This article analyzes the relation between labor movements and public authorities in the context of the beginning of the state intervention in the economy in the nineteenth century. I depart from recent studies on the origins of the labor movement and the notion of the social to develop a new interpretation about the changing attitudes of the organized workers in regard to the state regulation of labor relations.

In the first section, I argue that the labor movements were not necessarily one of the expressions of the so-called “rise of the social”, and so they had not a “social character”. This implies that the analysis of the organized workers’ attitudes toward state interventionism must take into account the workers’ conceptions and ways of experiencing labor conditions. The non-social character of their forms of making sense of the world allows us explaining the workers’ indifference or rejection of social legislation in a new way. If the notion of the social was not their base, what was the historical character of these movements and how it affected to the workers’ attitudes towards the public authorities? This is the first of the two main empirical questions that this essay tries to elucidate and that I examine in the second section.

On the other hand, it is indisputable that the notion of the social had a notorious impact on many labor movements from the 1860s onwards. This impact can be detected in the emergence of several trends that posed new relations between unions and political authorities, including the defense of the state regulation of labor relations. Nevertheless, I will show that the incorporation of the notion of the social to the workers’ worldviews internally fractured the labor movements in conflicting currents. Thus, its influence on the organized workers must be carefully explained. This is the second main question of this article, which I explore in the third section.

The previous issues have deep theoretical implications for the history of the labor movements, the interventionist state, and social citizenship. In order to examine
some of them in all their complexity, I will focus on the Spanish labor movement during its formative period (1840-80). The reasons for choosing this case are two. First, it has hardly been taking into account in transnational comparative studies. Its analysis provides new sources to understand better the emergence of the social. Second, historians have usually underlined the Spanish workers’ hostility against the state — especially seen in the strength of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism in the twentieth century.¹ Yet, it is less known that the rejection of the state intervention existed before the rise of anarchism, although it had a different character. In fact, the Spanish workers’ attitudes shared many commonalities with those of the organized laborers in other western countries in the nineteenth century. Therefore, its analysis contributes to clarify fundamental processes that affected other cases of study.

I. Labor Movements, State Interventionism, and the Social

The first thing that must be explained is the meaning of the social. The idea that the labor movement was not an expression of the social does not deny the empirical ascertainment that it was a collective phenomenon. It is obvious that the labor movements mobilized an ample group of people. Rather, the meaning of the social refers here to a specific way of considering the character, emergence, and historical evolution of that movement which is related to a more general conception of human relations. This is due to the fact that the social is a historical category that objectivizes (or allow us to makes sense of) those relations in a certain way. In so doing, it provides historical subjects with a specific way of conceiving such relations and their role in them, and of acting accordingly. Moreover, it also provides historians with the epistemic base to explain these relations and explain the workers’ behaviors.

The social defines human relations as a field of complex and sometimes antagonistic forces whose nature and pattern of development are in large part independent of those who participate in them. In this view, these relations constitute an organic or systemic entity that cannot be reduced to its single components because it has its own regulatory principles. The inherent logic of the social would determine the experiences, identities, and actions of individuals and groups. In this way, the social makes it possible to talk about social relations as structures and processes that become

apparent in institutions and practices, and that can be discovered through the empirical analysis. This is also the epistemic base of the thesis of social causality.²

This is the epistemic assumption that has underlined many explanations of the rise and development of labor movements. From the social perspective, a particular configuration of the social lattice, named “capitalism,” divided people into classes with conflicting interests. The “working class,” the subject of the labor movement — and the social subject par excellence —, emerged as a group invested with opposite interests to those of the bourgeois class. Its aspirations would have been eminently social, for the workers would have attempted to transform social organization according to their class interests. This has a last implication concerning their conceptions and relations with the state. Since individuals and their organizations alone were unable to change society, the workers would have been interested in using the state to achieve a deep and general social transformation through the implementation of social laws. This would have driven laborers to ask for social legislation and to fight for controlling the state. Eventually, this would have transformed them in the main social support of the welfare states and the guardians of the social rights.

The bases of this social explanation have been deeply reconsidered in the last three decades. Recent research has argued that the social is not an objective and trans-historical entity that acquires different shapes in different historical periods and determine peoples’ interests and actions. Rather, it is argued that the social is a specific way of objectivizing (that is, of giving meaning and logic to) human relations and the collective life. In this view, the social constitutes a historical category, that is, a form of conceiving human relations that carries specific kinds of knowledge, power, and actions. For this reason, the social has become a new object of the historical analysis in what has been defined as the transition “from social history to the history of the social”.³


This does not involve rejecting the empirical facts of the collective life and the interdependence of human beings. It simply indicates that there are many historical ways of constructing such interdependence. Nor does it entail to deny the real effect of the social on the historical subjects’ identities, experiences, and actions when this notion existed. However, if it was a historical way of conceiving human relations, then it is feasible to think that the social was not the logical fundament of the workers’ practices and attitudes in certain places and periods; and for when it was, it is necessary to explain what made it possible. The social (and social causality) cannot be the unquestioned premise of the historical explanation any longer. It has to be the object of the historical analysis.

At the same time that this postsocial turn took place in the theoretical approaches to the labor movement history, new studies on the history of labor relations put into question some pivotal assumptions of the social perspective. In particular, they showed the lack of interest of the organized workers for state interventionism in several countries. They also pointed out the lack of causal connection between the first social reforms and the labor claims. Many of the first and most important social laws did not have the objective of fulfilling the workers’ concrete aspirations; and when they did, they followed a more general plan of shaping the workers as “responsible” (non-revolutionary) social citizens. This explains the skepticism of many organized workers. As a result, today it is necessary to reconsider the role of the labor movements in the making of the welfare states and the social rights. For if the interventionist states were a consequence of the rise of the social and a significant part of workers opposed to their

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creation, then the relations between these states and the labor movements were more complex than previously thought.

These studies are generating fresh and valuable interpretations on these relations. However, the social premises are still driving historical research on certain topics and generating certain problems. One of the most important is the lack of a persuasive explanation of the laborers’ initial rejection of social policies. Most works coincide in pointing out the strong “sense of independence” of the laborers, the intense repression, and the state support to the employers’ positions as the explanatory factors of the workers’ attitude. The “sense of independence” is commonly interpreted as the survival of certain artisanal cultures and customs from the old regime. Yet, these traditions involved a very different relation with the authorities, including the acceptance of their role in the fixation of labor rules along with the masters in the guilds. On the other hand, the last two mentioned factors imply (or do not deny) that laborers would have endorsed reforms had the state been more respectful with their claims and organizations. This argument is based on the social premise that the workers were interested in state interventionism, but external factors (i.e. state repression) led them to distrust reformist projects.

I do not pretend to refuse that these factors could have played a role in this attitude. Rather, my point is that they cannot explain by themselves why the workers could have been interested in state regulation, unless we accept the notion of the social as a premise of our interpretation. The only way to clarify this question is through the study of the workers’ identities and conceptions about labor relations in which their attitudes towards the state were anchored.

II. Society without the Social

I foreground Spanish workers who created unions, organized strikes as a weapon of systematic negotiation of labor conditions in a free market context, and built broad alliances with other workers on local and national scales between 1840 and 1880. As it happened in other labor movements of the same period, most of them were skilled workers from the urban trades and the textile industry. The majority lived in the province of Barcelona, although their organizations steadily expanded throughout Catalonia, Castile (including Madrid), Andalusia, Valencia, and other regions. These

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6 There are not precise estimations, but the existing studies suggest that the number of these workers rose from approximately 10-15,000 in the early 1840s to 50-70,000 in the early 1870s. The government
workers usually had different concerns derived from the specific labor conditions of their trades. However, they often shared two basic objectives: the maintenance or increase of their wage levels and the defense of their “human dignity” in the workplace.  

In order to achieve such aims, most unions defended two complementary solutions: the creation of unions and the collective labor negotiation with the employers. There did not ask for social laws until the 1870s, and then only a few organizations did it in a very dubitative way. Their more general attitude was their opposition to state intervention in labor relations. In the decade of 1850, the spinner and union leader Alberto Columbri, whose experience I examine in detail later, strongly criticized the Civil Governor of Barcelona that forbade employers from cutting wages and “altering the interior order of the business” in 1844. Columbri, much like other associated workers, repudiated wage declines. Yet, he argued that the public authority could not meddle in an issue that exclusively concerned those individuals dealing with its negotiation. According to him, the 1844 prohibition was an attack against the individual freedoms of workers and employers. For this reason, “it can only upset masters and laborers, because it imposes obligations on all of them that did not favor their interests nor tend to diminish the mutual antagonism.”  

Judging from this and other testimonies, organized workers experienced state intervention as a source of conflicts because it restricted the freedoms they felt entitled to. In 1855, the Catalonian unions opposed the regulation of labor contract duration and wage levels outlined in the Manufacturing Industry Bill —the first state initiative for labor regulation. Their representatives argued that the government did not have to “intervene in the fixation of wages or in the amount of service” because it had “the insurmountable limit of the ownership of the individual over itself.” The “interest, either collective or individual, of employers and workers” was the only authority that could “naturally” dictate “the contracts.”  

Reckoned that there were 170,000 union members in 1904, Instituto de Reformas Sociales, Estadística de la Asociación Obrera en 1.º de noviembre de 1904, Madrid, Imprenta de la Sucesora de M. Minuesa de los Ríos, 1907, p. 283.  

7 For a recent account on the Spanish labor movement in the nineteenth century see FELIPE, Jesús de, Trabajadores. Lenguaje y experiencia en la formación del movimiento obrero español, Oviedo, Genueve, 2012.  


9 Molar, Joaquín and Alsina, Juan, Observaciones acerca del Proyecto de Ley sobre la industria manufacturera, Madrid, Imprenta de Compañel, 1855, pp. 10-14.
y Badia answered with an emphatic “No” to the question of whether the workers wanted the law to indicate “the price of the workforce.” According to an article in the first Spanish union newspaper, El Eco de la Clase Obrera, this attitude derived from the conviction that wage prices only concerned workers and owners as free individuals. Authorities could not establish such prices and labor conditions “without attacking individuals’ freedom, and this freedom is sacred.” Also in 1855, Catalonian union representatives rejected protective laws generated an unwanted creation of privileges among citizens. They “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 have a home for the disable for us.” In 1869, the Catalonian associated weavers declared that they did not intend for a hateful “privilege of protection” that distinguished them from other citizens.

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, urban trade workers and employees of the first textile factories had sought protection in the Crown to defend the prerogatives of guilds and trade communities. The royal authority was the guarantor of the corporative privileges in each trade community. Conversely, those that created the first unions stated that they and their employers were “equal citizens.” For this reason, they did not want “exclusive rights,” but their “natural freedoms” such as the right to make a living from their work, the right to own the product of their work, and the freedom to associate. As the organized cotton weavers from Barcelona proclaimed in 1841, to solve their conflicts “it was enough” to exercise these “rights that the nature […] has provided us with”.

In this view, the exercise of these rights represented a “natural” way of regulating labor relations. In 1855, during the first national-scale mobilization of

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10 Simó y Badia, Ramón, Memoria sobre el desacuerdo entre dueños de taller y jornaleros, Madrid, Establecimiento Tipográfico Militar, 1855, p. 11. Simó was answering to the liberal newspapers that accused unions of pretending to create laws that regulate the labor conditions.

11 El Eco de la Clase Obrera, 5, 2/IX/1855, pp. 66-69.

12 Molar and Alsina, Observaciones, pp. 8-9.

13 La Federación, 8, 19/IX/1869, pp. 3-4.


15 Diario de Barcelona, 356, 22/XII/1841, p. 5224. The allusion of any of those “natural” rights was constant in the majority of the unions’ manifestoes and private correspondence.
workers, roughly 30,000 employees signed a petition to the deputies of the Cortes (the Spanish parliament) demanding the right to exercise those 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 single caduceus is freedom, proclaim it for everything and everyone. Do not fear freedom, because the order is inside of it. 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.16

Thus, organized workers were convinced that individual freedom itself could regulate labor relations. Freedom was the only possible solution for their difficulties since it possessed the capability of “limiting itself”: “Its boundary 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.”17 What these workers experimented as “exploitation” was the lack of recognition of their attributed freedoms. Consequently, only their exercise could stop it. The weaver 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.18

The formal declaration of the equality of civil rights by the Spanish liberal regime was not enough to guarantee the exercise of these rights in the workshops. Since laborers were poor, they had to accept the labor conditions proposed by the employers, some of which did not respect the employees’ “human dignity”. In isolation, laborers became “slaves,” “proletarians,” men with no rights, non-citizens. As it was pointed out

16 Exposición de la clase jornalera española a las Cortes, 1855. Archivo de las Cortes. Leg. 106, exp. 3. Capitals in original.
17 Molar and Alsina, Observaciones, p. 5.
18 Roca y Galés, José, “Carta a Emilio Castelar,” La Democracia, 129, 3/VI/1864, p. 2.
in the newspaper *La Solidaridad* in 1870, “laborer: if you want to be a free citizen, join the association. Isolation is slavery, is death.”¹⁹ The exercise of one of their “natural” freedoms, the right of associate, would allow them to put an end to their hardships. The representatives of the unions explained to the Cortes in 1855 that thanks to the “power of the workers’ associations,” they could make employers to give up “exaggerated pretensions” in order to achieve “the harmony between capital and labor.”²⁰

Thus, Spanish first unionism was closely linked to the identity of the worker as citizen with “natural” freedoms. During the period of study, unions multiplied in the main cities in spite of tough repression. If organized workers resisted persecution it was because many of them considered repression an intolerable intrusion of the state in the sphere of their attributed “natural” freedoms. The cotton weavers from Barcelona argued that their association “does not need the government’s or anyone else’s approval[.] We have enough with our natural rights […]. Our association is a voluntary and reciprocal bond that is not subject to dissolution.”²¹ To their understanding, the ban of their associations entailed the denial of their rights, which in turn was the cause of labor exploitation. Their principal reason for opposing the mentioned Manufacturing Industry Bill was that it denied the right of creating unions while it did not question the employers’ capability to impose labor conditions or to create their own associations. The organized workers interpreted this a “privilege” that introduced a hierarchical relation between equal citizens, pushing laborers to “slavery.” In rejecting this bill, workers’ delegates pointed out that “the object of this law” should be “to equalize, and not to distinguish”.²²

Therefore, most organized workers thought that the source of their difficulties and social inequalities was the lack of recognition of their alleged natural rights, not the capitalist social organization. In addition, they wanted the government to assure the exercise of these rights because they conceived its role through the classic liberal political theory. According to this theory, the state was in charge of the protection of individual rights.²³ From this perspective, authorities could not “meddle” in the specific content of labor relations, but they were expected to guarantee the exercise of individual

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²⁰ *Exposición de la clase jornalera española a las Cortes*.
²¹ “Aviso a los jornaleros asociados”, *Diario de Barcelona*, 356, 22/XII/1841, p. 5244.
freedoms assisting the free bargaining on contracts between citizens. This was the logic imbedded in the demands of the organized workers. In 1841, the unions from Barcelona exposed to the authorities that “The most trivial suspicions will stop when the government, without meddling in the direction or regulation of individual interests, tries to use its means to inspire confidence in capitalists and journeymen.”²⁴

The workers’ perspective on this point shared the same logic with that of their owners and the liberal authorities. The difference lies in that the former included their associations as legitimate actors in the negotiations of labor contracts. It was this conviction that drove them to ask for the creation of negotiation boards or joint committees of workers and employers (jurados mixtos). As the unions’ delegates argued in 1855, since these boards comprised the representatives of free individuals, they were the most legitimate institutions to settle “wisely and successfully the wage issues, assigning the tasks of maintaining their agreements and silencing exclusive exigencies to the authority.”²⁵ The role of the state was limited to ratifying labor pacts as the expression of free bargaining between equal citizens. To be sure, many owners considered such agreements an attack over individual freedoms and the free market. This was also the reason that led the authorities to persecute collective negotiations and unions. But workers contemplated them as the outcome of the “complete freedom” of individuals. According to them, collective agreements were “sacred” and “had more power than the laws” passed against them by any government.²⁶ This conception led them to relentlessly demand the creation of those committees in the majority of struggles in which unions participated. They also collaborated with public authorities in the rare interludes in which the latter accepted their demand—as it happened in Barcelona in 1841 and 1854-55.²⁷

In this view, collective agreements allowed freedom to regulate labor relations. Any condition they could impose over the free market was considered a “natural” one because it distinguished the “real freedom” (the one that took into account the people’s

²⁴ Las clases trabajadoras asociadas a los diputados a Cortes y en particular a los de la antigua Cataluña, Barcelona, Imprenta de Benito Espona, 1841.
²⁵ “Manifiesto de las asociaciones de trabajadores de Barcelona,” reproduced in Ceferino Tresserra, Porvenir de las asociaciones de la clase obrera; origen y estado actual de la cuestión del trabajo en Cataluña, Barcelona, Imprenta de Narciso Ramírez, 1855, pp. 30-33.
²⁶ El Eco de la Clase Obrera, 10, 7/X/1855, p. 156.
²⁷ At the end of the 1840s, authorities pursued unions along with employers that negotiated agreements with them. See Gómez, Fidel, “Problemas sociales y conservadurismo político durante el siglo XIX,” Historia Contemporánea, 29 (2004), p. 607; García Balañà, Albert, La fabricació de la fàbrica. Treball i política a la Catalunya cotonera (1784-1874), Barcelona, PAM, 2004, p. 422.
rights) from licentiousness, abuse, and excess. The best example of this is the most extensive collective agreement during the period of study: the wage agreement (tarifa). From the organized workers’ perspective, the negotiation over wages was not a “taxation”—a term used to refer to the artificial limitation of the free market by the state—but the result of free bargain between equal citizens.28

Now it is necessary to elucidate the roots of the conceptions and ways of experiencing labor relations and conflicts that based the workers’ demands. These roots were a set of liberal categories and assumptions about the real world, especially the notions of “freedom,” “equality,” “human nature,” “natural right,” and “citizenship.” All of them were meaningfully interrelated, creating a complex and instable categorical frame that workers used to make sense of their labor and living conditions. The system of meanings provided the basis and logic for the workers’ historical action and identities. This is what various historians have called imaginary, that is, in Mary Poovey’s words, “what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society,” or “that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.”29

The essential notion that operated as a basic nexus in this imaginary was that of the “individual” or “man” as a subject of natural rights. Workers assumed that they and their employers were equal in rights. Their foremost aim was “not being considered […] slaves, but equal citizens” to owners.30 No hierarchy could be possible between them, except the functional one derived from the coordination in the productive process. 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 carry out [the labor tasks] 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.31

28 El Eco de la Clase Obrera, 18, 9/XII/1855, p. 279.
29 Poovey, Mary, “The Liberal Civil Subject,” pp. 49-50. This notion of imaginary originally comes from the work of Cornelius Castoriadis and has been redefined and used by authors such as Poovey or Charles Taylor. See Taylor, Charles, Modern Social Imaginaries, Durham-London, Duke University Press, 2004; Cabrera, “The Crisis of the Social.”
31 Molar and Alsina, Observaciones, p. 9.
Organized laborers talked about “society” as an aggregate or association. However, they did not invent this concept of human relations. It was born at the end of the eighteenth century as an alternative to the corporative conceptions from the Old Regime. In this view, the nature of individuals was “pre-social,” that is, individuals were free subjects prior to the creation of society. Society was a product of a contract among them, by which they sacrificed a portion of their independence in exchange for more security and prosperity. This was the notion of society that underlined the Western liberal regimes (including the Spanish one) in the nineteenth century. It also gave shape to the workers’ interest in the creation of unions. Since society was an association of individuals, the creation of associations was a coherent and appropriate way of behaving. Poor citizens could unite with one another to defend their rights and, ultimately, emancipate themselves through their own efforts.

This individualistic conception of society explains why Spanish laborers did not understand labor relations in terms of “class struggle.” Although they talked about the existence of different “classes,” the meaningful (in the sense of being more “real” and “objective”) fact for them was to be a “free individual” that belonged to a community of equal citizens. To belong to a class was just an accidental aspect of their relation to their more essential citizen identity. For this reason, organized workers did not talk about the “owner class” as their enemy. The “owner class” was not the Other upon which they built their common identity. In fact, the term class had a nebulous meaning in the workers’ proclamations, being frequently used as a synonym for “trade”. According to the workers’ understanding, employers and employees could have different interests, but they were compatible since they all belonged to the same community of citizens. As they persistently repeated in their claims, “social harmony” was possible and indispensable.


33 The analysis of the other is crucial because, as Chantal Mouffe argues, the creation of an identity is a relational process because it requires the establishment of a difference. The constitution of the “we” always depends on the type of “they” from which it is differentiates. Thus, the study of the difference is a crucial way of analyzing the constitution of historical subjects. See her On the Political, Routledge, London-New York, 2005, pp. 14-16.

34 On the class identity in Spain see Pérez Ledesma, Manuel, “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), pp. 59-88.
From this standpoint, the cause of labor exploitation did not lie in the organization of sociolaboral relations, but in the employers’ individual behavior. Exploitation was a result of the moral conduct of each owner in regard to his duty to respect other citizens’ rights. The “bad citizen” was the Other from whom unionized workers differentiated themselves. Thus, they distinguished between “good” and “bad” employers. The former did not cut wages or mistreat their laborers. He also attended the unions’ demands and negotiated with them. The workers viewed them as “humanitarian citizens”, “honest” and “supportive employers” and named in the working press and union manifestos as models for other owners. Therefore, the fact of belonging to the employers’ class did not necessarily transform an individual into an exploiter. Rather, “exploiter” defined those employers who did not respect employees’ rights. Workers used this adjective to name them, along with other appellatives such as “monopolistic,” or “oppressors” and “selfish” who put their interests before the workers’ freedoms. Their names were published as illustrations of immoral citizens. The unions focused their actions on “bad employers,” while “good employers” were considered to be potential allies. It was usual for workers to ask for help from the latter during labor conflicts. Several examples could be cited to show this, such as one the most challenging fights of the period, the so-called “half-hour conflict” of 1856. The spinner union of Barcelona published the names of the 17 “exploiters” and “selfish” owners that wanted to prolong the workday half an hour and those of the 49 “more humanitarian” employers that preferred to maintain the “social harmony.”

This individualistic notion of society explains the occasional use of the adjective “social” by the unionized workers. The “social revolution” they tried to start during the Spanish revolutions of 1854 and 1868 did not have the aim of changing sociolaboral relations based on the wage system and the free market. As the associated workers from Sallent (Barcelona) declared in 1854, their objective was to moralize this organization so as to be maintained in a “well-understood freedom.” In their view, the cause of the conflicts was not the free market principle, because this principle was based on the individual freedom that was supposedly embedded in them. Rather, it was its misguided implementation. In 1841, the Catalonian unions complained that individual freedom has


36 El Constitucional, 23, 13/VIII/1854.
been embodied in an unsuitable “system” because it curtailed the exercise of freedoms to everyone. In order to correct it, it was enough to recognize and exercise the individual “natural” rights, especially that of association:

It is quite convenient to let everyone seek the increase of their fortune using their efforts and means, because it is the law of individual freedom which workers respect and want to be respected [...] But when a system that only rarely improves workers’ condition and, at the same time, magically allows money to grow and increases the establishments of all kinds and industries is implemented, those that consume their lives [working] get alarmed [...] Their instincts impel them to analyze and combine their possible [actions] in order to obtain any advantage [...] They collect their capitals not to destroy those of their masters, because they would commit suicide; not to compete with them, because there cannot be competition between those individuals that have the same goal[,] but to establish the equitable harmony that must exist [...] to avoid the collapse of everything. 37

Likewise, the workers’ solutions followed the same individualistic rationality that defined their conflicts. Social harmony was only possible through the recognition of individual freedoms, and not through state intervention —considered a permanent threat to that freedom. Therefore, the rejection of state intervention was not the outcome of the supposed “lack of maturity” of the Spanish labor movement, nor its simple reaction before governmental repression. Rather, it was the result of the way workers conceived their world through an imaginary articulated around the liberal notion of the individual.

III. The Emergence of the Social

The aforementioned conceptions about labor relations and conflicts, and the practices that generated prevailed among Spanish organized workers until the beginning of the twentieth century. Taking this into account, the question that must be answered is not why these laborers rejected state intervention, for this question is driven by the theoretical assumption that workers had to recognize social policies as the best solutions to their hardships. Rather, the relevant question is why a small sector of them defended the implementation of social laws, while others proposed the destruction of the state from 1860s-70s onwards.

Between 1860 and 1880, a set of new postures concerning the state and the labor relations sprouted among organized workers. Their emergence is closely related to the ways in which some of them interpreted the practical sequels of union strategies of the

37 Las clases trabajadoras asociadas a los diputados a Cortes.
previous years. A small but active group of laborers expressed their disappointment with the results of unionism. Despite all sacrifices and efforts during decades of fights, workers were still poor and subjugated. As the weaver and labor organizer Antonio Gusart stated in 1864, “for twenty four years such associations have lived with a variable degree of freedom. Twenty four years lost in the apathy of routine!”

In the same decade, Columbri analyzed his long experience in the fights of spinners and concluded that unionism was “mistaken”: “my condition as a worker and labor leader impelled me to examine this situation, and I wish I could transfer to my coworkers the inner conviction that this analysis has brought me, that is, the uselessness of the immense sacrifices made for the sake of a mistake.”

The frustrating results of unionism sapped the deeper workers’ conviction that the simple exercise of freedom of association was the answer to their problems. Columbri bitterly pointed that if unions “aspire to improve working-class conditions supporting 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 labor struggles of the organized spinners from Barcelona in the 1840s and 1850s were devastating: the unions had brought no benefits to them. The salary evolution had been independent from their fights. Their wages were high “while the number of machines grew and there were not enough spinners to operate them,” not due to the efficacy of the spinners’ collective pressure. The introduction of the self-acting mule resulted in spinners who “could hardly maintain the status quo of their salaries.” Their wages “were reduced to the lowest level” despite the opposition of unions. The “big pecuniary sacrifices” the spinners made to uphold their associations were useless. All this drove Columbri to the “conviction that the workers’ efforts to succeed with just their own savings were hopeless.”

However, this was not the only way of experiencing this situation. Actually, most unionized workers kept fighting in the old ways, trying to negotiate collective agreements and accusing some employers of being “selfish” and “bad citizens”. In 1869, the spokesmen of the Union Federation from Barcelona accused “bad employers” of being responsible for the failure of labor negotiations and for “the critical state of anxiety in which the peaceful inhabitants and lovers of true freedom and order are”.

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39 For the quotations of the last two paragraphs see Columbri, Una víctima, pp. 412-413, 454 and 501-502. Emphasis in original.
They assured that “social harmony” was possible with the support of the “employers of good faith”. From their perspective, unionism was a correct strategy, and if it did not work was because the strength of the “bad employers.”

In fact, many of the union fights were successful. Unionized workers achieved collective agreements that regulated wages and workday in many sectors in the 1860s-70s. However, unions also lost many battles and, above all, they did not procure a quick and effective “emancipation” for workers in three decades of existence. These facts did not meet the expectations of many workers, and some of them could interpret them as the proof of their failure. Their disappointment was clearer in the frequent difficulties of collective labor negotiation due to the owners’ opposition. How was it possible that so many owners obstinately rejected the opportunity to become “good citizens”? Why did they constantly break labor agreements, devalue workers’ rights, and pressure the authorities into destroying unions? It was no coincidence that the first critiques emerged after the failure of the joint committee system instituted in Barcelona in 1854-55.

In this context, some workers began to think that unionism had failed because the conciliation between them and employers was impossible. This conviction became an important problem for the workers’ explanations. It affected crucial notions such as the idea that social harmony was feasible. It meant to question the conception of workers and employers as equal citizens that were able to put the general welfare before their economic interests. Those who questioned the existing explanations underlined social organization as the cause of conflicts and the failure of previous solutions. As Columbri wrote, “the emergence of [labor struggles] all around Europe is evident proof that in all of them there is a purely social cause, which is the offspring of the depraved organization of the industry.” From this perspective, social relations had their own operating principles that constrained individual will. They determined the experiences and interests of individuals, grouping them in different social classes with confronted

40 “La cuestión del día entre fabricantes y obreros”, La Federación, 6, 5/IX/1869, p. 1.
41 For example, an heterogeneous group of unionized workers (cabinet makers, dockworkers, beakers, lamp makers, metal workers, etc.) from Valencia, Cadiz, Cadiz and certain Catalanian achieved the reduction of working hours the 1860s-1870s. Arbeloa, Victor M., I Congreso Obrero Español (Barcelona, 18-26 de junio de 1870), Madrid, Zero-ZYX, 1972, pp. 138, 146 y 158; La Federación, 11/XI/1870, 19/II/1871 y 27/VIII/1871; “Las huelgas en Valencia”, La Igualdad, 949, 16/XI/1871.
42 On the workers’ frustration with the Spanish Revolution of 1854 see Felipe, Jesús de, “La orientación del movimiento obrero hacia el republicanismo en España en el siglo XIX (1840-1860),” Historia y Política, 25, pp. 119-148.
43 Columbri, Una víctima, p. 543. Emphasis in original.
interests. In this view, labor conflicts were not the result of individual egoism, but the expression of their social circumstances.

As individuals could not transcend their own social interests, individual (moral) responsibility was pushed into the background. The notion that workers and employers shared a horizon of common (citizen) interests was dissolved. Between the 1860s and 1880s, some workers began to affirm that all owners were “exploiters” and “parasites” by their position in the social organization. The distinction between “good” and “bad” employers ceased to make sense. Whether they were “good” or “evil,” “altruist” or “selfish” was no longer the important issue. In 1884, the worker from Madrid Juan Cordobés proclaimed before an official commission created to gather information about labor conflicts that the workers’ troubles did not depend on the lack of morality of employers and workers, but rather the “social circumstances” in which they lived:

It is not that I believe that governments and people are bad, or that I feel that the bourgeois is evil [...] ; because I do not think anyone had bad feelings, it is the circumstances that place them in certain conditions instead. 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.\(^{44}\)

This was the core of the transcendental transformation that triggered the materialization of the social in the Spanish labor movement. It derived from the workers’ previous conception of the character of human relations. The union fights were originally based on the idea of society as an aggregate of free individuals. In this view, the exercise of individual freedoms would “emancipate” workers as free citizens. The free individuals could overcome any environmental constriction—including those derived from their respective social positions—to reach agreements among themselves. Most unionized workers acknowledged that they had different interests from their employers, but also argued that they could subordinate these interests to the wider aspiration of living in a community of free citizens. However, the idea that their interests were socially incompatible weakened that premise. It also implied that environmental (social) conditions became more important in the explanation of the individual behavior. Thus, the notions of individual freedom and social determination

were linked as the two faces of a coin. The weakening of one implied the strengthening of the other.

This social perspective brought a new understanding of labor conflicts. Exploitation was redefined as a *social* problem. This meant that labor conflicts were produced by the social principles that regulated labor conditions, such as personal benefit, the free market, and the wage system. The organized workers had never put into question these principles. They even had defended them as the implementation of the individual freedom. Now some of them argued that they had to “discover” them as the previous step to change them. In the 1860s, Columbri was confident that “a Newton of socialism” would soon uncover the “natural laws” that regulated society and motivated labor conflicts. Their knowledge would provide the bases to formulate effective solutions to labor struggles. In 1869, a group of union leaders and associated workers from Barcelona created the newspaper *La Federación* Barcelona to study the “social science” that would solve the problem of the workers’ emancipation by “achieving the radical cure of the sick society”. By “social science” they understood the diverse socialist currents (cooperativism, Proudhonism, Bakuninism, Marxism) that were spreading among unions in Spain and Europe and claimed to “discover” the social character of labor conflicts.45

This new interest in the “social laws” brought attention to the treatises of those who had studied the economic configuration of human relations, especially the classical liberal economists. In their works, the economy was conceived as an auto-regulated sphere of relations in which individuals exchanged products and services. They argued that the inner logic of these relationships could be unveiled through empirical observation, from which they could infer the laws that controlled market operations. In the 1860s, some of these laws acquired a sudden relevance in some of the workers’ demands and reflections. They consider them as immutable principles that determined the laborers’ working conditions in the capitalist society. The most significant case was the Ricardian “Iron Law of Wages,” which stated that wage levels were directly related to the prices of consumer goods in the free market. Therefore, any effort to increase the

real income of employees was done so in vain because salaries tended to remain near the subsistence level.\textsuperscript{46}

Worker criticism of unionism took this law as an unquestionable principle of the social organization and used it as new social evidence against wage struggles. Roca y Galés stated that all wage improvements made living costs more expensive. For this reason, he argued, the fight for wages had never achieved its main objective and needed to be abandoned.\textsuperscript{47} The same conclusion was drawn by Gusart, who felt that “to fight selfishness […] with inefficient remedies”, such as unions, “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.”\textsuperscript{48} “And since it must produce this result,” Columbri pointed out, “is it reasonable that workers persevere to receive wage increases? […] To what, then, is the panacea —not of the right, but of the practice of the principle of association— when its only objective is that of enhancing salaries? 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?”\textsuperscript{49}

From this perspective, unions had failed not only because laborers and owners had incompatible interests, but also because their objectives did not challenge the logic of the social organization that created exploitation. For those who embraced the premise of the social, unions did not solve workers’ problems. On the contrary, they prolonged them through preserving the wage system that constantly balanced itself with market prices, making union victories useless. So it was necessary to change both the objectives and the methods. Instead of trying to moralize selfish employers, workers had to transform the “social circumstances” themselves.

As Columbri 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.”\textsuperscript{50} This means that workers thought that social relationships could be changed. They were operating with the liberal idea that society could be (re)organized in accordance to rational criteria, especially the defense of individual rights. This led them to redefine the

\textsuperscript{46} On the impact of this Ricardian law upon the Spanish Marxists see Pérez Ledesma, Manuel, \textit{Antonio García Quejido y la Nueva Era. Pensamiento socialista en el último tercio del siglo XIX}, Madrid, Ediciones del Centro, 1974, pp. 30-32.
\textsuperscript{47} Roca y Galés, José, “De las asociaciones cooperativas,” \textit{La Asociación}, 5, 6/V/1866, p. 55.
\textsuperscript{48} Gusart, “La asociación productiva.”
\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 561-562.
meaning of “social revolution”: workers had to substitute one labor organization based on salary for another that assured their “natural” rights. In 1869, some leaders from the Union Federation from Barcelona defended the creation of a labor organization based on new “social principles,” such as the defense of workers’ “natural” rights such as the ownership of the product of their work: “we think that the salary is a social infamy, […] we want that the work be above the refined selfishness, the usury of those parasites [the employers] […]. We are firmly convinced that there will not be equity and prosperity until the great social principle that Work must be the workers’ property is fulfilled.”

The change in the workers’ conception of labor relations involved a new conception of the state as a social institution. This idea meant two (not necessary complementary) things. First, the state was not any more the defender of the individual rights, but the product of an “unfair” social organization. As we have seen, the organized workers had complained about the state’s partiality in dealing with labor issues, especially as far as the recognition of the their rights was concerned. However, they had kept asking for such recognition to the authorities, which they considered to have the responsibility of defending the citizens’ rights. But if the state was the product of a social organization based on labor exploitation, the public institutions could not be any more the defenders of their rights. Second, the state was a tool to preserve the social order that was controlled by the owner class. Nevertheless, this also meant that this “social tool” could be used to change such order.

The social conception of the state allowed workers to explain state repression of the unions as a new evidence of the “unfair” character of social organization. This made it possible to reconsider the relationships between them and authorities. The new social currents that spread in the 1860s-70s were the expression of this change. Some of them, especially cooperativism and Bakuninism (and later anarcho-syndicalism), tended to emphasize workers’ autonomy and to radicalize the previous rejection to state intervention. Since the 1860s, cooperativists spread in the labor movement by creating cooperatives as alternatives to unions. Cooperatives gave control over production to the workers to implement new ways of organizing labor relations that eradicated the divide between capitalists and employees. Their objectives were to eliminate the capitalist figure and the wage system and to introduce the collective management of

51 “Nuestra conducta ante el paro de los jornaleros, hiladores y tejedores mecánicos,” La Federación, 4, 22/VIII/1869, p. 2. Emphasis in original.
52 Roughly 40 cooperatives attended the first conference of cooperatives in Barcelona in 1865.
capital and work. Cooperation was the touchstone of a new labor organization that guaranteed the workers’ rights. Those who created cooperatives in Catalonia in the 1860s declared themselves to be “against wages” and to be confident that cooperativism is prone to unite labor and capital, not as it is today, when the wrongly called social order is divided between a capitalist class and a wage-earning class; but making the worker [...] become himself laborer and capitalist [...], being the one that renders capital useless by exchanging products for products [...]. These are our deep convictions, based on experience and supported by the social science.\footnote{Nuestra conducta ante el paro de los jornaleros”. Emphasis in original.}

In this scheme, the independence of the workers’ associations and initiatives with regard to the state became accentuated. The expansion of cooperatives would gradually change society without state intervention. Roca y Galés attributed them the ability to carry out “the social ideal within the widest freedom and completely independent from the state, in harmony with the natural rights of man.”\footnote{Roca y Galés, “Carta a Emilio Castelar.”}

Bakuninists in the 1870s and anarcho-syndicalists from the 1880s onwards departed from this idea of independence to oppose social reform and any collaboration with state. Since they considered the state as the defender of an oppressive regime, they pleaded for its destruction and substitution by the workers’ associations. They argued that unions had to abandon their previous fights and negotiations with employers to coordinate the social revolution through the general strike. The revolution would give the means of production to workers’ associations that would use them following the cooperative principle.\footnote{See Álvarez Junco, José, La ideología política del anarquismo español (1868-1910), Madrid, Siglo XXI, 1976.}

A second trend emerged among the groups of cooperativists and unionized workers. As Columbri pointed out, if labor conflicts were “social problems” and the cause of these social evils was in “the economic constitution of societies,” then the exercise of the individual freedom (of association) could not be enough. Only by solving those social problems would the desired ideal of the “establishment of the absolute freedom of the individual” come into existence. Following this line of thought, workers could use the state to transform the social organization. In the 1860s, Columbri, who had earlier censured state intervention, ascribed to the state the responsibility of acting on the social mechanisms that created labor conflicts and alleviating the living conditions of the working classes. Public authorities, “acknowledging their duty of
contributing to make all kind of injustices disappear” and using “the extremely powerful means they have,” could play a role “in the work initiated by the working classes themselves.”

This perspective was the base of the workers’ first petitions of social laws. In the 1870s and 1880s, a few unions argued that state could “help” them to achieve their emancipation, especially if it was controlled by their republican allies. The government could pass laws that ameliorate working conditions and support the workers’ fights. In July of 1873, the Manufacturing Union (Unión Manufacturera), an organization that claimed 40,000 members, demanded to the government the prohibition of child labor, hygienic control of workshops, equal pay for women and men, eight-hour workday, minimum wage, free primary and professional education for workers, and a credit system for the workers’ associations.

The Manufacturing Union considered these measures as “complementary” to freedom of association and collective negotiation. However, these and other demands constituted the departing point for a deeper conviction in state intervention, such as Marxist socialism. From 1879 onwards, Marxists succeeded in creating several parties and union federations, such as the Spanish Socialist Worker Party (PSOE) and the General Union of Workers (UGT). Marxists agreed with cooperativists and anarchists in locating the causes of exploitation in the social organization. They also shared the criticism against unionism, which they considered an ineffective strategy for achieving the workers’ emancipation: “as extraordinary as their strength may be, [unions] will never establish by way of strike” favorable labor conditions, such as “a stable workday” of eight hours. Marxists also alluded to the Iron Law of Wages to affirm that the unions’ successes would never overcome the oscillations of periodic economic crises, when employers broke collective agreements.

What made Marxists different from other trends was that they explored a distinct path opened by the notion of the social, that is, state intervention to fix social imbalances. In their view, the only way to solve social problems was to have the support of the state to create specific labor conditions that would protect the workers’ rights.

56 Columbi, Una víctima, pp. 420-421, 504 and 554-555.
57 Exposición de la Unión Manufacturera a las Cortes, Gracia (Barcelona), 5/VII/1873. Reproduced in http://www.veuobrera.org/00fine-x/um-expo.htm (consulted by last time 13/XI/2012). The petition was made even with the opposition of the Bakuninist leaders of this federation.
Thus, workers could resist economic cycles and improve their condition with “a law that prevented employers from extending the workday” and altering other labor circumstances. This was the conviction that drove Spanish Marxist to demand social laws such as the eight-hour workday and the prohibition of child labor and to try to control the state through their party since the 1880s.\textsuperscript{59}

Therefore, only when workers perceived their conflicts as being products of social problems could state intervention in the economy be posed as legitimate solution. However, socialists distrusted state action when workers did not control it. They refused to collaborate with what they called “the bourgeois state” until 1904. In their view, the really effective social laws were those that workers “conquered” from the state.\textsuperscript{60} Since they conceived the state as a social institution in the hands of the owner class, they focused their efforts on trying to control the state through their party. They maintained an ambiguous attitude towards the first initiatives of social legislation because they interpreted them in social terms, that is, as a new attempt of the classes that benefited from the social organization to maintain such order.

The new attitudes concerning the state were the consequence of a transcendental transformation in the way the workers experienced their working conditions. In this way, they were not the product of an ideological influence of the socialist currents that appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century. Rather, these currents could spread as a consequence of a change in the assumptions and categories that the workers used to make sense of their world and act accordingly, that is, in their imaginary.\textsuperscript{61}

This change was motivated by the contradictions derived from the use of the individualistic conceptions to make sense of labor conflicts. Those contradictions arose when the practices based on their assumptions did not bring the predicted the “emancipation” of the workers. The frustration of the expectations sapped the conviction in the existing conceptions of labor relations. This opened the possibility of adopting alternative explanations on such relations. In this way, the social was not “discovered”, but it was the fruit of a historical process of constant re-elaboration of the meaning of human (labor) relations. The social conception competed with the existing

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} The Marxists exposed this attitude before the government commission that was studying the possibility of creating the first social laws in 1884. See Castillo (ed.), \textit{Reformas Sociales}, vol. I.
\textsuperscript{61} For the distinction between ideology and imaginary see Poovey, Mary, “The Liberal Civil Subject,” pp. 49-50.
one and brought new expectations and strategies, such as those represented by the mentioned currents.

This implies that labor relations and conditions have no meaning by themselves. Their meaning depends on the frame of categories the workers used to make sense of them. This explains why the process of making sense of the world is always “incomplete”, because the logic of human relations is not based on an intrinsic objective meaning. As Ernesto Laclau argues, the operation of making sense of them produces permanent contradictions.\textsuperscript{62} Such incongruences motivated the changes in the workers’ explanations about labor conflicts and in their attitudes concerning the state.

If this analysis is correct, the whole history of the labor movements in the nineteenth century has to be reconsidered. If the notion of the social played no role in the emergence of the Spanish labor movement, then we must explore its role in other cases. The workers’ identities and actions could be articulated through historical imaginaries in which the notion of the individual was pivotal. The social affected their aspirations and behavior only when it was articulated as a way of conceiving labor relations. In this essay I have tried to underline that this articulation has to become an object of historical explanation. In order to do so, I believe the analysis I have exposed shows the need to further explore the possibilities of the category of imaginary. To develop this kind of analysis, it is essential to examine how the social was incorporated into the existing views and actions in a more detailed way than I have done here. However, I hope to have proved that this approach denaturalizes the category of the social that still drives many analyses of the relations between unions and authorities.