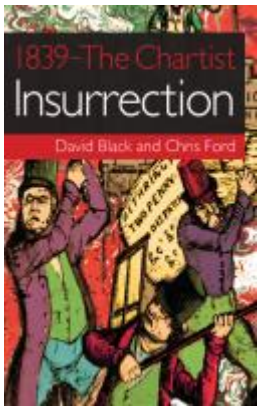
Reaffirming the Chartists' Revolutionary Moment

written by Dan La Botz | June 26, 2013



Book Review: David Black and Chris Ford. *1839: The Chartist Insurrection*. Foreword by John McDonnell, M.P. London: Unkant Publishers, 2011. 233 pages. Chronology. Illustrations. Appendices. Index. £10.99.

David Black and Chris Ford in their book *1839: The Chartist Insurrection*, a history of the Newport Rising, set themselves a clear objective—though surprisingly they never tell us what it is, leaving that to John McDonnell who wrote the foreword and to Ben Watson who wrote the blurb on the back cover of their book. As McDonnell writes, "The Newport Rising [as the 1839 insurrection is also known] and other attempts to use physical, as opposed to moral force have been, if not hidden from history, then at least pretty well disguised." The authors aim is to show that modern Britain, so often thought of as a model of moderation and gradualism, where all changes take place within the Parliamentary framework, guided by rules of decorum and deference, and always respecting authority—does indeed have a revolutionary, working class tradition. Their book on the Chartist Insurrection of 1839 is a study of a key moment in a political upheaval that produced an insurrection revealing revolutionary possibilities unfulfilled. Ben Watson writes on the back cover that this is a "revolutionary handbook," though that would be going too far, for nowhere do the authors, who are great story tellers, attempt to explain the meaning of these events.

Black and Ford have written a fast-paced, narrative history of the 1839 Insurrection, filled with thumbnail sketches of the Chartist movement's major figures, descriptions of the most important Chartist organizations and their politics in brief, excerpts from contemporary speeches, and parliamentary debates, and wonderful descriptions of the movement's rise, growth, and spread throughout Britain. All of this is based on the most masterful command of the sources: newspapers, parliamentary records, memoirs, private papers, and all of the secondary literature. They tell their story in the most straightforward way but at a breathtaking clip that contributes to the sense of the excitement of the movement and its culmination in the insurrection.

From the *Peoples' Charter* to the Insurrection

The Chartist Party represented the first political response of the working class to capitalism and the industrial revolution in Britain. The combination of the steam engine and machinery began in the

1750s to create modern industrial production, which brought about competition between bosses and workers, the intense exploitation of workers, low wages, long hours, miserable working and living conditions, followed by unemployment and starvation. These conditions led workers first to rage against the machine and then to the creation of labor unions, first legalized in 1824, to try to end competition among workers and raise wages. The labor unions, however, were unstable. They rose with each period of economic expansion and fell with each contraction, while they also faced repression from employers and the state. Workers could do little to change government policies because they did not have the right to vote.

The recognition by workers that their unions were not enough and that they needed a political party to change their social conditions and to make society more humane for all led the labor movement to enter politics. The British people, both the middle class (large and small business people and professionals) and the working class began to demand universal suffrage, Parliament passed the Reform Act of 1832, extending the vote to the middle classes, those worth at least £10 per year—effectively excluding the working classes. The Reform Act united the property-owning classes throughout the country against their laboring underlings. Britain in 1832 had what Lord Russell thought a perfect electoral system: in a nation of 25 million, half of them male, there were only 700,000 voters, all men of property. At the same time, political associations were banned to prevent the non-propertied classes from organizing.

These developments led workers and their labor unions to call for The Charter that would give the vote to the working classes. While the Chartists were a political party, they were a party with a difference. As Friedrich Engels wrote in his pioneering book *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), "Herein lies the difference between Chartist democracy and all former brands of bourgeois political democracy. *Chartism is a social movement.*"[1] Engels expected it to soon become a socialist movement.

Black and Ford provide the reader no such context, but simply plunge into the story, describing the various organizers and their organizations within the broader Chartist movement—George Harney of the National Union of the Working Class; William Lovett of the London Working Men's Association; Feargus O'Connor of the Great Northern Political Union and his newspaper *The Northern Star*; Bronterre O'Brien of the London Democratic Association, and local and regional groups and their leaders—as well as the differences and conflicts among them. There were rival personalities, differences of strategy and style, fierce arguments and debates and yet out of them emerged a movement made up of several elements.

- First, *The Peoples' Charter* first published on May 8, 1838 calling for universal manhood suffrage, the secret ballot, no property qualifications to run for office, equal representation for equal districts, and pay for those who were elected to office (making it possible for working people to take office if elected).
- Second, a "National Holiday" or "Sacred Month," that is, a general strike.
- Third, a National Rent Fund to pay for the movement's expenses.
- Fourth, the General Convention of Industrious Classes or National Convention, so that leaders of the movement could plan a political strategy.

The movement's various leaders began to circulate throughout the country organizing mass meetings of astounding size: 200,000 in Glasgow; 60,000 in Newcastle; 200,000 at Birmingham; 300,000 at Manchester; 250,000 in the West Riding. Black and Ford tell us, "by the end of 1838 there were 608 organizations—Working Men's Associations, Female Political Unions, Radical Clubs, Political Unions and Democratic Association et al.—collecting signatures for the petition and money for the National Rent." (p. 23). Women participated in both the organizations and the mass meetings, though the Chartist movement never supported their right to vote. As the movement grew

it adopted the slogan, “Peaceably if we can. Forcibly if we must.” As the authors point out, the slogan was ambiguous; was this a call to action or a call to arms?

The National Convention began in February of 1839 attended by 71 delegates, 40 of them working men, the rest of them newspaper publishers and editors, small businessmen and professionals. It was not so much a Convention as a meeting of the general staff of the Chartist movement that went on for months. The Convention debated principles, strategy and tactics, there was a vote for a general strike, but then the strike was called off, and while Convention members at times threatened the use of force, there was never a clear call for revolution. Strikes and riots broke out in various places, suppressed by the police. Meanwhile the Chartist petition, bearing 1.3 million signatures was presented to the House of Commons which rejected it by a vote of 235 to 46—proof to the physical force tendency that there was no hope for change through moral suasion.

The Convention collapsed, but a secret group within it had been organizing for an armed insurrection. John Frost, who had been elected the president of the Convention did not support the plans for an armed uprising, but felt that he had to take responsibility for the group, even if it went against his better judgment. The South Wales Directorate, meanwhile had at the same time begun to organize the uprising, planning on a general strike combined with an insurrection to take place on Guy Fawkes Day, using the disorderly celebrations for cover. The Convention’s secret conspirators and the Directorate decided to seize the city of Newport. Many Chartists were already armed and now prepared for the assault. Waiting and watching was General Sir Charlier Napier with about 5,000 troops.

Frost led what is estimated to have been 5,000 Chartists in an assault on Westgate but were quickly defeated and scattered by a combination of special officers from the propertied classes and British troops. At least 20 of the rebels were killed and some 500 were imprisoned. Another convention was called, another insurrection launched, but only seventy men showed up and it fizzled. Frost and two other leaders were sentenced to death, but their sentences were commuted to transportation for life to Van Diemen’s Land, now called Tasmania, an island off the southern tip of Australia. Chartism continued as a positive force throughout the 1840s, though no longer with the same insurrectionist character. This is the story that Black and Ford tell, though obviously in far greater detail and nuance. They have made their point: “In our view what existed in 1839—and ceased thereafter—was a mass working class democratic movement, with revolutionary tendencies.”

They conclude by writing, “….we can only salute them and try and understand why they lost.” Surprisingly—they make no attempt to do so, though there have been hints throughout the story suggesting what their explanation might be. Black and Ford, part of the theoretically interesting Marxist-Humanism current inspired by Raya Dunayevskaya, which tends to emphasize the self-organization and spontaneous action of the masses over political organization, seem to value the story much more than they do understanding and explaining it. I understand that *1839* is a book for the general reader and therefore does not have the usual historiographic discussion found in an academic book, but even a popularly-written book might have given us a sense of what sort of debate has gone on about the Newport Rising and how their book differs from other accounts and interpretations. I wondered if their theoretical commitment to the masses’ self-activity and to the role of spontaneity might be the reason that they do not offer more discussion of a variety of questions posed by the events.

At the same time, the authors seem utterly uninterested in theory, dispatching in sentence or two the theoretical questonsthat arise over the relationship between economic depressions and labor movements (p. 37), on the role of the Welsh national bourgeoisie (p. 47), between wage levels and political consciousness (p. 50), or the later appearance of the “labor aristocracy” (p. 195), though they do spend five pages discussing the role of women in the movement and conclude that, “The

Chartists' failure to support women's suffrage in 1838 left a legacy that lasted throughout the century." (p. 64) With no guide to go by in the book—no historiography and virtually no theory—what are we to make of the Newport Rising?

The authors seem to suggest, though they never say so explicitly and certainly never argue the case, that the movement failed because of the ambivalence of the leaders of the Convention, their lack of clarity about whether they would use physical force, and their failure to create a real command structure to carry out their attempt at insurrection which might have become a revolution. Dorothy Thompson, author of *The Chartists: Popular Politics and the Industrial Revolution* believes that the Newport rising was meant to encourage others who had been planning for a national insurrection and suggests it might have been successful had they assaulted the town at night or "if there had been no soldiers." But, of course, there will always be soldiers.[2] Edward Royle in his *Revolutionary Britannia? Reflections on the Threat of Revolution in Britain, 1789-1848* thought that the insurgents lacked a better coordinated strategy for simultaneous risings in several cities. He writes, "Had the Chartists had better military leadership they would have planned a simultaneous rising in south Wales, rather than leaving the other attacks until after success at Newport was reported." [3] G.D.H. Cole in his *Chartist Portraits,* more realistic than Thompson wrote that the "insurrection was hopeless," because the workers were not well armed and the army was not likely to revolt. "Without a soldiers' rebellion, a Chartist revolution was impossible."[4] E.P. Thompson has the most powerful explanation that he applies to Chartism and to the European Revolution of 1848:

> What held this movement together was hunger, wretchedness, hatred and hope. And what defeated it, in Chartist Britain, as on the revolutionary continent of 1848, was that the poor were hungry, numerous and desperate enough to rise, but lacked the organization and maturity which could have made their rebellion more than a momentary danger to the social order. By 1848 the movement of the labor poor had yet to develop its equivalent to the Jacobinism of the revolutionary middle class of 1789-94.[5]

I would like to have heard what Black and Ford, who tell an important story so well, think about these alternative interpretations of events, and what their explanation is. I am sure they would have interesting things to say and only wish they had said them.

Notes

1. Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England,* trans. By w.O. Henderson and W.H. Chaloner (Stanford: California: Stanford University Press, 1958), p. 267.
2. Dorothy Thompson *The Chartists: Popular Politics in the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 85.
3. Edward Royle, *Revolutionary Britannia? Reflections on the Threat of Revolution in Britain, 1789-1848* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 108.
4. G.D.H. Cole, *Chartist Portraits* (London : Cassell, 1941), p. 304.
5. E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: 1799-1848* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), p. 216.