**Remarks at the Bronterre O’Brien memorial event, Saturday 29 February 2020, by Professor Michael J. Turner of Appalachian State University, North Carolina, author of *Radicalism and Reputation: The Career of Bronterre O’Brien* (Michigan State University Press, 2017).**

James “Bronterre” O’ Brien is one of those figures from our history who enjoyed a rapid rise to celebrity and influence, but whose star subsequently faded so that, by the time he died, very few people were paying him much attention. In later times, when historians went back over the events in which O’Brien had been involved (especially the Reform Crisis of 1830-32 and the Chartist movement of the mid-1830s to the early 1850s), O’Brien’s role was often overlooked or minimized. To those who are interested in bold and radical ideas for reform, however, and in the abiding power of those ideas to guide and inspire, O’Brien remains an important figure. He links the era of the French and American Revolutions and Britain’s Great Reform Act with much later developments in radical ideology and program, even into the early 20th century. And he is not the less significant because his most mature and detailed scheme for the radical shake-up of British state and society only emerged when his career was in decline and after Chartism had passed its peak. He called this scheme “National Reform.”

Born in County Longford in 1804, O’Brien came to London at the end of the 1820s to qualify as a lawyer. He started to attend political meetings; reform campaigners were at this time stepping up the agitation that would soon lead to the 1832 Reform Act. O’Brien abandoned the law, realizing that it was made by the landed and moneyed elites in order to protect the landed and moneyed elites. Rather than *practice* law, he set out to *change* the law. He became “Bronterre,” one of the most well-known and highly regarded radical journalists of the period. Such was his popularity that in the early years of Chartism, 1837-40, he was among the movement’s leading spokesmen. Chartism was probably the largest and most significant popular political mobilization of the 19th century, and although it was never a wholly united movement, all Chartists—whatever their differing backgrounds and opinions—campaigned for the Six Points, the Charter that would democratize the system of government: manhood suffrage, annual elections, vote by ballot, equal electoral districts, no property qualification to stand for parliament, and payment of MPs.

O’Brien was committed to the Charter, and continued to consider himself a Chartist to the end of his days. But he developed a wider radical program, because he realized that creating a democratic form of government would not be enough. Political rights had to be used to promote economic justice and social improvement.

A “constitutionalist idiom” was, for many radicals, the dominant mode of communication, but other idioms were employed as well, and the Chartist era—largely because of O’Brien—saw a merging of an older rhetoric (political corruption, aristocratic rule, monopolies, heavy taxation) and a new paradigm (class conflict, economic exploitation, the labor theory of value, and capital-versus-labor). As was just mentioned, though, Chartists were a varied bunch: many of them not only rejected O’Brien’s principles but also accepted much of the liberal political economy that he condemned.

O’Brien was certain that without a democratic suffrage, people would be crushed by a network of monopolies in lawmaking and in the land, machinery, and resources. He believed that the ability to make laws gave large property-owners the chance to strengthen their position to the detriment of everybody else. Voting was based on a property qualification. O’Brien held that the workers lacked property because they lacked parliamentary representation, not the other way around. Winning the vote would be the first step. Political rights could then be used to correct economic and social relationships that favored the few not the many.

After a spell in prison and after separating from other Chartist leaders, O’Brien could not regain his former status and influence in radical circles, and yet this was the time (late 1840s to early 1850s) when he elaborated a remarkable plan—“National Reform”—that made plain a democratic aspiration for Britain (and beyond): a picture of what a democratic government could and should accomplish in order for the whole people to enjoy equal economic opportunity and social peace and fulfilment.

“National Reform” had many elements, all of which O’Brien had been adapting and amending for years in order to fashion them into a coherent and, he believed, realizable program. The most important element was nationalization of the land, to result in a system of tenancies held from the state. The premise was that the land belonged to the people. It had to be taken back and leased out for productive activity, and the rents would go into the public purse. Poverty and exploitation could be ended, but only if land was recognized as a public resource. O’Brien did not advocate violent confiscation. Rather, he described a gradual process with the government purchasing property as it became available. Landowners would be paid according to agreed valuations. In time, the state would become the only landowner and could develop an integrated system of tenancy and public credit. Revenues would cover the cost of schools, welfare, and public works. There would be no need for people to pay taxes; there would be no unemployment; and, since the whole point was to change Britain for the benefit of all, why not extend public ownership to utilities and related enterprises? O’Brien soon applied his arguments about the land to the railways, mines, gasworks, canals, and docks. On the grounds that no socially-established property laws could supersede the pre-existing common right to the earth and its produce, O’Brien anticipated what he termed “a complete subversion of the institutions by which wealth is distributed.”

To O’Brien, access to land was the key. The land had to become public property, private ownership abolished, and all rents made payable to and for the state—that is, the post-Charter, democratically reorganized state. Tenant right and the right of occupancy would be available to everyone equally, and every leaseholder would get the full value of improvements made by him on the land during his occupancy. Restoring the land gradually to the people as existing owners died off, so that no proprietor would be disturbed during his lifetime, was in O’Brien’s view “safe, peaceable, and humane.” When a proprietor’s land passed to the nation, his heirs or representatives would receive the full money value, paid in annual installments out of future rents; and since all this involved no confiscation, O’Brien reckoned that existing proprietors had no grounds for opposition.

The national debt and all public debts were to be treated in the same manner. Capital sums would be recognized and payment of them guaranteed in annual installments, but O’Brien wanted “no more plundering of the taxpayer and debtor interests, by everlasting usury and law expenses, kept up merely to feed a portion of the community in idleness at the expense of the rest.”

Gold and silver would no longer be used as currency and standards of value. They would be treated only as commodities. A quarter or bushel of wheat would serve as the standard of value, and its average price—measured by labor—the unit of account. The Bank of England and all other privileged corporations for issuing money were to be abolished. The government would be the sole issuer of money; and “mercantile paper” would be issued to represent every type of exchangeable wealth, as well as gold and silver, when “ample security” was given by the issuers. This paper was to be stamped and made legal tender for all parties but the issuers, by whom it would be convertible on demand into government paper or precious metals at the market price. No privilege of any kind was to attach to the issuing of mercantile paper. The right to issue would be enjoyed equally by all who complied with the new rules and furnished the necessary security for the solvency of the issues.

Public marts would be established for the deposit and sale of all commodities, on the principle of equitable exchange. No manufacturer or depositor was to appraise or sell his own goods. These tasks would fall to salaried officials elected by the depositors. The officials would appraise all goods on delivery and give depositors the money price for them in paper that showed their value in labor or corn. This paper would have the same denominations as government notes and be convertible into the latter when required for the payment of taxes, or into gold and silver at the market price when required for exportation. All depositors, on presenting notes at the mart, would be able to purchase items to the amount of their notes. Arrangements would be made to prevent marts from being overstocked with some items and deficient in others. All accumulations not wanted in the home market could be sent abroad by agents of the depositors, appointed and paid in the same way as the appraisers at the marts.

District banks would be set up, into which rents were to be paid. In order to allow industrious families to farm land and manufacture goods the banks would make loans, to be repaid with no more interest than was necessary to support the bank. The banks would belong to the public, so would the funds, and loans would go only to people who used them for the public benefit. Repayment rested on the labor and stock of the borrowers. This provision of honest credit, with the nationalization of the land and an efficient currency, would completely emancipate the working classes.

This is what O’Brien left behind him: a full plan for progress, freedom, opportunity, and justice; a carefully developed and clearly articulated plan that covered political rights, the land, credit and debt, banking and money, work and trade—all the things needed for an individual and a nation to be self-supporting and successful.

O’Brien died in December 1864, having spent his final years around Soho and Clerkenwell sick, depressed, poor, and largely forgotten. But his unfortunate ending should not detract from the aspirational nature of his radicalism and his ability to imagine and demand a future that was enormously better—for the vast majority of people—than their present. He tried to tell his contemporaries—as his scheme of “National Reform” continues to tell us today—that it is not only possible, but urgently necessary, to scrutinize institutions and relationships and to restructure them if they are not serving our needs. O’Brien had big ideas, but his program for change was also practical and intelligible. We’re in a different context now, of course, but here we are, more than a century and a half after O’Brien’s heyday, with political institutions and social and economic relationships that need changing, and with “Bronterre” speaking to us from the grave, reminding us that reform has to be radical, not superficial, and that the bold, far-sighted, and detailed can also be the practical and intelligible.