‘Utopia is what links philosophy with its own epoch’

Although labour history traces the origins of trade-unionism back to the eighteenth century, most comprehensive studies eschew its earlier phases and focus on its development during the nineteenth century. Several historians followed the lead of the Webbs and the Hammonds and those who engaged with the eighteenth century did so in a minimal way. Eric Hobsbawm, who recognized the importance of the nineteenth century as a formative period for trade unionism, commented that ‘eighteenth century unionism or its equivalent has been hardly touched upon by labour historians since the Webbs surveyed it…’ One possible reason for this is that, within Marxist orthodoxy, the relations of production are fundamental to the construction of class identity; and these relations were formulated during the nineteenth century. If, however, we start our discussion by affirming the indeterminacy of social reality and, as such, the indeterminate identity of social agents (thus escaping economic determinism); their unity becomes the product of political articulation rather than an underlying essence.

In order to examine the articulatory practice that constituted and organized the trade unionist discourse, we should look more closely at the privileged points, which try to fix the meaning of the latter. In this respect, the earlier history of trade-unionism is important, because it demonstrates the intertwined origins of the first trade unionist organizations and the Friendly Societies. The aims and objectives of all these early combinations were as much political as economic. Furthermore, between 1790 and 1830 the radical and trade unionist discourse was undetermined and the structure of the political space after 1832 (The Reform Bill) was the product of a series of antagonistic relations, which drew political frontiers across ‘class’ lines.

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1 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, (1991), What is Philosophy?
2 For example H. Pelling (1963) A History of British Trade Unionism.
5 The necessary class character of the social agents was addressed in the Second International. As economic fragmentation had failed to unify the social agents along ‘class’ lines, the unity of the social agents became a matter of political recomposition [bloc], yet unable to establish the necessary class character of social agents. For this discussion see E. Laclau and C. Mouffe (1985) Hegemony and Socialist Strategy.
6 In some cases, combinations acted as both Friendly Societies and Trade Unions. See G.D.H Cole (1925) A Short History of the British Working Class Movement, 1789-1925, p.55.
From 1790-1830, however, elements common to both radical and trade unionist discourse were able to participate in the same equivalential chain, which had the potential of bringing about a more radical break between the proprietary classes and the lower orders. This ‘dialogue’ between radicalism and trade unionism was voiced through the shape of their organization as well as their insurrectionary arguments, which bore close affinities with the Jacobin, revolutionary rhetoric. Thus, the first aim of this paper is to show the political objectives common to trade unionism and radicalism.

The second aim is to examine the influence of Owenism in the early nineteenth century. With the incorporation of Co-operativism in trade-unionism, the movement gained the potential to challenge the existing socio-political order in a more decisive way and offer a radical socialist alternative. With the retreat of Co-operativism and Owenism in the 1830s (and trade unionism’s break from the political objectives of Chartism in the 1840s), trade unionism confined itself to the negotiation of industrial, rather than political, issues. With its renunciation of wider political objectives and its newfound legitimacy, trade unionism embraced ‘respectability’ in the latter part of the nineteenth century but, at the same time, dulled its radical edge against the ideological and economic assumptions of the liberal, capitalist state.

In order to demonstrate the scope of trade-unionism when affiliated with Owenism, I will examine the concept of the ‘General Strike’ as a myth that only offered a remedy to specific economic and social needs, but also attempted to reclaim the realm of the political.

The origins of trade-unionism.

According to mainstream historiography, during the eighteenth century, the new industrial conditions (including rapid commercial growth, developing specialization and increased industrial mechanization) made existing state regulation and the Guilt system’s wage guarantees, outdated. Parliament’s recognition of the new industrial landscape lead to a policy of laissez faire, which necessitated the formation of worker’s combinations. Earlier combinations, such as the clubs of journeymen, had more of a social purpose, while still including, however, indirect resistance, in order to safeguard the journeymen’s working conditions. Furthermore, ‘friendly societies’, widely spread in Britain during the eighteenth century, offered their members mutual funds; in case of sickness, old age, and death. The dividing line between ‘friendly societies’, legal under the 1793 Act, and combinations for wage bargaining, remained unclear. This ambiguity allowed some space for the organization of workers, even in periods (such as following the 1780s when the French Revolution signalled danger to Britain) when government hostility increased. Even under the 1800 Act, which forbade combinations of workmen, they still flourished.

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6 Following the theory of E. Laclau (and in contrast to Foucauldian theory), this analysis is based on the rejection of the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices. Every object is an object of discourse, the latter having a linguistic but also a material character. On this discussion see E. Laclau and Mouffe op.cit. chapter 3.

7 The work of H. Arendt, On Revolution (1963) and On Violence (1970) (realm of necessity versus realm of freedom), and J. Copjec (2002) Imagine there’s no Woman (desire versus drive) are quite useful in problematizing the distinction. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the distinction drawn by E. Laclau between popular and democratic demands.

8 For the origins of trade unionism see among others Pelling (1963: chapter 1). According to Pelling, within printing establishments in London for example, it was a common practice to cause mischief, attributed to the ‘chapel ghost’, as a means of reinforcing work arrangements in relation to the masters (quoted in Pelling, 1963:20).
The new industrial conditions in Britain were the product of a lack, which disrupted the established social order. They not only produced a set of demands, associated with a specific social sector but, even if initially isolated, they sprang up across different sectors of the social fabric. Upon their emergence during the eighteenth century, the trade unions and the clubs confined their demands to a limited objective and had no sense of solidarity. Between 1717 and 1800, the labour disputes involved a very wide variety of trades. Considering that these organized labour pressures became visible only through strikes and demonstrations, and based on the pamphlets and newspapers they left behind, we can assume that they were more common than is usually thought.

For a long time, early instances of labour violence and resistance had been dismissed by historians; as insignificant or irrational episodes, and a symptom of trade unionism’s ‘primitive stage’. This argument was challenged by social historians like G. Rude, who investigated the early food riots in pre-revolutionary France and concluded that these outbursts of the ‘mob’ were the means through which the unrepresented part of the population expressed grievances and negotiated labour conditions. To pursue this argument, the lack of success of these riots (success in the case of France being measured against the French Revolution; while, in the case of Britain, by their inability to form either a political or an industrial movement) was not caused by the immaturity of the social actors nor of the social conditions. Rather, it resulted from their inability to extend and embrace demands of other social sectors.

The process of articulating populist demands starts when the accumulation of unfulfilled demands, and the inability of the governing centres to deal with each one of them in isolation, allows the creation of an equivalential relationship among them. The logic of equivalence allows the incorporation of the different demands into an expanding chain and unifies them against a common ‘enemy’; dividing the social space into two antagonistic political camps. The first attempt at the creation of this equivalential chain came with the French Revolution. As a threat to the established ruling classes in Britain, it started – from the outset – to divide ‘the people’ from power. It was assisted in this by the coercive legislation of the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800. The latter, directed against political (radical) and industrial (trade unionist) combinations, gave both a common organizational and ideological reservoir. The pre-existing framework within which they had operated could not sustain the proliferation of new demands and a new one was constructed.

Contrary to the mainstream historiography, which argued that the 1800 Combination Laws were the landmark by which we navigate the terrain of weakening radical agitation and trade unionism at the beginning of the nineteenth century; such oppression may have helped unify...
political and industrial demands. The oppressive hypothesis has been challenged by other historians on the grounds that the Act was a ‘negligible instrument of oppression’ and that innumerable new combinations remained or came into existence.\textsuperscript{16} Despite the commonalities of their origins and the oppressive strategies they endured, however, it is widely accepted that the political societies of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (the cradles of the radical reform movement) should be separated from trade-unionist organizations (which pursued industrial rather than political reform). The separation, however, is the product of different ideological perspectives adopted by distinct schools of historians; rather than a product of the already contentious evidence.\textsuperscript{17} Based on the shared ideological discourse of radicalism and trade-unionism, which incorporated Painite and Jacobin elements, I will argue that, from the close of the eighteenth century until the dawn of the nineteenth, both trends participated in the same equivalential chain, bringing Britain closer to insurrection.

Jacobinism and the ‘levelling instinct’.

During the War years, older trade clubs started to change and one saw, in the midlands and the north, the first trade unions among miners and factory workers. While existing trade clubs could be controlled, the new organizations, lead by intelligent artisans, inspired by Jacobin doctrines, and with a growing membership of impoverished and violently discontented industrial workers, threatened to become a national revolutionary movement.\textsuperscript{18}

Given the oppressive Combination Acts, the increased British nationalism sparked by the spectre of French invasion (between 1803-1805), and the dissatisfaction that greeted the passage from the French Republic to the rule of Napoleon; it is widely accepted that, by the end of the eighteenth century, British Jacobinism was in retreat.\textsuperscript{19} Despite this position, Jacobinism still held a prominent place within the radical press. Thelwall argued, in the main publication of the London Corresponding Society (LCS, established in 1792), that ‘If we are Jacobins, and Jacobinism is a crime, the historians, the philosophers, the poets and the legislators of antiquity were Jacobins also.’\textsuperscript{20} As the language and symbols of the French Revolution began to play an important role for the radical Jacobins, their admiration of France eroded their respect for British constitutional heritage.\textsuperscript{21} Even fairly moderate radical journals turned to the French example and asked ‘Is the English Constitution Adapted to the Genius of France?’ Similarly, admiration for the tripartite governing system of Britain retreated before the most important emancipatory act in world history. It comes as no surprise then, that the French Revolution had a profound effect on the language of radicalism.\textsuperscript{22}

In its passage from the French to the English discourse, the concept of ‘Jacobinism’ was contested and re-appropriated. It functioned as an ‘appraisive, signifying or accrediting’ concept, which entailed ‘some kind of valued achievement’. Its contestability shows in the internal complexity of the concept, which contained various rival descriptions of its

\textsuperscript{17} Stevenson op.cit. p. 23; E. P. Thompson (1968), The Making of the English Working Class, p. 546.
\textsuperscript{19} E. P. Thompson (1963), op. cit. p. 125.
\textsuperscript{20} Moral and Political Magazine, Thelwall, letter, July 1796.
\textsuperscript{21} [explain main characteristics]
component parts and was open to modification in light of changing circumstances’.  The English Jacobins of the 1790s and 1820s recognized and engaged fully with the contestability of the concept. In December 1816, for example, radicals in Salford debated the question ‘whether the Jacobin or the loyalist commonly called was the best friend of the country;’ deciding in favour of Jacobin patriotism. Thelwall, the most persistent Jacobin, explains the adoption of the term,

‘I adopt the term Jacobinism without hesitation- 1. Because it is fixed upon as a stigma, by our enemies. (…) 2. Because, though I abhor the sanguinary ferocity of the late Jacobins in France, yet their principles (…) are the most consonant with my ideas of reason, and the nature of man, of any that I have met with (…) I use the term Jacobinism simply to indicate a large and comprehensive system of reform, not professing to built upon the authorities and principles of the Gothic customary.’

It was not only the term ‘Jacobinism’ that was forcefully contested and employed as a value judgement for radicals and enemies alike. Related concepts within the framework of ‘Jacobinism’ were also contested and modified within the radical discourse. The term ‘Sans-Culotte’, illustrated the close resemblance between British Jacobins and the ‘menu people’ of the French Revolution. The symbols of Jacobinism that re-enforced radical expression and resistance included the widespread use of Tricolour flags and liberty caps – a common sight at radical meetings and gatherings. At the same time, these symbols were used widely within the radical press. Even the gatherings of the radicals themselves illustrated the ideological, but also symbolic character of radical expression.

The language and practice of Jacobinism indicated the possibility of a radical break with the established socio-political order. This was reinforced by the advocacy, by at least the small part of the ultra-radical press, of ‘physical force’; ‘We have long entertained an idea, that Reform cannot be obtained without a bloodshed, and everyday teems with fresh proofs of the correctness of our opinion.’ The events at Peterloo (1819) greatly strengthened their case and, among the demands for blood, one could hear the fall of a guillotine’s blade,

The Inhabitants of Manchester have sealed with their blood, on the field of St. Peter, the necessity for a Radical Reform- their expiring agonies have reached from one extremity of the land to the other-the sword of justice must surely fulfil the edict which demands “BLOOD for BLOOD.”

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24 J. A. Epstein, op. cit. p. 15.
26 E. P. Thompson, op. cit. p.171.
28 Cap of Liberty, ‘State of Public Feeling in Lancashire’, Oct 20, 1819; Medusa, 9 Oct. 1819: ‘There is not a Post from every part of the Kingdom, which does not furnish some new and striking instance of the necessity of constantly wearing arms’ (quoted in Thompson, 1963:763).
*The Medusa* also advocated resort to violent insurrection and a radical break from the existing political system, rather than piecemeal reform. In the article entitled “On the Blowing up of the present system and breaking up of ‘The Regiment’”, it suggested that

‘...it would be wrong, it would be highly criminal at such a period partially to relieve the suffering of the people from the wrongs practiced upon them for so many ages. It will be diabolical wickedness, and against reason and justice, to leave any part of property *held* by the tyrants, at the disposal or contour of the people’s present oppressors. Not to make an example would be injustice to all subsequent tyrants, as it would act like a decoy to ensnare them, that they might be subject to the accumulate vengeance of a justly enraged people.’

If the earlier ultra-radical proposal for simultaneous meetings across the country had been taken up by a greater majority of radicals, the period between 1790 and 1820 could have witnessed a violent outbreak.

Violence and rioting were the natural weapons of the ‘lower orders’ when the traditional means of petitioning failed. The cotton weavers in 1808, for example, managed to stop their conditions deteriorating when, after Parliament refused to secure the minimum wage, they engaged in extensive rioting. The working classes had two options in order to fulfil their demands; either wreck the property of employers who paid unfair rates or used labour-saving machinery; or agitate for the reform of the oppressive state, which was responsible for poor living standards. The second path was taken by the radicals who identified the corrupt boroughs and unfair taxation as the source of their grievances. The first path was taken by workers as early as 1802, when they destroyed gig-mills. Like the ultra-radicals, they contemplated the use of ‘physical force’, long before the more organized Luddite Movement. In 1811, the Luddite movement of the Midlands, with its undercover organization, and an expanding membership of framework-knitters, (whose labour was threatened by new forms of production), managed to secure a wage raise. ‘Luddism’, the name given to all organized attacks against machinery, did not have the same success in Lancashire and Yorkshire, where machinery was protected within the factories. In this respect, the attacks on machinery were directed more against old machinery, like knitting frames, than newer machinery (as a House of Lords Committee argued). Furthermore, we can see the machine-breaking as part of the Food riots, which peaked in Oldham and Middleton.

While the earlier outbreaks should also be recognized as a way of negotiating labour conditions, the Luddites, as well as the Jacobin, ultra-radical part of the wider Reform movement, pointed to the crystallization of an internal frontier, separating ‘the people’ from power. They both had little success in leading the wider Radical movement but, their importance lay less with their economic and political accomplishments than with their

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29 *The Medusa*, May 1, 1819.
32 For the creation of ‘the people’ see Laclau (2004), op.cit.
articulation of ‘the people’s’ demands within a more radical framework, which split ‘the people’ from the governing orders.  

This internal divide also prevented a clear distinction between political and industrial demands, a subject of criticism by many historians. Although trade unions did not necessarily act in accordance with radical aspirations, and remained somewhat aloof from the radical movement, after the Napoleonic Wars, they were in many instances driven to take political measures. In 1817 for example, the Lancashire Weavers saw Parliamentary reform as the only remedy for their sufferings. The Peterloo meeting (1819), one of the highlights of Radical history, was attended by 60,000 weavers along with representatives of other trades, even though the weavers had disassociated themselves from the radical leaders during the 1818 strikes. By 1819, most working class groups in Lancashire rallied behind the radical cause. As ‘bridges’ were built between the different sectors of the Radical movement (and here I use the term in both its political and industrial senses), the more extensive the equivalential chain became, ‘The crowd may riot because it is hungry or fears to be so, because it has some deep social grievance, because it seeks immediate reform or the millennium, or because it wants to destroy an enemy and acclaim a “hero”; but it is seldom for any of these reasons’. What is common to the actual content of all these demands, is what Rude calls ‘the levelling instinct’, the need of the people to demand some social justice at the expense of the government, the rich, the capitalists and so on. In other words, all those who, in a certain context, are identified as the ‘enemy’ of the people. Furthermore, this ‘levelling instinct’, without a specific content of its own, can be seen yoked to radical, less radical, or moderate demands.

Owenism and its influence on Trade Unions.

Around 1815, ‘socialist’ arguments were represented by the Spenceans. Although Thomas Spence himself was a member of the LCS, he believed that mere political reforms were useless if not accompanied by the re-organization of Society, into democratic parish communes based on communal land ownership. At this time, when most radicals argued for tax relief and the reform of political institutions, Owenism and Co-operativism became an influential trend within trade unionism, though by no means internally unified or consistent. By the late 1820s, four different strands merged within co-operativism, ‘Owenite communitarian theorists; Owenite co-operators who thought of community as a long term prospect; co-operative traders who hesitated at using resources for communities; and trade club producer co-operators who leant towards political agitation’. The incorporation of Owenite and Co-operative ideals within trade unionism, however, made it more likely that

33 Middle-class radicals had initiated the Reform movement and, until 1832, remained an important force within it. Nevertheless, they did not contribute to the articulation of popular demands, in so far as they tried to bring the radical demands within an institutional framework.
35 D. Read (1958), Peterloo: The ‘Massacre’ and its background.
37 Rude in Laclau (2004), op. cit.
38 A number of incidents show that the ‘levelling instinct’ was not necessarily attached to a radical cause. For example, during the ‘Church and King’ riots in Naples, Jacobins were attacked not because of their political position but because they travelled in carriages (the example and the discussion on the ‘levelling instinct’ are from Rude (1964)op. cit. and Laclau (2004), op. cit.
39 Thomas Paine, who was the greatest influence on radicalism, was in no sense a socialist. Only Godwin and his philosophical anarchism, one of the trends that influenced Owenism, was close to a Socialist view.
41 R. G. Garnett (1972), Co-operation and the Owenite socialist communities in Britain, 1825-45, p.60.
trade unionism would become part of the wider populist demands of Radicalism. Owen’s messianism offered the working class movement a positive moral doctrine with universalistic aspirations, while his contradictory or imprecise discourse accommodated a number of diverse intellectual tendencies, which played an important role in subsequent socialist thought.

The term ‘socialist’, first used in the London Cooperative Magazine (Nov. 1827), and more widely by the Owenites of the mid-1830s, consolidated previously used phrases such as ‘the new view of society’, ‘cooperation’, and so on. By the 1840s, socialism became synonymous with Owenism; illustrating the essence of the Owenite discourses: their stress on a collective rather than individualistic approach to human activity; economic or otherwise.

His first contribution towards the creation of a new social bond was the community ideal, which was offered as the panacea for the sores of industrialization and capitalism. Owen’s rejection of conflict and antagonism as a means of social change (and the resultant rejection of revolution or political reform) lead him to believe that the adoption of communitarianism was the only method of social reform. Owenite thinking started from the principle that human happiness is the goal of human endeavours. This, they held impossible in a society of competition, conflict, and excessive individualism, but achievable in communities of cooperation, which promoted character-building based on reason and intelligence. The utilitarian principle of the ‘greatest happiness for the greatest number’ was the core of his communitarianism and, in this respect, the ethical argument behind it was as weak as that of the Utilitarians.

The concept of the ‘community’ at this time, however, contained contradictory elements. On the one hand, because his community was not reserved for a specific sector or class and aimed at the re-organization of society as a whole, it could acquire a universal character. In this respect, the concept of community was close to Thomas Spence’s plan for a universal state of nature, organized on the basis of collective ownership of the land. Furthermore, a product of rational reasoning, Owen’s concept of the community bore certain similarities with W. Godwin’s system (that entailed the abolition of all government in favour of a rational system), despite Owen’s deterministic views. Simultaneously, his views drew on working class collectivism, which found expression in the friendly societies and trade associations mentioned earlier. These features gave the concept of the community a truly radical character.

On the other hand, however, the concept of the community was part of the ‘Constitutionalist’ discourse, which evoked the freedom enjoyed in Anglo-Saxon England and its eclipse by the Norman conquest. Although ‘Constitutionalism’ had been re-appropriated by the radical discourse and was used together with the republican ideals of Tom Paine, the idea of an Old

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42 Although Owen’s arguments and his community experiments in New Lanark, were a powerful inspiration to his disciples, it was the latter who initiated the co-operative movement through their original contributions (often polemical to Owen’s), theoretical or organizational.
England that was a genuine community still echoed the Tory tradition. The concept erred more toward conservatism, if we take into account the means through which the communities would come about. Contrary to the Spenceans, Owen was not prepared to side with the expropriation of landowners, and he treated the State as a neutral player, seeing the communities as experiments within the capitalist state.  

The contestability of the concept of the community within Owen’s discourse shows that it could be incorporated either within the radical language of political reform and trade unionism or within the more ‘constitutional language’, for which reform had a more moderate character and a less totalizing effect. This undecidability was also the strength of Owenism. Despite the particularity of its premises and its social rather than political character, it could have a hegemonic, universalizing effect. The ideal of the community envisioned by Owen, with all its particularity, had the potential of becoming the ideal community of different social sectors. Universal emancipation becomes possible only when a particular sector or content suspends its particularity and becomes the locus of universalizing effects. Thus, ‘Community’ becomes an empty signifier, a signifier that, while maintaining ‘the incommensurability between universal and particulars, enables the latter to take up the representation of the former’.  

W. Thompson’s contribution to the Owenite discourse, created the bridge between the Owenite notion of community and the trade unionist movement, advancing further the possibility of a universalizing effect. Central in his definition of the ‘community’, is mutual cooperation that implied for him a constraint that every individual entering the community is willing to direct his or her labour, mental or physical, or as its most frequently the case, both combined, to whatever objects may be deemed by the general voice, most conductive to the general good’. The belief in the universal adoption of cooperative communities was against based on the rationality of the proposed system and the defaults of the exiting institutions which were irreconcilable with the axiom of the ‘greatest happiness for the greatest number’. Thompson’s emphasis on co-operation, brought Owenism closer to equal distribution than Owen had imagined, as the former argued for the entitlement of the worker to the full value of his labour. Furthermore, Thompson’s recognition of antagonism and clash of interests and the possibility of transferring from an individual level to a community level, lead him to the embracement of political agitation as a preliminary to a co-operative society.  

These two elements in Thompson’s theory, the emphasis on co-operation and the recognition of antagonism as a constitutive force in social change, created a closer link between Owenite discourse and trade unionism. The link was consolidated in Thomson’s assertion that trade unions could become embryonic communities of mutual co-operation where labourers could

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48 R. G. Garnett, op. cit ch. 1; J.F. Harrison, op. cit. ch. 2.  
49 For the whole discussion on Universality/Particularity and Empty Signifiers, see E. Laclau in J. Butler, E. Laclau and S. Zizek (2000) Contingency, Hegemony, Universality, pp. 50-59.  
50 W. Thompson (1830), Practical Directions for the Speedy Establishment of Communities on the Principle of Mutual Co-operation, United Possessions and Equality of Exertions and of the Means of Enjoyment, p.3.  
51 W. Thompson (1824), An inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth most conductive to Human Happiness applied to the newly proposed System of Voluntary Equality of Wealth, p.563.  
52 Owen wanted to limit the claims of the capitalists but not to dispense with them, and he never went as far as to argue for the full entitlement of the worker to the product of his labour.  
53 R. G. Garnett, op. cit. p.49.  
enjoy the whole product of their labour. The affinity between the Owenite programme and the Trade Unions, allowed the transformation of Owen’s ‘Villages of Co-operation’, from a gift offered by the governing classes to self-governing worker’s associations, initiated by the workers themselves. ‘Union Shops’ disposed their products via the Co-operative Stores and by 1830, there were over three hundred active Co-operative Societies.

The new challenges to Representation.

The formation of an internal antagonistic frontier is the first precondition for a populist articulatory practice. The second is an equivalential articulation, which – at the beginning – will go no further than a feeling of solidarity but, progressively through political mobilization, will unify the different demands within a stable system of signification. The possibility of unifying trade-unionist and co-operative demands with the radical movement rested, to a certain extent, on the common forms of organization that they introduced among the middle and, most importantly, the working classes. In their practices, they introduced modes of representation that directly confronted the representational system of the established order.

One major example of the unification of Jacobin-Radical and Trade Unionist practices towards popular sovereignty was the plan for a National Convention initiated by the National Union of the Working Classes (NUWC) in May 1833. The concept of the Convention had an ideological but also a symbolic function. In the first case, the Convention was ‘popular sovereignty’ in action. The ‘unrepresented’ could choose their own representatives, who functioned as ‘delegates’. The idea of the ‘delegate’ being sent to the Convention, with particular instructions or a message, implied that sovereignty remained with the body that sent them; with the chosen representatives remaining subordinate. In the case of the radical movement, it re-affirmed that the radical organizations were, despite their extra-Parliamentary character, a unified, official body. Thus the convention had the dual aim of undermining the existing parliamentary organs and re-affirming popular sovereignty. Despite the suspension of the plans for the National Convention, as a result of police pressure, the NUWC offered sufficient potential for insurrection to alarm the Government, which suspended its Parliamentary proceedings.

One of Trade Unionism’s most important steps came in 1834, when a conference of trade-union delegates tried to unite all trade unions in one body, the Grand National Consolidated Trades’ Union of Great Britain and Ireland (GNCTU). The resolution of the conference reflected the Owenite influence: it called for the settlement of workers on the land; the establishment of workrooms to employ strikers and the unemployed; lodges to furnish means

55 W. Thompson (1827), Labour Rewarded. The Claims of Labor and Capital conciliated; or, how to secure to Labor the whole Products of its Exertions..., p. 73.
57 E. Laclau (2004), op. cit.
58 The Wilkes movement introduced the idea of ‘accountability’ by stripping the King from his sovereign role based on authorization, and by reducing him to a representative, accountable to the represented. As issues of ‘misrepresentation’ started to take a central place within the Radical discourse, the radicals started to examine the role and actions of the representatives in relation to the people. The aspiration to popular sovereignty soon took hold of the radical imaginary. For the different notions of representation, see H. F. Pitkin, (1967), The Logic of Representation.
59 For the role of the convention within the discourse of the radical press in 1790s, Moral and Political Magazine, p.164-5; The Tribune, vol 3, p.146. Also J.Stevenson, op. cit. pp. 25-6.
60 From the Latin ‘legare’, ‘to send with a commission’.
62 Stevenson, op. cit. p.25.
of respectable entertainment and so on. Owen’s support was underlined by his ideological aims to a new society and, while the delegates may have had more pragmatic aims, nevertheless, the whole project illustrates the role of Owenism within radical trade unionism.63

The radical demand for annual Parliaments, which would reinforce popular sovereignty, also found expression in the twice-yearly ‘Builders’ Parliament organized by the Operative Builders’ Union (OBU), and responsible for a series of strikes and lock-outs aimed at enforcing union recognition. One of the primary objectives of the OBU was to strengthen the bargaining power of the union but, at the same time, it echoed the Owenist influence, by proposing to organize direct work in direct competition with the master builders.64 Although it would be misleading to argue that Owen supported popular sovereignty, many of the Owenite proposals facilitated the organization of the new representative bodies. In the first Co-operative Congress in 1831, Owen’s suspicion of the self-organization of the working classes became apparent when he declared that his experience had taught him that the people could not act for themselves in a community. This view was not shared by other Owenites, however, among them W. Lovett and W. Thompson, who believed in committee rule and rejected his despotism.65

When, in April 1834, trade unionist leaders called for a general strike in support for the GNCTU, the gap between Owen and other Owenites became more apparent. Owen’s chief assistants, James Morrison (editor of The Pioneer) and J.E. Smith, who strongly advocated ‘a long strike, a strong strike, and a strike altogether’, met with Owen’s disapproval, who was unwilling to launch a warfare against the capitalists.66 The newly articulated concept of the ‘General Strike’ however, was the syndicalist myth bringing all groups (trade unionists, Owenites, radicals) together in one equivalential chain, which suspended their particularity and assured the struggle against the established orders and the fulfilment of what was experienced as social ‘lack’.67

The ‘General Strike’, with its near-millenarian connotations, had all the undertones of the Owenite discourse but its antagonistic character contrasted with the reform that Owen and Thompson had envisioned for the creation of a new social order. When, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, trade unionism lost its utopian, universalistic dimensions and the cleavage between ‘the people’ and power was bridged through the negotiations of industrial demands, trade unionism lost its populist potential. Instead of articulating the unity between diverse social demands in a stable system of signification that could re-organize the social order in a radically new way, it confined itself to demands that satisfied, or not could be inscribed within, the existing socio-political order.68

Conclusion

The aim of the paper was to show that between 1790 and 1830, the possibility of unifying radicalism, trade unionism, and Owenism in one populist movement with the potential of overthrowing the existing order, was open. The early discourse of the Jacobin Radical’s and

63 Stevenson, op. cit. 27; G.D. H Cole (1938), op. cit. p. 258.
64 Stevenson, op. cit. o. 26-7.
68 It’s demands became ‘democratic’ rather than ‘populist’. For the distinction between the two concepts, see E. Laclau (2004), op. cit (forthcoming).
the first trade combinations of Luddism, played a significant role in creating an antagonistic frontier between ‘the people’ and power, the first step towards a populist movement. An equivalent articulation of their demands based on a) a new vision of a future community; and b) new organizational schemas, which evoked popular sovereignty, created the preconditions for a unified political mobilization. Within this second step, Owenism played a significant role, by allowing the extension of the particular demands for a utopian ideal with universalizing effects. With the retreat of Owenism from the trade-unionist discourse in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the trade unionist demands lost their universalizing character, thus becoming demands, which could be met within the existing socio-political system.