

Thomas Hodgskin and the Corn Law Agitation

The Corn Law agitation had a strong inter-class base (Trentmann 2008). Cheaper grains were an aspiration of all the “industrious classes” and, from the vantage point of political symbols, the movement appealed to all but the landed aristocracy. “The slogan of ‘the people versus the aristocracy’ remained the most obvious rallying cry for the League, despite the growing adherence of aristocratic politicians to its cause” (Howe 1997, p. 30).

The Anti-Corn Law League, whose foremost champion was Richard Cobden (1804-1865), was “a new phenomenon in British history, a middle-class organization that neither sought nor needed upper-class patronage” (Longmate 1984, 19). It aimed however to teach all Englishmen that “they could better profit by the prosperity and freedom of other nations, through the peaceful paths of industry, than they could triumph through the force of war or military conquest.”¹

However, the relationship between the League and the workers’ movement was tense. The Chartists, in particular, vigorously opposed the League, as they were competing with it for the working classes’ allegiance and support.

In his study, Elie Halevy (1956) argued that Thomas Hodgskin represented the case of a thinker that drifted to the Free Traders, after being shocked by the violence shown by the Chartists in their competition with the League.

This paper will argue that Hodgskin’s staunch support to the Anti-Corn Law League was perfectly consistent with his own theory as developed in *Popular Political Economy* (1827). Hodgskin’s commitment to Free Trade was a lifelong one.

1. Did Hodgskin Change His Mind on the Corn Laws?

In his *Labour Defended Against the Claims of Capital* (1825), certainly his best-known work, Hodgskin compared the Corn Laws with the “tax exacted by Capital” writing that:

I am quite certain, that the Corn Laws, execrable as they are in principle, and mischievous as they are to the whole community, do not impose anything like so heavy a tax on the labourer as capital.

He apparently thought that Corn Laws

however injurious they may be to the capitalist, it may be doubted whether they are so to the labourer. They diminish the rate of profit, but they do not in the end lower the

¹ Quoted in Prentice (2013, pp. 268-9).

wages of labour. (...) In other words, the labourer will always have to give much about the same quantity of labour to the capitalist for a loaf, whether that loaf be the produce of one hour's or one day's labour (Hodgskin 1964, p. 77).

There is a bit of a contradiction in this passage: on one hand, Hodgskin considers the Corn Laws “execrable in principle, and mischievous” to the whole community. On the other, he sees them as not a big deal from the standpoint of workers, that will get bread for work whether grains are subject to tariffs or not.²

Also, it is not particularly clear whether Hodgskin is referring to the 1815 Corn Law—which Parliament eventually repealed in 1846—or he is thinking of the Corn Laws, as measures which had been in force long before the nineteenth century. The difference being that, whereas previously the Corn Laws had closely regulated the export of grains, the act that passed in 1815 strongly restricted its import.

It is perhaps because of this passage, that the eminent historian Elie Halevy, who rescued Hodgskin from obscurity by making him the subject of a monograph, believed that he converted to the cause of abolition after 1832 (the year in which Hodgskin published his *The Natural and the Artificial Right of Property Contrasted*) when “father of seven children and compelled to work to provide for this entire family, disappeared [...] into the obscurity of anonymous journalism” (Halevy 1956, p. 130).

According to Halevy, Hodgskin, in spite of his heavy involvement in journalism, supported the Chartist agitation but “no doubt because of the violence of Chartists and their appeals for the state to intervene with legislation in social questions, he became disgusted with revolutionary and socialist radicalism and was brought round with others to the party of Cobden and the agitation for Free Trade” (Halevy 1956, p. 130).

² This statement is *particularly* problematic, as one of the contentions of Hodgskin's pamphlet is that “circulating capital is only co-existing labour.” For Hodgskin, the need for “circulating capital” is basically the need for a certain amount of certainty, on the part of the worker, that the division of labour is working for allowing him to satisfy his necessities, so that he can specialize. He uses the provision of bread as an example. “One portion of the food of the people is bread, which is never prepared till within a few hours of the time when it is eaten. (...) For the cotton-spinner to be able to attend only to his peculiar species of industry, it is indispensable that other men should be constantly engaged in completing this complicated process [of harvesting corn], every part of it being as necessary as the part performed by the agriculturist. The produce of several of the labourers particularly of the baker, cannot be stored up. In no case can the material of bread, whether it exist as corn or flour, be preserved without continual labour. The employer of the working cotton-spinner can have no bread stored up, for there is none prepared; the labouring cotton-spinner himself knows nothing of any stock of corn being in existence from which his bread can be made; he knows that he has always been able to get bread when he had wherewithal to buy it, and further he does not require to know. But even if he did know of such a stock, he would probably give up cotton-spinning and take to preparing food, if he did not also know that while he is making cotton other labourers will till the ground, and prepare him food, which he will be able to procure by making cotton. His conviction that he will obtain bread when he requires it, and his master's conviction that the money he pays will enable him to obtain it, arise simply from the fact that the bread has always been obtained when required.”

A more recent biographer of Hodgskin, David Stack, offers a more nuanced view. Stack describes Hodgskin as a “social climber.” Hodgskin’s first career in life was that of a naval officer, who was stripped of his rank by a Court Martial in 1812. He subsequently wrote and published *An Essay on Naval Discipline* (1813), a work that made him known to Francis Place (1771-1854) who in turn introduced him to the philosophic radicals and helped him in various endeavours.

The publication of *Labour Defended* (1825) ended his friendship with Place. That pamphlet was imbued with what has been described as Hodgskin’s “ultra-labourism” (Rothbard 1995, p. 401) and made him a fleeting sensation in the socialist movement. However, his later work was mainly in Whig journalism, beginning with the *Morning Chronicle* to which he was helped in being recruited by Place. Hodgskin’s critics may have thought that he, in the 1830s, “frustrated in his efforts to win advancement by the patronage of the philosophic radicals he had abandoned the mechanics and turned to the whig press as his vehicle” (Stack 1997, p. 151).³

In fact, Hodgskin had claimed, in *An Essay on Naval Discipline*, that “the love of praise, or superiority, is a general passion of our nature” (1813, p. 18), of which he himself didn’t feel immune to.

Therefore, it is not surprising that he sought distinction. Stack has an interesting psychological interpretation of Hodgskin’s feelings:

Hodgskin was appalled by his fall in civil society. He was born a gentleman, and trained for the officer class. For the first part of his life he had experienced the distinction concomitant with that. At his court martial he was stripped of distinction, and he found himself in a world which did not recognise merit, only wealth, of which he had none. It was this which made him an outsider, and led him for a time to flirt with the labouring classes, just as it was his restless desire to rise back to the level of a gentleman in civil society that made the connection short-lived (Stack 1997, p. 153).

Though Stack concedes that Hodgskin “never lost his feeling for the labourers” and that “he never consistently propagated any position directly at variance with his own” (Stack 1997, p. 154), he maintains that Hodgskin’s 1843 *Lecture on Free Trade in Connexion with the Corn Laws* (1843) represents somehow “a retreat from the 1820s” (Stack 1997, p. 155).

In this paper, I would try to argue that Hodgskin’s allegiance to the cause of the Anti-Corn Law League is fully consistent with Hodgskin’s earlier *Popular Political Economy* (1827), which is the proper venue for understanding his economic thinking. While psychological explanations are certainly interesting, and in a sense Hodgskin’s distinctly unsuccessful attempts naturally invite them, we shall perhaps simply understand him as mainly an advocate of free trade pushed to the extreme, all through his life.⁴

³ In his *Labour Rewarded*, the Owenite William Thompson (1775-1833) in particular accuse Hodgskin of hypocrisies: he signed his pamphlet *Labour Defended* as “A Labourer” but he was just a greedy “intellectual” labourer, whose fate was to part from that of manual workers (Thompson 1827, pp. 2-3).

⁴ A relevant part of recent scholarship on Hodgskin tends to emphasise the Smithian elements in his thought. See Hunt (1977), Hollander (1980), Thompson (1984), Rothbard (1995, pp. 399-403). Hodgskin is most efficaciously described as “Smithian anarchist” (Hutchinson 1978, p.242n).

2. *Free Trade and Popular Political Economy*

Hodgskin's *Popular Political Economy* is the result of a series of lectures he gave at the London Mechanics Institute in 1825.

He was one of main promoters of the Institution, having published, on October 11th, 1823, an appeal in the *Mechanics' Magazine* to solicit London mechanics and artisans to set up an institution for their own improvement. Together with Joseph C. Robertson (1787-1852), he envisioned an educational establishment that was financed by funds provided by workers themselves through subscriptions. Francis Place persuaded them that this was unviable. A large donation from George Birkbeck (1776-1841) accomplished the establishment of the institution. However, most likely because of Place's maneuvers, both Robertson and Hodgskin happened not to be elected to the board. Hodgskin, however, did not sever his ties with the Institute, somehow made it up with Birkbeck and, in spite of Place's opposition, succeeded in eventually giving a course on political economy in 1826.

The result, *Popular Political Economy*, is an interesting exposition of the principles of laissez faire. The qualification "popular" does not imply that this brief treatise is aimed to the general public: as Halevy observes, it was "political economy not vulgarised and written down to the level of a popular audience, but conceived from the standard of the interest of the people."

The first lecture, titled "The Influence of Knowledge," was published as the second and third chapter of the book, whereas the second lecture, dealing with the notion of division of labor, provided the material for the fourth to sixth chapters. Chapter seven, on exchange, basically coincides with the third lecture, and the fourth and last lecture was used for the final chapters of the book, that investigate money and prices.

The four lectures originally given by Hodgskin were turned into a ten-chapters book. As an epigraph to his work, Hodgskin took a quotation from J.B. Say (1767-1832), whose lectures he attended in the 1815-16,⁵ when he visited France upon Place's suggestion. Say's lectures made a profound impression upon him. The quotation reads

The laws which determine the prosperity of nations are not the work of man; they are derived from the nature of things. We do not establish; we discover them.

For Hodgskin "society has a course of its own," and the "ultimate objects at which a wise legislator ought to aim" should be to recognize such a course and learn "what are the principles of legislation necessary for maintaining it," before enacting new rules (Hodgskin 1832, p. 4).

Thus, the very *nature* of political economy inclined towards *laissez-faire*, in the sense of being more interested in discovering the natural laws that govern society than in prescribing *positive* action on the part of government. He maintained that political economy was "not, as is generally supposed, a meddling, factious, ambitious science,—not a political science, prescribing regulations for society, or dictating duties to men" (Hodgskin 1827, pp. 38-39). The economy was to be studied and hopefully understood, not intervened upon: "The science observes the close connexion between

⁵ We know that Hodgskin attended classes at Institut National des Sciences et des Arts and, upon Say's suggestion, read Destutt de Tracy's *Elements de Ideologie*. Hodgskin to Place, January 1st 1816.

individual gain and the general welfare; but it does not pretend to direct the operations of the merchant, the trader, or the farmer, any more than those of the engineer; nor the labour of the ship-owner, any more than those of the shipwright and smith” (Hodgskin 1827, p. 39).

As Gregory Claeys puts it, “*Popular Political Economy*, in fact, was principally a paean to the existence of immutable natural laws regulating and determining the production of wealth, which for Hodgskin had only to be recognised in order to be applied correctly” (p.164). Driver suggests that Hodgskin’s economics was basically “a particular application to special circumstances of his own philosophy of law” (1932, p. 198). If we need to find *unity* in Hodgskin’s thought, we find it indeed in his interest in the nature of political obligation, that first surfaced in his *Essay on Naval Discipline*.

Hodgskin’s natural laws entailed the idea of a *direction* of progress. They set “the natural progress of civilization” (Hodgskin 1827, p. xiv) which is attained inasmuch as people are allowed to be subject to natural rather than to man-made laws. The first are benevolent, the latter are a cover-up for privileges manufactured to the benefit of special interests.

Hodgskin’s view is strikingly similar to that later expressed by Herbert Spencer (1820-1903)⁶ in *Social Statics*:

Progress, therefore, is not an accident, but a necessity. Instead of civilization being artificial, it is a part of nature; all of a piece with the development of the embryo or the unfolding of a flower. (Spencer 1851, p. 65)

For Spencer, evil consists chiefly as a maladaptation of an organism to nature: Hodgskin likewise considered that the lack of compliance with natural law, as embodied in legislative meddling, was conducive to artificially and unnecessarily retarding the development of civilization.

With progress, knowledge emerged and grew. In Hodgskin’s view, “knowledge” encompasses both formal knowledge and know-how, that is, formalised knowledge and knowledge that is only conveyed and used in a relatively deliberate manner by individuals and that consists in the skill and the expertise in performing a given task. These different kinds of knowledge are placed in a continuum of sorts: using quite an evocative expression, Hodgskin stresses that each and any tool and occupation is de facto “indebted” to the observations, discoveries and inventions made in the past.

He is dissatisfied with Smith, for he found in the great Scotsman a certain lack of interest for the issue of knowledge, that looks so pervasive to him:

In *The Wealth of Nations* there are numberless scattered remarks, which show that Dr. Smith was aware of the influence of knowledge in adding to productive power; yet he

⁶ Spencer was a colleague of Hodgskin, at the *Economist*, for a few years, and Hodgskin is credited with the very positive review of *Social Statics* published by the magazine. The relationship between the two appeared to be cordial and relatively intense, as Spencer admitted they spent “a Christmas Eve (or New Year’s eve)” together. However, Spencer claimed Hodgskin was no influence on his thought (“The intercourse we had daily at the *Economist* office consisted of remarks about passing incidents, especially such as bore upon misgovernment and overgovernment, in which remarks we habitually found ourselves in agreement. That he exercise any influence over my opinions I deny”). Spencer to Mary Hodgskin, March 22nd 1903.

has not dedicated any part of his book expressly to this subject. He has made no attempt whatever to explain the natural laws which regulate the increase of knowledge (Hodgskin 1827, p.53).

Hodgskin concedes that

Dr. Smith was not ignorant [...] of the effects of knowledge and observation in adding to productive power [...] But he seems not to have been thoroughly sensible of their importance; and to have supposed, I think erroneously, as mental labourers subdivide their employments in the progress of society, as well as bodily labourers, that the effects of observation and knowledge might all be referred to his favourite principle. “The invention,” he says, “of all those machines by which labour is so much facilitated and abridged, seems to have been originally owing to the division of labour.” In consequence of this opinion, while Dr. Smith has developed at great length the influence of the latter principle, he has done little or nothing towards explaining the more important laws which regulate the increase of knowledge, and its influence over productive power. (Hodgskin 1827, pp. 77-78)

Hodgskin considers economics the study of production and of the natural laws that govern it. The focus of production is the creative labor of man: from the outset, what characterizes human labor is the contribution of knowledge and wisdom. It permeates all production.

For Hodgskin labor is knowledge-driven. He distinguishes between two species of labor, “bodily” and “mental,”⁷ but even the former cannot be performed absent the acquisition and application of knowledge in any form.

The meanest labourer must use some mental exertion, and much of the most common labour is now rendered easy of acquisition by the transmitted habits, knowledge and skill of former generation. (Hodgskin 1827, p. 48)

Each task is thus embedded into a stream of knowledge. This obtains for any occupation:

Though agriculture does not supply us with the most striking examples of observation adding to productive power, yet even in this neglected and generally speaking, slave-practised art, we may find numerous examples of the hand of the labourer having been rendered productive by the observations of the philosopher. (Hodgskin 1827, p. 55)⁸

⁷ This distinction was already explicit in *Labour Defended*. Mental labor (“the labour of observing and ascertaining by what means the material world will give us most wealth”) and physical labor (“the labour of carrying those means, when ascertained, into execution”) are both necessary for production. It is worth noting that in *Labour Defended* Hodgskin considers also managerial abilities a sort of “intellectual labour,” accepting that these abilities are rewarded (Hodgskin 1827, p. 46).

⁸ At the same time, however, “without practical manual skill, the most elaborate learning may be of no use” e “without dexterous workmen, the most ingenious contrivances must be classed merely as visionary dreams” (Hodgskin 1827, p. 91).

In a way, Hodgskin's work seems to be reminiscent of the famous observation by Smith that "the invention of all those machines by which labour is so much facilitated and abridged, seems to have been originally owing to the division of labour." (Smith 1981, p. 20) Focusing on specific tasks, exclusively assigned to them, can drive labourers that "naturally turned their thoughts towards finding out easier and readier methods of performing it." (Smith 1981, p. 20)

Hodgskin thinks instead that even the humblest and simplest task could not be carried out absent the knowledge that makes this possible. He "reifies," so to say, such knowledge and identifies it with the tools and artifacts that enable any given job to be executed. Hodgskin takes care to specify that he does not refer to the increasingly complex machinery that leads to the growth of productivity: in this case his analysis would not substantially differ from Smith's. Instead, he includes ancient and extremely simple tools, indispensable for a number of tasks, and that despite their simplicity do in fact embody the knowledge needed to make and use them.

The most simple instrument in use, such as a common spade, a carpenter's gimlet, or a sewing needle, by the help of which labour is not merely facilitated, but without which several most useful and necessary daily operations could not possibly be performed, were at one time unknown; and probably required as close observations of the properties of iron and steel – of the form and powers of the human body, so as to adapt the digging and sewing instruments to its capabilities – and the gimlet to the purpose of boring rapidly through wood, and bringing to the surface the little pieces it cuts, – as the invention of the steam-engine at a later period required of the properties of caloric, and of the weight of the atmosphere. (Hodgskin 1827, pp. 74-75)

Knowledge was seen by Hodgskin as both logically and historically preceding the division of labour ("undoubtedly they [men] had learned to make bows and arrows, to catch animals and fish, to cultivate the ground and weave cloth, before some of them dedicated themselves exclusively to making these instruments, to hunting, fishing, agriculture, and weaving" [Hodgskin 1827, p. 79]), and increasing as a result of it. "Inventions," in which knowledge is crystallized, "always *precede* division of labour, and *extend it*, both by introducing new art and by making commodities at a less cost" (Hodgskin 1827, p.80 *emphasis added*).

The ubiquity of human ingenuity in economic affair is best epitomised by the fact that no natural resource is a "resource" by and in itself: cows and sheep, "in nature," were altogether different "from the large flesh- and wool-bearing and milk-giving animals that are nourished by the art of the grazier" (Hodgskin 1827, p. 62). In a sort of *crescendo* Hodgskin applies the same reasoning to the wonders of steam engine:

The expansive power of steam has been known almost as long as history can trace back the existence of our race; but an immense reach of intellect, numberless observations, a prodigious quantity of knowledge, gathered in all the ages of the world, and a vast variety of experiments, were necessary to devise this engine in its present admirable, but not yet perfect form. (Hodgskin 1827, p. 68)

If Hodgskin thinks Smith overemphasized the division of labour without fully understanding the importance of the division (and growth) of knowledge, he nonetheless thinks that "the accuracy of Dr. Smith's remarks on the beneficial effects of division of labour, must be perceptible to every

man.” By continuously stressing the importance of *skills*,⁹ Hodgskin comes to emphasize that “all the benefits” of the division of labour “naturally centre in the labourer; belong to him, and contribute to his ease or add to his opulence.”

It increases his skill, by allowing his attention to be uninterruptedly fixed on a single operation; it saves his time, by making no change of tools or of employment necessary; and it facilitates his invention of those machines that are adapted to the single and simple operations, which, in consequence of division of labour, constitute the whole task of each individual. By no single machine, perhaps, except man himself, could we perform the whole process of manufacturing a piece of cloth out of the raw material; but when the complicated process of shearing the sheep, cleansing the wool, carding, spinning, weaving, dressing, and dyeing it, has been separated into distinct operations, performed by different individuals,—machines can be, and are, made to execute most of them, even with more precision than can be done by the unaided hand. (Hodgskin 1827, p. 108)

In this context, Hodgskin’s anti-Malthusianism is easily understood.¹⁰ Human beings contribute their skills and knowledge to each other

The chances of improvement, it is plain, are great in proportion as the *persons are multiplied* whose attention is devoted to any particular subject. (...) an increase in the number of persons produces the same effect as communication; for the latter only operates by bringing numbers to think on the same subject. (Hodgskin 1827, pp. 93-94)

This principle seems to be amply confirmed by experience. Almost all discoveries and improvements have been made in crowded cities and in densely peopled countries (Hodgskin 1827, p. 95)

Hodgskin’s view can be summarised in: “more people, more ideas, more growth.” Because of his view of the division of labour being based upon, and increasing, knowledge, Hodgskin takes very seriously the idea that “the division of labour is limited by the extent of the market.” He regarded population growth as inherently beneficial, precisely because it increased market participation, and thus individual skills and ideas that could benefit people through market cooperation. The more the players in the division of labour, the merrier are the outputs going to be. As observed by Beer, Hodgskin deemed “increase of population, wants, knowledge, and inventions as the dynamic factors of human society” (Beer 1984, p.207).

For the very same reasons, Hodgskin endorses the benefits of international trade. “The immediate pecuniary advantages which accrue to all the parties concerned, in exchanging the products favoured by one climate, for those favoured by another,” explains Hodgskin, “gives but a feeble notion of the benefits conferred on mankind by trade.”

He is sure that

⁹ Mokyr recently argued that “Hodgskin (...), without using the term, came closer than anyone to realising the central role of human capital in economic growth” (2009, p. 238).

¹⁰ Hodgskin (1827. p. xix) considered Malthus’s “celebrity” “unhappy”. On the point, see Kern (2003).

The mutual exchange of the products of different climates, is a great means, therefore, of promoting civilization. It offers additional enjoyments, and to procure them it incites to additional exertions. It is the parent, consequently, of much of our skill. To obtain its gratifications, gives a perpetual but gentle stimulus to our passions, saving us both from the weariness of idleness, and from those violent emotions which are followed by painful lassitude, and end in speedy when not self-destruction. A number of innocent desires fill up, with an equable flow of happiness, the time of our existence; and foreign trade is even a greater good by the stimulus it gives to thought and exertion, than by the enjoyments it immediately bestows. (Hodgskin 1827, p. 156)

Men would sink “into inglorious repose,” if they limit themselves to self-sufficiency. “The skill and knowledge requisite at any time to provide for our animal wants, must be small, and did not some other stimulus intervene, all the ingenuity and faculties of civilized man would remain dormant, or be much limited.” Higher motives can find room in human life as soon as people understand “the utility of some wealth-creating arts” and “taste the enjoyment of some new productions of human skill” so that “after our mere animal wants are gratified, we still labour, and are happy when labouring, to obtain some other, and generally foreign productions” (Hodgskin 1827, p. 164).

On the specific subject of the Corn Laws, Hodgskin’s opinion seems to be indisputably opposed to the tariffs in corn. In the introduction, he mentions them as an example of (bad) social regulation that “also influence the production and distribution of wealth.” He explains clearly that “commercial prohibitions compel us to employ more labour than is necessary to obtain the prohibited commodity” but they also “curb the spirit of enterprise, and impede production, by checking the progress of knowledge and the acquirement of skill.” On the Corn Laws as a case in point, he writes:

The corn laws of this country—to take an example of a social regulation influencing both production and distribution—compel all those who eat bread to give a greater quantity of labour to obtain it than nature requires; or they make us pay from fifteen to twenty shillings more for a quarter of wheat, than would otherwise be necessary; and they alter distribution, by putting, (through the medium of exchange, it must be remarked,) a part of the sum thus abstracted from the consumers into the pockets of the landlords. (Hodgskin 1827, p. 34)

Further on, in the concluding note of Chapter 8, Hodgskin mentions William Huskisson’s (1770-1830) unsuccessful attempt of amending the tariffs on grains, linking it to his straying from the “free-trade” path in the issue of bank policies. In Chapter 9 he names the duties on grains as the foremost cause of the high prices of food staples. In Chapter 10 he compares them for their injuriousness to the Combination Laws, “our monstrous system of taxation (...) and church establishment, and our West and East India monopolies” (Hodgskin 1827, p. 253).

This view is perfectly attuned with the one Hodgskin previously expressed in his *Travels in the North of Germany*, published 1820. In that work, he argued that wealth was “diffused in our country by commerce” and that happened because of unhampered international trade (in the case of Germany, “the same freedom has not been left to its trade as to that of Britain” and thus “the diminution of its commerce has been caused by impolitic regulations”) (Hodgskin 1820, p. 446).

Certainly, he might have changed his mind as he got back to London from his European *tour* and thus considered the issue of free trade differently, in his 1825 pamphlet. However, *Popular Political Economy* was written and published two years after *Labour Defended*, and conveys, under some

respect, the very same outlook. Hodgskin conceived the lectures to be given to working class people at the Mechanics Institution. They were part of a court that was fulfilling his dream of lecturing workers and artisans. He made up his mind. The Corn Laws were “execrable” and “mischievous (...) the whole community” indeed. He won’t change views for the rest of his life.

3. An attempt to radicalise the League?

Cecil H. Driver (1900-1958) maintained that Hodgskin’s was an attempt “to establish a creed of industrial individualism in the interest of workers” (Driver 1932, p. 192). In the case of Hodgskin’s “Lecture on Free Trade....,” given on January 21st 1843 at White Conduit House, in Islington, it seems this was one of Hodgskin’s own priority, as he writes:

As the laboring classes have unfortunately stood aloof from our agitation, though they are now I believe coming forward and making common cause with us, as it has been asserted that to abolish the Corn Laws would injure them, and I do not purpose on the present occasion to consider how the abolition would affect them, I must begin by saying that if I had the shadow of a shade of a suspicion that it would lower wages, diminish employment, delay the profess of freedom or retard for one hour the emancipation of the masses, I should belie my whole life if I undertook its advocacy. (Hodgskin 1843, pp.4-5)

He writes that “a robbery is not to be excused, cause it has been exercised on a beggar” (Hodgskin 1843, p. 14). Tariffs are thus to be considered robbery, that damage the weakest in society.

Hodgskin is apparently aiming at using his own reputation as a champion of the labouring classes (earned when he was publishing *Labour Defended* under the *nom de plume* “A Labourer”) to build bridges between the Chartists and the Anti-Corn Law League.

A few months before, it was the League that somehow contacted him at the time of the so-called “Plug Plot.” In Summer 1842 “colliers at Longton in Staffordshire, faced with a sudden cut in wages, stopped work and began marching from colliery to colliery throughout the Potteries, enforcing closure by raking out boiler fires and drawing boiler blues (Hence the name Plug Lot given to these disturbances)” (Hinde 1987, p. 110).

The so-called “Plug Plot” was considered as having been caused by the League, for two reasons. Writes Grampp: “The *Manchester Courier*, anti-League paper, quoted an employer as saying he would go on cutting wages until his men had not ‘a cabbage a day’ to live on” (p. 68) Others believed instead the League to be in cahoots with the Chartists, that had instigated a number of strikes, initially mainly in the environs of Manchester, where the city’s governing bodies (allied with free traders) refrained from cracking down the protests. “The protectionist everywhere in the country charged that a few employers provoked the strike and that others urged their men to join it. The employers purpose, it was asserted, was to give the workers’ discontent a forcible expression and to turn it against the government in order to force the repeal of the corn laws.” The fact that in the previous months the free traders had themselves contemplated the possibility of a tax-strike and the recourse to a lock-out to come to the attention of the Government.

Cobden strongly denied that the League was in any way involved with the protest. He wrote a letter to Hodgskin with clear familiarity. Cobden asked him not to leave “the defence of your old friends of the League entirely in the hands of the *Globe Chronicle* & other “strangers”.” Hodgskin was then

writing mostly for the *Evening Chronicle*, which actually defended the League. From this piece of correspondence, it seems clear that Cobden considered Hodgskin certainly by then (one year before Hodgskin's *Lecture*) a friendly voice, to which he could appeal.

Farrar (1987, p. 36) suggests that actually Hodgskin influenced Cobden's thinking. Cobden described Hodgskin in 1857 as "an old literary acquaintance of mine" and possibly "knew possibly as early as 1828-30 in London." For Farrar, since "some of Hodgskin's ideas were regarded as dangerous by the propertied class (...) despite his belief in private property legitimately acquired (...) there is nothing strange in the fact that Cobden did not refer to Hodgskin's ideas in public."

The relationship between Hodgskin and Cobden was certainly amicable, but we cannot really say if it was closer than it seems by now. The two corresponded also in the occasion of Hodgskin leaving *The Economist*. In this exchange, Cobden told Hodgskin that he was unaware of his working for *The Economist* (which he claimed he didn't read)¹¹ and subsequently sent him a long letter criticising anonymity in journalism as unaccountable and therefore dangerous.¹² Thinking of Hodgskin's fondness for distinction and presuming anonymity to be discouraging for a man of ideas, this may have been also a gesture of fondness towards an old friend who thought life didn't sufficiently recognise his accomplishments.

Stack somehow alludes to the possibility Hodgskin's *Lecture* on free trade may have been useful to place him in friendly terms James Wilson (1805-1860), since it "had deployed many of the same arguments as Wilson's anti-corn law pamphlet, *Influences of the Corn Laws, as affection all classes of the community, and particularly the landed interests*" (Stack 1997, p. 163). This is, however, true just in part: Wilson's pamphlet is an ambitious exercise in applied economics. Hodgskin shared the same starting point, which is that the Corn Laws were detrimental for all classes in society: however, it soon launched into an attack to the landed classes. If Wilson (1839) tried to be empirical and grounded his own arguments in the available statistics, Hodgskin was instead producing—as typical to him—a *moral* argument.

Certainly, Wilson's acquaintance helped Hodgskin in securing an employment at *The Economist*.

Ruth Dudley Edwards suggests that although "there is no evidence about how the relationship between Hodgskin and Wilson was conducted (...) it is clear from the pages of *The Economist* that it worked well. Hodgskin added intellectual tone, and though facts, more facts and yet more facts continued to form the backbone of the paper, it became quirkier, less stolid, more cultivated and less prosaic" (Edwards 1993, p. 127). However, the two parted ways in 1857. Hodgskin seemed to be increasingly turned off by *The Economist's* inclining towards unabashedly supporting the government, as a by-product of Wilson's political career.¹³

Insofar as Hodgskin's relationship with the League are concerned, it is worth mentioning that the Anti-Corn Law League's poet, Ebenezer Elliott (1781-1849), dedicated his "Corn-Law Hymns" to

¹¹ Cobden to Hodgskin, May 20th 1857.

¹² Cobden to Hodgskin, October 14th 1857.

¹³ Hodgskin's daughter claimed that "When Wilson desired the whole spirit of his articles changed, my Father (...) simply refused to write anything contrary to his convictions and left office" (Halevy 1956, p. 168n)

“Mr Thomas Hodgskin, author of “Popular Political Economy” (...) with many thanks for his masterly work” (Elliott 1840, p. 167).¹⁴

Scott Gordon argued that the tone of Hodgskin’s *Lecture* “prompts one to the speculation that he was trying to attach himself to the free-trade movement” (Gordon 1955, p. 474) because Hodgskin praised the League very high. This was, however, no surprise—given Hodgskin’s theses in *Popular Political Economy* and most likely because of previous interactions with the League.

When it comes to the supposed aim of “reconciling” the working class movement with the Corn Law agitation, Hodgskin’s lecture seems poorly fit to fulfil the object. It did not compete with pamphlets such as *Anti-Bread Tax Tracts for the People* (1841), which explained the ideas of Free Trade in comprehensible terms to a larger audience, with the illustration of everyday life examples.

In spite of the premise we mentioned, Hodgskin does not reflect specifically on the damages that tariffs inflict on workers. Instead, what he tries to do—in spite of Stack’s claim of the *Lecture* being “a retreat from the 1820s”—is to inoculate his more radical ideas in the anti-Corn Laws agitation.

The contemporary reader’s impression is that Hodgskin wanted to jump on an opportunity he longed for. At last, a powerful and well-developed movement in support of free trade existed. The movement shared his antipathy for the landed classes. Its leader, Richard Cobden, was used to frame his political discourse in *moral* arguments. “The man who has been held up as the tribune of laissez faire was, in fact, not governed by economic purposes at all (...) He said repeatedly that he wanted free trade because it would bring world peace, and his actions were altogether consistent with what he said” (Grampp 1960, p. 100).

Hodgskin hoped that he could push the League’s own arguments a bit further: that is, moving from a denunciation of the iniquity of the Corn Law as a bad social regulation that hinders growth and societal cooperation, to the denunciation of all social regulations as detrimental to the development of society.¹⁵ This is the very goal he himself declares, as he approves of the League’s goals as good and beneficial but admits to think that “it does not go far and fast enough, and does not carry out the principles it advocates to their proper conclusions” (Hodgskin 1843, p. 22).

Also, Hodgskin may have imagined there was an opportunity to be seized. He praised the League because it “is no knot of theorists, proposing some Frenchified police as the means of promoting security, or borrowing from that and other despotic lands a centralized system of providing for the people (...) nor does it propose some Prussian scheme of drilling mankind into order” (Hodgskin 1843, p. 21).

The Corn Law agitation deserved support because

The Corn Laws constitute the coping-stone of a huge system of injustice, all of which must be removed, and the League shows its moderation and its wisdom by beginning to remove that which binds the whole together, so as to enable us hereafter gradually and safely to take it down entirely (Hodgskin 1843, p. 22)

¹⁴ In his *Hymns*, Elliott laments the harmful influence of Malthusian notions and exhorts the public and the middle classes to rouse themselves to action: this would seem to betray at least a passing acquaintance with Hodgskin’s works. On Elliott, see Briggs (1950) and Neilson (1951).

¹⁵ This was the theme of Hodgskin (1832) and of his later lectures on crime (Hodgskin 1857a and 1857b).

Hodgskin proclaims the Corn Laws to be a “direct violation of liberty which is every man’s natural right” (Hodgskin 1843, p. 13). Also, a point of relevance, for Hodgskin, was certainly that the League fight for the *repeal* of the Corn Laws, and not for the establishment of a new kind of legislation. The idea of *repealing* laws fit into his own system: the idea of *proposing* laws did not.

But Hodgskin’s attempt was to further generalise and radicalise the League’s message, bringing it to the extreme. Describing William Huskisson’s success in reforming and weakening tariffs, Hodgskin explains that “every prohibition abolished and every duty lowered have contributed to increase employment, to extend the national resources, and arrest the mischievous consequences of excessive taxation and of the prohibitions and restrictions that are still suffered to remain on the statute-book” (1843, p. 6). He is thus claiming evidence for the “deregulation” of social life, as we would say now, to be inevitably socially beneficial. His basic outlook remained unchanged from 1827: “every law is a restraint on freedom, and per se mischievous, though this truth is continually lost sight of” (Hodgskin 1843, p. 7).

One rhetorical artifice Hodgskin frequently used (as early in his *Essay on Naval Discipline*) was the comparison between the *promise* of liberty that is the heritage of all Englishmen, and the infringements upon their freedom the government commits. In his *Lecture on Free Trade* he claims that “we have achieved personal freedom—we have nearly conquered freedom of conscience; the press is almost free, but we have yet to conquer freedom for industry” (Hodgskin 1843, p. 7).

The core argument of the Lecture is a comparison between *internal* and *foreign* trade. Hodgskin emphasises the asymmetry. Nobody denies the baker or the greengrocer the right to purchase his stock from the cheapest suppliers and he who does not do it is soon branded as an injudicious merchant. The freedom of looking for the best bargains, explains Hodgskin, guarantees not only what we would style today as a greater allocative efficiency, but also the very life in society. The lack of the simple opportunity of exchanging with other individuals within the same country would cause “dissatisfaction, discontent, and collision.” (Hodgskin 1843, p.7) This freedom of exchange within the borders of one nation is one of Britain’s great advantages, whereas on the Continent the territories of Italy and Spain are still beset by multifarious custom barriers, and no wares are immune to duties and custom’s officers.

The same, however, cannot be said of the “freedom of trade between individuals living under different governments” which, “though fools or presumptuous madmen cramp and prohibit it, is as much a part of the system of nature as trade between the subjects of the same government, which statesmen at length universally admit cannot be restricted.” No real conceptual difference separates those transactions that are concluded between English subjects, and those between Britons and citizens of foreign countries. Both are part of the same natural system and, if anything, the difference of “soils and climates” of the several nations is an argument in support of free trade, instead of protection.

This is an argument Richard Cobden would have certainly endorsed. In a similar fashion, he argued that “Free trade, in the widest definition of the term, means only the division of labour by which the productive powers of the whole earth are brought into mutual co-operation” (Cobden 1903, p. 389).

Protectionist barriers are artificial constraints, thus being unable of bringing any advantage, but only liable to hamper the market process and make it less efficient. For Hodgskin, “Man is created free to buy and sell with whom, when, and where he likes, and legislators are bound to prove such freedom a great public injury, and that they are wiser than nature, before they venture in any case to re-

strain it” (Hodgskin 1843, p. 11). As in *Popular Political Economy*, Hodgskin mentions the ignorance of legislating men, which can curb down spontaneous progress, as perhaps *the* argument for laissez-faire.¹⁶

Hodgskin also suggests to consider regulations as equivalent to taxation. He sees laws that obstruct the potential use of someone’s property as comparable to a direct violation of her property rights. Property is thus violated whenever any regulation is made to force an individual to employ his labour or capital in a particular way. An artificial increase of the price of bread is logically equivalent to the forcible seizure of the greater amount of bread that would have been available in the absence of the duty. It is “in principle as great a violation of the right of property to prevent Mr Cobden importing corn, as it is to take away the Duke of Buckingham’s estate” (Hodgskin 1843, p. 12).¹⁷

In *Popular Political Economy*, Hodgskin articulated an enthusiastic argument *for* the unbridled growth of the population, because an increased population meant more participants in the market, more and more different skills, and thus social and economic progress. In his *Lecture on Free Trade*, however, Hodgskin comes to address the Corn Laws as a deliberate and yet secretive attempt to limit population:

It is, indeed, said, those who passed the Corn Laws, alarmed at the increase of a town population, deliberately limited the supply of food, that they might, in direct contravention both of the revealed and discovered laws of God, prevent the multiplication of the people. Knowing not that population carries with it its own laws, extending civilization and improving morality as it increases—they were afraid of God’s creatures, and they secretly attempted to starve them down to a manageable number. We must be slow to believe that such diabolical intentions were ever entertained by those who ask and obtain the confidence of the people in order to protect them. No such motive was avowed in 1815; but when we recollect their regardlessness of the lives of the people, such an intention is not very foreign to their habits (Hodgskin 1843, pp. 17-18).

These are indeed strong words, particularly if coming from someone who has been following the making of legislation for years.¹⁸ Hodgskin didn’t name names, but wanted to raise suspicion towards the landed class. The tariffs on grains were, he maintained, clearly detrimental of social progress and diminished the purchasing power of money: if they “are retained” this should be “because some of the aristocracy hate and dread the free and independent population of the towns” (Hodgskin 1843, p. 18). They are indeed “a great robbery solemnly decreed by the owners of the rent, on all other classes, in which, like all other robberies, a vast deal more property is wasted and destroyed than is transferred and enjoyed” (Hodgskin 1843, p. 14).

In all of Hodgskin’s writings, starting from *An Essay on Naval Discipline*, public opinion is practically deemed to be the paramount driver of social change. Hodgskin rejected legislative improve-

¹⁶ I’ve attempted to elaborate on this point in Mingardi (2014).

¹⁷ In making thus argument, Hodgskin quotes McCulloch (1789-1864), who was actually one his targets (the other happened to be James Mill) in *Labour Defended*. This may suggest a change in tone, from the 1820s pamphlets. However, there are multiple references to McCulloch in *Popular Political Economy* and they are not by all means all negative.

¹⁸ Alongside being a parliamentary reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*, Hodgskin was also one of the first collaborator of Hansard’s *Parliamentary Reports* (Halevy 1956, p. 130).

ment as a *method* to achieve societal improvement: no matter how worthy a specific social goal might be, it needed to be pursued by society itself changing its practices and habits. He later argued that “no individual, however earnest his convictions, and urgent the necessity may appear to give them effect, is entitled to expect or require that they should be the impulse and immediate guide to legislation” (Hodgskin 1857a, p. 5)

But, in addition to his skepticism towards government action of all kind, Hodgskin was profoundly convinced that ideas and prejudices diffused in society had a paramount importance. He did not think so exclusively insofar as *political* ideas were concerned. He was indeed convinced that “the love of praise, or superiority, is a general passion of our nature” played a big part in society, exciting people to more important exertions, and thus awakening “all the ingenuity and faculties” of humankind. Human beings’ trajectory was *upwards*, and they were used, so to say, to look *up*.

This view was *in nuce* in Hodgskin’s earlier writings, beginning with *An Essay on Naval Discipline*, but was better detailed in the later ones: in particular, in his last two published lectures on crimes.

In the first of those, he explained that “what is first adopted by one, or a few influential persons, for their ease, convenience, or gratification, very generally becomes a stern and unavoidable necessity for the multitude.” This argument is supported by a wealth of evidence, from the consumption of drinks such as tea and coffee, to improvements in sanitation and the diffusion of the water closet, to the most frivolous fashions in dress and even to the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Hodgskin deliberately compares “positive” and “negative” examples, in the attempt of finding a regularity in the way consumption and customs, whatever they may be, spread from a few wealthy individuals to the multitudes.

For Hodgskin, legislative plunder—think about patronage or monopoly granting—is thus particularly problematic, because it weakens in the lower classes the sense for property and the sense for propriety.

The *Lecture on Free Trade* anticipates those works. Hodgskin argues here that “the many hideous crimes we deplore in individuals are made feasible and encouraged by the legislative crimes which the public are thus betrayed into permitting and applauding” (Hodgskin 1843, p. 18). From this perspective, the Corn Laws become the seal of the oppressive rule of the higher classes of the rest of the nation:

the Corn laws were passed to keep down and cut short the supply of food; and when we find that people want food, and wanting food, want clothing, want cleanliness, want comfortable habitations, want decency, want kindness, and want morality, why should we seek beyond these laws for the cause of our immense and our intolerable woes? The people want food because the paternal legislature has ordained a dearth! (Hodgskin 1843, p. 20)

Hodgskin’s *Lecture on Free Trade* is perfectly attuned to his philosophy from what we know from his previous and later writings. We may speculate that it was an attempt to bid for a possible *radicalisation* of the Anti-Corn Law League. *Moral* and *political* rather than strictly *economic* arguments were not a novelty for the League: Cobden conceived his own argument for *Free Trade* as part of a wider battle for reform and world peace. However, making of *Free Trade* basically a trojan horse for anarchy was certainly not an easy endeavour.

4. Conclusion

Hodgskin didn't drift to free trade: freedom of trade was instead a pillar of his way of thinking, and just a particular case in his general philosophy of minimising government interventions.

He felt for the Anti-Corn Law League basically because he identified with their core idea—the abolition of tariffs that was asked by people “who seek only freedom for buying and selling” (Hodgskin 1843, p. 20). The repealers enjoyed his sympathy, precisely because they did not want a “Frenchified police” neither proposed “some Prussian scheme of drilling mankind into order.” “They do not go to the legislature to demand cheapness or even abundance, though both, they believe, will be the consequence of the repeal. They ask no favour, they barely demand justice” (Hodgskin 1843, pp. 21-22).

Francis W. Hirst remarked “the Manchester men were the disciples of Adam Smith and Bentham, while the Philosophical Radicals followed Bentham and Adam Smith” (Hirst 1903, p. xi). That comment alone may capture Hodgskin's fascination for the League, as he grew less and less friendly towards the Benthamites with time. If the movement that Bentham and his followers inspired was a movement for the *reform* of the law, Hodgskin dreamt of one for the *abolition* of laws—and hoped to find it in the Anti-Corn Law League.

In a piece written for the *New York Daily Tribune*, Marx mocked the failure of the League and, more generally, of the British bourgeoisie, in being truly revolutionary. “To the men of the Manchester School,” he wrote, “every institution of Old England appears in the light of a piece of machinery as costly as it is useless, and which fulfils no other purpose than to prevent the nation from producing the greatest possible quantity at the least possible expense, and to exchange its products in freedom. Necessarily, their last word is the Bourgeois Republic, in which free competition rules supreme in all spheres of life.” (Marx 1979, p. 333)

To be fulfilled, this dream would however require a revolution and “the complete annihilation of Old England as an aristocratic country.” But “Having obtained, in 1846, a grand victory over the landed aristocracy by the repeal of the Corn Laws, they were satisfied with following up the material advantages of this victory, while they neglected to draw the necessary political and economical conclusions from it.” (Marx 1979, pp. 333-334)¹⁹

Ten years later Marx ridiculed the League for not having done something similar to what Hodgskin, ten years before, hoped they could do: that is, radicalising their message. There are, of course, good reasons why this didn't happen - but if somebody dreamt that dream, it was Thomas Hodgskin.

On the issue of Free Trade, Hodgskin was not a social climber that adapted his message to propel himself in a better company. He can be best seen as a failed prophet: his failure can be perhaps be seen as a by-product of his consistency.

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¹⁹ The decline of the great champions of Free Trade in British politics was possibly caused by adherence to their policy of pacifism than anything else. See *inter alia* Grampp (1960, pp. 116-132)

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