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# **Society without the social: the Spanish Labour Movement and the rise of the social, 1840-1880**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Focusing on the Spanish case, this article addresses two fundamental questions: why were many unionized workers sceptical about state intervention in labour issues throughout the nineteenth century, and why did this attitude begin to change from the 1860s onwards? Its main thesis is that workers' attitudes derived ultimately from different historical notions of 'society' that shaped their perceptions and experiences of labour relations and their attitude toward the role of the state. Thus, a notion of society as an aggregation of individuals shaped unionized Spanish workers' hostility toward state intervention since the creation of the first unions in the 1840s. From the 1860s onward, a new conception of collective relations, namely 'the social', began to transform some workers' expectations of the role of the state in labour conflicts. The main factor that explains this change, it is argued, lies in the relationship between the workers' imaginary, their actions, and their expectations about these actions.

## **KEYWORDS**

Spain; nineteenth century; trade unions; Spanish labour movement; social.

European labour movements developed along different paths during the nineteenth century, although many of them shared a crucial commonality: most unions generally distrusted state intervention in economic relations. Indeed, social legislation was not one of their essential goals.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, social laws eventually became a target of many unionized European workers in the early twentieth century. Why were they initially reluctant to pursue social legislation that could improve their labour and living conditions? Why did their attitude change at the turn of the century? This article aims to answer these two questions by focusing on the unionized Spanish workers' changing attitudes towards state regulation of labour relations through social laws (the regulation of wages, the length of working day, and child and female labour) throughout the formative period of the Spanish labour movement, 1840-1880. I argue that the emergence of workers' interest in state intervention from the 1860s onwards entailed a change in their perception of labour relations and the nature of the state and state action. In exploring this transformation, my aim is to take advantage of the explanatory possibilities opened up by recent historical research on what is characterized as the 'rise of the social'.

Before explaining the pertinence of the Spanish case, it is crucial to clarify what I mean by 'the social' and by the theoretical implications of new studies for the problems I analyze here. Recent research considers the emergence of the social as a complex, transnational historical process that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. This process entailed the emergence of a new conception of collective relations among people, namely 'the social'. According to the definitions given by several researchers, the social redefined the meaning of the category 'society' that had emerged in late-eighteenth-century

Europe. This first notion of ‘society’ envisaged collective relations as bonds between rational, free, equal, and independent individuals who reached agreements and established contracts based on the respect for their ‘natural’ freedoms and rights.

The emergence of a new sense of the social from the mid-nineteenth century onwards constituted a challenge to the previous conception of society. According to this new definition, society was something more complex than the ‘individualistic’, ‘atomistic’, or ‘contractual’ idea of a set of relations between independent and rational individuals. Rather, it was an entity with its own operating ‘rules’, ‘principles’, or ‘laws’ that constrained individuals’ freedom and determined their experiences, interests, identities, and agency. Therefore, the notion of the social entailed the definition of a set of relationships among individuals and groups that was partly independent from political and economic spheres, that would influence and be influenced by such spheres, and, as a result, become a crucial target of political intervention.

This is not the place to tackle in depth the transformation between these two notions of society, but it is important to clarify its implications for the study of the labour movement. Research on the social usually focuses on intellectual and political debates where the new notion of society was formally described, studied, and analyzed. The rise of the social is usually linked to debates among European thinkers, scientists, and politicians on a problem that materialized in the mid-nineteenth century, that is, the ‘social question’; or to the fact that individual freedom and legal equality implemented by liberal regimes did not entail the material security and the happiness for the majority of citizens, but extended poverty among them. As a consequence of the persistence of this problem, many intellectuals stopped interpreting labour conflicts as the simple result of the workers’ ‘lack of morality’ and began to explain them as one of the consequences of the ‘negative’ impact of capitalist economic development on the social

field. In order to preserve the social order and to avoid the degeneration of the ‘nation’ and the ‘race’, these intellectuals supported the implementation of social reforms to ‘protect’ workers from the free market’s worst ‘social’ consequences. Thus, these intellectual debates were crucial for the emergence of the modern interventionist state. Although some groups of unionized workers were interested in social laws and eventually participated in their elaboration, research on the emergence of the interventionist state has broadly concluded that reform was largely designed and implemented before most workers demanded them.

However, since studies of the social focus on intellectual and institutional fields, they do not clarify the crucial issue of how and why the attitude of unionized workers to state intervention changed. This is the gap in the literature that this article addresses. My analysis of the Spanish case shows that the transformation in how society was thought about also occurred within labour movements. In the nineteenth century, unionized Spanish workers operated with the first notion of society while from 1860 some of them began to use the second notion. This entailed a crucial transformation in unionized workers’ attitudes towards the role of the state in labour conflicts. This process was similar to the one that provoked the rise of the social among intellectual and political elites. It was the frustration of unionized workers’ expectations of the liberal state, employers’ actions, and the results of their own struggles that drove them to reconsider their conception of collective relations.

This new concept of society was historically contingent. The social does not mirror an ‘objective’ social entity that epistemologically preexists and determines what people think about collective relations. Rather, it is a historical category: a specific way of making sense of relations between people that emerged in a certain period. From this perspective, the social does not reflect the underlying meaning of an objective reality,

but rather ‘objectivizes’ situations and relations with particular meanings, providing individuals with a (limited) range of possible interpretations and forms of action.<sup>2</sup>

My aim here is to contribute to elucidating the explanatory possibilities of the historical character of the social for exploring new historical interpretations of workers’ changing actions. This is especially relevant for labour studies since the social has not only been a historical category, but has also operated as a theoretical frame that has informed historical research. As a theoretical notion, many historians have adopted it as a naturalized (that is, a non-historical) and unquestioned representation of an objective reality. Accordingly, the labour movement has been considered a ‘social’ phenomenon, that is, a movement originated by and within a certain social organization (capitalism) and its inner contradictions, which determined workers’ experiences, interests, and actions. This explanation is based on the theoretical assumption that ‘social’ (including socio-economic) relations, especially class relations, constitute the independent factor that causes human conduct. From this perspective, social organization had a determining effect in the formation of workers’ actions. Thus, the social is the epistemic basis for the thesis of social causality that has shaped both ‘social’ and ‘sociocultural’ historical explanations of labour movements.

This is particularly clear in accounts of the Spanish case, in which a naturalized, objectivist notion of society has set the epistemic foundations for historical explanations of organized workers’ attitude toward social reforms. Thus, the majority of existing studies explain the emergence of the Spanish labour movement as a direct consequence of the implementation of capitalist social relations and the subsequent proletarianization of workers’ labour and living condition.<sup>3</sup> Although several recent works play down the importance of these factors and introduce the Thompsonian notion of ‘experience’ as well as cultural and subjective factors such as the influence of preexisting labour

traditions and political ideologies, they do not question the naturalized and objectivist meaning of the category of the social. As a result, some historians have stated that it was an ‘accumulation’ of ‘class’ and ‘exploitation’ experiences, derived from the implementation of capitalist social relations, that led workers to organize themselves and demand state intervention in labour issues in the nineteenth century. The problem is that these experiences are supposed to have a particular social (class) meaning that would eventually be reflected in workers’ actions and demands. Indeed, there are virtually no accounts of the Spanish case that put the assumed centrality of this social assumption into question.

This has important implications for the analysis of unionized workers’ attitudes towards state intervention. If the labour movement emerged from capitalism’s inherent contradictions, it is logical to assume that workers were interested in state intervention as one of the most effective ways of changing such relations; and if they were not, it has been argued, they would eventually become so once workers became aware of ‘objective’ social (class) relations and position. This thesis has influenced historical explanations of several national cases, but it has generated serious interpretative difficulties in the Spanish case. For it is well known that many Spanish unions were hostile to state intervention at the beginning of the twentieth century, which spurred the development of a strong anarcho-syndicalist movement.<sup>4</sup> In order to deal with this problem, most historians have interpreted this situation as a ‘lack of maturity’ of the Spanish workers, an interpretation based on the ‘social’ thesis of the scarce and slow implementation of capitalist relations in Spain.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, these interpretations have led researchers to focus on the question of why workers did not act as they were supposed to do (‘why did they not support state intervention when it was so beneficial to them?’), while relegating the more crucial

question of why they acted as they did. New approaches to the social allow us to challenge the teleological character of these explanations. For, if the social is not an objective entity but a historical category that influenced the formation and actions of historical subjects, then a labour movement that emerged before the rise of the social, such as the Spanish one, was not necessarily a product of social changes and organization brought by capitalism. A concept of society different from that of the social—namely, a notion of ‘society without the social’—could have led workers to perceive themselves as subjects of collective action and agents of historical change during the nineteenth century. Obviously, this does not deny the possibility that the notion of the social could have played an important role in determining workers’ actions in other periods. Indeed, this article aims to explain how this notion emerged and influenced workers’ actions in a particular period. Yet, if the social is not a representation of the objective reality, but a way of ‘objectivizing’ (that is, of making sense of) that reality, we must explain why this influence occurred in the first place. In other words, rather than the social being considered as an unquestioned basis for historical analysis, the social must become a central object of that analysis.

This means that we must rethink existing ‘social’ explanations of relationships between workers’ perceptions of collective relations and workers’ actions. Here the analytical concept of ‘imaginary’ is extremely useful. If labour movements were the result of the way in which workers perceived collective relations through historical notions such as ‘society’, and if these notions were related to others (including ‘individual’, ‘freedom’, ‘equality’, ‘human nature’ and ‘exploitation’) in complex and contradictory networks of interrelated categories, then these networks formed a ‘system of meanings’ through which workers made sense of their living and working conditions.<sup>6</sup> This system of meanings that mediated in the constitution of workers’



perceptions, experiences, and actions is what several researchers have called ‘imaginary’. In Mary Poovey’s words, an imaginary is ‘that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy’, as well as ‘what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society’. Thus, an imaginary does not refer to mere particular representations or actions, but to the foundational assumptions about what count as adequate representations and actions.<sup>7</sup>

The analysis of this imaginary is crucial in order to understand workers’ actions. My examination of the complex interactions between workers’ conceptions of collective relations and their practices is articulated around the two key concepts of ‘experience’ and ‘prediction/expectation’. Experience is considered here not as events or situations that merely ‘happen’ and affect workers’ lives and that workers interpret with their available cultural tools, but as those ones that become relevant or meaningful because workers make sense of them through specific historical categories. As Joan Scott has put it, this is because events or situations have no meanings of their own; or, in other words, because experience is constituted through the mediation of categories that confer meanings to situations and relations.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the same events—such as wage cuts or long working days—can be experienced in different ways and have different meanings (or no meanings at all) depending on the imaginary that shapes workers’ perceptions of collective relations. As William Sewell argues, wage cuts may produce unrest anywhere, but they are experienced as a ‘public injustice’ that can lead workers to take action only when workers make sense of the world through certain categories, such as when ‘material prosperity’ and ‘labour’ are considered the pillars of public life.<sup>9</sup>

In the analysis I am proposing here, experiences are meaningful events in themselves: that is to say, the product of the use of a certain categorical framework or imaginary in order to apprehend and make sense of specific collective relations and

situations that have no meaning by themselves. For this reason, I analyze how these experiences were constituted and changed throughout the nineteenth century and how this process played a crucial role in workers' changing attitudes towards the state. In so doing, I focus on primary sources in which unionized workers set forth their ways of experiencing their conflicts, their actions, and state intervention, including union newspapers, manifestos, private letters, books and pamphlets. My aim is to examine the underlying assumptions that articulated their experiences and drove their actions and explain why these notions changed over time.

The analytical category of prediction/expectation plays a crucial role here. The workers' imaginary provided them with the crucial assumptions on which they built their explanations about how labour relations operated. These explanations guided the logic of the solutions they put into practice, including unionism, strikes, and collective negotiation. In turn, the implementation of these solutions brought about the opportunity of testing the logic of workers' conceptions about human relations. The practical success or failure of workers' actions had deep consequences for workers' imaginary. An action that did not fulfill workers' objectives could lead them to challenge their way of making sense of collective relations and conflicts, developing existing notions and incorporating other assumptions into their imaginary, which in turn entailed the emergence of new forms of experiences and possibilities for action. After all, and according to Ernesto Laclau, if unionized workers felt attracted by new explanations and forms of action it was because they thought that existing interpretations and solutions were lacking and there existed better ways of understanding and solving their problems.<sup>10</sup> This is a crucial factor in explaining the change in the sense of the social that informed how unionized workers operated. My

analysis shows how contradictory or unexpected results of workers' actions caused a crisis in the existing imaginary that led to historical transformation of workers' actions.

In order to develop such analysis, this article is divided into two parts. In the first part I examine unionized Spanish workers' scepticism toward social legislation during the nineteenth century. In the second section I explore the change that occurred between 1860 and 1880, when a small (but growing) sector of unionized workers adopted new perspectives on the state and its role in labour conflicts. This transformation eventually split the labour movement and witnessed the growing influence of contradictory ideological trends: co-operativism, anarcho-sindicalism, and Marxist socialism.

### **Society without the social**

How could organized workers imagine a 'society without the social', and how did this guide their actions? These two questions must be answered through empirical analysis. I foreground those Spanish labourers who created unions, organized strikes as a weapon for negotiating labour conditions in a market context, and built wide alliances with other workers at local and national levels between 1840 and 1880. As in other contemporary labour movements, most of these labourers were male skilled workers from urban trades and the textile industry, a profile related to the slow industrialization of the Spanish economy in the nineteenth century. The majority lived in the province of Barcelona, although labour organizations steadily expanded across other industrial towns of Catalonia, Castile (including Madrid), Andalusia, Valencia, and the Basque Country. As occurred in other European countries, although unions developed and multiplied throughout the century, the conservative governments that controlled the Spanish state for the most part of this period persecuted them. Conversely, in periods of progressive

rule, such as 1840-43, 1854-56, and especially 1868-74, unionized workers could organize and carry out their actions publicly. In 1854-55 they prepared their first general strikes in Barcelona and in 1869-70 they created the first national federation of unions. The Spanish labour movement was not as big, stable and powerful as many of its Western counterparts, but the process that affected this movement – and which is the object of this essay – occurred at the same time as in other countries.<sup>11</sup>

Unionized Spanish workers had varying concerns and demands depending on their respective trades and labour conditions. However, they shared two basic aims that shaped their common project: the maintenance or increase of their wage levels and the defence of what they called their ‘human dignity’ and ‘natural freedoms and rights’ in the workplace.<sup>12</sup> In order to achieve such aims, these workers put two complementary solutions into practice: the creation of unions and the collective negotiation of labour conditions with employers, for which they demanded the support of the state or, rather, the state’s recognition of the workers’ ‘natural’ freedom to create associations and negotiate with employers. However, they did not ask for what is usually understood as ‘social or labour laws’ (the regulation of the working day, the regulation of child and female labour and the minimum wage) until the 1870s. Indeed, they even opposed state intervention in labour relations when the opportunity came. In 1844, the spinner and union leader Alberto Columbrí strongly criticized the Civil Governor of Barcelona who made unions illegal and forbade employers from cutting wages and ‘altering the interior order of the workshops’. Columbrí, much like other associated workers, repudiated falling wages but argued that public authorities should not meddle in issues that exclusively concerned workers and employers. According to him, the 1844 prohibition was an attack against their individual freedoms, and thus ‘it can only upset masters and

labourers, because it imposes obligations on all of them that did not favour their interests nor tend to diminish the mutual antagonism'.<sup>13</sup>

Judging from this and other testimonies, organized workers perceived state intervention as a restriction on their attributed rights in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1855 Catalan unions opposed the regulation of wage levels and the duration of labour contracts in the Manufacturing Industry Bill, the state's first labour regulation initiative. The representatives they sent to the Cortes (the Spanish parliament) argued that the government should not 'intervene in the fixation of wages or in the amount of service' because of 'the insurmountable limit of the ownership of the individual over himself'. Only the 'interest, either collective or individual, of employers and workers' could 'naturally' dictate the contracts.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the state that tried to regulate private relations among free individuals was acting against the 'nature' of these relations, which was based on the ideas of individual freedom and equality. The same year, the typographer and union leader Ramón Simó y Badia answered with an emphatic 'No' the question of whether workers wanted to fix 'the price of the workforce' by law.<sup>15</sup> According to an article published in the first Spanish union newspaper, *El Eco de la Clase Obrera*, this attitude derived from the conviction that wage levels only concerned workers and owners as free individuals. Authorities could not establish such levels and other labour conditions 'without attacking individuals' freedom, and this freedom is sacred'.<sup>16</sup>

In 1855, Catalan unions also rejected protective laws because they created 'privileges' among citizens. Their representatives argued that unionized workers 'want neither more nor less rights from the state than other citizens. The state does not quench our thirst, satisfy our hunger, cloth our bodies, or provide us with a home for the disabled'.<sup>17</sup> In 1869, the Association of Catalan Weavers declared that workers did not

intend to have a hateful ‘privilege of protection’ that distinguished them from other citizens.<sup>18</sup> With these public declarations, unionized workers wished to emphasize their firm conviction that their work and their freedom was sufficient to provide material security and a decent life.

This attitude did not exist before the creation of the first unions in 1840. In fact, the situation then was quite the reverse. In the Old Regime, workers from urban trades and the first textile factories sought protection from the Crown to defend the prerogatives of their trade communities. The royal authority was the guarantor of the corporate privileges and the hierarchical internal organization in each trade and guild. When masters wanted to change labour conditions against the rule of the trade, it was commonplace for officials to report their intentions to the king or local authorities.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, workers who created the first unions did not demand that authorities intervened in order to preserve the hierarchical order of the trade. Rather, they stated that workers and employers were ‘equal citizens’, an idea that trade officials would have found difficult to share (or understand) in earlier years. The primary aim of the Association of Cotton Weavers, the first and most important union created in Barcelona in 1840, was that workers were not ‘slaves, but equal citizens’ to owners.<sup>20</sup> No hierarchy was possible between them, except the professional one derived from coordination in the productive process. This idea was central to all the unions that were created later and that took the rules of the Association of Cotton Weavers as a model. Indeed, the idea that workers and employers were free and equal men became commonplace among unionized Spanish workers. As representatives of the Catalan unions argued before the Cortes in 1855:

We...do not abjure our rights of man when we enter a workshop. We do not find differences between those who work and those who supervise industrial operations because all of us take part equally in the creation of products. We respect and must respect foremen and employers because we want them to respect us. Do we not have this right? Reciprocity is a law of Humanity, and we are men.<sup>21</sup>

This idea was precisely what led unionized workers to interpret and reject protective laws as examples of legal inequality or exclusive rights among equal citizens. In turn, they tried to guarantee their ‘natural freedoms’ as free men, especially what they called the rights to make a living from their work, to own the product of their work, and to associate in order to secure the previous two rights. From their perspective, the exercise of such rights represented the more logical way of regulating relations between equally free citizens. Unionized cotton weavers from Barcelona proclaimed in 1841 that to solve labour conflicts ‘it was enough’ to exercise the ‘rights that nature...has provided us with’.<sup>22</sup> In 1855, in their first national-scale mobilization, roughly 30,000 workers signed a petition to the Cortes deputies demanding the right to exercise individual freedoms, especially that of association:

We do not want you to attack individual freedom, because it is sacred and inviolable; or that you kill free trade, because it is the life of the arts; or that you charge the state with the obligation of coming to our aid... . We only demand the free exercise of one right: the right of ASSOCIATION... . [Until] all the interests competing today are in harmony, you cannot think your mission is finished. Our interests and those of the masters...are in an endless war. Pacify them. If your

caduceus is freedom, proclaim it for everything and everyone. Do not fear freedom, because it is order. Do not hinder freedom, because it limits itself. Do not obstruct its development in any of its manifestations, because it is the fusion of all of these shapes, as light is the fusion of all the colors.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, organized workers were convinced that individual freedom, which included their freedom to associate, could naturally regulate labour relations. This was so because, in their view, individual freedom possessed the capability of ‘limiting itself’. As the representatives of Catalan unions declared in 1855, the boundary of freedom ‘lies in the freedom of the next individual; the worker’s freedom bound by the manufacturer’s, and the manufacturer’s by the worker’s’.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the specific situations these workers experienced as ‘exploitation’ were understood as the lack of recognition of their attributed freedoms. The weaver and labour leader José Roca y Galés wrote in 1864:

We want nothing from the state, but that which is naturally ours: our rights. As lovers of freedom, we worship it; as devotees of work, we want it to be paid with justice. That is why we want freedom first; and later, as a result of it, we want the moral and material improvement of the working class. To achieve this objective, we believe that the best option is the absolute freedom of association; with it we will be able to face all exploitations that we suffer[.] [A]nd instead of continuing this struggle between capital and work, *which is the outcome of the lack of freedom and rights for some and the excess of privileges for others*, we will reconcile the brotherhood of all the classes with the workers’ emancipation.<sup>25</sup>



Although liberal authorities and many employers shared the workers' interest in preserving individual freedom, they did not share the idea of that workers were free to associate in order to create unions—which they found to be organizations that limited the free market of labour, and free, unfettered negotiation between individual workers and employers. Unionized workers perceived this attitude as proof that authorities and employers were not as liberal as they proclaimed to be. Thus, they complained that the Spanish liberal regime's formal declaration of equal civil rights in the 1830s was not enough to guarantee the exercise of these rights in the workshops. Poverty and individual contracts made workers accept the labour conditions proposed by employers, many of whom did not respect their 'human dignity' and rights. In isolation, labourers became 'slaves', 'proletarians', 'men with no rights', 'non-citizens'. The solution to this problem was to exercise one of their 'natural' freedoms, the right to associate, to limit employers' 'abuses' that undermined workers' rights. In 1855, Catalan union representatives explained to the Cortes that the 'power of the workers' associations' would make employers give up 'exaggerated pretensions' in order to achieve 'harmony between capital and labour'. Likewise, the newspaper *La Solidaridad*, from Madrid, stated in 1870: 'Labourer: if you want to be a free citizen, join the association. Isolation is slavery, is death'.<sup>26</sup>

The emergence of Spanish unionism was then closely linked to the new identity of the worker as a 'citizen' and a 'man' with 'natural' freedoms that the state had to preserve. Between 1840 and 1870, unions and committees for collective negotiation multiplied in the main cities in spite of tough repression. Organized workers resisted persecution because they experienced it as unacceptable state intrusion into the private sphere of their freedom. Banning their associations entailed the inadmissible denial of their rights, which in turn allowed labour exploitation. In 1841, leaders of unionized

weavers from Barcelona argued that their association ‘does not need the government’s or anyone else’s approval[.] [W]e have enough with our natural rights... . Our association is a voluntary and reciprocal bond that is not subject to dissolution’.<sup>27</sup> The principal reason for the unionized workers’ opposition to the Manufacturing Industry Bill (1855) was that it denied them the sacred right to associate, while allowing employers’ organizations to do so. Organized workers interpreted this as the creation of a ‘privilege’ between equal citizens that pushed them to ‘slavery’. Their delegates stated that ‘the object of this law’ had to be ‘to equalize, and not to distinguish’.<sup>28</sup>

Spanish unionism was rooted in the workers’ perception of their hardships as caused by the lack of recognition of their alleged natural rights, and not by the destructive logic of capitalist social organization. This explains the workers’ conception of the state that underlined their petitions to authorities. From the workers’ perspective, authorities had to assure individual rights assisting free bargaining between equal citizens, but without interfering in those negotiations. As unions from Barcelona asserted in 1841, labour conflicts ‘will stop when the government uses its means to inspire confidence in capitalists and journeymen without meddling in the direction or regulation of individual interests’.<sup>29</sup> From 1840 onward many unions demanded that the authorities enforce previous contracts and labour conditions in the face of employers wanting to introduce change, particularly with respect to wage levels. In 1840 and 1841, unionized weavers and spinners from Barcelona and other industrial Catalan towns requested authorities to defend workers’ ‘right to live’ through their own efforts by preserving the tariffs of prices that many owners were diminishing.<sup>30</sup> In 1854, unionized spinners from Barcelona asked for the support of local authorities to avoid the introduction of self-acting mules into the factories. They argued that these machines were introduced without negotiation and negatively affected their labour conditions and

their rights as free individuals.<sup>31</sup> However, in all these petitions unionized workers did not demand that the authorities directly regulate labour conditions.

The roots of unionized workers' perspective were located in classic liberal political theory, according to which the state had to protect individual rights without meddling in the private sphere of relations among free individuals. Liberal authorities and many owners also shared this idea, although for them labour negotiations had to be strictly among individuals. Conversely, organized workers included unions as legitimate actors in labour negotiations and demanded the creation of mixed arbitration committees (*jurados mixtos*), composed of workers' and employers' representatives. In the workers' view, these committees were legitimate institutions because they represented the interests and rights of free individuals. For this reason, as the unions' delegates from Catalonia argued in 1855, mixed committees were entitled to settle 'wisely and successfully the wage issues, assigning the tasks of maintaining their agreements and silencing exclusive exigencies to the authority'.<sup>32</sup> The role of the state in collective negotiations was limited to ratifying pacts reached by equal citizens. Many owners bitterly rejected this demand because they considered collective negotiations an attack on individual freedoms and the free market, a reasoning that also led the authorities to ban them.<sup>33</sup> Yet, as *El Eco de la Clase Obrera* put it in 1855, unionized workers regarded collective agreements as the outcome of the 'complete freedom' of individuals, as 'sacred' and with 'more power than the laws' of any particular government.<sup>34</sup> This drove them to collaborate actively with the authorities in the rare interludes in which mixed committees were allowed and had official support — as happened in Barcelona in 1841 and 1854-55.

As we have seen, the unionized workers' way of experiencing labour conditions and conflicts and envisaging their solutions was based on a set of interrelated

assumptions about the real world such as the liberal notions of ‘individual freedom’, ‘equality’, ‘human nature’, ‘natural right’, and ‘citizenship’. Together, these assumptions created a complex and unstable categorical framework that workers used to make sense of their labour conditions and that provided the logical basis for their identities and actions. In other words, this was the imaginary used by unionized workers to make sense of labour relations. An essential notion that operated as the basic nexus in this imaginary was that of the ‘individual’, ‘man’, or ‘citizen’ as subject of ‘natural’ rights and freedoms. In drawing on this notion, organized labourers perceived ‘society’ as an aggregate or association of free individuals. Since they were considered to be free subjects prior to the creation of society, individuals were ‘pre-social’ beings. Society emerged as the result of a contract among them, by which they sacrificed a portion of their natural independence in exchange for security and prosperity. If society itself was an association of individuals, then associations (including unions) could be considered to be an appropriate solution to protect individuals’ rights. Since associations were based on the individual freedom of their members, they could be used to preserve the independence of poor labourers against the abuses of employers. It was this conception of society that led those workers who created unions to join together to defend their rights in order to emancipate themselves from poverty through their own efforts. Yet, while organized workers used this ‘individualistic’ or ‘contractual’ notion of society to make sense of labour relations, they did not invent it. Rather, it was born in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century as an alternative to the corporate conceptions of collective relations from the Old Regime. Indeed, this notion became the basic pillar upon which liberal regimes (including the Spanish one) were built in the nineteenth century.<sup>35</sup> Spanish workers were using it in order to make sense of their world, and, in

so doing, they perceived themselves as free and equal individuals entitled to rights they had never demanded before.

This notion of society explains why Spanish labourers did not perceive labour relations in terms of class struggle. Although they talked about the existence of different classes and identified themselves as members of the ‘working classes’, the most meaningful (in the sense of being more *objective*) fact for those labourers was that they were free individuals who belonged to a community of equal citizens. Indeed, the term ‘class’ had a nebulous meaning in their proclamations, being frequently used as a synonym for ‘trade’.<sup>36</sup> Belonging to a class was, in large part, an accidental aspect in relation to the more essential idea of being a ‘free citizen’ in unionized workers’ identities. This explains why these workers did not refer to the ‘owner class’ as the *Other* from which they differed and upon which their common identity was built.<sup>37</sup> While they argued that employers and employees had different economic interests, they also posed that these interests were compatible since both groups belonged to the same community of citizens. This is the crucial assumption that led organized workers to persistently insist that ‘social harmony’ between them was possible and indispensable — even though many employers rejected unionized workers’ understanding of that harmony.

The *Other* from whom unionized workers differentiated themselves was rather the *bad citizen*, and more specifically, the ‘bad employer’. From the workers’ standpoint, the cause of labour exploitation lay not in the current mode of social organization, but in the moral conduct of certain (not all) employers. Unionized workers distinguished between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ owners. The former did not cut wages or mistreat their labourers, attended to unions’ demands, and were willing to negotiate with their employees. Workers considered them as ‘humanitarian citizens’, ‘honest’, and

‘supportive employers’ and named them in union manifestos as role models for other owners. Thus, the fact of belonging to the owner class did not necessarily transform individuals into exploiters. Rather, the term ‘exploiter’ defined those employers who did not respect employees’ rights. Workers called them ‘monopolistic’, ‘oppressors’, and ‘selfish’ individuals who put their interests before other citizens’ freedoms. Their names were published in the working press as illustrations of ‘immoral citizens’. Unions focused their actions on bad employers and considered good employers potential allies during labour conflicts. Several examples could be cited to show this. Take for instance one of the most challenging fights of this period: the so-called ‘half-hour conflict’ that affected the cotton spinning sector in Barcelona in 1856. The union of spinners published the names of the seventeen ‘exploiters’ and ‘selfish’ owners who were extending spinners’ workday by half an hour. They also mentioned the names of the forty-nine ‘more humanitarian’ employers that were maintaining ‘social harmony’ and asked for their help.<sup>38</sup>

In addition, the ‘individualistic’ or ‘contractual’ notion of society also defined the meaning of the adjective ‘social’ as used by the unionized workers. The ‘*social* revolution’ they tried to start during the Spanish revolutions of 1854 and 1868 did not challenge the wage system or the free market that articulated labour relations. As the associated workers from Sallent (Barcelona) declared in 1854, their objective was rather to make labour relations compatible with a ‘well-understood freedom’, by which they meant the right to associate and form mixed committees.<sup>39</sup> Thus, a ‘social revolution’ would bring a new political and social order where workers would enjoy their ‘natural’ freedoms to create unions and negotiate with employers as equal citizens. This meaning had nothing to do with the notion of the social that emerged later and that is examined in the next section.

### **The labour movement and the emergence of the social**

From the above it seems clear that unionized workers' rejection of state intervention in labour relations was not the outcome of their putative 'lack of maturity', as many historians have argued.<sup>40</sup> This explanation would only be valid were we drawing from the idea that labour movements had an inner 'social' character that eventually impelled them to demand social reforms, which was not the case. Neither was this attitude a mere reaction to state persecution, as has also been argued.<sup>41</sup> For we have seen that repression itself did not preclude unionized workers from obstinately invoking the state as the protector of citizen rights, collective negotiation, and labour agreements that some employers wanted to break. Rather, unionized workers' attitudes are better understood as the consequence of the imaginary and the specific notion of society through which workers made sense of labour relations and actions.

The conceptions and practices that emerged from this imaginary proved to be very resilient. Indeed, they prevailed among organized Spanish workers through the beginning of the twentieth century, providing the basis for what some historians have called the 'Spanish workers' political culture' until the 1930s.<sup>42</sup> This means that the relevant question that must be answered is *not* why these workers rejected state intervention (which has been the question that has guided historical research on the relationship between Spanish unions and authorities), but why some of them adopted a different set of attitudes towards the state from the 1860s onwards. In this period, new conceptions and explanations of labour conflicts and the role of the state emerged within the Spanish labour movement. In the 1860s, a small but active group of workers expressed their disappointment with unionism. These workers belonged to several urban trades and professional sectors, but all of them participated in unions; indeed, some

were union leaders and organizers who had been involved in union actions for years. Here I focus on those who frequently wrote in unions' newspapers and pamphlets, where they set forth their frustration, developed new explanations about labour conflicts, and defended new forms of actions that were based on a conception of society which was very different from the 'contractual' one we have seen above.

These new explanations were informed by how workers interpreted the results of union strategies over time. The main argument was that, despite all the sacrifices and efforts made during decades of fighting, workers were still poor and subjugated. As labour organizer Antonio Gusart stated in 1864, 'for twenty-four years [unions] have lived with a variable degree of freedom. Twenty-four years lost in the apathy of routine!'<sup>43</sup> Around the same time, Columbrí analyzed his own syndical experience and concluded that unionism was 'mistaken': 'my condition as a worker and labour leader impelled me to examine this situation... I wish I could transfer to my co-workers the inner conviction that this analysis has brought me, that is, the *uselessness* of the immense sacrifices made for the sake of a mistake'. This interpretation of union fights undermined the workers' deep conviction that the mere exercise of individual freedom to associate would solve their hardships. Columbrí bitterly pointed out that if unions 'aspire to *improve* working-class conditions through the *rise in wage levels*, then [workers] believe in a...false conviction...which I have believed in for a long time'. His impressions of the labour struggles of the organized spinners from Barcelona were devastating: between the 1840s and 1850s, unions had brought them no benefits at all. Salaries, for instance, had evolved independently of union fights: wages were high 'while the number of machines grew and there were not enough spinners to operate them', and not due to the efficacy of collective pressure. The introduction of the self-acting spinning mule from the late 1840s onwards resulted in spinners who 'could



hardly maintain the *status quo* of their salaries'. Their wages 'were reduced to the lowest level' despite the unions' opposition. As a result, the 'big pecuniary sacrifices' that spinners made to uphold their associations were useless. This drove Columbrí to the 'conviction that the workers' efforts to succeed with just their own savings were hopeless'. It was another way of saying that unions and collective negotiation could not solve labour exploitation.<sup>44</sup>

This was not the only way of experiencing this situation. Most unionized Spanish workers kept blaming 'selfish employers' for the failure of labour negotiations and 'the critical state of anxiety in which the peaceful inhabitants and lovers of true freedom and order are', in the words of the spokesmen of the Union Federation from Barcelona in 1869. Accordingly, they asserted that 'social harmony' was possible thanks to the support of the 'employers of good faith'.<sup>45</sup> In this view, unionism was a valid strategy whose failure was due to external facts. Indeed, 'failure' was too hard a word. Many union fights in the 1860s and 1870s were successful and unionized workers achieved collective agreements that regulated wages and workdays in several trades and sectors.<sup>46</sup>

However, unions also lost many battles and, above all, they had not guaranteed workers' freedoms in an effective way after three decades of struggle. The disappointment showed by workers who were critical of unionism was especially acute with respect to the feasibility of collective negotiation. Why did so many owners break labour agreements, devalue workers' rights, and pressure authorities into destroying unions? How was it possible that they obstinately rejected the opportunity to act as 'good citizens'? It was no coincidence that the first critiques of unionism emerged after the failure of the mixed committees in Barcelona in 1854-55, when the authorities, pressured by many owners, put an end to collective bargaining.<sup>47</sup> This lack of

correspondence between workers' expectations and the outcomes of their disputes called into question some of the fundamental assumptions on which unionism was based. Some workers began to argue that previous fights had showed that labour conciliation was simply impossible. This meant questioning the essential idea that employers and employees were equal citizens who could put the general welfare of the citizen community before their particular interests. Those who took this path stopped talking about employers' 'misuse' or 'abuse' of individual freedom as the cause of labour conflicts. At the same time, they began to refer to social and economic organization itself as the ultimate cause of workers' hardships. From this new perspective, labour exploitation did not derive from individual misbehavior of some selfish employers, but from a vicious social organization that provided workers and employers with contradictory interests. In the words of Columbrí, 'the emergence of [labour struggles] all around Europe is evident proof that...there is a *purely social cause*, which is the offspring of the depraved organization of the industry'.<sup>48</sup>

For Columbrí and those who shared his perspective, social organization had its own operating principles that determined workers' and employers' interests and constrained individual freedom. As individuals could not transcend their own social interests, their moral and individual responsibility was pushed into the background. In this view, the notion that workers and employers were equal citizens who shared a horizon of common interests was displaced by the idea that society grouped individuals in different 'classes' with irreconcilable interests. The distinction between 'good' and 'bad' employers ceased to make sense. At the same time, some workers began to state that social organization made *all* owners 'exploiters' and 'parasites'. They regarded class division and social circumstances as the main factors explaining employers' attitudes and labour conflicts. In 1884, Juan Cordobés, a worker from Madrid, set forth

in a particularly clear way this new perspective to the members of a committee created by the government to gather information about labour conflicts. For Cordobés, workers' hardships derived not from the lack of morality of employers and workers, but from the social 'class organization' that determined their living and labour conditions:

I do not believe that governments and people are bad, or that the bourgeois is evil... I do not think anyone has bad feelings, but it is the circumstances that place them in certain conditions. So I am against all governments and all capitalists, though as individuals I may be their friend. What I condemn is the class organization, the way of being, and the form in which exploitation is materialized. I will never condemn the individual.<sup>49</sup>

This was the core of the transformation that entailed the emergence of a new conception of collective relations (namely the social) among Spanish workers. One can see how this new notion of society was a logical development of the previous notion. The 'contractual' notion had led workers to experience labour conflicts as the effects of immoral behavior, 'abuse', and the lack of freedom in relations between free citizens. But since solutions designed to deal with these conflicts (unionism and collective negotiation) were ineffective (or not as effective as they were thought), then it was possible to think that social circumstances or conditions, such as class belonging, exerted a stronger, even determining influence over individual interests and actions. The ideas of individual freedom and social determination were linked as two faces of a coin. The weakening of the former entailed the strengthening of the latter.

The rise of this 'social' perspective brought a new understanding of labour conflicts. Some workers began to argue that hardship was determined by 'social laws' that could be 'uncovered'. In the 1860s, Columbrí was confident that 'a Newton of socialism' would soon discover the 'laws' that regulated society and produced labour

conflicts. In 1869, a group of union leaders and associated workers from Barcelona created the newspaper *La Federación* with the aim of promoting the study of ‘social science’ among workers. Social science would solve the question of workers’ emancipation by ‘achieving the radical cure of the sick society’. By ‘social science’ they understood the several socialist currents (cooperativism, Proudhonism, Bakuninism, Marxism) that were spreading among unions in Spain and Europe, all claiming to ‘discover’ the social basis of labour conflicts.<sup>50</sup>

These workers began to talk of social organization as an underlying, objective reality whose regulatory principles explained labour conflicts and could be discovered and analyzed. Their interest in social organization brought their attention to the treatises of those who studied economic relations at that time, that is, classical liberal economists. Economists considered the economy an auto-regulated sphere of relations based on the principle of individual exchange of products and services. They argued that the inner logic of these relationships could be unveiled through empirical analysis of the ‘economic laws’ that ruled market operations. In the 1860s, some economic laws ‘discovered’ by economists acquired relevance for some workers. They considered these laws to be immutable principles that determined labour conditions in capitalist society, paying special attention to the Ricardian ‘Iron Law of Wages’, which stated that wage levels were proportionally related to the prices of consumer goods in the free market. Thus, any effort to increase wages was in vain because salaries tended to remain at the subsistence level.<sup>51</sup>

The Iron Law of Wages provided workers with a new way of making sense of wage relations and struggles that had seriously undermined union strategy. In 1866, Roca y Galés stated that every wage improvement eventually made living costs more expensive. Thus, since the fight for better wages never achieved its objective, it had to

be abandoned.<sup>52</sup> The same conclusion was drawn by Gusart, who felt that ‘to fight selfishness...with inefficient remedies’, such as unionism, ‘was to aggravate the problem, to walk to perdition, to waste time in the foolish stubbornness of fighting against the eternal and indisputable laws of progress’.<sup>53</sup> ‘And since it must produce this result’, Columbrí pointed out, ‘is it reasonable that workers persevere to obtain wage increases?...Has it not been proved that, if our real aspiration is to *improve* the working classes, it is necessary to...appeal to more efficient solutions?’<sup>54</sup>

From this perspective, the mere exercise of individual freedoms, such as the freedom to associate, could not overcome social circumstances that determined labour conflicts. Unions had failed because they could not challenge the social organization that created exploitation. As a result of all this, exploitation was entirely redefined as a new kind of problem: a ‘social problem’ that required a change in workers’ goals and forms of organization. Instead of controlling ‘selfish employers’ through collective negotiation, workers had to transform the ‘social principles’ and ‘laws’ that regulated labour relations. In other words, workers had to change society itself. As Columbrí argued, ‘if men, when materializing their instinct of sociability and organizing their societies, had used the proper means, the result would have been the creation of a welfare compatible with the imperfection of their [individual] nature’.<sup>55</sup> Thus, if social organization that produced workers’ hardships was based on a set of principles such as personal benefit, the free market, and the wage system—which unionized workers had not called into question before— then workers had to substitute those principles with new ones that preserved workers’ ‘natural’ rights. In 1869, some leaders from the Union Federation from Barcelona defended the reorganization of labour relations on new ‘social principles’ such as the defence of workers’ natural’ right to own the product of their work: ‘we think that *salary* is a social infamy...we want labour to be above the

refined selfishness and usury of those parasites [the employers]... . [T]here will not be equity and prosperity until the great social principle that *work must be the workers' property* is fulfilled'.<sup>56</sup>

As a consequence of this 'social turn', some workers started to consider the state under a new light. They began to refer to it as a *social* institution, that is, as the product of social organization based on labour exploitation. Previously, unions had complained about the state's bias in dealing with labour issues, especially as far as public recognition and protection of their rights in the workplace was concerned. However, they had kept asking for such recognition because they considered authorities to be responsible for defending citizens' rights. But if the state itself was the product of an 'unfair' social organization, it would not defend their citizens' rights. Rather, authorities would maintain social and economic organization as it was. From this perspective, the state was a tool of the owner class to preserve social order and, therefore, workers' confidence in authorities as protectors of citizen rights was unfounded.

This new 'social' conception of the state opened the possibility of perceiving state repression not as the outcome of the lack of liberal character of authorities, but as an experience of 'class oppression'. This perception led those workers who were critical of existing unionism to revise union strategies concerning the state in two different ways: the state had either to be avoided and completely excluded from labour issues, or to be controlled and used as a tool for social change. Both trends were critical of previous union strategies and emphasized working-class independence and the ability of the working class to transform social organization, but they differed in how to carry out this transformation. This explains why workers became interested in new forms of organization and practices advocated by the new socialist currents that had emerged in other European countries between the 1850s and 1860s in response to the same

problems that Spanish workers were facing. Their propaganda echoed the same feelings of frustration with prevailing unionism, provided new explanations of labour conflicts, and presented new programmes of action whose objective was the transformation of the social order.

Cooperativists and anarchists (who in the 1870s were usually ‘Bakuninists’) emphasized that the state and capitalists were no longer needed for workers’ emancipation from exploitation. In addition, they postulated a new way of organizing labour relations based on the collaboration of workers and the elimination of the capitalist class. Spanish cooperativism spread in the 1860s: roughly forty associations attended the first conference of cooperatives in Barcelona in 1865. Cooperativists stated that the ‘cooperative system’ could change capitalist social relations since it entailed the eradication of the class divide and guaranteed workers’ ‘natural’ rights. Cooperatives provided workers with direct control over production and capital, introduced the collective management of capital and work, eliminated the figure of the capitalist, and eradicated the wage system. In 1869, cooperativist leaders from Catalonia felt confident that cooperativism:

is prone to unite labour and capital, not as it is today, when the incorrectly named *social order* is divided between a *capitalist* class and a *wage-earning* class; but by making the worker...become himself both labourer and capitalist..., being the one that makes capital useless by exchanging products for products... . These are our deep convictions, based on experience and supported by social science.<sup>57</sup>

This view accentuated the independence of workers’ associations with regard to the state. The expansion of cooperatives by itself would gradually transform society without state intervention. As Roca y Galés wrote, cooperatives could carry out ‘the social ideal

within the widest freedom and completely independent from the state, in harmony with the natural rights of man'.<sup>58</sup>

This idea also inspired the first anarchist groups in the 1870s, some of whom participated in the cooperativist movement. Anarchists differed from cooperativists in that they pleaded for the direct destruction of the state (as defender of an oppressive regime) and its replacement by workers' associations. They added that unions had to abandon their wage objectives and collective negotiations and start social transformation through a general strike. The revolution (also called *liquidación social*, 'social liquidation') would provide workers' organizations with the means of production, which would be used according to the cooperative principle.<sup>59</sup> Following this idea, anarchists approached and tried to control Spanish unions, influencing the leaders of the first labour national federations in the 1870s and 1880s: the Regional Spanish Federation of the First International (*Federación Regional Española*, 1870-1881) and the Federation of Workers of the Spanish Federation (*Federación de Trabajadores de la Región Española*, 1881-1888).<sup>60</sup>

Cooperativists and anarchists did not provide the only characterizations of the state and the social character of labour conflicts. As Columbrí pointed out in 1864, if labour conflicts were 'social problems' caused by 'the economic constitution of societies', then individual freedom was also socially limited. Therefore, strategies based on the mere exercise of such freedom, such as unionism and cooperativism, could not overcome the social factors that produced exploitation. The only way to establish 'the absolute freedom of the individual' was to use instruments that directly acted on labour relations, the state being the most obvious of them. In the 1860s, Columbrí, who had earlier censured state intervention in labour relations, ascribed to the state the responsibility of acting on the social mechanisms that created labour conflicts. Public



authorities, ‘acknowledging their duty of making all kinds of injustices disappear’ and using ‘the extremely powerful means they have’, had to participate ‘in the work initiated by the working classes themselves’.<sup>61</sup>

This idea was the core of the unions’ first petitions for social laws in the 1870s. Some union representatives argued that the state could ‘help’ them protect workers’ rights, especially if it was controlled by an allied party such as the Republican Party. In July of 1873, while the Republican Party was in power, the Manufacturing Union (*Unión Manufacturera*), a labour federation that claimed 40,000 members, demanded the prohibition of child labour, the hygienic control of workshops, equal pay for women and men, an eight-hour workday, a minimum wage, free primary and professional education for workers, and a credit system for workers’ associations.<sup>62</sup>

Yet, this petition was ambiguous concerning the role of the state. The leaders of the Manufacturing Union considered such measures complementary to freedom to associate and mixed committees and did not clarify whether they wanted social laws or only state support for collective negotiation on these issues. However, this petition was the point of departure for the development of trends that defended more systematic state intervention, such as so-called ‘opportunist socialism’ and Marxist socialism. From the late 1870s onwards, these currents founded their own parties and labour organizations. Opportunist socialism had the support of former branches of the Manufacturing Union (such as the *Tres Clases de Vapor*), whereas Marxists created the Spanish Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, PSOE) and the General Union of Workers (*Unión General de Trabajadores*, UGT) in 1888.

Spanish Marxists harshly criticized traditional union strategies in their manifestoes: ‘as extraordinary as their strength may be, [unions] will never establish [favorable labour conditions] by way of strike’. They alluded to the Iron Law of Wages

to hold that unions would never overcome the social logic that produced exploitation and periodic economic crises when employers broke collective agreements.<sup>63</sup> Marxists argued that only state action could address social imbalances, which led them to organize campaigns for the legal implementation of the eight-hour working day and the prohibition of child labour in the 1880s.<sup>64</sup> However, since Marxist groups argued that the class of owners controlled the state, they refused to collabourate with the ‘bourgeois state’ and its incipient social reforms until 1904. From their perspective, effective social laws were those that workers ‘conquered’ and ‘imposed’ on the state.<sup>65</sup> As a result, even those Spanish unions influenced by Marxist ideas remained hostile towards social legislation until the turn of the century.

From the 1880s onwards, cooperativists, anarchists, and Marxist socialists fought against each other (and sometimes among themselves) in order to gain influence among unionized workers, as occurred in other Western countries.<sup>66</sup> It is indisputable that the ideological ascendancy of these currents grew throughout this period and became an active factor in extending the notion of the social among workers and in consolidating workers’ changing attitude toward the state. Yet, although the rise of this new notion of society employed a range of ideological perspectives, it was not merely ‘ideological’. Ideological influence is not enough to explain why these trends emerged in those years and not earlier, why they attracted a group of workers while others rejected them, and why they took specific forms in Spain. These issues are better understood when we take into account the deeper transformation of the workers’ imaginary, which changed workers’ perceptions, and experiences of their hardships and actions. In other words, new ideologies had an impact on Spanish workers’ perceptions of the world because a deeper change in workers’ conception of society was taking place. Indeed, new ideologies were themselves one of the products of this change. For

this reason, their expansion among Spanish workers must be understood not as a mere ‘ideological’ transformation, but as a visible result of a crucial change within the workers’ imaginary that drove them to provide new explanations and take new actions.<sup>67</sup>

In addition, the emergent interest of the Spanish government in social legislation in the 1880s and the implementation of the first social laws in the 1900s made many workers reflect on the possible advantages of state intervention for the defence of their ‘natural’ rights. However, the prevalence of earlier conceptions of labour relations and the state among workers made it difficult for Marxist socialists, anarchists, and even the reformist government to gain control of the labour movement. Unions’ insistence on freedom to associate and the creation of mixed committees led Marxist socialists and anarchists to postpone their social revolutionary goals, to adapt their programmes, and to negotiate with unions — a process that also occurred in other labour movements. The result was that the ‘individualistic’ notion of society was not displaced by the idea of the social among most organized workers. The particular development of the new currents after 1880 can be considered an effect of the complex and contradictory mixture of different assumptions about the meanings of collective human relations and their related practices.<sup>68</sup>

## **Conclusions**

This analysis has shown the implications that denaturalizing the category of society has for the historical analysis of the Spanish labour movement and relationships between unions and authorities. If the meaning of labour relations and conditions is not intrinsic to those relations and conditions, but depends on the imaginary employed by workers to make sense of them, then the social was not an objective reality waiting to be uncovered

by workers. Rather, it was the product of a historical process of constant re-elaboration of the meaning of human relations; a process that is always ‘incomplete’ since, as Laclau argues, the operation of making sense of these relations permanently produces contradictions that are the source of change for historical identities, experiences, and actions.<sup>69</sup>

In the nineteenth century, the majority of Spanish workers viewed society as an aggregate of free individuals. This led them to experience labour conflicts as a result of individual selfishness and to design solutions based on the respect to individual ‘natural’ freedoms and rights (such as the creation of unions). Accordingly, they demanded the state to guarantee those freedoms and perceived social laws as ‘interferences’ of the state in the private sphere of individual freedoms. The different attitudes concerning the state that emerged later entailed a deep transformation in the concept of society that had shaped workers’ conceptions of collective relations. In this change, the contradictions derived from the use of the ‘contractual’ notion of society in understanding labour conflicts played a key role. Such contradictions arose when practices based on the previous notion of society (unionism and collective negotiation) did not bring about the predicted emancipation of the workers from labour exploitation. Workers’ frustrated expectations of unionism weakened their conviction in existing conceptions of labour relations and conflicts, opening up for them the possibility of adopting alternative explanations and actions.

The new notion of the social (and the new explanations of labour conflicts and actions that this notion entailed) emerged as a result of this weakening of the preexisting notion of society within workers’ imaginary. As a result, some organized workers came to perceive labour conflicts as ‘social problems’ whose solutions required the transformation of the ‘social principles and laws’ that ruled collective relations. It was

then when a new notion of the state as a ‘social institution’ emerged among these workers, a notion that implied that the state could be controlled by certain social classes to maintain or transform collective relations. New attitudes concerning the state appeared among organized workers, including the idea of state intervention through laws in order to regulate labour relations — but also the idea of destroying the state as a system of political control of the ruling classes.

This suggests that the rise of the social was not a process circumscribed to political and intellectual elite circles alone and that workers were not the mere objects of the projects of social reform, but that the emergence of the social was a more complex phenomenon in which workers played an active role. This means that the deep changes within the liberal imaginary that brought about the notion of the social also affected popular classes in ways that existing studies have not explored yet. This finding could enhance prevailing theoretical perspectives on the history of the social and the formation of social interventionist states.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> See, P. Thane, ‘The Working Class and State “Welfare” in Britain, 1880-1914’ in D. Gladstone (ed.), *Before Beveridge: Welfare Before the Welfare State* (London, 1999); H. Pelling, ‘The Working Class and the Origins of the Welfare State’ in H. Pelling (ed.),

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*Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain*, (London, 1968); E. Anderson, 'Ideas in Action: The Politics of Prussian Child Labour Reform, 1817-1839', *Theory and Society*, 42 (2013), 86-87 and 96; G. Esping-Andersen, 'The Emerging Realignment Between Labour Movements and Welfare States' in M. Regini (ed.), *The Future of Labour Movements* (London, 1993); C. Howell, *Trade Unions and the State. The Construction of Industrial Relations Institutions in Britain, 1890-2000* (Princeton, 2007); W. Streeck and K. Yamamura (eds.), *The Origins of Nonliberal Capitalism. Germany and Japan in Comparison* (Ithaca, 2001); P. Rosanvallon, 'État et société. Du XIXe siècle à nos jours' in J. Le Goff (ed.), *Histoire de la France. L'État et les pouvoirs* (Paris, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> See G. Eley, 'Is All the World a Text? From Social History to the History of Society Two Decades Later' in T.J. McDonald (ed.), *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor, 1996), 193-244; G. Eley and K. Nield, *The Future of Class in History. What's Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor, 2007); M.A. Cabrera, 'The Crisis of the Social and Post-social History', *The European Legacy*, 10 (2005), 611-20, and M.A. Cabrera, *Postsocial History. An Introduction* (New York, 2004); M.A. Cabrera and A. Santana, 'De la historia social a la historia de lo social', *Ayer*, 62 (2006), 165-92; P. Joyce, 'Introduction' in P. Joyce, (ed.) *The Social in Question. New Bearings in History and the Social Sciences* (London, 2002), and P. Joyce, 'What is the Social in Social History?' *Past and Present*, 206 (2010), 213-48.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the main general syntheses of the Spanish labour movement, including J. Fontana and J. Maluquer, 'Los orígenes del movimiento obrero en España' in *Historia del movimiento obrero* (Buenos Aires, 1972), 449-80; M. Izard, 'Orígenes del movimiento obrero en España' in S. Castillo, C. Forcadell, M.C. García and J.S. Pérez (eds), *Estudios de Historia de España* (Madrid, 1980), 295-314; C. Seco, 'Los

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orígenes del movimiento obrero español', *Anales de Historia Contemporánea*, 5 (1986), 11-26; M. Tuñón de Lara, *El movimiento obrero en la historia de España* (Madrid, 1972). Many recent general works essentially assume the same social explanatory theses set forth in the aforementioned studies. See, for instance, T. Abelló, *El movimiento obrero en España, siglos XIX y XX* (Barcelona, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> P. Heywood, 'The Labour Movement in Spain Before 1914' in D. Geary (ed.), *Labour and Socialist Movements in Europe before 1914* (Oxford, 1989); E. Malefakis, 'A Comparative Analysis of Workers' Movements in Spain and Italy' in R. Gunther (ed.), *Politics, Society and Democracy. The Case of Spain* (Boulder, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, C. Seco, 'El Instituto de Reformas Sociales', *Revista del Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales*, extraordinary volume (2003), 27-37; A. Rivera, 'Orden social, reforma social, Estado social' in S. Castillo and J.M. Ortiz (eds), *Estado, protesta y movimientos sociales* (Bilbao, 1998), 3-17; J. Trías and A. Elorza, *Federalismo y reforma social en España (1840-1870)* (Madrid, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> J. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History. Revised Edition* (Nueva York, 1999), 53-67.

<sup>7</sup> Poovey, 'The Liberal Civil Subject and the Social in Eighteenth-Century British Moral Philosophy' in P. Joyce (ed.), *Social in Question, op. cit.*; C. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham-London, 2004), 49-50. See also Joyce, 'Introduction', *op. cit.*, 5-6 and G. Eley, 'Empire, Ideology, and the East: Thoughts on Nazism's Spatial Imaginary', in *Nazism as Fascism. Violence, Ideology, and the Ground of Consent in Germany 1930-1945* (London, 2013), 131-55.

<sup>8</sup> J. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991), 773-97.

<sup>9</sup> W. Sewell, *Work & Revolution in France: The Language of Labour from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge, 1980).

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<sup>10</sup> E. Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London, 2007), 96-98 and 118.

<sup>11</sup> Although there are no accurate estimations, existing studies suggest that the number of unionized workers rose from approximately 10-15,000 in the early 1840s to 50-70,000 in the early 1870s, mostly concentrated in the province of Barcelona. Official figures reckoned 170,000 union members in 1904. See Instituto de Reformas Sociales, *Estadística de la Asociación Obrera en 1.º de noviembre de 1904* (Madrid, 1907), 283. For more details about the general history of the Spanish labour movement see note 8.

<sup>12</sup> For recent accounts of the Spanish labour movement, unionism and labour conflicts in the nineteenth century see G. Barnosell, *Orígens del sindicalisme català* (Vic, 1999), and A. Garcia Balañà, *La fabricació de la fàbrica. Treball i política a la Catalunya cotonera (1784-1874)* (Barcelona, 2004); J. de Felipe-Redondo, *Trabajadores. Lenguaje y experiencia en la formación del movimiento obrero español* (Oviedo, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> A. Columbrí, *Una víctima. Memorias de un presidiario político (1857)* (Barcelona, 1864), 498-99.

<sup>14</sup> J. Molar and J. Alsina, *Observaciones acerca del Proyecto de Ley sobre la industria manufacturera* (Madrid, 1855), 10-4.

<sup>15</sup> R. Simó y Badia, *Memoria sobre el desacuerdo entre dueños de taller y jornaleros* (Madrid, 1855), 11. Simó was responding to the liberal newspapers that accused unions of pretending to regulate labour conditions through laws.

<sup>16</sup> *El Eco de la Clase Obrera*, 5 (2 September 1855).

<sup>17</sup> Molar and Alsina, *op. cit.*, 8-9.

<sup>18</sup> *La Federación*, 8 (19 September 1869).

<sup>19</sup> On labour relations and conflicts in the Spanish kingdoms during the Old Regime see Departamento de Educacion y Cultura, *Cofradías, gremios y solidaridades en la Europa medieval* (Pamplona, 1993); V. López and J.A. Nieto, (eds), *El trabajo en la*



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*encrucijada: los artesanos urbanos en la Europa de la Edad Moderna* (Madrid, 1996); A. Peiró, *Jornaleros y mancebos. Identidad, organización y conflicto en los trabajadores del Antiguo Régimen* (Barcelona, 2002). See also J. Romero, *La construcción de la cultura del oficio durante la industrialización. Barcelona, 1814-1860* (Barcelona, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> *Reglamento de la Sociedad de Mutua Protección* (1840). Archivo Municipal de Vich. Documentos i papers de l'Asociación de Tejedores de Vich.

<sup>21</sup> Molar and Alsina, *op. cit.*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> *Diario de Barcelona*, 356 (22 December 1841).

<sup>23</sup> *Exposición de la clase jornalera española a las Cortes* (1855). Archivo de las Cortes Españolas. Legajo 106, expediente 3. Capitals in original.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Molar and Alsina, *op. cit.*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> J. Roca y Galés, 'Carta a Emilio Castelar', *La Democracia*, 129 (3 June 1864). Emphasis mine.

<sup>26</sup> *Exposición de la clase jornalera española a las Cortes*, *op. cit.*; *La Solidaridad* (29 October 1870), quoted in R. Flaquer, *La clase obrera madrileña y la 1.<sup>a</sup> Internacional* (Madrid, 1977), 27.

<sup>27</sup> *Diario de Barcelona*, 356 (22 December 1841).

<sup>28</sup> Molar and Alsina, *op. cit.*, 10-14.

<sup>29</sup> *Las clases trabajadoras asociadas a los diputados a Cortes y en particular a los de la antigua Cataluña* (Barcelona, 1841).

<sup>30</sup> Examples of the several manifestoes that unions sent to local and regional authorities include R. Mercader and B. Beltrán, *Los infrascritos comisionados...* (Barcelona, 1840) and *Los que suscriben como individuos de la junta directiva de mutua protección de tejedores de la ciudad de Vich...* (Vic, 1841).

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<sup>31</sup> See Josep Benet and Casimir Martí, *Barcelona a mitjan segle XIX* (Barcelona: Curial, 1976), vol. I, 375-81.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Manifiesto de las asociaciones de trabajadores de Barcelona’, reproduced in C. Tresserra, *Porvenir de las asociaciones de la clase obrera; origen y estado actual de la cuestión del trabajo en Cataluña* (Barcelona, 1855), 30-33.

<sup>33</sup> F. Gómez, ‘Problemas sociales y conservadurismo político durante el siglo XIX’, *Historia Contemporánea*, 29 (2004), 607; Garcia Balañà, *op. cit.*, 422.

<sup>34</sup> *El Eco de la Clase Obrera*, 10 (7 October 1855).

<sup>35</sup> K. Baker, ‘Enlightenment and the Institution of Society. Notes for a Conceptual History’ in S. Kaviraj and S. Khilnani (eds), *Civil Society. History and Possibilities* (Cambridge, 2001), 98. For the introduction of this notion of society in Spain see J. Fernández Sebastián, ‘Sociedad’ in J. Fernández Sebastián and J.F. Fuentes (eds), *Diccionario político y social del siglo XIX español* (Madrid, 2002). On the influence of liberal ideas among Spanish popular sectors see I. Burdiel, ‘Myths of Failure, Myths of Success: New Perspectives in Nineteenth-Century Spanish Liberalism’, *Journal of Modern History*, 70 (1998), 892-912.

<sup>36</sup> On class identity in Spain see M. Pérez Ledesma, ‘Ricos y pobres; pueblo y oligarquía; explotadores y explotados. Las imágenes dicotómicas en el siglo XIX español’, *Revista del Centro de Estudios Constitucionales*, 10 (1991), 59-88.

<sup>37</sup> Here I draw on C. Mouffe, *On the Political* (London-New York, 2005), 14-16.

<sup>38</sup> *La Asociación*, 96 (25 June 1856), 3. A more detailed analysis can be found in de Felipe-Redondo, *op. cit.*, 171-81. Organized workers from other countries shared similar conceptions about employers. See P. Joyce, *Visions of the People. Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848-1914* (Cambridge, 1991); R.Q. Gray, ‘The Deconstruction of the English Working Class’, *Social History*, 11, 3 (1986), 372-3; R.

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Magraw, 'Socialism, Syndicalism and French Labour Before 1914' in D. Geary (ed.), *op. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> *El Constitucional*, 23 (13 August 1854).

<sup>40</sup> See the works cited in note 12.

<sup>41</sup> M. Pérez Ledesma, *El obrero consciente* (Madrid, 1987).

<sup>42</sup> S. Juliá, 'Sindicatos y poder político en España', *Sistema*, 97 (1990), 41-62.

<sup>43</sup> A. Gusart, 'La asociación productiva', *El Obrero*, 17 (25 December 1864).

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Columbrí, *op. cit.*, 412-13, 454 and 501-2. Emphasis in original.

<sup>45</sup> *La Federación*, 6 (5 December 1869).

<sup>46</sup> A heterogeneous group of unionized workers (cabinet makers, dockworkers, beakers, lamp makers, metal workers, etc.) from Valencia, Cadiz, and Catalonia achieved the reduction of the workday in these years. See V.M. Arbeloa, *I Congreso Obrero Español* (Madrid, 1972), 138-58; *La Federación* (11 November 1870, 19 February 1871, and 27 August 1871); *La Igualdad*, 949 (16 November 1871).

<sup>47</sup> On the workers' frustration with the Spanish Revolution of 1854 see J. de Felipe-Redondo, 'La orientación del movimiento obrero hacia el republicanismo en España en el siglo XIX (1840-1860)', *Historia y Política*, 25 (2011), 119-48.

<sup>48</sup> Columbrí, *op. cit.*, 543. Emphasis in original.

<sup>49</sup> Reproduced in S. Castillo (ed.), *Reformas Sociales* (Madrid, 1985), I, 233.

<sup>50</sup> Columbrí, *op. cit.*, 561; *La Federación* (1 August 1869, 13 February 1870). On the term 'social science' see M. Gómez Garrido, 'Dos formas distintas de investigar el problema del paro en los albores de la encuesta social', *Empiria*, 9 (2005), 117-18 and 136.

<sup>51</sup> On the impact of this Ricardian law upon Spanish Marxist socialism see M. Pérez Ledesma, *Antonio García Quejido y la Nueva Era* (Madrid, 1974), 30-32.

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<sup>52</sup> J. Roca y Galés, 'De las asociaciones cooperativas', *La Asociación*, 5 (6 May 1866).

<sup>53</sup> Gusart, *op. cit.*

<sup>54</sup> Columbrí, *op. cit.*, 418-19. Emphasis in original.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 561-62.

<sup>56</sup> *La Federación*, 4 (22 August 1869). Emphasis in original.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis in original.

<sup>58</sup> Roca y Galés, 'Carta a Emilio Castelar', *op. cit.*

<sup>59</sup> See J. Álvarez Junco, *La ideología política del anarquismo español (1868-1910)* (Madrid, 1976).

<sup>60</sup> On the rather limited anarchist influence on these organizations see A. López Estudillo, 'Republicanism and movement obrero in Andalucía', in M. González and D. Caro (eds), *La utopía racional* (Granada, 2001).

<sup>61</sup> For the previous quotes see Columbrí, *op. cit.*, 420-21, 504 and 554-55.

<sup>62</sup> *Exposición de la Unión Manufacturera a las Cortes* (Gracia, Barcelona, 5 July 1873).

Reproduced in <http://www.veuobrera.org/00fine-x/um-expo.htm> (accessed, 21 April 2015). See also M. Izard, *Industrialización y obrerismo. Las Tres Clases del Vapor, 1869-1913* (Barcelona, 1973) and 'Entre la impotencia y la esperanza: la Unión Manufacturera', *Estudios de Historia Social*, I:4 (1978), 29-105.

<sup>63</sup> *El Socialista*, quoted in S. Castillo, 'Todos iguales ante la ley... del más fuerte', *Sociología del Trabajo*, 14 (1991-92), 160.

<sup>64</sup> S. Castillo, 'El socialismo madrileño hace un siglo: un anhelo de reformas', *Arbor*, CLXIX (2001), 419.

<sup>65</sup> See the responses of Marxist representatives to the committee that studied the creation of the first social laws in 1884 in Castillo, *Reformas Sociales, op. cit.*, vol. I.

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<sup>66</sup> These fights marked the reorganization of the unions of Barcelona in the 1890s-1900s. See X. Cuadrat, *Socialismo y anarquismo en Cataluña (1899-1911)* (Madrid, 1976); A. Smith, *Anarchism, Revolution and Reaction. Catalan Labour and the Crisis of the Spanish State, 1898-1923* (Oxford, 2007). For other countries see G. Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000* (Oxford, 2002); M. van der Linden and W. Thorpe (eds), *Revolutionary Syndicalism. An International Perspective* (Aldershot, 1990).

<sup>67</sup> For the distinction between ideology and imaginary see Poovey, 'Liberal Civil Subject', *op. cit.*, 49-50.

<sup>68</sup> On this issue, see J. de Felipe-Redondo, 'Worker Resistance to "Social" Reform and the Rise of Anarchism in Spain, 1880-1920', *Critical Historical Studies*, 1:2 (2015), 255-84.

<sup>69</sup> Laclau, *op. cit.*, 59-60 and 96-98.