively represent everyone, prompting the belief that more individuals should have a say in governance.

1.2 Chartism Defined

Chartism was a working-class movement in Britain during the 19th century that advocated for parliamentary reform. It derived its name from the People's Charter, a bill drafted by William Lovett in 1838, which included demands such as universal manhood suffrage, equal electoral districts, and vote by ballot. Chartism emerged as a response to the injustices of the industrial and political order in Britain.

The movement gained momentum during the economic depression of 1837-1838, fueled by high unemployment and the impact of the Poor Law Amendment Act. Feargus Edward O'Connor, an Irish leader, played a significant role in rallying support for the movement. A Chartist convention met in London in 1839 to prepare a petition to present to Parliament, but it was summarily rejected. An armed uprising in Newport in 1839 was swiftly suppressed, resulting in the banishment of its leaders.

Despite setbacks, the Chartists continued their efforts, emphasizing efficient organization and moderate tactics. They presented another national petition in 1842, but Parliament again refused to consider it. The movement experienced a decline in mass support as the economy improved and other political issues divided radical energies. The last significant wave of Chartism occurred in 1848, but it gradually lost its national influence.

Although Chartism as an organized movement waned, its ideas and principles continued to influence popular causes. Over time, several of the demands outlined in the People's Charter were achieved, except for annual Parliaments.

1.3. The Chartists' Six Demands

In 1836, William Lovett, a cabinet-maker from Cornwall, established the London Working Men's Association along with Henry Hetherington, a publisher, and printers John Cleave and James Watson. One of the aims of the association was to disseminate information that would benefit the working classes. Additionally, they sought to use legal methods to ensure that all segments of society could enjoy equal political and social rights. Collaborating with Francis Place, Lovett drafted the people's charter, which outlined the desired reforms for the British electoral system. It Contains Six Demands:

- Universal suffrage (the right to vote)
- Abolition of property qualifications for members of parliament
- Annual parliamentary elections
- Equal representation
- Payment of members of parliament
- Vote by secret ballot

The People's Charter, despite not introducing new ideas, served as a unifying document for those advocating political reform. Its six points became the central doctrine for radicals seeking to transform the political system. The support for the Charter spread rapidly, leading to the emergence of a group known as the Chartists.

While all Chartists campaigned for the six points outlined in the People's Charter, they were not a completely homogeneous group. Some members pursued

additional objectives in their efforts to improve the lives of the working class in Britain. For instance, Feargus O'Connor, a prominent Chartist, attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to establish a rural utopia called O'Connorville, aiming to relocate the working classes from urban areas. These diverse pursuits reflected the multifaceted nature of the Chartist movement and its varied approaches to addressing the issues faced by the working class.

1.4. Chartist Campaign Participants

Chartism was indeed a significant mass movement that garnered widespread support, attracting millions of followers. Their meetings often drew hundreds of thousands of attendees, and their three petitions gathered millions of signatures, although there were instances of fraudulent signatures being included. Friedrich Engels highlighted the working class's collective opposition to the bourgeoisie within the Chartist movement. However, Chartism extended beyond being solely a working-class movement, as it also garnered support from rural areas and more radical elements of the middle class.

Although the People's Charter itself did not advocate for women's suffrage, Chartism was not limited to male participants. William Lovett, the author of the People's Charter, expressed his support for female suffrage in his autobiography. However, it was decided that advocating for women's suffrage could potentially hinder the success of the Charter. While women may not have had a prominent public presence like male Chartist speakers, many attended meetings and mass demonstrations, and some formed Female Charter Associations. There were also women who actively challenged the Chartists to include demands for women's suffrage in their campaigns.

1.5. Chartists Means Used To Run Their Campaign

The Chartist movement was characterized by internal divisions and fragmented leadership. While all members agreed on the ultimate goal of Chartism, there were significant differences in opinion regarding the methods to achieve it.

One faction, known as the "moral force" Chartists, led by figures like William Lovett, believed in peaceful tactics such as public meetings, publications, and petitions to persuade those in power of the moral necessity of electoral reform. However, there

were others who believed that relying solely on "moral force" would not be sufficient. The "physical force" Chartists, led by individuals like Feargus O'Connor, advocated for the use of violence as a means to achieve the demands of the People's Charter if peaceful methods failed.

The more radical elements of the Chartist movement engaged in riots and protests, including notable incidents in Newcastle, Birmingham, and the infamous Newport Rising in 1839, where a group of Chartists stormed a hotel and were met with fatal consequences when troops intervened. The movement temporarily lost momentum after this event, but the National Charter Association was established in 1840 to coordinate Chartist activities nationwide.

Over time, the Chartist movement became divided into various factions, leading to a decline in its influence. The last major protest took place at Kennington Common in April 1848, followed by a procession to Westminster to present another petition. While Chartist leaders claimed the petition had over 5 million signatures, many were proven to be fraudulent. The event saw a significant police and military presence, but the gathering remained peaceful, with an estimated crowd size of around 150,000. The petition was ultimately defeated by a substantial margin, marking a setback for the Chartist cause.

1.6. How successful was Chartism?

The Chartists faced repeated rejections from Parliament, and none of their demands from the People's Charter became law during the time of the movement. However, the influence of Chartism persisted and continued to shape the push for electoral reforms in the years that followed.

Significant progress in electoral reform was made with the passage of the Reform Bill in 1867. This granted voting rights to all male heads of households over the age of 21, as well as male lodgers paying a certain rent amount. The Ballot Act of 1872 further advanced the cause by ensuring that votes could be cast in secret, addressing a key demand of the People's Charter.

The Third Reform Act in 1884 extended voting qualifications to rural areas, allowing almost two-thirds of men to have the right to vote. With these reforms, all of the Chartists' demands from the People's Charter, except for annual parliamentary elections, became part of British law.

While Chartism may have been deemed unsuccessful at the time, its campaign for electoral reform played a significant role in the development of democracy in the United Kingdom. The movement's persistence and influence paved the way for subsequent reforms that expanded voting rights and brought about a more inclusive political system.

References

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