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The “Social Question” as a Democratic Question: Louis Blanc’s *Organization of Labor*

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Abstract

Recent studies have identified the revival of the idea of democracy in early nineteenth-century French thought. This article recovers one important reason behind this revival: democracy became a response to another debate that emerged during that period—the “social question.” Although not well known in the English-speaking world, Louis Blanc was one of the most important socialist figures during the July Monarchy in France. Examining Blanc’s Organization of Labor, this article shows how Blanc mobilized democracy to challenge the July Monarchy’s exclusionary representative government and its reduction of the “social question” to pauperism. Blanc argued that industrial competition created a system of domination and proposed democratic reorganization of labor as a way to promote the common good. Blanc reformulated the “social question” as a democratic question, arguing that poverty and class domination can be solved not by administrative measures but through democratic participation in work and in the republic.

In December 1847, the Paris correspondent of the Chartist newspaper *Northern Star* reported that “incontestably the most splendid one of the whole series of Reformist banquets” took place in Dijon, France.¹ The correspondent was none other than Friedrich Engels. Many things impressed him. The banquet attracted 1,300 people; French and Swiss deputies were present; and, most importantly, some of the most influential members of the “Ultra-Democratic Party” gave speeches. One of these notable speakers was Louis Blanc. In his speech, Blanc asserted that democrats must be “cosmopolite[s]”: “We want union in Democracy ... We do not think and labour for France only, but for the whole world.” Despite some “friendly” disagreements, Engels praised Blanc’s “splendid speech” and concluded with a celebratory note: this banquet proved that the democratic movement—particularly its socialist strand—was gaining mass support.²

¹Friedrich Engels, “Reform Movement in France: Banquet in Dijon,” *Northern Star* 11/530 (1847), 2. Because associations and demonstrations were forbidden in the July Monarchy, reformist campaigns appropriated banquets as a way of publicizing their ideas and mobilizing people. Gareth Stedman Jones, “Introduction,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. Gareth Stedman Jones, trans. Samuel Moore (London, 2002), 3–187, at 30 n. 28.

²Engels, “Reform Movement in France,” 2.

This event reflects one significant aspect of early nineteenth-century French political thought: the increasing prevalence of the idea of democracy. The term “democracy” descended “from book to life” especially in the 1820s as it became a common currency among reformist circles to express opposition against the reactionary Bourbon Monarchy.³ After the 1830 Revolution, however, the term’s prevalence became a source of contention. While the “liberal” proponents of the July Monarchy (i.e. the Doctrinaires) employed the term to refer to the representative government of the capable classes,⁴ various socialist and republican circles countered by calling themselves *démocrates*, appropriating democracy to express demands for social and political reform.⁵ It is therefore not surprising that Engels celebrated the 1847 “Ultra-Democratic” banquet in Dijon for its role in mobilizing the *démocrates* toward the socialist camp.

Engels’s choice to highlight Blanc’s speech was also not arbitrary. Although not well known in the English-speaking world, Blanc was one of the most important socialist figures. He was an influential journalist, and his most famous work, *Organization of Labor*, first published in 1840 as a stand-alone work, was one of the most popular socialist works.⁶ After 1848, in the new republic, Blanc was one of the two socialist members (along with Alexandre Martin) of the provisional government. He also chaired the short-lived Luxembourg Commission—an assembly tasked with creating a social reform plan for the provisional government. Although his efforts ultimately failed, his mobilization of the term “democracy” to express demands for political and social reform played an important role in the formation of a democratic critique of industrial capitalism. Put otherwise, Blanc used democracy to address what came to be known as the “social question”—the debate around pressing problems caused by industrial capitalism such as poverty, social conflict and atomization, and the gap between formal equality and social inequality.⁷

³Joanna Innes and Mark Philp, “‘Democracy’ from Book to Life: The Emergence of the Term in Active Political Debate, to 1848,” in Jussi Kurunmäki, Jeppe Nevers, and Henk te Velde, eds., *Democracy in Modern Europe: A Conceptual History* (New York, 2018), 16–34.

⁴On the history of the July Monarchy and the “liberal” thought of the Doctrinaires see Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le moment Guizot* (Paris, 1985); Larry Siedentop, “Two Liberal Traditions,” in Raf Geneens and Helena Rosenblatt, eds., *French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day* (Cambridge, 2012), 5–35; Aurelian Crăiutu, *Liberalism under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires* (Lanham, 2003); Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?* (Cambridge, 2008), Chs. 3, 6; Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), Chs. 5–6.

⁵As Engels reported in another article, the alliance behind democracy had internal tensions that could be observed in different banquets. Some moderate reformists, for instance, toasted King Louis-Philippe. The radical ones refused to toast the king, instead toasting the “sovereignty of the people,” or the “honor of democracy.” Friedrich Engels, “Reform Movement in France,” *Northern Star* 11/526 (1847), 6. Yet, because all the banquets demanded reforms, they became a forceful aggregate opposition to the July Monarchy.

⁶David Pinkney comments that “it was probably the single most influential socialist publication of the decade.” David H. Pinkney, *Decisive Years in France, 1840–1847* (Princeton, 1986), 96.

⁷As Holly Case explains, the phrase “social question” consists of two peculiar formulations that became commonplace in the nineteenth century. A “question” meant a pressing problem that requires a timely solution. The “social” referred to the new material and moral condition that emerged after the abolition of aristocratic castes, the declaration of rights, the expansion of the press, and industrialization. Therefore the “social question” signaled a need not only for interventions into social problems but also

In this article, I revisit the theoretical and historical struggle to reformulate democracy as a response to the “social question.” The goal is twofold. First, I explore Blanc as a thinker of democracy.⁸ By foregrounding Blanc’s democratic thought, I do not intend to argue for labeling Blanc as a democratic thinker instead of a socialist or a radical republican thinker. In fact, Blanc himself used various words to define his position, including “democrat,” democratic party, “democratic school,” and “socialist,” and often used the term democracy in “theoretical constellations” with terms from socialist and radical republican thought.⁹ My intention is to center our attention on Blanc’s persistent appeal to democracy while shaping his approach to the “social question” and his vision of a “democratic and social republic.”¹⁰ This thematic focus highlights how Blanc reclaimed the term “democracy” to challenge the July Monarchy’s exclusionary representative government and its paternalistic reduction of the “social question” to pauperism.

This takes us to the second goal of this article: to contribute to the growing scholarship that has recovered the centrality of democracy in nineteenth-century French political thought.¹¹ More specifically, it expands on Stephen Sawyer’s

for visions for creating modern social ties. Holly Case, *The Age of Questions: Or, a First Attempt at an Aggregate History of the Eastern, Social, Woman, American, Jewish, Polish, Bullion, Tuberculosis, and Many Other Questions over the Nineteenth Century, and Beyond* (Princeton, 2018), 6–34, 78–84. Also see Holly Case, “The ‘Social Question,’ 1820–1920,” *Modern Intellectual History* 13/3 (2016), 747–75; Robert Castel, *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale: Une chronique du salariat* (Paris, 1998); Jacques Donzelot, *L’invention du social: Essai sur le déclin des passions politiques* (Paris, 2003); Giovanna Procacci, *Gouverner la misère: La question sociale en France, 1789–1848* (Paris, 1993). The first section of this article offers a more detailed discussion of the “social question.”

⁸While Blanc is known as a prominent socialist figure in nineteenth-century France, his idea of democracy and his democratic thought have not received sustained attention. The most extensive work on Blanc’s life and thought is Leo A. Loubère, *Louis Blanc: His Life and Contribution to the Rise of French Jacobin-Socialism* (Evanston, 1961). This work gives a helpful overview of Blanc as a “philosopher of democracy” with a focus on Blanc’s contribution to “Jacobin-socialism.” Stephen Sawyer focuses on Blanc’s theory of the democratic state, highlighting its “liberal” aspects. Stephen W. Sawyer, “Louis Blanc’s Theory of Democratic State,” *Tocqueville Review/La revue Tocqueville* 33/2 (2012), 141–63. In another work, Sawyer explores Blanc’s theory of the state with attention to Blanc’s later writings on the history of the 1789 Revolution. Stephen W. Sawyer, *Demos Assembled: Democracy and the International Origins of the Modern State, 1840–1880* (Chicago, 2018), Ch. 6. My focus is on Blanc’s earlier writings during the July Monarchy, and particularly his *Organization of Labor*. Pamela Pilbeam’s work on early French socialism highlights Blanc’s prominence but the bulk of its discussion is devoted to Blanc’s involvement in the Provisional Government and Luxembourg Commission after the 1848 Revolution. Pamela Pilbeam, *French Socialists before Marx: Workers, Women, and the Social Question in France* (Montreal and Kingston, 2000). For notable works on Blanc in French see Francis Démier, ed., *Louis Blanc, un socialiste en république* (Paris, 2005); Jean-Fabien Spitz, “Louis Blanc: La république démocratique et sociale,” in Louis Blanc, *Textes Politiques, 1839–1882*, ed. Jean-Fabien Spitz (Paris, 2011), 8–75.

⁹As we will see, Blanc also appealed to terms such as “fraternity” and “association” that were commonplace among various radical republican and socialist thinkers. The phrase “theoretical constellations” comes from James Farr, “Understanding Conceptual Change Politically,” in Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell L. Hanson, eds., *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge, 1989), 24–49, at 39.

¹⁰This was one of the revolutionary slogans during and after the 1848 Revolution. See, for instance, Louis Blanc, 1848: *Historical Revelations, Inscribed to Lord Normanby* (London, 1858), 426.

¹¹This sophisticated scholarship has established how democracy was integral to various debates in nineteenth-century France such as popular sovereignty, the state, violence, freedom, radical republicanism, and political aesthetics. See respectively Pierre Rosanvallon, *La démocratie inachevée: Histoire de la souveraineté du peuple en France* (Paris, 2000); Sawyer, *Demos Assembled*; Kevin Duong, *The Virtues of*

insight that there was a “democratic tradition” in post-Revolutionary French thought—one that “defined democracy as a means for solving public problems by the public itself,” and prioritized “inventing effective, popular, and participatory practices” of government, administration, and regulation.¹² Distinct from the debates on parliamentary representation, this “tradition” sought to rethink “the social” and democracy “in service of a relatively egalitarian society for the public welfare.”¹³ This article shows that this egalitarian concern with social welfare also led to calls to establish democracy in labor relations.¹⁴ In fact, it argues that democracy rose to prominence in July Monarchy France precisely because it was offered as a way to remedy industrial capitalism and its inegalitarian and destructive effects on society. Blanc’s *Organization of Labor* is a key entry point to understand the significance of democracy in socialist criticisms of the July Monarchy and in socialist visions for an egalitarian and solidaristic society. Blanc argued that industrial competition created an impersonal system of domination and proposed a democratic organization of labor to give power back to the people over their social conditions. The union of democratic participation and work, Blanc suggested, would transform the purpose of work—from a forced activity of subsistence imposed on the working class to an activity of the people to promote “fraternity” and the common good.

Democracy and the “social question” in the July Monarchy

In July 1830, in a loose alliance with the “liberal” parliamentary opposition (i.e. the Doctrinaires), Parisians took to the streets and overthrew the Bourbon Monarchy. Louis-Philippe of Orléans, the self-proclaimed “citizen-king,” assumed the throne. Yet, in the eyes of many republicans and socialists, 1830 swiftly became a hijacked revolution, or a Doctrinaire coup.¹⁵ The new July Monarchy only marginally enlarged the all-male electorate, resisting demands for universal suffrage. Despite their advocacy of freedom of speech and of association during the Bourbon regime, the Doctrinaires abandoned such liberal commitments within a few years. Their governments banned demonstrations, increased surveillance of political clubs, and censored the press. Furthermore, they saw the social problems that accompanied emerging urbanization and industrialization as problems of pauperism—a level of poverty that threatened the moral and social order.¹⁶

Violence: Democracy against Disintegration in Modern France (Oxford, 2020); Annelien de Dijn, *Freedom: An Unruly History* (Cambridge, MA, 2020); Karma Nabulsi, “Two Traditions of Radical Democracy from the 1830 Revolution,” in Bruno Leipold, Karma Nabulsi, and Stuart White, eds., *Radical Republicanism: Recovering the Tradition’s Popular Heritage* (Oxford, 2020), 118–46; Jason A. Frank, *The Democratic Sublime: On Aesthetics and Popular Assembly* (Oxford, 2021).

¹²Stephen W. Sawyer, “The Forgotten Democratic Tradition of Revolutionary France,” *Modern Intellectual History* 18/3 (2021), 629–57, at 632.

¹³*Ibid.*, 656.

¹⁴Sawyer’s article attends to the “social question” near the end of its exploration of the “democratic tradition” by briefly comparing Tocqueville and Proudhon. *Ibid.*, 655–6. In foregrounding Blanc and debates on the democratization of industry and work, I extend the scope of Sawyer’s exploration.

¹⁵Pamela Pilbeam, *The 1830 Revolution in France* (London, 1991), Ch. 8.

¹⁶Procacci, *Gouverner la misère*, Ch. 6.

This perception was a product of the Doctrinaires' peculiar idea of social progress and democracy. When they were the main opposition party in the 1820s, the Doctrinaires challenged the Bourbon Monarchy's "ultra-royalist" program to restore aristocracy through a particular approach—one that based politics on "sociological terrain."¹⁷ François Guizot, perhaps the most influential of the Doctrinaires, contended that "it is wiser to study first the society to know and understand political institutions ... political institutions are an effect; a society produces them before being modified by them."¹⁸ Put otherwise, Guizot argued that a political thinker should first seek to understand the "nature of property relations," "the manner of individuals according to their social situation, the relationship between different classes, and the state of persons."¹⁹ What this approach revealed was a "great social metamorphosis"—an irreversible social progress in industry, intellect, and morals that made any attempt to restore the *Ancien Régime* anachronistic.²⁰ Against the ultraroyalist Villèle's parliamentary speech that blamed the "new interest" for fomenting "disorder" in the kingdom, Guizot wrote that the real danger was the reactionary "old interests" of aristocracy.²¹ "Not only does public opinion in France dismiss this legal and fixed classification of society, the state of society itself refuses it."²² Guizot urged the regime to "help" the "ascendance" of these "new interests," which he associated with the "young," educated "middle class."²³ Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard echoed this argument in parliamentary debates. Just like Guizot, he posited the emergence of the "middle classes" as a sign of social progress in "industry and property."²⁴ And Royer-Collard used the term "democracy" to characterize this new "universal form of society": "This is our democracy, as I see it and; yes, it is in full spate in this beautiful France ... The true work of wisdom is to observe and direct it."²⁵

The Doctrinaires argued that this novel democratic society licensed one true political regime: the representative government of the enlightened "middle class." This also meant a rejection of political democracy. During the Bourbon Monarchy, Guizot claimed in his Sorbonne lectures that "the desire and tendency of society are in fact being governed by the best."²⁶ He asserted that "democratic governments" cannot fulfil this desire because they bring the "despotism of number" and the "domination of inferiorities over superiorities."²⁷ After the 1830 Revolution, this argument in favor of a government of "middle class" became the basis of the

¹⁷Rosanvallon, *Le moment Guizot*, 50; Siedentop, "Two Liberal Traditions," 19.

¹⁸François Guizot, *Essais sur l'histoire de France: Pour servir de complément aux observations sur l'histoire de France de l'abbé de Mably*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1824), 87.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 86–90.

²⁰François Guizot, *Des moyens de gouvernement et d'opposition dans l'état actuel de la France* (Paris, 1821), 146.

²¹*Ibid.*, 181–7.

²²*Ibid.*, 151.

²³*Ibid.*, 217–18.

²⁴J. Madival and M. Laurent, eds., *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860: Recueil complet des débats législatifs et politiques des chambres françaises, deuxième série (1800 à 1860)*, 127 vols. (Paris, 1876), 34: 133.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶François Guizot, *The History of the Origins of Representative Government in Europe*. trans. Andrew Scoble (Indianapolis, 2002), 57.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 61.

July Monarchy's exclusionary governments. In a parliamentary speech in 1837, Guizot targeted proposals for the extension of suffrage with similar language. He argued that "universal suffrage" and "political equality" are expressions of an "envious ... democracy" that wants to "lower everything to its level." The "perfection" of the July government, he claimed, was to blend "social equality" with "true liberty" because it enabled "capacity, virtue, and work" to "rise to the highest offices of the state."²⁸

It is therefore not a coincidence that the "social question" and democracy emerged together as prominent topics in early nineteenth-century French public debates. Indeed, as Daniel Gordon suggests, "the invention of the social" had begun during the late seventeenth century, when French thinkers attempted to demonstrate the existence of a "self-instituting" realm distinct from the supervision and reach of royal sovereignty.²⁹ Especially after the 1789 Revolution, with the abolition of the *Ancien Régime*, the "invention of the social" became an indispensable task.³⁰ The Doctrinaires gave a particular direction to this ongoing concern with "the social." In making "the social" an autonomous condition and a priority for political thought, and in using the term "democracy" to refer to its modern (and antiaristocratic) aspects (e.g. the "middle class," "social equality" in the sense of social mobility), they created a tension between the imaginary of "the social" (as the condition of progress, mobility, prosperity) and the reality of "the social" (as the condition of poverty and exclusion).³¹ In fact, early uses of the term "social question" emerged to express a similar tension. The *Journal des débats* in 1826 used the term to criticize the Bourbon regime's inegalitarian law of entails that solidified the place of nobles in the electoral college. The periodical commented that the regime was "amusing itself ... making a legal question combat a social question."³² Ironically, after the establishment of the July Monarchy, the association of democracy with the "social question" became a threat to the Doctrinaires' image of "the social" and their self-proclaimed "legal country" [*pays légal*]³³—the limited electorate of the "middle class."³³

The uprising of the Lyonnais silk weavers in 1831 was the first real confrontation between the young July Monarchy and the "social question." The uprising was a result of a dispute between the silk weavers and merchants.³⁴ Against the merchants' pressures to lower silk prices, the Lyonnais weavers asked the local prefect to establish a fixed price. When this demand was rejected, they revolted and took control of the city for a few days. When the army entered to retake the city, their

²⁸Archives parlementaires, vol. 110, 496.

²⁹Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670–1789* (Princeton, 2017), 5.

³⁰For example, various drafts of the 1789 and 1793 *Déclarations* include formulations such as the "rights of man in society" and the "rights of man in the social state." For examples see Lucien Jaume, ed., *Les déclarations des droits de l'homme: Du débat, 1789–1793 au préambule de 1946* (Paris, 1989), 124, 272.

³¹Here I follow Jacques Donzelot, who makes a similar claim in the context of the 1848 Revolution and the Second Republic. Donzelot, *L'invention du social*, 32–3.

³²"Paris," *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, 20 March 1826, n.p.

³³Guizot used this term "legal country" in his abovementioned parliamentary speech. *Archives parlementaires*, vol. 110, 494.

³⁴Robert J. Bezucha, *The Lyon Uprising of 1834: Social and Political Conflict in the Early July Monarchy* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), Chs. 1–2.

only victory was that there was no bloodshed. Still, the uprising shook the European political scene. The British newspaper *Courier* published a report, stating that the event raised the “social question.”³⁵ In fact, this was a translation of the French interior minister Casimir Perier’s words. Casimir Perier told the Chamber of Deputies that the uprising in Lyon was an illegitimate attack against the July Monarchy. He also argued that the uprising did not contest the political principles of the regime:

the more we believe that these disorders [in Lyon] were unconnected with politics, the more necessary it is to observe the purely social circumstances which led to the crises ... [The] government has as ardent a desire and wish as any person ... to afford assistance, as far as it is in its power, to the suffering people ... [This] is indeed the basis of the question, the social question, which has confounded itself with that of the industry of Lyons.³⁶

In a sense, the regime officially recognized the term “social question.” But this recognition was also a refusal in two senses. First, it refused to explore the connections between the “social question” and the exclusionary representative government of the July regime. Second, it refused to acknowledge the emerging problem of class conflict. Casimir Perier reduced the “question” to an overall problem of unemployment and poverty resolvable through administrative measures. Guizot was soberer in his assessment:

The July Revolution only raised political questions, only questions of government. Society was by no means menaced by those questions. What has happened since? Social questions have been raised. The troubles of Lyon have raised them. Today there are attacks against the middle classes, against property, against familial sentiments ... today we find ourselves facing the double difficulty of constructing a government and of defending a society.³⁷

Guizot’s remarks meant that the regime acknowledged that “the social” had become an ominous “question” in the sense that it forced the regime to inquire how industrialization brought tensions that challenged its formulation of “the social” and the “middle class.”³⁸ Consider Guizot’s words:

Have I assigned the limits of the middle class? Have you heard me say where it started, where it ended? I carefully abstained from it ... I simply expressed the general fact that there is a class ... which is not devoted to manual labor, which does not live on wages, which has freedom and leisure in thought, which can devote a considerable part of its time and faculties to public affairs, and ... which has enlightenment, independence.³⁹

³⁵“Events at Lyons,” *Courier*, 20 Dec. 1831.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷*Archives parlementaires*, vol. 72, 681.

³⁸As Case demonstrates, the “question” became an “instrument of thought with special potency” in the nineteenth century, as it signaled a problem or crises that compelled thinkers and statespersons to find a timely solution. Case, *The Age of Questions*, xv–xvi.

³⁹*Archives parlementaires*, vol. 110, 493.

Strikingly, despite the claim to keep the “middle class” open (which aligns with the idea of a flexible democratic social condition), Guizot explicitly drew a boundary around it. His remarks created the other of the “middle class,” namely a distinct “class” of wage laborers that cannot be included in the political sphere because their life conditions and work do not give them the capacity for political participation. Consistent with its rejection of political democracy, the July regime characterized this working class as a “social danger” that is prone to criminality and the popular violence of the 1789 Revolution.⁴⁰ For instance, the French Academy of Moral and Political Sciences in 1838 sponsored a competition for studies that offered “positive observations” on “the dangerous class” and its “vices, ignorance, and misery.”⁴¹ The prize-winning work (which Blanc discussed in *Organization of Labor*), Honoré Frégier’s *The Dangerous Classes*, gave an alarming picture of criminality in Paris, arguing that the culprits were the poor and their bad morals.⁴² The solution to this “invasion of vice,”⁴³ Frégier argued, was to promote the morals of the “middle class” through private (e.g. the mentorship of industrialists over workers) and public (e.g. libraries, shelters) initiatives.⁴⁴ This problem of “dangerous classes” swiftly became *the* “social question” in the eyes of the regime and many other “social economists.”⁴⁵ Their focus on moral vices allowed them to characterize poverty not as a product of emerging industrial capitalism but as a moral anomaly that could be remedied through paternalistic and pedagogical interventions.⁴⁶

Yet, ultimately, the July regime’s search for a new superior class (i.e. the “capable” middle class) created a paradoxical conceptual framework that supported the socialist and democratic opposition. On the one hand, because the regime rejected corporatism, it formulated its idea of the modern “social” by using terms like democracy, mobility, and individual voluntarism. On the other hand, because it wanted to differentiate the capable from the rest of society, it used idioms of collectivity (i.e. the “middle class” vis-à-vis the “poor”) that could easily be transformed into a new collectivist language in the hands of workers.⁴⁷ This meant an opportunity for new visions of collectivity, including democracy, the people, and the working class.

⁴⁰Procacci, *Gouverner la misère*, 210.

⁴¹Georges Picot, ed., *Concours de l'Académie: Sujet proposés, prix et récompenses décernés, listes des livres couronnés ou récompensés, 1834–1900* (Paris, 1901), 5.

⁴²Honoré Antoine Frégier, *Des classes dangereuses de la population dans les grandes villes, et des moyens de les rendre meilleurs*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1840).

⁴³*Ibid.*, 1: 267.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 1: 296–303, 2: 114–53.

⁴⁵While the “social economists” shared the political economists’ trust in the science of social and economic life, they were emphatic that certain paternalistic policies were necessary for correcting certain social trends such as overpopulation. Procacci, *Gouverner la misère*, Ch. 5. On the July Monarchy’s “sociologist state” see Rosanvallon, *Le moment Guizot*, 255–62.

⁴⁶As we will see later, the July regime promoted two institutions: savings banks and assistance societies. Castel, *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale*, 231–59.

⁴⁷William H. Sewell Jr, *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge, 1980); Samuel Hayat, “Working-Class Socialism in 1848 in France,” in Douglas Moggach and Gareth Stedman Jones, eds., *The 1848 Revolutions and European Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2018), 120–39.

For example, in 1840, a flood of socialist works appeared: Étienne Cabet's *The Voyage to Icaria*, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's *What Is Property?*, Pierre Leroux's *On Humanity*, and, indeed, Blanc's *Organization of Labor*. Christian socialist Philippe Buchez's worker-edited journal *L'Atelier* was also launched this year, followed a few years later by other works such as romantic socialist Victor Considerant's journal *La démocratie pacifique* (1843) and feminist socialist Flora Tristan's *The Workers' Union* (1843). While there was no cohesive definition of socialism (and, in a similar manner, of radicalism, republicanism, communism, or democracy), these works overlapped on one objective: a search for a new response to the "social question"—in the sense of both finding reforms to remedy the problems of industrial capitalism and creating a new egalitarian society.⁴⁸ In fact, puzzled by the proliferation of such works, liberal Catholic Louis de Carné wrote a review of new "democratic and communist" works, including Blanc's *Organization*.⁴⁹ Blanc later responded to Carné, blaming him for misrepresenting the "democratic party." Against Carné's argument that in the "last ten years" the "democratic party" and its "utopias" had increasingly gained popularity, Blanc wrote that the "democratic school" had not existed ten years ago and that neither the "liberals" (*Doctrinaires*) nor the "utopians" were "truly the democratic school."⁵⁰ Carné's review and Blanc's response, therefore, demonstrated that the term "democracy," thanks to the proliferation of socialist works, had become central to the debates on reforming industrial society.

Blanc's *Organization* was one of the most popular socialist works.⁵¹ Three thousand copies of the first edition sold out in two weeks. Alarmed by such popularity, the government ordered its confiscation.⁵² By 1847, its fifth edition had been published (republished again in 1848), thicker in size as Blanc revised his work and added new chapters to respond to his critics.⁵³ Blanc aspired to offer an accessible depiction of industrial capitalism's ills and a peaceful and practical solution to them. As he declared in the introduction to the fifth edition,

⁴⁸On the varieties of socialism in the July Monarchy France and their relationship with other radical currents see Maxime Leroy, *Histoire des idées sociales en France: De Babeuf à Tocqueville*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1950), Ch. 12; Pilbeam, *French Socialists before Marx*, Chs. 1–2; Loubère, *Louis Blanc*, Ch. 2; David W. Lovell, "The French Revolution and the Origins of Socialism: The Case of Early French Socialism," *French History* 6/2 (1992), 185–205; Jonathan Beecher, "Early European Socialism," in George Klosko, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy* (Oxford, 2011), 369–92.

⁴⁹Louis de Carné, "Publications démocratiques et communistes," *Revue de deux mondes* 27/5 (1841), 724–47. Carné used the term "communist" to allude to the revival of Babeuf's and his fellow self-proclaimed *démocrates'* radically egalitarian ideas—also labeled by some communist ideas. Thus democracy was sometimes equated with Babeuvian conspiracy and communism. Stedman Jones, "Introduction," 27–8; Rosanvallon, *La démocratie inachevée*, 160–62.

⁵⁰Louis Blanc, *Organisation du travail, IVe édition considérablement augmentée précédée d'un introduction, et suivie d'un compte-rendu de la maison Leclaire* (Paris: 1845), 171–3.

⁵¹Louis Blanc, *Organisation du travail* (Paris, 1840), 94. This is the first stand-alone edition. Blanc earlier published parts of *Organization* as articles in his journal *Revue de progrès* in 1839–40.

⁵²Loubère, *Louis Blanc*, 31.

⁵³Louis Blanc, *Organisation du travail, 5ème édition revue, corrigée et augmentée* (1847) (Paris, 1848). For other editions published in 1841 and 1845 see respectively Louis Blanc, *Organisation du travail: Association universelle. Ouvriers—chefs-d'ateliers—hommes de lettres* (Paris, 1841); Blanc, *Organisation du travail, IVe édition*. I will use various editions in this article and hereafter cite as OT with year of publication in parentheses.

Will the democratic party be accused of pressing toward an industrial insurrection, when it has scientifically developed the means of rescuing industry from the terrible disorder in which it has been lost? Will it arm itself against the blind repugnance of the middle class, when it has proven that the ever-increasing concentration of capital threatens them with the same yoke under which the working class is crushed?⁵⁴

There is a “peaceful solution,” Blanc claimed: “Their [the excluded poorer classes’] enfranchisement alone can open to you [the rich] the unknown realm of tranquil enjoyment, and such is the virtue of the principle of fraternity, that whatever is taken from their sufferings is necessarily added to your enjoyments.”⁵⁵ With these sentences, Blanc summarized the overall argument of the “democratic party”: the democratic reorganization of industry and government was the only way to remedy the industrial disorder that threatened all classes (even the middle class) and promote social solidarity (as expressed by the revolutionary republican principle of “fraternity”). Blanc made democracy a call for political and social reform. The “social question,” in Blanc’s *Organization*, became a democratic question—a question of establishing democratic participation in work and in the republic.

Blanc and democracy

Early expressions of Blanc’s idea of democracy are evident in his reviews of the first volume of Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835). Tocqueville’s favorable portrayal of democracy in the United States gave Blanc the opportunity to reassert that political democracy did not mean “riot” or “all the frightening dimensions of a revolution” but an “organized” exercise of popular sovereignty.⁵⁶ Blanc acknowledged that democracies could create the tyranny of masses.⁵⁷ But he added that a shorthand equation of democracy with tyrannical masses revealed a confusion: democracy can bring such tyranny only if politics is confused with administration, and if a democratic government is confused with a centralized administration.⁵⁸ Blanc emphasized Tocqueville’s twofold conceptual distinction: first, between centralization and decentralization, and second, between politics and administration. Blanc summarized: political centralization means concentrating “in the same hand the power to direct the common interests of all parts of the nation,” whereas administrative centralization means concentrating “in the same hands the power to direct the special interests of certain parts of the nation.”⁵⁹ The real danger, Blanc declared, is the latter because it “fatally” hinders “the public life.”⁶⁰

Blanc here referred to Tocqueville’s warning that there can be a tension between administration and politics. Tocqueville argued that administration concerns itself

⁵⁴ *OT* (1848), 12–13.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 20–21.

⁵⁶ Louis Blanc, “De la démocratie en Amérique,” *Revue républicaine* 5 (1835), 129–63, at 137.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 153–6.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 158.

with “proper order” and “public tranquility.”⁶¹ Tocqueville, however, was wary of administrative power—especially when it was centralized. He wrote, and Blanc quoted, “It excels at preventing, not at doing. When it is a matter of stirring a society to its depths and spurring it forward in a rapid pace, centralization’s strength deserts it. Even if the slightest cooperation is required of individuals, the vast machine turns out to be astonishingly feeble.”⁶² In other words, administrative power could undermine politics in the sense that it could relieve citizens of public affairs which, in effect, could debilitate any citizen participation or action. This is what Tocqueville argued when he wrote that the decentralization of administration in the United States created a key “*political advantage*”: it did not put a distance between citizens and their responsibility and interest to take charge of their public affairs.⁶³ Democracy created an energetic society, in which each citizen, “from the level of the town to the Union as a whole,” cared about the “public interest” as though it was “their own.”⁶⁴ Therefore Blanc suggested that when citizens exercised their political power at local and national levels, they would not relinquish power to the central government. Therefore democracy was, in fact, the remedy to a despotic centralized administration.⁶⁵

Blanc’s emphasis on democracy as a practice was important here—and as we will see later, it informed his proposals for establishing democratic participation in work. But, before that, Blanc was aware that a discussion of American democracy and democratic participation immediately evoked the French debates on political democracy and universal suffrage. Thus Blanc introduced the topic of reform in *Organization* by voicing the socialist criticisms of “parliamentary disputes.”⁶⁶ In the 1841 edition, Blanc added explicit references to the “social question,” “democratic government,” and “universal suffrage”:

What do you fear? That the audacity of certain solutions to social questions troubles the heart and hurts the success of a political reform? But, firstly, do the questions of universal suffrage, of the real sovereignty of the people, of the democratic government, frighten anybody in France? What should be done then to prove the puerility and emptiness of those fears?⁶⁷

In the same year, reflecting on the first ten years of the July Monarchy, Blanc wrote elsewhere that universal suffrage was forcefully demanded because it was seen as the only way to make the law a product of “the will of the whole people.”⁶⁸ Blanc’s emphasis was on the universalizing aspect of suffrage—the displacement of the will of the “bourgeoisie” or “wealth” in favor of the “will of the whole people.”⁶⁹

⁶¹Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York, 2004), 102.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 102–3; Blanc, “De la démocratie en Amérique,” 154.

⁶³Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 104, original emphasis.

⁶⁴Blanc, “De la démocratie en Amérique,” 154.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 153.

⁶⁶*OT* (1840), 94.

⁶⁷*OT* (1841), 72–3. Blanc moved these sentences to the introduction of the later editions of *Organization*. *OT* (1845), xvi–xvii; *OT* (1848), 12.

⁶⁸Louis Blanc, *Histoire de dix ans, 1830–1848*, vol 1. (1841) (Brussels, 1846), 198.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 197–8.

Blanc here was not alone. Several other socialist and reformist thinkers also wanted to create a collective will and realize ideals such as “fraternity.”⁷⁰ Yet there were two points of contention among the socialists. First: does this will of the people mean the will of the working class or the poor in conflict with the will of the bourgeoisie or the rich, or does this will of the people mean a harmony of the interests of all classes—the whole society? For instance, Auguste Blanqui targeted the July regime by appropriating the term “democracy” to underline class antagonism: “One hundred thousand bourgeois form what is called, by a bitter irony, the ‘democratic element’.”⁷¹ He asserted that the real “democratic elements” were the “republican” “proletarians” who “raised it [the tricolor flag of the revolution] in 1830.”⁷² Blanqui added, “We call for the thirty million French people to choose the form of their government . . . through universal suffrage.”⁷³ As is evident in Blanqui’s words, while this language of collective will or the people rendered universal suffrage a forceful demand for the inclusion of the excluded classes, it also sat uneasily with the universalist aspirations of suffrage since it still equated the collective will of the people with the excluded working class.

The second and related point of contention was this: are political democracy and universal suffrage capable of realizing “the people” (in its either possible meaning: the empowerment and inclusion of the excluded class or the harmonization of the interests of the whole society)? For instance, Considerant argued that while the “unity of the people in government” was the ultimate political goal, “neither the electoral mechanism nor universal suffrage could bring harmony out of the chaos” caused by class “war.”⁷⁴ For his part, after the 1848 Revolution, Proudhon embraced “the principle of democracy” in his proposal for the “People’s Bank” but blamed “universal suffrage” for “pretend[ing]” to create the “republic” (which he equated with “the people acting and speaking as one person”).⁷⁵ Therefore, while many socialists shared an aspiration for solidarity, some saw “the political” as secondary to “the social,” some were skeptical of political democracy’s ability to bring social change or unity, and some were hostile to political democracy as a ruse that concealed class inequality.⁷⁶

⁷⁰Lovell, “The French Revolution and the Origins of Socialism,” 196–8; Kevin Duong, “What Was Universal Suffrage?”, *Theory and Event* 23/1 (2020), 29–65, esp. 33–9.

⁷¹Louis Auguste Blanqui, “Le procès des quinze: Défense du citoyen Louis Auguste Blanqui devant la cour d’assises,” in Blanqui, *Textes choisis*, ed. V. P. Volguine (Paris, 1971), 59–69, at 60.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 65.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 64.

⁷⁴Victor Considerant, *Principes du socialisme: Manifeste de la démocratie au XIX siècle* (1843) (Paris, 1847), 72. Only after the 1848 Revolution did Considerant decisively embrace direct democracy (as we will see, to Blanc’s dismay). For Considerant’s ambivalent attitude towards democracy and suffrage see David W. Lovell, “Early French Socialism and Politics,” *History of Political Thought* 13/2 (1992), 257–79; Jonathan Beecher, *Victor Considerant and the Rise and Fall of French Romantic Socialism* (Berkeley, 2001), Ch. 8.

⁷⁵Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *La solution du problème social* (Paris, 1848), 65–6. For Proudhon’s changing attitude towards democracy see Edward Castleton, “The Many Revolutions of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon,” in Moggach and Stedman Jones, *The 1848 Revolutions and European Political Thought*, 39–69.

⁷⁶On the divisions among socialists in approaching “the political” vis-à-vis the “the social” see Gregory Claeys, *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-politics in Early British Socialism* (Cambridge, 1980), 1–14.

Blanc's thought was squarely entangled in these questions. On one general point, Blanc was unwavering: political and social democracy are inseparable.⁷⁷ Yet Blanc's justification of this argument was not as clear or convincing to his readers. One reason for this was Blanc's idea of the state. In the first edition of *Organization*, Blanc introduced the state as the new "organized power" in the new social condition: "without doubt, a renovated society would call for a new power, but is this power so independent from society that one can be changed without the other?"⁷⁸ In other words, Blanc appropriated the Doctrinaires' argument that the modern state was not a power external to society, that the state was merely the political center of the "social powers."⁷⁹ As such, the task was to give the state its true role, namely to emancipate and organize all powers in society—including the productive classes. "It would be foolish to think that it [the emancipation of the proletariat] can be achieved through partial efforts or isolated attempts. The whole strength of the state must be applied. The proletarians lack the instruments of labor to liberate themselves, and it is the government that must furnish them."⁸⁰ As the later versions of *Organization* summarized, "the state is the banker of the poor."⁸¹ For Blanc, political and social democracy were inseparable because only a democratic state could legitimately realize social reform.

Blanc explained his idea of the democratic state further in a later article: "In a real democracy, the state is not the executive power ... it is the society itself ... by the word state we understand the society acting as a body ... [for] the free development of the individual, not for the benefit of a few only, but for the benefit of all."⁸² Blanc's sentences here had a noticeably normative or aspirational tone:⁸³ in a truly democratic state, there would be no difference between the "individual," the "social," and the state because political government would not be an external agent imposing power and partial interests on society. Yet Blanc was aware that a purely aspirational argument would be inconsistent with his above-mentioned argument that the "organized power" of the state is also the best practical option to realize reform. Therefore it was important to clarify how a democratic state realizes this aspiration of "society acting as a body." Blanc's answer built on his review of Tocqueville. Revisiting his Tocquevillian argument for the separation of politics and administration, Blanc celebrated democracy for combining "two principles": "political centralization" and "administrative decentralization."⁸⁴ He reiterated that the former did *not* mean concentrating power in the hands of the state administration but creating a government that directs the "common interests."⁸⁵ When such power was combined with administrative decentralization, political power did not become a monopoly of a centralized administration. Rather, it created a

⁷⁷OT (1840), 94–5; OT (1848), 15–16.

⁷⁸OT (1840), 95.

⁷⁹Rosanvallon, *Le moment Guizot*, 39–41.

⁸⁰OT (1840), 96.

⁸¹OT (1845), xix; OT (1848), 14.

⁸²Louis Blanc, "De L'État et de la commune," in Blanc, *Questions d'aujourd'hui et de demain*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1873), 257–318, at 278–9.

⁸³Sawyer, "Louis Blanc's Theory of Democratic State," 154.

⁸⁴Blanc, "De L'État et de la commune," 285.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*

robust political sphere in which both participatory citizenry and common interests flourished. Democracies therefore enabled the “exercise of popular sovereignty.”⁸⁶

Thus Blanc maintained that democratic participation, including universal suffrage, was a practical school for creating “the people.” In so doing, Blanc challenged the Doctrinaires’ exclusionary idea of “capacity.” If political democracy and participation were central to people’s capacity to orient themselves to their common interests, then the exclusion of the poor or the working class could not be justified through the argument that they lacked “capacity.” In fact, it was the opposite: they lacked “capacity” because they were deprived of their exercise of political participation. This is why Blanc argued that political democracy and universal suffrage were indispensable: they allowed people to *really* exercise their capacity for self-government. Elsewhere, Blanc specified this point by advocating for the imperative mandate. In response to Considerant’s proposals for a localized direct democracy, Blanc argued that such a plan would not realize the “direct government of the people by the people” because it would mean the fragmentation of the people’s will, thereby creating the “direct government of one party over others.”⁸⁷ Instead, Blanc turned to Montesquieu’s depiction of democracy: “a people having sovereign power should do all for itself all it can do well, and what it cannot do well, it must do through its ministers.”⁸⁸ While this may sound like celebration of the rule of the capable, Blanc’s emphasis was on the opposite: the “people’s capacity to perceive merit.”⁸⁹ As Montesquieu wrote, people “learn better in a public square than a monarch does in a palace” and an integral part of this political education is the capacity to unite voices behind an enlightened will.⁹⁰ Hence Blanc’s demand for the imperative mandate: a popularly elected government consisting of mandates would ensure the real exercise of people’s capacity in this extended meaning—perceiving, exercising, delegating, and supervising merit. Overall, Blanc maintained that only a political democracy ensured the rule of the enlightened common interests.

However, one question still lingers: can there be common interests in a society divided by class inequalities? Or, to repeat the earlier point of contention, is this democratic will the will of the excluded classes or is it the will of the whole society? To address these questions, Blanc needed to show how class divisions can be overcome. This required a study of how industrial capitalism leads to social conflict and disintegration, and how the “social question” concerns the whole of society.

Blanc and “the social”: “tyranny of circumstances”

Since its first edition, Blanc’s *Organization* had rebuked the Doctrinaires’ idea of the “democratic” social condition. “In modern societies,” Blanc began the first two editions, the “public order rests on two men: one parades, the other cuts off heads. The hierarchy of the old school of politics starts with the king and ends

⁸⁶Ibid., 288.

⁸⁷Blanc, “Du gouvernement du peuple par lui-même,” in *Questions d’aujourd’hui et de demain*, 45–143, at 72.

⁸⁸Ibid., 67.

⁸⁹Ibid., 70.

⁹⁰Ibid., 66, 71.

with the executioner.”⁹¹ Blanc’s rhetoric was striking but not original. Blanc opened his *Organization* with the claim that modern societies are as hierarchical and oppressive as the *Ancien Régime*. As he acknowledged, Blanc drew on the discourse of Fourier and Considerant. “Fourier, who through his vigorous attacks on the present social order, and after him, his disciple, Victor Considerant, have laid bare with an irresistible logic the great wound of society that we call commerce.”⁹² Blanc implicitly voiced Fourier’s argument that modern commerce did not replace the conflicts of the old order (e.g. poverty, slavery, conquest), but added new conflicts such as the one between the merchant and the producer.⁹³ Moreover, Blanc borrowed Considerant’s argument that mercantilism was the “great wound” of modern society because it promoted self-interestedness and poverty.⁹⁴ Like Fourier and Considerant, Blanc did not reject the historical progress from the old to the new social order. Rather, the point was that the progress was not yet complete. In other words, a new revolution was necessary to finish what the 1789 Revolution had started: the complete abolition of the old order by extending the revolution into social relations.

In *Organization*, Blanc characterized the 1789 Revolution as a “bourgeois” revolution: “1830 belongs to the chain of which 1789 was the first link. 1789 had commenced the dominion of the bourgeoisie; 1830 continued it.”⁹⁵ The 1789 Revolution ended up as a bourgeois revolution because the rights it declared were only formal. “Considered in an abstract manner,” rights are a “mirage,” a “metaphysical and lifeless protection.”⁹⁶ The abstractness of rights, Blanc’s argument ran, “masks all the injustice of a system of individualism, and all the barbarity of abandoning the poor.”⁹⁷ Thus formal rights are not only imperfect but also a device for the disenfranchisement of the poor and the working class. “Let us say once, and for all: liberty consists, not only in the rights accorded, but in the power given to men to exercise and develop their faculties.”⁹⁸ Blanc effectively argued that liberty and power are the same; that there is no liberty if there is no power to exercise it. This also shed light on why the 1789 Revolution failed to completely overthrow the *Ancien Régime*. While it abolished legal and political privileges of nobility and proclaimed the equality of rights, it left society in one sense disorderly, and in another sense hierarchical and aristocratic. The new society was disorderly because the Revolution abolished labor corporations without reintroducing a new form of organization. And this new society was hierarchical and aristocratic because it left workers in a condition of perpetual inferiority and dependency. Blanc wrote, “In the present social regime, we have the inequality of means of development instead of muscular force; the contest of capital with capital instead of body with body; the abuse of conventional advantages instead of physical

⁹¹OT (1840), 7; OT (1841), 3.

⁹²OT (1840), 124.

⁹³Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World* (Berkeley, 1986), 199–201.

⁹⁴Victor Considerant, *Destinée sociale*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1838), 91.

⁹⁵OT (1840), 96–9; OT (1848), 9–10.

⁹⁶OT (1848), 20.

⁹⁷Ibid., 19.

⁹⁸Ibid.

superiority; the ignorant instead of the weak; the poor instead of the powerless.”⁹⁹ A social condition that did not allow the majority of the population to develop and exercise their capacities could not be called a democratic social condition.

Using Academy-sponsored works (including Frégier’s *Dangerous Classes*), Blanc documented this inegalitarian condition of disorder and dependency: the low levels of wages (particularly lower for women workers), unsanitary living conditions, commonness of industrial child labor, and serious levels of poverty that engendered criminality.¹⁰⁰ Yet, contra these works, Blanc did not blame the so-called “dangerous” poor and their moral vices. He located a different cause: “competition produces poverty; this is a fact proven by figures.”¹⁰¹ “Competition” produced not only “horribly prolific misery” but also class antagonism and social disorder.¹⁰² Thus competition was the proof of the “regime of individualism”—an atomized and antagonistic society that was on the brink of ruin.¹⁰³ Blanc here forwarded a version of an argument that was commonplace among French socialists. For instance, Considerant warned that competition drove “European societies” toward an industrial “jacquerie.”¹⁰⁴ Leroux also lamented the “immense anarchy” created by competition and “individualism” in commercial societies.¹⁰⁵ However, a noteworthy characteristic of Blanc’s *Organization* was its appropriation and subversion of the language of political and social economy. As William Roberts observes, “one of the most important divisions” among the European socialists at the time was “the division between those who sought some accommodation or confrontation with political economy and those who refused outright to engage with the new science.”¹⁰⁶ Blanc was in the former camp. Appropriating the language of political and social economy, Blanc aimed to show that the logical end of this language was, in fact, the democratic organization of labor.

Since the first edition of *Organization*, Blanc targeted one common assumption of political economy—that competition would bring “cheapness.” For Blanc, this assumption failed to see the self-destructive tendency of competition. “*Cheapness*—this is the big word which, according to the economists of the school of Smith and Say, contains all the advantages of unlimited competition. But why stubbornly refuse to face the result of *cheapness*, except as it affects the momentary benefit of the consumer?”¹⁰⁷ The supposed benefits of cheapness to workers-as-consumers arose only when competition subjected workers-as-producers to poverty.

⁹⁹OT (1845), xxi; OT (1848), 17.

¹⁰⁰OT (1845), 23–54; OT (1848), 40–73.

¹⁰¹OT (1840), 57; OT (1848), 74.

¹⁰²OT (1840), 57; OT (1848), 75.

¹⁰³OT (1848), 19.

¹⁰⁴Considerant, *Principes du socialisme*, 14.

¹⁰⁵Pierre Leroux, *Revue sociale ou solution pacifique du problème du prolétariat* (Paris, 1846), 92–9.

¹⁰⁶William C. Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital* (Princeton, 2017), 47. While I agree with Roberts that the “vast majority” of French socialists did not engage with political economy, I suggest that Blanc was an exception. In fact, as I will show, Blanc’s critical appropriation of the language of political economy created ambiguities in his characterization of class power and antagonism. This is certainly not to say that only Blanc criticized political economy. For instance, Leroux refuted political economy as the science of individualism but through a language of religion and morality instead of political economy. Leroux, *Revue sociale*, 73–9.

¹⁰⁷OT (1840), 58–9; OT (1848) 76–7.

“*Cheapness* is the mace with which the wealthier crush the poorer producers.”¹⁰⁸ Competition was also harmful to the small industrialists and the middle class because it led to the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few powerful industrialists. “*Cheapness* is the executer of the grand schemes of monopoly. It is the funeral of the moderate industry, commerce, and property; it is, in a word, the annihilation of the middle class for the benefit of a few oligarchic industrialists.”¹⁰⁹ “It is maintained as long as there is a struggle: as soon as the wealthier has eliminated all the rivals, the prices rise.”¹¹⁰ Cheapness revealed that the end point of competition was not the permanent reduction of prices, or the perfection of competition, or general prosperity, but monopoly and competition’s self-destruction.

Blanc also challenged the Malthusian premises of the July regime’s “social economy”: the problem of poverty was separate from the progress of industry and could be resolved by controlling population growth among the poorer classes.¹¹¹ Blanc criticized the Malthusian “overpopulation” argument, first, by denouncing its inherently paternalistic outlook. He wrote, “does population have any bound which it is not permitted to exceed? Are we allowed to say to production, which is abandoned to the caprices of individual selfishness, to this industry, which is an ocean full of shipwrecks: ‘Thus far you shall go but no further?’”¹¹² More importantly, even if population growth was halted, competition would still diminish wages or lead to unemployment. “Who is blind enough not to see that under the empire of unlimited competition, the continuous decline of wages necessarily becomes a general and by no means exceptional fact?”¹¹³ The diminution of wages was therefore not an anomaly in industrial competition solvable through Malthusian measures to control population growth. The deprivation of workers was built into industrial competition and progress. For instance, technological progress forced workers to compete against machinery and against each other. “The thousand workers that the new machine displaces, will come knocking at the door of the neighbor factory, reducing the wages of their fellow workers.”¹¹⁴ Overall, Blanc declared, “a systematic diminution of wages, resulting in the elimination of a certain number of workers, is the inevitable effect of unlimited competition. It is nothing but an industrial process by means of which the workers are compelled to exterminate each other.”¹¹⁵

At this point, Blanc’s critical appropriation of political economy took a peculiar turn. He contended that the system of competition, in fact, undermined the power of all classes—including the so-called capable “middle class.” He wrote, “As paradoxical as this may sound, both the oppressor and the oppressed are equal gainers by the destruction of oppression and equal losers by its maintenance. Do you want a striking proof? The middle class established its dominion by unlimited competition; the principle of tyranny. Very well, it is by the unlimited competition that we

¹⁰⁸OT (1848), 77.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

¹¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹¹Procacci, *Gouverner la misère*, 161–3.

¹¹²OT (1841), 12–13; OT (1848), 31.

¹¹³OT (1841), 12; OT (1848), 31.

¹¹⁴OT (1841), 13; OT (1848), 32.

¹¹⁵OT (1841), 13; OT (1848), 32.

see today the middle class perishing.”¹¹⁶ Here, Blanc did not simply repeat his above-mentioned argument that competition leads to monopoly and oligarchy. He contended that competition was destructive for all classes and for the whole of society. He bolstered this point in the later editions of *Organization*. Blanc argued that “competition”

makes the poor the victim of the rich, puts the cunning speculator against the naive worker, the client of the simple banker against the slave of the usurer ... And, this disorderly, permanent clash between power and helplessness, this anarchy in oppression, this invisible tyranny of circumstances surpasses in hardship the palpable tyrannies with a human face ... This is what they call liberty!¹¹⁷

There is one key argumentative maneuver here. By characterizing competition as the “tyranny of circumstances,” Blanc maintained that the problems of poverty and class domination cannot be explained through a focus on morals and classes. Such problems were, instead, a product of the system of competition—a novel and impersonal form of oppression that was different from, as he wrote above, the “palpable tyrannies with a human face.” In fact, Blanc made this argument repeatedly: “I know an inexorable tyranny, far more difficult to elude or shake than that of a Nero or a Tiberius; it is the tyranny of circumstances.”¹¹⁸ It was harder to locate and combat this novel tyranny because it was “invisible” in the sense that it did not belong to persons or classes.¹¹⁹ The “circumstances” figured as the tyrannical agent. Therefore, in this “tyranny of circumstances,” the poor became “the slaves of hunger, the slaves of cold, the slaves of ignorance, and the slaves of chance.”¹²⁰ In a similar vein, workers were “reduced to dependence not on [their] prudence or foresight but on the disorders that competition naturally creates: a distant bankruptcy, a ceased order, an invented machine, a closed workshop, an industrial panic, unemployment!”¹²¹ As such, even a prudent worker and the so-called capable “middle class” were subject to the unpredictable and destructive consequences of the system of industrial competition. “Tyranny is not only odious, it is blind ... All interests are one, and social reform is a means of salvation for all the members of society, without exception.”¹²²

Evident in Blanc’s “tyranny of circumstances” was his critical appropriation of the language of political economy. This appropriation allowed him to demonstrate the systemic nature of domination and impoverishment and to refute the moralistic

¹¹⁶*OT* (1840), 12–13; *OT* (1848), 26.

¹¹⁷*OT* (1845), xxii; *OT* (1848), 17.

¹¹⁸*OT* (1848), 48.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 17.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 19. For discussions of how freedom (as non-domination) was formulated in opposition to “slavery” in ancient and modern republicanism of various strands see Quentin Skinner, *From Humanism to Hobbes: Studies in Rhetoric and Politics* (Cambridge, 2018), Ch. 7; Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2015); de Dijn, *Freedom*, 86–110, 155–68, 184–9. As Blanc’s sentences demonstrate, socialists also appropriated this rhetoric of slavery. Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*, 63–70, 116–25.

¹²¹*OT* (1848), 18.

¹²²*Ibid.*, 27.

approaches to the “social question.” However, it also created an ambiguity in his characterization of class power and antagonism. Blanc sometimes used a language focused on classes. For example, as we saw, he wrote that the “the middle class established its dominion by unlimited competition; the principle of tyranny.”¹²³ When discussing “cheapness,” Blanc highlighted the domination of “oligarchic industrialists.”¹²⁴ He also at times characterized competition as a product of bourgeois “individualism.”¹²⁵ In fact, this oscillation between a focus on system and classes was a point that Blanc’s contemporaries targeted. For instance, questioning Blanc’s characterization of competition as “individualism,” Considerant’s *La Phalange* commented that the real cause of “industrial anarchy” was not competition but industrial “fragmentation.”¹²⁶ The same review also criticized Blanc for understating the clash of interests between the capitalists and the workers.¹²⁷

Arguably, Blanc did not clearly explain the relationship between systemic domination (the “tyranny of circumstances”) and class power (of the “middle class” or “oligarchic industrialists”). Yet he had a clear general argument: industrial capitalism bears internal contradictions that would eventually lead to its destructive demise. For instance, Blanc asserted that political economists never questioned the fact that competition requires ever-increasing production and consumption. In fact, for political economists, this idea of ever-increasing production and consumption was celebrated as one of the basic ways of keeping capital and labor in balance. Blanc sardonically summarized: “The worker must never lack work; the master, on the other hand, should always find a ready market for his productions and the means to pay work accordingly. Isn’t the problem solved?”¹²⁸ In other words, when there is an increase in the supply of labor, industrialists would increase production to alleviate unemployment. In turn, employed workers would be encouraged to consume, creating profits that would fund further investment in production. The result: workers would always have work and wages; industrialists would always have profits. For political economists, when left to itself, the market could achieve this equilibrium of ever-increasing production and consumption. To criticize this outlook, Blanc sarcastically wrote, “Let us open the gates of infinity to human activity and let nothing hinder its expansion. Let us proclaim the laissez-faire principle boldly and openly.”¹²⁹ For Blanc, this outlook further evidenced the self-destructive tendency of industrial capitalism because such a goal of incessant expansion in production and consumption required competition in another area: colonial expansion.¹³⁰ Imitating “the English,” Blanc declared, “The number of raw materials offered by our agriculture is too circumscribed. Very well! We will seek at the extreme ends of the earth materials for our manufactures. All nations shall become consumers of the produce of England.”¹³¹ In addition to

¹²³Ibid., 26.

¹²⁴Ibid., 77.

¹²⁵Ibid., 61.

¹²⁶Ibid., 172–3.

¹²⁷Ibid., 167.

¹²⁸Ibid., 85.

¹²⁹Ibid., 86.

¹³⁰Ibid., 86–9.

¹³¹Ibid., 86.

causing war,¹³² colonial expansion was a recipe for further impoverishment both at home and in the colonies because, in this expansionist economy, what was increasingly produced was not the “means of subsistence” but commodities such as “cotton” and “silk.”¹³³ “This political economy carried in itself a fatal vice to England and to the world. It posed, as a principle, that all that was required was to find customers. It should have added: consumers who can pay.”¹³⁴ The impoverishment of workers-as-producers through competition was the real issue because competition “poisoned” the “fountain of all wealth—labor.”¹³⁵ The proof was nothing other than “the pauperism of whole masses of workers” in England and the “general impoverishment” of its colonies.¹³⁶

Ultimately, Blanc argued that the system of competition is harmful to all classes, and, as colonialism demonstrates, to all societies. This point also turned the Doctrinaires against themselves because competition, with its unpredictable and destructive consequences, undermined any class’s control and capacity. Against such a system of domination and disorder (as expressed by Blanc through phrases like the “tyranny of circumstances” and “industrial anarchy”), Blanc emphasized organizational restructuring rather than class power or antagonism. In so doing, he formulated the main question of social reform: how can industrial production be reorganized so that people can take control over their social conditions? Blanc answered: democratically associated labor that promotes “fraternal” production.

Blanc and organization: “social workshops”

Blanc’s *Organization* proposed three successive stages for a democratic reorganization of labor: first, the gradual replacement of privately owned industries with what Blanc called “social workshops”; second, the mobilization of industrial competition toward a state-level industrial cooperation; and finally, the establishment of workers’ democratic control in the “social workshops.”¹³⁷ In the end, Blanc suggested, these measures would transform the “industrial world” from a world of competition to a world that is “at the service of all.”¹³⁸

The state would play a key role in the first two steps. First, it would give financial support to the “social workshops” through public loans to ensure that they are not eliminated by big privately owned industries in their founding stage.¹³⁹ The social workshops would also admit “all workers who give guarantees of good conduct.”¹⁴⁰ In the second step, once the “social workshops” became productive and outcompeted their private counterparts, the state would regulate the incorporation of the defeated private industries into the “social workshops.” This regulation would not mean that the state would expropriate private industries. The state instead

¹³²Ibid., 97.

¹³³Ibid., 88.

¹³⁴Ibid., 89.

¹³⁵Ibid.

¹³⁶Ibid., 89–90.

¹³⁷Ibid., 15, 102–8.

¹³⁸Ibid., 112.

¹³⁹Ibid., 103.

¹⁴⁰Ibid.

would let the system of competition gradually eliminate private industries. Blanc wrote, “instead of being like the great capitalist, at present the master and tyrant of the market, the government would be its regulator. It would use competition as a weapon, not for violently destroying private industry, which would above all be its own interest to avoid, but for gradually guiding it to a composition.”¹⁴¹ This meant steering industrial competition toward industrial “association.”¹⁴²

Before moving to the third stage (which concerns the democratic internal organization of the “social workshops”), we must note Blanc’s choice of the term “association.” “Association” was one of the most important and polyvalent terms in post-Revolutionary France because it expressed a wide array of visions (religious, pedagogical, economic, utopian, humanitarian) for creating modern social bonds.¹⁴³ In a nutshell, it was the term to replace the old word *corps*. During the 1789 Revolution, the abolishment of corporate bodies was seen as the first indispensable step toward emancipating individuals from the rigid and hierarchical structure of the *Ancien Régime*. However, atomism also needed to be thwarted. Association therefore became a key concept for envisioning new social bonds in post-Revolutionary France—bonds that are voluntary and egalitarian as opposed to the *Ancien Régime*’s hierarchical corporate bodies.¹⁴⁴

Just like the term itself, Blanc’s use of “association” was not straightforward. In one sense, Blanc used the term as the opposite of competition and “individualism” akin to other above-mentioned socialists like Considerant and Leroux. In this sense, “association” meant the “defeat of competition.”¹⁴⁵ “From the solidarity of all the workers in the same workshop we infer the solidarity of all workshops in the same industry. To complete the system, we must establish the solidarity of various industries.”¹⁴⁶ Such solidaristic association among industries would end not only the “tyranny of individual egotism” but also the “extraordinary and unforeseeable” circumstances that competition created, such as worldwide industrial “crises.”¹⁴⁷ In fact, Blanc aspired that such an association should become universal: “we substitute a system of alliance founded on the needs of industry and the reciprocal conveniences of workers in all parts of the world.”¹⁴⁸ Blanc did not dwell much on this universal association—except for an admission that such an aspiration was harder to realize in the present global “industrial anarchy.”¹⁴⁹ Yet he insisted that a state-level association of industry would be the most practical path for social reform.

¹⁴¹Ibid., 106.

¹⁴²Ibid., 107.

¹⁴³Pilbeam, *French Socialists before Marx*, Chs. 7–10; Michael C. Behrent, “The Mystical Body of Society: Religion and Society in Nineteenth-Century French Political Thought,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69/2 (2008), 219–43; Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France*, 201–11; Loubère, *Louis Blanc*, 18–19; Samuel Hayat, *Quand la république était révolutionnaire: Citoyenneté et représentation en 1848* (Paris, 2014), 51–6; Michèle Riot-Sarcey, *Le procès de la liberté: Une histoire souterraine du XIXe siècle en France* (Paris, 2016), 41–56; Naomi J. Andrews, “The Romantic Socialist Origins of Humanitarianism,” *Modern Intellectual History* 17/3 (2020), 737–68.

¹⁴⁴Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France*, 201–2; Duong, *Virtues of Violence*, 35–7.

¹⁴⁵OT (1840), 115.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., 119.

¹⁴⁷Ibid., 119–20.

¹⁴⁸Ibid., 120.

¹⁴⁹Ibid.

This is where he expressly differentiated himself from Owen, Saint-Simon, and Fourier in the first edition of *Organization*. While acknowledging their importance in popularizing reformist “social studies,” Blanc contended that each thinker failed to offer practical means of social reform: Owen’s theory of distribution based itself on needs instead of labor, Saint-Simonians focused on family and inheritance instead of labor, and Fourier left his theory of organization at the mercy of “individual caprices” because he lacked a fully fledged idea of “power.”¹⁵⁰ In the later editions, Blanc dropped such explicit polemics and resorted to implicit criticisms. For instance, he repeated his criticism of Fourierists, arguing that their schema would fail because they relied on efforts of “isolated” communities instead of the power of the state.¹⁵¹

Blanc’s readers were quick to target this idea of the state. Republican Alphonse de Lamartine blamed Blanc for making the state a monopolist in property and industry at the expense of individual liberties;¹⁵² political economist Michel Chevalier blamed Blanc’s state for imposing “absolute equality” on society and crippling industry;¹⁵³ Fourierist journal *La Phalange* contended that Blanc’s idea of the state is not different than the Saint-Simonian idea of a technocratic state.¹⁵⁴ Carné claimed that Blanc’s idea of the state evidenced how the idea of the free market was under attack.¹⁵⁵ As a response to these criticisms, Blanc inserted a hundred-page-long section in the fifth (1847) edition of the *Organization*.¹⁵⁶ But, first, Blanc in the 1845 edition gave a response to Lamartine that sounded more like a general clarification: those who characterize Blanc’s idea of the state as despotic fail to see that Blanc always means a “democratically constituted” state.¹⁵⁷ To further clarify his democratic proposals, Blanc refuted the criticisms that his idea of the state is a Saint-Simonian state—a monopolist, hierarchical, and *dirigiste* state.¹⁵⁸ “In the Saint-Simonian doctrine,” he contended, “the intervention of the state in industry is permanent. In our project, it is only primordial.”¹⁵⁹ Given the “tyranny of circumstances” and industrial competition, the organized force of the state was practically necessary to establish “social workshops,” to “furnish” workers with “the instruments of labor.”¹⁶⁰ Blanc wrote, “After the first year ... the workers having had the time to appreciate one another, all being equally interested ... in the success of the association, the hierarchy [of the “social workshops”] would proceed on the elective principle.”¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁰Ibid., 105–6.

¹⁵¹*OT* (1848), 14.

¹⁵²*OT* (1845), xix.

¹⁵³Michel Chevalier, “Organisation du travail par M. Louis Blanc,” *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, 21 Aug. 1844, n.p.

¹⁵⁴“Étude critique sur l’organisation du travail” (23 Sept. 1840), in *La Phalange: Journal de la science sociale: Politique, industrie, sciences, art et littérature*, 3rd series (Sept.–Dec. 1840), vol. 1 (Paris, 1840), 190–200.

¹⁵⁵Carné, “Publications démocratiques et communistes,” 741.

¹⁵⁶*OT* (1848), 119–219.

¹⁵⁷*OT* (1845), xix.

¹⁵⁸*OT* (1848), 119–67.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 165.

¹⁶⁰Ibid., 14.

¹⁶¹Ibid., 103.

This brings us to a more specific meaning of “association” in *Organization*: the democratic organization of industrial labor. In other words, “association” specified the third stage of Blanc’s plan for social reform: the establishment of workers’ democratic control in the “social workshops.” Once the “social workshops” were secure thanks to the sponsorship of the state, their administrations would be handed over to the associates. Blanc repeated that the state’s role was to protect the autonomy of workshops, not to control them. The administration of workshops was entirely left to workers themselves: “the associated workers will choose freely ... [their] administrators and chiefs; they will divide the profits among themselves; they will form plans for the extension of their operations—what opens a path to arbitrary power or tyranny in this system?”¹⁶² Blanc once again drew a distinction between administration and politics. When citizens could equally and freely express their will, the state was nothing other than the *political* association of citizens. The “social workshops” therefore would not bring state administration into industry. To the contrary, it would extend political association into industry by establishing democratic participation in industry.

Consistent with his celebration of political democracy and participation, Blanc’s plan for solving the “social question” relied on the collective agency of the people. Blanc extended democratic participation, suffrage, and the imperative mandate to the “social workshops.” This was not solely a procedural proposition. This was also a way to blend work and collective will formation. Recall that Blanc’s demand for universal suffrage was based on the argument that it would mend social ties because, as a practice of self-government, it oriented all citizens toward common good. In Blanc’s eyes, democracy in the “social workshops” was essential for the same reason. As democratic institutions, the “social workshops” could become the practical schools of associative industry and self-government. Building on his definition of liberty as power, Blanc argued that the exercise of democratic participation in industry would be the way to abolish the “tyranny” of systematized competition and its accompanying destructive morals such as individualism. “Industrial reform,” in Blanc’s words, “will be, in fact, a profound moral revolution.”¹⁶³ Blanc’s equation of “industrial reform” and “moral revolution” did not mean a moralist argument for pedagogical or paternalistic reform. It meant revaluing work, restoring work’s moral and material purpose.

Note, for instance, Blanc’s criticisms against the “savings banks”—one of the institutions, along with assistance societies, that the July regime promoted. The *Doctrinaires*’ celebration of “capacity” was visible in these two social institutions. Savings banks aimed to create security funds for the poorer classes as well as to teach them good morals such as economic prudence. Assistance societies aimed to create relations of tutelage between the rich and the poor. In between the state and individuals, they constituted secondary bodies that not only alleviated hostility or atomism but also served as a model for social bonds.¹⁶⁴ To further emphasize the moral aims of these institutions, and to ensure that they did not license any legal-social right (e.g. a right to assistance from the state), the July regime identified them

¹⁶²Ibid., 15.

¹⁶³Ibid., 115.

¹⁶⁴Castel, *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale*, 238–49.

as voluntary and philanthropic institutions.¹⁶⁵ Therefore saving banks and assistance societies were based on the principle of philanthropy, and they functioned strictly as mechanisms for the integration of paupers into moral society.

For Blanc, savings banks were at best “delusional” and at worst iniquitous.¹⁶⁶ “The worker is advised to save for the future ... For what? To arrive at the possession of petty capital, reserved as a prey for competition.”¹⁶⁷ More dangerously, paternalistic institutions like savings banks stripped work of its real value and purpose. Targeting Guizot’s remark that “work is a moral restraint” against dangerous pauperism, Blanc asserted, “For the work to be a moral restraint, it first needs to be available for those it is supposed to contain.”¹⁶⁸ Since, “in the current regime,” competition systematically deprived people of work, Guizot’s remarks were “absurd.”¹⁶⁹ Blanc commented sardonically that when the Lyonnais workers adopted the slogan “Live Working or Die Fighting,” “they probably lacked Guizot’s moral restraint!”¹⁷⁰ Only once work was emancipated from the purpose it was condemned to in industrial capitalism (i.e. a “forced” competition for “subsistence”¹⁷¹) could it have a moral value and become an activity that “universalize [s] wealth and “elevate[s] ... the standard of humanity.”¹⁷² Savings banks failed to have any educative effects on society because they neither transformed work nor abolished “individualism” and the antagonism of interests.¹⁷³ The “social workshops,” on the other hand, would overcome “individualism” and the antagonism of interests because they would promote an interest in making prosperity a common good. Blanc’s response to *La Phalange* was especially telling here. The journal questioned Blanc’s plan for admitting capitalists to “social workshops,” arguing that capital and labor were at odds with each other.¹⁷⁴ Blanc responded that labor and capital were two integral elements for production, and that their antagonism was, in fact, abnormal. A “general association,” Blanc asserted, would overcome such antagonism and “renovat[e]” industry so that it can “embrace the whole society.”¹⁷⁵ Blanc once again expressed his belief in the educative role of democratic participation. When exercising work and self-government simultaneously, workers could seek and articulate their common interests without competing against each other. Blanc’s implicit point was that everybody, even the capitalists, would become associates in industry as they learn the virtues of solidarity over destructive competition.¹⁷⁶ This is another reason why *Organization* lacked phrases such as “class antagonism.” Crucially, this union of democratic participation and work would give work its true purpose. Industry would become an activity “animated by the

¹⁶⁵Ibid., 250–53; Procacci, *Gouverner la misère*, 228–9.

¹⁶⁶*OT* (1848), 58–9.

¹⁶⁷Ibid.

¹⁶⁸Ibid., 181–2.

¹⁶⁹Ibid., 182.

¹⁷⁰Ibid.

¹⁷¹Ibid., 181–2.

¹⁷²Ibid., 21.

¹⁷³Ibid., 59.

¹⁷⁴“Étude critique sur l’organisation du travail,” 198; *OT* (1848), 167.

¹⁷⁵*OT* (1848), 171.

¹⁷⁶Spitz, “Louis Blanc,” 45.

same spirit” and by “common hopes and a common interest.”¹⁷⁷ This associational work would be instructive of the “principle of fraternity.”¹⁷⁸

As his turn to “fraternity” evidenced, Blanc invested a great deal of trust in the republican tradition and its unificatory power. This is not surprising given Blanc’s own intellectual trajectory: he started his career as a journalist in a republican journal and published his above-mentioned review of Tocqueville in a republican journal. In a sense, Blanc himself was part of the increasing interaction between republican and socialist movements and the increasing effort of both movements to recruit workers during the July Monarchy.¹⁷⁹ For Blanc, republican principles like “fraternity” could incorporate socialist reorganization of labor into a legible political tradition and program.¹⁸⁰ He summarized his vision: “*Moral and material amelioration of the lots of all by the free consent of all, and their fraternal association!*—which brings us back to the heroic device of our fathers, fifty years ago, on the flag of the revolution: ‘Liberty, equality, fraternity.’”¹⁸¹ Blanc saw political and social reform (“moral and material amelioration”) as a progressive step in the history of republicanism (“liberty, equality, fraternity”), and called for a solidaristic and democratic action (“by the free consent of all, and their fraternal association”).

The “social workshops,” overall, expressed an argument: the “social question” could not be answered by administrative measures but through the democratic activity of citizens themselves. Blanc made the democratic capacity of people the basis of social solidarity and prosperity. In so doing, Blanc inverted the July regime’s approach to the “social question.” He maintained that workers were not disenfranchised because they lacked morality and capacity. They lacked capacity because they were disenfranchised. By the same token, workers were not disenfranchised because they were poor, but they were poor because they were disenfranchised. The “tyrannical” competition deprived them of their capacity to ameliorate their own conditions and the whole society. The solution to the “social question,” then, was not voluntary tutelage in philanthropic societies. Nor was it the tutelage of the state administration in industry. The solution was establishing democratic egalitarianism and participation in political and social relations. Democracy enabled individuals to develop their capacities because only through the practical experience of democratic participation could individuals gain an ethos of solidarity and the notion of common good. The erasure of the distinction between work and democratic participation would not only bring social solidarity but also new meaning and purpose to the activity of work. Only once democracy was realized in political relations (i.e.

¹⁷⁷OT (1848), 114–15.

¹⁷⁸Ibid., 117.

¹⁷⁹Alain Faure, “Mouvements populaires et mouvement ouvrier à Paris (1830–1834),” *Le mouvement social* 88 (1974), 71–85; Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France*, 205–9; Hayat, *Quand la république était révolutionnaire*, 52–3.

¹⁸⁰To what extent Blanc was right to trust the republican tradition’s power to give a language and vision to a unified working class and society-wide support for reform is debatable. For different perspectives on the existence and degree of republican militancy and class consciousness among the workers during the July Monarchy see Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France*, Ch. 9; and Lynn Hunt and George Sheridan, “Corporatism, Association, and the Language of Labor in France, 1750–1850,” *Journal of Modern History* 58/ 4 (1986), 813–44.

¹⁸¹OT (1848), 8, original emphasis.

universal suffrage and imperative mandate) and social relations (i.e. the “social workshops”) could a “democratic and social republic” be established.

Conclusion: the citizen worker

In February 1848, the reformist banquets turned into barricades, overthrowing the July Monarchy. The provisional government declared universal male suffrage and freedom of association. While the vision that these democratic principles would create a common will was yet to be tested, the Parisian working class could successfully pressure the new republic to establish the Luxembourg Commission. The commission succeeded in setting limits on work hours, banning the practice of subcontracting, and guaranteeing access to work in “national workshops.”¹⁸²

However, the daily influence of the Parisian working class started to raise questions among moderate and conservative republicans about the desirable extent of popular participation. One deputy voiced, “this revolution [of February 1848] made by the people and for the people, must turn, for the benefit not of a part of the people, but of the totality of the people ... The people is not this so interesting working class ... The people is the generality of citizens whose rights your Constitution must guarantee.”¹⁸³ Hence the universality of citizens could become a way to negate the specific demands of the working class for democratic and social reform, including self-government in industry. By asserting that the universality of citizens could only be represented in the national assembly, conservative republicans established a twofold opposition between the working class and the people and between representation and participation.¹⁸⁴ This picture of universal male suffrage opposed Blanc’s idea of suffrage and mandate. Instead of using suffrage as a part of extending democratic participation and supervision, it was used as a step for limiting them. With the new republic, democracy and the “social question” found themselves on difficult terrain: between the universality of citizenship and the particularity of the working class.

Blanc was optimistically silent on this difficulty in *Organization*. But he had to face it as the supervisor of the Luxembourg Commission.¹⁸⁵ He tasked himself with making the commission a practical school of democracy for workers—a place where workers could first unite themselves as the delegates of the people and mobilize their democratic experience and activity toward solving the “social question.” This education involved experimenting with new democratic procedures. Each trade held elections to choose their delegates. There were also experiments with the mandate system and lottery for appointing delegates to internal tasks.¹⁸⁶ While these democratic procedures and practices were important steps, the weight of the corporatist tradition still needed to be abolished. Blanc was particularly

¹⁸²Blanc, *1848*, Chs. 8–9.

¹⁸³*Compte-rendu des séances de l'Assemblée nationale*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1850), 813.

¹⁸⁴Samuel Hayat, “The Revolution of 1848 in the History of French Republicanism,” *History of Political Thought* 36/2 (2015), 331–53.

¹⁸⁵On Blanc and the Luxembourg Commission see Loubère, *Louis Blanc*, 79–97; Pilbeam, *French Socialists before Marx*, 157–62; Hayat, *Quand la république était révolutionnaire*, 141–55.

¹⁸⁶Louis Blanc, *Discours aux travailleurs, par Louis Blanc, prononcé le 10 mars au Luxembourg* (Paris, 1848), 7.

worried that the division of workers into particular trades could rekindle the conflicts between trades. During the first general-elections campaign of April 1848, the importance of creating a unified working-class identity and a unified list of candidates was paramount to ensure that workers could win seats in the Assembly. Blanc urged the Luxembourg Commission to take up the role of organizing this list. In one of his speeches, Blanc warned the delegates that if “each corporation” clung to their own candidate the result would be the “dispersion of votes, disunity of choices, and if it goes this way the people will be sacrificed once again ... You must start from the principle that you are not here as blacksmiths, joiners, machinists. You are here as men of the people, who are brothers.”¹⁸⁷ Blanc suggested that workers should not only become a unified class. They should also realize that their will was the will of the people. Blanc argued that the workers in the Luxembourg Commission effectively represented the whole people until the general elections. He declared,

The people are oppressed, that must change. All that the [Luxembourg] Commission ... does here ... will help that change. It is admirable that we have come to establish ... the Estates General of the People. You are here ... an assembly of the deputies of the people. Whether the National Assembly is installed or not, this one, I am confident, will not perish.¹⁸⁸

Noticeable here once again is Blanc’s turn to the revolutionary republican tradition of 1789. He characterized the Luxembourg Commission as the new Estates General, similar to Abbé Sieyès’s argument that the Third Estate was the only representative of the entire nation during the 1789 Revolution.¹⁸⁹ Just like his aspiration to “fraternal association” in *Organization*, Blanc claimed that the commission was the real representative of the people because it represented the working class who promoted solidarity and common prosperity. Crucially, unlike formal rights, the universality of the working class (as *the people*) was not fictive. It was concrete, manifesting itself in various types of activities, including industrial labor, agriculture, and even intellectual and literary work.¹⁹⁰ According to Blanc, this was why the working class was able to materialize the common good. To evidence that the commission served the interests of all, Blanc highlighted how the commission arbitrated conflicts between workers and industrialists.¹⁹¹ “Pleading the cause of the poor is, we can never repeat it too often, pleading the cause of the rich; it is defending the universal interest! So we are not the men of any faction here.”¹⁹² Thus, in Blanc’s eyes, the commission

¹⁸⁷*Rapport de la Commission d’enquête sur l’insurrection qui a éclaté dans la journée du 23 juin et sur les événements du 15 mai*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1848), 118.

¹⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁸⁹Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, “What Is the Third Estate?,” in Sieyès, *Political Writings: Including the Debate between Sieyès and Tom Paine in 1791*, ed. and trans. Michael Sonenscher (Indianapolis, 2003), 92–162.

¹⁹⁰In the much shorter second part of *Organization*, Blanc focused on intellectual property and proposed the establishment of “social publishing and bookselling houses” based on the principles of the “social workshops.” *OT* (1848), 220–69. He was virtually silent on agriculture.

¹⁹¹Blanc, 1848, 150–51.

¹⁹²Blanc, *Discours aux travailleurs*, 5–6.

was a place where work and the republic met, where citizen workers could achieve the unity of “work,” “government,” and “progress.”¹⁹³

Yet Blanc’s vision was ultimately defeated. Instead of the “social workshops,” the provisional government created “national workshops”—workshops that provided employment through public “charity.”¹⁹⁴ The first general elections in April created a moderate and conservative majority in the Assembly. The insurrection of the disillusioned radical clubs on 15 May gave the Assembly an excuse to close the Luxembourg Commission and arrest influential left republican and socialist figures. Blanc was forced to escape to Britain. Although the “national workshops” were devised to defeat the socialist visions for reorganizing work, conservative republicans still saw them as hotbeds of socialist dissension. Their closure in June led to a massive working-class insurrection in Paris. The Assembly’s response was a bloody application of the army. Any lingering hopes for a “democratic and social republic” were crushed with Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte’s *coup d’état* in 1851.

In 1852 Karl Marx commented that the 1848 Revolution ended up being a “far[ic]” repetition of the 1789 Revolution in which Blanc played Robespierre.¹⁹⁵ He argued that the republican principle of fraternity gave the revolutionaries false confidence. “The phrase which corresponded to this imagined liquidation of class relations was *fraternité*, universal fraternization and brotherhood. This pleasant abstraction from class antagonisms, this fantastic elevation above the class struggle, *fraternité*, this was the special catch-cry of the February Revolution.”¹⁹⁶ Arguably, Marx was right that Blanc and the *démocrates* relied too heavily on the vocabulary and principles of the 1789 Revolutionary tradition when they aspired to create working-class or society-wide solidarity.¹⁹⁷ Marx was perhaps also right when he claimed that Blanc “assumed” the reformist power “prematurely,”¹⁹⁸ underestimating not only the conservative and moderate backlash but also the divisions within and between the socialists and the working class.¹⁹⁹

Yet Marx’s characterization of Blanc as an imitator of the revolutionaries of 1789 overlooks one key point. As this article has aimed to show, Blanc played an

¹⁹³Ibid.

¹⁹⁴Maurice Agulhon, *1848 ou l’apprentissage de la république: 1848–1852* (Paris, 2002), 50.

¹⁹⁵Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in Marx, *Later Political Writings*, ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge, 1996), 31–127, at 31.

¹⁹⁶Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France (1848–1850)* (New York, 1964), 44–5.

¹⁹⁷On Marx and the 1848 Revolution see Bruno Leipold, “The Meaning of Class Struggle: Marx and the 1848 June Days” *History of Political Thought* 42/3 (2021), 464–99.

¹⁹⁸“Minutes of the Central Committee Meeting of 15 September 1850,” in Karl Marx, *The Political Writings*, ed. David Fernbach (London, 2019), 333–8, at 337.

¹⁹⁹For example, Proudhon criticized Blanc’s statism and plans for organizing labor in *La solution du problème social*, arguing instead for the organization of credit. Blanc’s pacifist reformism also put him into conflict with insurrectionary republicans and socialists such as Blanqui. In fact, his pacifism is one of the reasons why Blanc did not join the Paris Commune in 1871, putting a permanent stain on his reputation among socialists. Loubère, *Louis Blanc*, 104–9, 195–8. There was also a discrepancy between the middle-class socialist proposals for democratic labor associations (e.g. Blanc’s “social workshops”) and workers’ demands for more immediate reforms on unemployment and wage levels. Iorwerth Prothero, *Radical Artisans in England and France, 1830–1870* (Cambridge, 1997), 163–5. Most strikingly, the insurgents of June 1848 and the recruits of the Mobile Guard were composed of people from almost identical social background. Mark Traugott, *Armies of the Poor: Determinants of Working-Class Participation in the Parisian Insurrection of June 1848* (Princeton, 1985), 69–71.

important role in the emergence and popularization of a socialist and democratic response to the “social question” in the face of the nineteenth-century challenges of industrialization and proletarianization. While this response appealed to the revolutionary republican tradition, it ultimately aimed to push the 1789 Revolution further, toward its “democratic and social republican” stage. As a rebuttal of the July Monarchy’s exclusionary idea of “capacity” in political and social relations, Blanc argued that the “social question” was not the problem of pauperism stemming from inferior moral and material capacities. To the contrary, it was a problem of industrial organization that prevented the development of people’s capacities through systematic competition and domination. Blanc also offered a plan for social reform: reorganize industry through democratic associations. Blanc suggested that solidarity and prosperity are only possible when democracy is established in political and social relations.

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