

July 4th and America's revolutionary influence on Britain

Thomas Scripps
3 July 2026

The American Revolution not only freed its citizens from the domination of the British Empire; it was an inspiration to all progressive struggles in British society, from the anti-slavery movement to the radical movement for democratic reform.

A direct line can be drawn from the supporters of the American revolutionaries to the Chartists, the great working-class movement of the 1830s and 40s—the best of whom would support the North in the Civil War which ended slavery. 1776 was also a critical moment in the development of the Irish Independence struggle.

In 2019, the *New York Times* launched the “1619 Project” rejecting the progressive character of the American Revolution, fraudulently presenting it as an effort to defend slavery with no real interest in democracy and equality. The independence struggle was rendered just another shabby episode in a country for whom slavery and anti-black racism was in its “DNA”. What passes for the American “left” signed up to this reactionary disavowal of one of the most significant revolutionary events in world history.

Seizing the opportunity, President Donald Trump and the wider American right has sought to claim 1776 for its own ultra-nationalist purposes. It is using the 250th anniversary to claim for Trump's aspiring dictatorship the legacy of the founding fathers, who waged a war against precisely the sort of “tyranny” now being orchestrated from the White House.

British politicians, historians and even the monarchy have meanwhile sought to present the event as a terrible misunderstanding, ultimately only a blip in a longstanding “special relationship” between the two governments founded on joint foreign policy objectives and, supposedly, shared democratic values.

This is history falsified to suit the agenda of different factions of the ruling and affluent middle class. What is erased by all of them is the closely interconnected, popular struggle for democratic rights which took place on both sides of the Atlantic. That history of international intellectual ferment, reciprocal waves of radicalisation, and political collaboration across borders is so horrifying to the ruling class and its hangers-on today because it finds its contemporary heir in the socialist movement.

American Independence and the British abolitionist movement

Contrary to the 1619 Project's claim that the American Revolution was launched in defence of slavery, the struggle gave an enormous spur to the abolitionist movement in Britain.

Lawyer Granville Sharp was among the earliest British abolitionists, publishing *A Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery* in 1769, securing the famous *Somerset vs Stewart*

ruling that slavery had no basis in English law in 1772 and corresponding with pioneering abolitionist Anthony Benezet in Philadelphia. He was an acquaintance of Benjamin Franklin and correspondent of Benjamin Rush—two founding fathers—and supported the rights of the American Colonies against the British government. His 1774 pamphlet, *A Declaration of the People's Natural Right to a Share in the Legislature*, was circulated by Franklin in America.^[1]

After the independence struggle, Franklin made it a priority for the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, of which he was president from 1785, to establish correspondence with Sharp and his close collaborator Thomas Clarkson. The pair were among the founders of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787, which led the campaign for abolition in the UK. Its work included publicising details of the legislation passed against the slave trade by Rhode Island and Massachusetts.^[2]

John Oldfield writes in *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution* that the “years immediately after the American Revolution” witnessed the “appearance on both sides of the Atlantic of highly organised, energetic and broad-based abolitionist societies that together formed a vibrant and relatively well-integrated international community.” He continues:

The timing of this “take off” was not entirely accidental. While there were long term factors involved, including economic development and the growth of compassionate humanitarianism, there is little doubt that the America Revolution changed the terms of the debate. The Declaration of Independence, in particular, raised pressing questions about the nature and extent of liberty... In Britain meanwhile, the American Revolution unleashed a heated debate about political representation that was quite often framed in terms of slavery (disenfranchisement) and freedom (the vote).^[3]

Large numbers of people were mobilised. Over one hundred petitions on the subject of slavery were presented to the UK parliament in 1788 and 519 in 1792. Seymour Drescher in *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* writes that a petition of 10,000 from Manchester “offered striking evidence that Manchester's workers were also aligned with the abolitionist cause... Manchester's abolitionist signers represented about two-thirds of its eligible adult males.”^[4] According to Oldfield, some 400,000 people in total are thought to have put their name to an anti-slavery petition in 1792, 13 percent of the adult male population of England, Wales and Scotland.^[5]

The heroic revolutionary uprising in Haiti (1791-1804) provided a crucial catalyst for the domestic pressure generated by this movement, deeply alarming the British ruling class. In 1807, Parliament passed the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, the first step in what would be decades-long battle to end slavery in the British Empire, sustained by

continued abolitionist campaigns and slave rebellions in Barbados (1816), Demerara (1823) and Jamaica (1831).

Sharp and Clarkson were clear on the impact the revolutionary process in America was having. Sharp responded to the US Slave Trade Act (1794) that it helped to answer the argument in Britain “that if England were to discontinue the traffic in slaves, America in particular would engage in those branches of it which the former would relinquish.”^[6] Clarkson commented in 1788, “As long as America was ours, there was no chance that a minister would have attended to the groans of the sons and daughters of Africa, however he might feel for their distress.”^[7]

A significant and rapidly growing section of the slave interest was removed from the British Parliament through the War of Independence. In the same stroke, the slaves of the American colonies were removed from the British Empire and placed in a state founded on “the proposition that all men are created equal”—a contradiction that erupted with the Civil War which ended slavery seven decades later.

The British radical movement and its ties with the American Revolution

As Oldfield indicates, the fight against slavery was intimately tied up with the struggle for democratic reform in Britain, which was similarly energised by the American Revolution.^[8] As David Brion Davis writes in *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, “In 1793 the Earl of Abingdon warned that the abolition movement also drew on ‘Tom Paine’s Rights of Man for its chief and best support,’ and that it carried ‘seeds of other abolitions, different and distinct from that which it professes.’”^[9]

Paine is, of course, the central figure: author of the hugely influential *Common Sense* (written in America in support of independence) and *Rights of Man* (written in Britain in defence of the French Revolution). These and others of Paine’s writings, drawing on the heritage of John Wilkes and James Burgh, became seminal texts in the British radical movement, but they were far from unique. They were the high points of a broad landscape of political writing and organisation supportive of the American Revolution and the fight for democratic rights in Britain.

Rights of Man, for example, was heavily promoted by the Society for Constitutional Information (SCI), founded in 1780 by Major John Cartwright, another leading radical heavily inspired by the American Revolution. An officer in the Royal Navy, he refused a promotion to avoid fighting against the Independence struggle, effectively ending his career.^[10] His first publication, *American Independence the Glory and Interest of Great Britain* (1774), argued, “the Colonies are entitled to the entire Independency on the British Legislatures and that it can only be by a formal Declaration of these Rights, and forming thereupon a friendly League with them, that the true and lasting Welfare of both Countries can be prompted.”^[11]

Cartwright followed this up in 1776 with the pamphlet *Take Your Choice!*, advocating annual parliaments, the secret ballot and manhood suffrage.^[12] A later work, *The English Constitution* (1823), was sent to then President of the United States Thomas Jefferson and earned a reply wishing for a meeting and giving “assurances of my high veneration and esteem for your person and character.”^[13] Cartwright was invited to speak from the platform of the mass meeting in Manchester that ended in the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, though old age and ill health prevented him from attending.

The SCI itself was one of several contemporary organisations campaigning for democratic reform, all with close connections to the American revolutionary struggle. In 1788, the London Revolution Society

was founded—in reference to the Glorious Revolution of 1688—followed by more in other cities. Its prominent members, many of whom also participated in the SCI, included the Dissenters Richard Price and Joseph Priestly and the radical John Jebb. All were vocal supporters of the American Revolution and opponents of slavery.

Price, who could count Franklin, Jefferson, and John Adams among his personal friends, published *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, the Principles of Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War with America* in 1776. The pamphlet was hugely influential in winning support for the American revolutionary cause and for its democratic ideals in a British context.^[14] One passage reads: “If omnipotence can, with any sense, be ascribed to a legislature, it must be lodged where all legislative authority originates; that is, in the PEOPLE. For their sake is government instituted; and their’s is the only real omnipotence.”^[15]

Priestly, also a friend of Franklin and later Jefferson, published a powerful defence of the Colonists’ cause in 1774, his *Address to Protestant Dissenters of All Denominations, on the Approaching Election of Members of Parliament, with Respect to the State of Public Liberty in General and of American Affairs in Particular*. He warned of “the effects which the oppression of America may have on the liberties of this country.”^[16] His 1788 sermon on slavery decried it as the “grossest of all abuses, perhaps even the greatest, and most crying evil under the sun.”^[17]

Jebb, a tireless agitator and publicist, was passionately moved by the American revolution, which, he told Franklin, had “for seven years, agitated my mind with feelings not to be described.” He argued that, with the “glorious institutions” of America, “the human species will, at last obtain an asylum; and every individual be permitted to enjoy a larger proportion of civil and religious liberty, than hath been indulged in any age or clime.”^[18] Pamphlets like his *Address to the Freeholders of Middlesex* (1779) and *Report of the Sub-Committee of Westminster* (1780) saw him push for this and more in Britain: for “equal, annual and universal representation of the Commons.”^[19]

Jebb later became a close friend to John Adams, telling him that he hoped America’s “bright example” would “influence the People from whence they sprang, and every other European state, to shake of the shackles of Civil and Religious despotism”. As his biographer Anthony Page concludes: “Jebb demonstrates how, for British radicals, notions of religious liberty, republican virtue and universal political rights coalesced around the American cause.”^[20]

A bridge to the British working class movement

The SCI and the Revolution Society were culturally and intellectually formative to the ultimately more significant London Corresponding Society, established in 1792 by a small group of founders including shoemaker Thomas Hardy, journalist John Thelwall, lawyer Joseph Gerrald and bookseller Thomas Spence and laying the groundwork for an extension of democratic ideas both in content and social constituency.^[21]

Arthur Sheps notes in “The American Revolution and the Transformation of English Republicanism” that “the papers of the London Corresponding Society [LCS] and other sources indicate that John Thelwall, Thomas Spence, Joseph Gerrald, and Thomas Hardy... all recognized the importance of the American Revolution in stimulating their political interests and shaping their ideas.”^[22] Hardy writes in his autobiography of how, prompted by Price’s work, he came to see that it “was not only necessary for the happiness of the transatlantic patriots themselves, that the struggle should terminate in their favour; but that even the future happiness of the whole human race was concerned in the event.”^[23]

Gerrald had lived in America for several years. Sheps writes that “In a work entitled *A Convention the Only Means of Saving Us From Ruin* (1793) he cited his knowledge of the United States to demonstrate that national conventions were the only legitimate as well as the only effective expressions of the sovereign power of the people.”^[24] The influence of the Declaration of Independence, with its insistence of the “self-evident” truth “that all men are created equal”, and on the “right” and “duty” to “throw off” a despotic government, is clear in the LCS’s founding public address. It began “Man, as an individual, is entitled to liberty—it is his birthright. As a member of society, the preservation of that liberty becomes his indispensable duty.”^[25]

Among the LCS’s other leading members was the famous freed slave Olaudah Equiano, whose speaking tour of Britain and Ireland helped forge broader connections, including with the United Irishmen (UI). The latter, also drawing on the example of the French Revolution, grew out of the Irish Volunteers movement of the 1780s directly inspired by the American Revolution. Equiano spoke at a rally in Belfast in 1791 hosted by a founding UI member Samuel Neilson.^[26] Both the LCS and the UI were banned by name in the Unlawful Societies Act 1799, following a vicious campaign of arrests and trials.

Organised on a highly democratic basis, with thousands of subscribers and audiences in the tens and even hundreds of thousands, the LCS’s critical contribution was to draw broad layers of working men into the radical movement, beginning to shift its class basis. The transformation was evident in Thelwall’s 1796 book *The Rights of Nature against the Usurpations of Establishments*, where he argued:

The fact is that the hideous accumulation of capital in a few hands, like all diseases not absolutely mortal, carries in its own enormity, the seeds of its cure... Whatever presses men together... is favourable to the diffusion of knowledge, and ultimately promotive of human liberty. Hence every large workshop and manufactory is a sort of political society, which no act of parliament can silence, and no magistrate disperse.^[27]

Enslaved people were encompassed in this profoundly radical outlook. Thelwall wrote scathingly in “Connection Between Parliamentary Corruption and Commercial Monopoly” that “at present (although the open barter only appears in the infamous African slave-trade) almost all the inhabitants of the universe are rendered as it were, the saleable commodities of a few engrossers and monopolists.”^[28]

E.P. Thompson, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, argues, “The history of reform agitation between 1792 and 1796 was (in general terms) the story of the simultaneous default of the middle-class reformers and the rapid ‘leftwards’ movement of the plebeian Radicals. The experience marked the popular consciousness for fifty years.” In the years that followed, “there were Thomas Hardy’s in every town and in many villages throughout England, with a kist [chest] or shelf full of Radical books, biding their time, putting in a word at the chapel, the smithy, the shoemaker’s shop, waiting for the movement to revive.” This legacy “contributed much to Chartism”.^[29]

A prominent personal link between the two was created by Francis Place, a member of the LCS and then a founder of the London Working Men’s Association founded in 1836—one of the central organisations of the early Chartist movement. So-named for the People’s Charter of 1838 for which it campaigned and received millions of signatures, the influence of the earlier radicals on the first mass working-class movement in history is evident in its demands: universal male suffrage, the secret ballot, an end to property qualifications, equal constituencies, and annual elections.

Chartism, America and slavery

The founding ideals of the American Republic were a central reference point for the Chartists. The movement played a decisive role in drawing broader layers of the working class into campaigns for a correspondingly radical extension of democratic rights. In doing so, in historian Betty Fladeland’s words, Chartism “created a political climate in which the developing arguments about the relationship between black and white slavery came to a head.”^[30]

Predating by several decades Marx’s analysis of the particular character of wage labour, many Chartist writers drew heavily on the comparison between chattel slavery and wage slavery. While this could take the form of setting up a false opposition between the two causes or downplaying the former, the general tendency, Fladeland explains, was one in which “out of these vigorous and often acrimonious exchanges, latent sympathies and a sense of common purpose slowly emerged.”^[31] Even in the confused thoughts on the subject of James Bronterre O’Brien—who had a real blindness to the realities of chattel slavery, especially in the southern United States—the concern was its joint abolition together with what O’Brien considered uniformly worse, wage slavery:

Let no one suppose that it was any part of our intention to extenuate the abomination of serfdom or chattel-slavery under any condition, or to mitigate that just abhorrence of it, in all its forms, which we feel assured the reader, in common with ourselves, feels towards it...

If we attempt to alter the condition of slaves we should do so for their own benefit, and not ... for the benefit of employers and usurers.^[32]

Others were clearer on the character of the southern slave states’ “peculiar institution”. A leading member of the London Working Men’s Association alongside Place, cabinetmaker William Lovett co-authored the book *Chartism: a New Organisation of the People* while in prison for seditious libel in 1839-40, which said of America:

The only stain in her star-bespangled banner is that remnant of kingly dominion, *the slavery of her coloured population*; which, like its damning brother, *the infant slavery of England*, is more a feature of wealth and class domination, than of the spirit of her people or her democratic institutions. But in proportion as knowledge is extending its humanizing influence over the selfishness of wealth, and the power and prejudices created by its dominion, so is American slavery last sinking into that oblivious pit, where all the impediments which now obstruct the happiness of *black and white* are destined to sink forever.^[33]

Lovett would later meet with African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglass during his 1845-7 tour of the UK, alongside fellow Chartist Henry Vincent—together they founded the short-lived but significant Anti-Slavery League in 1846.^[34] Attracting wide attention and favourable coverage in the Chartist press, Douglass engaged seriously with the relationship between the struggle for emancipation in the US and widening the franchise in the UK. Proclaiming “boldly that there was no more similarity between slavery as existing in the United States and any institution in Britain than there was between light and darkness,” he nonetheless, Richard Bradbury explains, spoke of “political slavery in

England... and, looking upon the labouring population, he contemplated them as slaves”^[35]

Direct Chartist relations with abolitionists tended to be strongest on its “Moral Force” wing, but the “Physical Force” faction, and the movement’s centre maintained by the leader of the movement—Feargus O’Connor, editor of the *Northern Star*—also paid attention to the issue. As Malcom Chase notes in *Chartism: A New History*, in a profile on William Cuffay, “the Chartist press and platform consistently opposed chattel slavery.” Cuffay himself, a tailor and the son of a freed slave, was a popular leader of the movement, and decidedly on its “Physical Force” wing.^[36] Elected to the national executive of the National Charter Association and to the Presidency of the London Chartists in 1842, he was ultimately sentenced to 21 years penal transportation in Tasmania.

Prior to this, Cuffay was a manager of the Chartist Land Plan. This is significant, Tom Scriven notes in “Slavery and Abolition in Chartist Thought and Culture”, because the plan—“developed hand in hand with American labour radicals” associated with the Free Soil movement—was a “fulcrum” around which many Chartists rethought “how wage labour related to American slavery and came to reject the Democrats for their support for slavery.” O’Connor described it as “a free temple” with “no distinction of colour”.^[37]

Taken as a whole, the Chartist movement played a vital role in asserting that workers in Britain shared a common cause with emancipation. It was not only a moral question, but a question of the fight for their own freedom. This would prove hugely significant just two decades later.

Ernest Jones, the British working class and the American Civil War

The last major leader of the Chartists movement, in its twilight years in the 1850s, was Ernest Charles Jones (1819-1869), editor of *Notes to the People* (later the *People’s Paper*). A friend to Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, the latter called Jones “the most talented, consistent and energetic representative of Chartism” and contributed numerous articles to his papers.^[38]

Perhaps Jones’s most important role came a decade later, however, with his dogged support for the Union in the American Civil War, behind which he was able to marshal the traditions built up in the last three decades of struggle. His speech to a public meeting in Rochdale was recorded by an American observer and sent to Secretary of State William Seward. Jones declared that “the sole origin and entire object of the secession war has been to perpetuate and to spread slavery”, denying any right “constitutional, legal, or moral, for secession”. He concluded, the observer records:

I trust that those who are now struggling, honorably and constitutionally, for the freedom of the black will join in every effort for a fresh instalment towards the charter of an Englishman’s liberty. [Applause.] Those who pat the slave-owners of America on the back would like to be slave-owners in England as well. [Cheers, and hear, hear.] I believe that those who come forward at this crisis to advocate the natural rights of the negro in America are really coming forward to advocate the rights of the workingmen in England, [cheers,] and I trust we shall find that in establishing liberty universally throughout the American continent, we shall be placing the crowning pinnacle on the edifice of freedom here as well. [Loud, prolonged, and enthusiastic applause.]^[39]

In Jones’s audience would have been workers who courageously upheld the blockade of the Southern cotton, at great personal cost, earning a letter of thanks from Abraham Lincoln. The President wrote, in part:

I know and deeply deplore the sufferings which the working-men of Manchester, and in all Europe, are called to endure in this crisis. It has been often and studiously represented that the attempt to overthrow this government, which was built upon the foundation of human rights, and to substitute for it one which should rest exclusively on the basis of human slavery, was likely to obtain the favor of Europe. Through the action of our disloyal citizens, the working-men of Europe have been subjected to severe trials, for the purpose of forcing their sanction to that attempt. Under the circumstances, I cannot but regard your decisive utterances upon the question as an instance of sublime Christian heroism which has not been surpassed in any age or in any country. It is indeed an energetic and re-inspiring assurance of the inherent power of truth, and of the ultimate and universal triumph of justice, humanity, and freedom.^[40]

The rally in Rochdale was one of many mass working-class meetings, attended by thousands at a time, in support of the Federal cause—while the secessionists struggled to organise any. The most famous was held on March 26, 1863, in St James’s Hall. A resolution passed by the meeting declared “That we altogether repudiate the statement that the war now raging in America is the result of Republican or Democratic institutions, but rather do we believe that the liberty arising out of such institutions has made it impossible for slavery longer to exist there... as the cause of labor and liberty is one all over the world, we bid them God speed in their glorious work of Emancipation.”^[41] Reports of the event were carried in Northern papers in the US.

Royden Harrison notes in “British Labor and American Slavery” that this powerful response was all the more remarkable given “The existence of a small group of influential Southern sympathizers within the labor movement” and “the decidedly Confederate tendency” of sections of the labour press.^[42] Despite this, Harrison writes: “From the end of 1862, there is overwhelming evidence to support the view that the great majority of politically conscious workmen were pro-Federal and firmly resolved to oppose war.” Looking to the future, it would be “difficult to over-estimate the importance of the Civil War for the subsequent history of the British labor movement... the Civil War helped to widen the horizons of the British workers and prepared their leaders for participation in the” International Workingmen’s Association, the First International.^[43]

George Julian Harney: radical, Chartist, socialist

Foremost in their ranks was George Julian Harney, a man who embodied the transition from the radical democratic movement to modern socialism, maintaining a passionate defence of the democratic principles of the American revolution and opposition to slavery throughout.

On the radical wing of the Chartist movement, Harney cut his teeth in the “War of the Unstamped”—a struggle against the “taxes on knowledge” (specifically on newspapers and pamphlets) imposed by the government of George III to curb radical publications. He earned the first three of what were to be many stays in prison by the age of 19. An early advocate of William Benbow’s “Grand National Holiday” (effectively a general strike) and a committed internationalist, he became the editor of

O'Connor's *Northern Star* between 1845-50, for which he solicited multiple articles from both Marx and Engels.

Under his editorship, as Scriven writes, "the *Northern Star* reprinted reports of atrocities from Garrison's Boston *Liberator* and other American abolitionist newspapers, and would commit to defend 'the rights of all men, without regard to colour, clime or creed' and espouse that democracy 'comprises all; the negro as well as the white man'." Ruthless in his condemnation of "social slavery" in Britain, and of the hypocrisy of the abolitionists who ignored the plight of the working class, Harney argued against attempts to downplay the significance of slavery: "European wrong forms no justification of American crime".^[44] He wrote for the *Northern Star* in 1846 (elsewhere reported as part of a speech delivered to a meeting of German democrats in 1848):

The cause of the people in all countries is the same – the cause of labour, enslaved and plundered labour... The men who create every necessary, every comfort and luxury are themselves steeped in misery. Working men of all countries, are not your grievances; your wrongs, the same? Is not your good cause one and the same also... the veritable emancipation of the human race.^[45]

During this time, Harney was a leading member of the Fraternal Democrats, along with Jones. Established in 1845-6, the organisation declared itself opposed to "all political hereditary inequalities and distinctions of caste".^[46] In 1847, Marx would speak to its members on behalf of the Democratic Association in Belgium. The Fraternal Democrats handed him a letter of reply which observed, "Your representative, our friend and brother Marx, will tell you with what enthusiasm we welcomed his appearance and the reading of your address... We are convinced that we must address ourselves to the real people, to the proletarians, to the men who drip sweat and blood daily under the pressure of the existing social system".^[47]

After being pressured to resign from the *Norther Star* due to his socialist views, which went beyond what O'Connor would agree to, Harney set up his own paper, the *Red Republican* (later the *Friend of the People*), which published the first English translation of the *Communist Manifesto* in 1850. Having travelled to Jersey to meet with exiled French socialists, the indefatigable Harney became editor of the *Jersey Independent*, in which he published the following open letter to Lincoln:

A worker from youth in the cause of Political and Social Progression, I have naturally regarded American Slavery as the bane and shame of the American Union; and I rejoiced in your election as indicating the turning point in American history, and the resolution of the majority of the States to prevent the farther encroachment, of the Slave Power. Since the commencement of the Civil War I have marked your progress in the path which must finally lead to the emancipation of all the enslaved; and, in common with every friend of Freedom, I feel bound to express grateful acknowledgement of your courageous and consistent course. Persevere, Sir, in the same path, and you will command the sympathies and prayers of the friends of Free Institutions all over the World, and win for yourself the glorious reputation of 'the second 'Father of the Republic'.^[48]

A second letter wished Lincoln luck "in the working out of the great mission which concerns not more the safety of the American Union, than the real and permanent welfare of all free nations and peoples struggling

for Freedom".^[49] In 1863, at the height of the Civil War, Harney travelled to the United States, where he lived until 1888. He met with Lincoln personally on the arrangement of leading anti-slavery Republican Charles Sumner.

In 1867, Harney wrote as an American correspondent for the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, regarding the question of universal suffrage: "Our interest in American politics has been mainly that of a desire to see the disenfranchisement of an oppressed and cruelly wronged race. That victory for humanity we at length witness. What a revolution in six years! Will the British working man occupy as proud a political position as that now held by the negroes of the States, within six years to come? There is stinging humiliation for us Englishmen in the very question."^[50]

The Marxist movement and the American Revolution

Both Harney and Jones were members of the International Workingmen's Association (the First International), founded in St Martin's Hall in London in 1864. Harney's Fraternal Democrats group was a precursor, both organisationally and in its internationalist outlook, as was Jones's International Committee/Association, founded in 1855.

The First International, however, was a qualitative leap, animated by the new communist ideas developed by Marx, who drafted the organisation's founding documents. One of these, the "Inaugural Address", made specific reference to "the heroic resistance... by the working classes of England, that saved the west of Europe from plunging headlong into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation and propagation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic."^[51]

Through the lens of historical materialism developed by Marx and Engels—in which history is understood as "the history of class struggle"—the role of the American Revolution and its continuation in the Civil War could be precisely identified, and its relationship with the current and future struggles of the working class established. Both aspects were brilliantly summed up in the 1864 "Address of the International Working Men's Association to Abraham Lincoln", authored by Marx, congratulating Lincoln on his re-election.

Marx spoke on behalf of a socialist movement inspired by the ideals of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" but oriented to the struggles of a growing working class which provided the basis for their vastly fuller realisation than was possible under the leadership of the American bourgeois revolutionaries. It is entirely fitting to give a section of his letter the final word:

When an oligarchy of 300,000 slaveholders dared to inscribe, for the first time in the annals of the world, "slavery" on the banner of Armed Revolt, when on the very spots where hardly a century ago the idea of one great Democratic Republic had first sprung up, whence the first Declaration of the Rights of Man was issued, and the first impulse given to the European revolution of the eighteenth century; when on those very spots counterrevolution, with systematic thoroughness, gloried in rescinding "the ideas entertained at the time of the formation of the old constitution", and maintained slavery to be "a beneficent institution", indeed, the old solution of the great problem of "the relation of capital to labour", and cynically proclaimed property in man "the cornerstone of the new edifice"—then the working classes of Europe understood at once, even before the fanatic partisanship of the upper classes for the Confederate gentry had given its dismal warning, that the slaveholders' rebellion was to sound the tocsin

for a general holy crusade of property against labour, and that for the men of labour, with their hopes for the future, even their past conquests were at stake in that tremendous conflict on the other side of the Atlantic. Everywhere they bore therefore patiently the hardships imposed upon them by the cotton crisis, opposed enthusiastically the proslavery intervention of their betters—and, from most parts of Europe, contributed their quota of blood to the good cause.

While the workingmen, the true political powers of the North, allowed slavery to defile their own republic, while before the Negro, mastered and sold without his concurrence, they boasted it the highest prerogative of the white-skinned labourer to sell himself and choose his own master, they were unable to attain the true freedom of labour, or to support their European brethren in their struggle for emancipation; but this barrier to progress has been swept off by the red sea of civil war.

The workingmen of Europe feel sure that, as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Antislavery War will do for the working classes.^{52]}

Colin Bonwick, *English Radicals and the American Revolution* (University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 73.

John Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution: An International History of Anti-Slavery* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 81.

Ibid., 13-14.

Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 214.

Oldfield, *Transatlantic*, 78.

Cited in *ibid.*, 75-76.

Thomas Clarkson, *An essay on the impolicy of the African slave trade* (J. Phillips, 1788), 30 [accessible: <https://archive.org/details/essayonimpolicy00clarkiala/page/6/mode/2up>].

H.T. Dickinson, 'Introduction' in *Britain and the American Revolution*, ed. H.T. Dickinson (Longman, 1998), 11.

David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 101.

Bonwick, *English Radicals*, 89.

John Cartwright, *American Independence the Glory and Interest of Great Britain* (Robert Bell, 1776), 1. [accessible: https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_american-independence-th_cartwright-john-major_1776/page/n1/mode/2up].

John Cartwright, *Take Your Choice!* (J. Almon, 1776) [accessible: <https://archive.org/details/takeyourchoicere00cart>].

Thomas Jefferson to John Cartwright, June 5 1824 [accessible: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/56035/56035-h/56035-h.htm#Page_355].

Bonwick, *English Radicals*, 92.

Richard Price, *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, the Principles of Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War with America* (T. Cadell, 1776), 5. [accessible: <https://archive.org/details/observationsonna00pric>].

Joseph Priestly, *Address to Protestant Dissenters of All Denominations, on the Approaching Election of Members of Parliament, with Respect to the State of Public Liberty in General and of American Affairs in Particular* (Joseph Johnson, 1774) [accessible: <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/an-address-to-protestant-dissenters-of-all-denominations-on-the-approaching-election-of-members-of-parliament-with-respect-to-the-state-of-public-liberty-in-general-and-of-american-affairs-in-particular>].

Joseph Priestly, *A sermon on the subject of the slave trade* (Pearson and

Rollason, 1788), 23. [accessible: https://archive.org/stream/sermonsubjecto00pric/sermonsubjecto00pric_djvu.txt].

Anthony Page, "'Liberty has an Asylum': John Jebb, British Radicalism and the American Revolution", *History* 87, no.286, 218.

John Disney, *The works theological, medical, political, and miscellaneous, of John Jebb: Volume 3* (Cadell, Johnson and Stockdale, 1787), 303 [accessible: https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_the-works-theological-m_jebb-john_1787_3/mode/2up].

Page, 'Asylum', 226.

Bonwick, *English Radicals*, 217.

Arthur Sheps, "The American Revolution and the Transformation of English Republicanism" *Historical Reflections* 2, no.1 (1975), 4.

Thomas Hardy, *The Memoir of Thomas Hardy* (James Ridgway, 1832), 8.

Sheps, "The American Revolution", 17.

Cited in Hardy, *Memoir*, 17.

Nini Rodgers, 'Equiano in Belfast: A study of the anti-slavery ethos in a Northern Town', *Slavery and Abolition* 18, no.2 (1997), 75.

Thomas Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature against the Usurpations of Establishments* (Symonds, 1796), 18 [accessible: https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_the-rights-of-nature-ag_thelwall-john_1796_0/mode/2up].

Gregory Claeys, *The Politics of English Jacobinism: Writings of John Thelwall* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 389.

E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin, 1976), 200-1.

Betty Fladeland, 'Abolitionists and Chartism' in *Slavery and British Society*, ed. James Walvin (Louisiana State University Press, 1982) 70.

Ibid., 71.

James Bronterre O'Brien, *The rise, progress, and phases of human slavery* (Reeves, 1885), 54, 93. [accessible: <https://archive.org/details/riseprogressphas00obriouft/mode/2up>].

William Lovett and John Collins, *Chartism: A New Organisation of the People* (1840) [accessible: <https://www.chartistcollins.com/complete-text.html>]

Richard Bradbury, 'Frederick Douglass and the Chartists' in *Liberating Sojourn: Frederick Douglass and Transatlantic Reform* (eds. Alan J. Rice and Martin Crawford) (University of Georgia Press, 1999), 179.

Ibid., 182-3.

Malcolm Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester University Press, 2007), 307.

Tom Scriven, 'Slavery and Abolition in Chartist Thought and Culture' in *The Historical Journal* 65, no.5 (2021), 16-18.

Karl Marx, 'The Chartists', *The New York Tribune*, August 10, 1852 [accessible: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/08/25.htm>].

'Mr. Ernest Jones on the American Slaveholders' War', Legation of the United States, London, March 18, 1864 [accessible: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1864p1/d144>].

'Lincoln's Letter to the Working-Men of Manchester, England', January 19, 1863 [accessible: https://acws.co.uk/archives-misc-lincoln_letter].

Cited in *Speeches of John Bright* (Little, Brown and Company, 1865), 189.

Royden Harrison, 'British Labor and American Slavery', *Science and Society* 25, no. 4 (1961), 315.

Ibid., 317.

Scriven, 'Chartist Thought', 19.

George Julian Harney, *Northern Star*, 14th February, 1846.

Cited in G.D.H. Cole, *Chartist Portraits* (Macmillan, 1941), 284.

Cited in Franz Mehring, *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life* (London,

1936), 142.

Cited in Scriven, 'Chartist Thought', 1.

Ibid., 2.

Cited in Owen R. Ashton and Joan Hugman, 'George Julian Harney, Boston, U.S.A., and Newcastle upon Tyne, England, 1863-1888', *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 107 (1995), 181.

Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association (London, 1864) [accessible: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/10/27.htm>].

'Address of the International Working Men's Association to Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America' *The Beehive Newspaper*, January 7, 1865 [accessible: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/iwma/documents/1864/lincoln-letter.htm>].

[1] Colin Bonwick, *English Radicals and the American Revolution* (University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 73.

[2] John Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution: An International History of Anti-Slavery* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 81.

[3] Ibid., 13-14.

[4] Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 214.

[5] Oldfield, *Transatlantic*, 78.

[6] Cited in *ibid.*, 75-76.

[7] Thomas Clarkson, *An essay on the impolicy of the African slave trade* (London, 1788) [accessible: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/clarke/page/6/mode/2up>].

[8] H.T. Dickinson, 'Introduction' in *Britain and the American Revolution*, ed. H.T. Dickinson (Longman, 1998), 11.

[9] David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 101.

[10] Bonwick, *English Radicals*, 89.

[11] John Cartwright, *American Independence the Glory and Interest of* *the British People* (London, 1776) [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/bonwick/works/1776/americaindependence-th_cartwright-john-major_1776/page/n1/mode/2up].

[12] John Cartwright, *Tracts on the African Slave Trade* (London, 1776) [accessible: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/cartwright/works/1776/tracts-on-the-african-slave-trade>].

[13] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (London, 1785) [accessible: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/jefferson/works/1785/notes-on-the-state-of-virginia>].

[14] Bonwick, *English Radicals*, 92.

[15] Richard Price, *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, the Principles of Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War with America* (London, 1776) [accessible: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/price/works/1776/observations-on-the-nature-of-civil-liberty>].

[16] Joseph Priestly, *Address to Protestant Dissenters of All Denominations, on the Approaching Election of Members of Parliament, with Respect to the State of Public Liberty in General and of American Affairs* (London, 1774) [accessible: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/priestly/works/1774/address-to-protestant-dissenters-of-all-denominations-on-the-approaching-election-of-members-of-parliament-with-respect-to-the-state-of-public-liberty-in-general-and-of-american-affairs-in-particular>].

[17] Joseph Priestly, *A sermon on the subject of the slave trade* (Pearson Education, 1788) [accessible: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/priestly/works/1788/a-sermon-on-the-subject-of-the-slave-trade>].

[18] Anthony Page, "'Liberty has an Asylum': John Jebb, British Radicalism and the American Revolution", *History* 87, no.286, 218.

[19] John Disney, *The works theological, medical, political, and miscellaneous, of John Jebb: Volume 3* (Cadell, Johnson and Stockdale, 1787) [accessible: https://www.marxists.org/archive/disney/works/1787/30-the-works-theological-m_jebb-john_1787_3/mode/2up].

[20] Page, 'Asylum', 226.

[21] Bonwick, *English Radicals*, 217.

[22] Arthur Sheps, "The American Revolution and the Transformation of English Republicanism" *Historical Reflections* 2, no.1 (1975), 4.

[23] Thomas Hardy, *The Memoir of Thomas Hardy* (James Ridgway,

1832), 8.

[24] Sheps, "The American Revolution", 17.

[25] Cited in Hardy, *Memoir*, 17.

[26] Nini Rodgers, 'Equiano in Belfast: A study of the anti-slavery ethos in a Northern Town', *Slavery and Abolition* 18, no.2 (1997), 75.

[27] Thomas Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature against the Usurpations of the British State* (Sydney, 1796) [accessible: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/thelwall/works/1796/the-rights-of-nature-against-the-usurpations-of-the-british-state>].

[28] Gregory Claeys, *The Politics of English Jacobinism: Writings of John Thelwall* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 389.

[29] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin, 1976), 200-1.

[30] Betty Fladeland, 'Abolitionists and Chartism' in *Slavery and British Society*, ed. James Walvin (Louisiana State University Press, 1982) 70.

[31] Ibid., 71.

[32] James Bronte O'Brien, *The rise, progress, and phases of human liberty* (London, 1851) [accessible: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bronte/works/1851/the-rise-progress-and-phases-of-human-liberty>].

[33] William Lovett and John Collins, *Chartism: A New Organisation of the People* (London, 1840) [accessible: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lovet/works/1840/chartism-a-new-organisation-of-the-people>].

[34] Richard Bradbury, 'Frederick Douglass and the Chartists' in *Liberating Sojourn: Frederick Douglass and Transatlantic Reform* (eds. Alan J. Rice and Martin Crawford) (University of Georgia Press, 1999), 179.

[35] Ibid., 182-3.

[36] Malcom Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester University Press, 2007), 307.

[37] Tom Scriven, 'Slavery and Abolition in Chartist Thought and Culture' in *The Historical Journal* 65, no.5 (2021), 16-18.

[38] Karl Marx, 'The Chartists', *The New York Tribune*, August 10, 1852 [accessible: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/08/25.htm>].

[39] 'Mr. Ernest Jones on the American Slaveholders' War', *Legation of the United States and Legation of the United Kingdom* (London, 1861) [accessible: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/jones/works/1861/ernest-jones-on-the-american-slaveholders-war>].

[40] 'Lincoln's Letter to the Working-Men of Manchester, England', *Journal of the American People* 9, no.1 (1864) [accessible: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lincoln/works/1864/lincoln-letter>].

[41] Cited in *Speeches of John Bright* (Little, Brown and Company, 1865), 189.

[42] Royden Harrison, 'British Labor and American Slavery', *Science and Society* 25, no. 4 (1961), 315.

[43] Ibid., 317.

[44] Scriven, 'Chartist Thought', 19.

[45] George Julian Harney, *Northern Star*, 14th February, 1846.

[46] Cited in G.D.H. Cole, *Chartist Portraits* (Macmillan, 1941), 284.

[47] Cited in Franz Mehring, *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life* (London, 1936), 142.

[48] Cited in Scriven, 'Chartist Thought', 1.

[49] Ibid., 2.

[50] Cited in Owen R. Ashton and Joan Hugman, 'George Julian Harney, Boston, U.S.A., and Newcastle upon Tyne, England, 1863-1888', *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 107 (1995), 181.

[51] *Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association* (London, 1864) [accessible: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/iwma/documents/1864/inaugural-address>].

[52] 'Address of the International Working Men's Association to Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America' *The Beehive Newspaper*, January 7, 1865 [accessible: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/iwma/documents/1864/lincoln-letter.htm>].

To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:



wsws.org/contact