On 11 December 1869, the Swiss Internationalist journal *L’Égalité* leveled grave charges against the General Council of the International Working Men's Association (IWMA): “Even if the Council in London administers the particular affairs of Great Britain perfectly [...], it certainly neglects issues that are of extreme importance from a general perspective of the International.”¹ The anonymous author of the article took particular exception to the General Council's recent statements on the Fenian question, which concerned the amnesty for Irish revolutionaries in British gaols and at the time was hotly debated in British radical circles.² For the author of *L’Égalité*, the issue of Irish independence only was a “local political movement” with no general relevance to the universal aspirations of the International. Since the General Council seemed to have slipped into the role of a “regional council of the English sections of the International”, the solution of the problem seemed obvious: liberating the General Council from its involvement in British affairs by creating a separate Federal Council for the International's affairs in the British isles.³

¹ This quote and the following references to *L’Égalité* are taken from: [Paul Robin], Réflexions, *L’Égalité*, No. 47, 11 December 1869, p. 1 (my own translations). Important sections of this article are quoted in Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA²), vol. I/21, pp. 1481 and 1484. The original excerpts read: “Si le Conseil siégeant à Londres administre parfaitement les affaires particulières de la Grande Bretagne [...], il est certain qu’il néglige des choses extrêmement importantes au point de vue général de l’Internationale.” The further terms quoted in the paragraph are “mouvement politique local” and “Conseil régional des sections anglaises de l’Internationale”. For the origin of the article see Robert Graham, *We Do Not Fear Anarchy, We Invoke It. The First International and the Origins of the Anarchist Movement* (Oakland, Edinburgh, 2015), pp. 125–127.

² The Fenian Brotherhood had been founded in 1858 by American-Irish advocates of Irish independence as a secret organization whose fight against British rule culminated in an attempted uprising in 1867, see Patrick Quinlivan, Paul Rose, *The Fenians in England 1865–1872. A Sense of Insecurity* (London, 1982); John Newsinger, *Fenianism in Mid-Victorian Britain* (London, 1994). For the Fenian uprising of 1867 and ensuing debates also see below, Section 1 of this chapter.

³ In accordance with contemporary usage, the terms "English Federal Council" and "British Federal Council" are used interchangeably in the following pages. In the period under
The Swiss Internationalists had a point – the organizational structure of the IWMA in Great Britain was an exception to its general design. When the association was founded in 1864, the General Council was established in London as “an international agency between the different co-operating associations”. It was meant to act as a centre of administration and communication, entitled to initiate discussions across the association and to take practical steps when labour disputes or political crises arose. The General Council was supposed to coordinate the work of the national bodies which were established in most countries with connections to the International. Only the British situation was different; a separate national branch was considered unnecessary since the General Council was based in London and could adopt the functions of a British section.

Karl Marx vigorously defended the existing arrangements against the charges raised by L’Égalité. Writing in the name of the General Council, he argued in January 1870 that “only England can act as a lever in any seriously economic revolution”. In evidence, he presented Britain as the only country in which a capitalist form of production had taken hold and where trade unions existed with “a considerable degree of maturity and universality”. The General Council would have to be foolish to transfer its hold on this great lever for a proletarian revolution to a regional British council. Moreover – Marx argued –, the very strength of the British trade unions would impede the work of a British Federal Branch of the IWMA. If in existence, it might be squeezed between the General Council and the powerful trade union bodies, losing all authority in the process. Marx’ defence of the status quo culminated in a striking plea for British discussion, such a council did not exist, thus alleviating the discussion of the need to adopt geographical precision in terminology.

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4 Karl Marx, *Provisional Rules of the Working Men’s International Association* (1864), no. 6, printed in MEGA² I/20, pp. 13–15, 14.

5 Karl Marx, *The General Council to the Federal Council of French Switzerland*, quoted from the translation by Andy Blunden in https://www.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/documents/1870/french-switzerland.htm (accessed 3.3.2015). Marx’s original French text can be found in: Karl Marx, *Circulaire du Conseil Général de l’Association Internationale des Travailleurs au Conseil Fédéral de la Suisse Romande du 1 janvier 1870*, quoted in MEGA² I/21, pp. 159–165; the quotations in the paragraph above in their original French form (italics in the original): “l’Angleterre seule peut servir de levier pour une Révolution sérieusement économique” (p. 161); “un certain degré de maturité et d’universalité” (ibid.); “L’Angleterre ne doit pas être traitée comme un pays auprès des autres pays. Elle doit être traitée comme la métropole du capital.” (p. 162). Marx also included the text of the *Circulaire* in his “Confidentielle Mittheilung” to the Social Democrats of Braunschweig, printed in MEGA² I/21, pp. 220–227.
exceptionalism: “England can not be considered simply as one country among many others. It must be treated as the metropolis of capital.”

Thus, for Marx, British affairs were all but local concerns; they were the crucible where the ingredients of universal revolution were mixed. Here were the roots of the general importance of the Irish question: Any successful social revolution would have to start by destroying the entrenched power of English landlordism. The weak link in its chain of power was Ireland – if landlord power collapsed in Ireland, it would – Marx assumed – also collapse in England. In contrast to L’Égalité, Marx maintained that support for the Fenians was of general importance since rebellion in Ireland offered the first grasp at the lever of universal social revolution: “Therefore the International Association’s attitude to the Irish question is absolutely clear. Its first need is to press on with the social revolution in England, and to that end, the major blow must be struck in Ireland.”

The exchange on the institutional structure of the IWMA in Great Britain between L’Égalité and Karl Marx was, of course, part of a much wider debate going on between Internationalists in French-speaking Switzerland and the General Council. The article in the Swiss journal had been written by Paul Robin, a close associate of Michail Bakunin. The dispute marked the beginning of the great power struggle between Marx and Bakunin for the heart and soul of the International. For Bakunin’s anarchist supporters on the editorial board of L’Égalité, there was no point in trying “to improve the existing governments”; all energy had to be directed “at radically suppressing them, and to replace the current political, authoritarian, religious and legal state by a new social organisation assuring to everyone the complete product of his work and all that follows from it.” Consequently, the political activities of the Marx-dominated

6 Quoted from https://www.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/documents/1870/french-switzerland.htm (accessed 3.3.2015). For the French original see Karl Marx, Circulaire, quoted in MEGA² 1/21, pp. 159–165, 163: “Donc la position de l’Association Internationale vis-à-vis de la question Irlandaise est très nette. Son premier besoin est de pousser la révolution sociale en Angleterre. A cet effet il faut frapper le grand coup en Irlande”.

7 From 1869, the Russian anarchist revolutionary Michail Bakunin (1814–1876) started to build a power-base from the International’s sections in French-speaking Switzerland against Marx’s dominance. From the Bakuninists’ perspective, the General Council was a tool in the hands of Marx. The dispute turned increasingly acrimonious, with hardening ideological front-lines and personal recriminations, leading to Bakunin’s exclusion from the International in 1872, but also contributing to the association’s decline, see e.g. Wolfgang Eckhardt, The First Socialist Schism: Bakunin vs. Marx in the International Working Men’s Association (Oakland, 2015).

8 My translation of: [Paul Robin], Réflexions, L’Égalité, No. 47, 11 December 1869, p. 1 (italics in the original): “Nous ne saurions trop répéter que l’intérêt des travailleurs n’est pas de
General Council within the current structure of the state were viewed with fundamental suspicion. But although the ideological confrontation extended to a wide range of issues, matters of organization were part and parcel of the conflict between Marxian centralism and Bakuninist federalism; soon, the Federal Council of French-speaking Switzerland was to split into two opposing camps at La Chaux-de-Fonds, with the anarchist challenge to Marx’ leadership becoming clear for all to see.9

The article in *L’Égalité* in December 1869 constituted a tactical move in an impending conflict rather than an attempt at a disinterested description of structural flaws in the International’s set-up. Still, it is worthwhile to take the arguments seriously. Might it not have been true that the focus on British affairs prevented the General Council from paying full attention to the requirements of Internationalist organization elsewhere? Did not Marx himself implant a seed of failure into the IWMA by directing its strategy towards a social revolution in Britain, which – as we now know – did not happen? Did British popular radicals gain undue prominence in the International due to their easy recruitment into the General Council?

In order to answer these questions, I will probe into the validity of the Bakuninist remonstrations, addressing the two main areas of concern broached by *L’Égalité*: the General Council’s proclamations on the Fenian amnesty question and the lack of a separate British Federal Council. The first issue provided the occasion for Robin’s attack; the latter one calls for a closer look at the role of British trade unionists inside the IWMA, since it was they who inspired Marx’s hopes for a social revolution in England and his plea for leaving British affairs in the hands of the General Council.

### The Fenian Question in the General Council

The Irish question should have been a topic where the International came into its own. One impulse for the founding of the International had been proclamations of solidarity with oppressed nations. The association had grown out of sympathy meetings for the Polish insurrection of 1863; at about the same time,
British workers had supported the anti-slavery stance of the Northern states in the American Civil War and they had been enthusiastic about Giuseppe Garibaldi, the hero of Italian independence. Marx should have found strong support for his condemnation of British rule in Ireland, which had been kept in a semi-colonial state since the union of 1801. Indeed, when the Irish question became a topic of discussion in the General Council of the International, there were strong sympathies for Irish Home Rule and Irish attempts to fight for it.

During the 1860s, there were two major occasions for discussions of the Irish question among British popular radicals and, for that matter, in the General Council of the International, in 1867, when a short-lived Fenian insurrection raised issues of Irish independence, and in 1869, when the British prime minister William Ewart Gladstone refused to grant amnesty to all Fenians in British prisons. However, on these occasions, it was not only Swiss Internationalists who harboured doubts about the General Council’s involvement in the Irish question. Rather than bearing out Marx’ hopes, the discussions on Ireland revealed fault-lines within British radicalism itself.

On the one hand, there were Internationalists such as the journalist Peter André Fox, who in 1867 presented the General Council with a resolution stating “Ireland’s right to autonomy”; in the same year, John Hales, who was to play a prominent role in the final years of the International, argued that Ireland deserved the same kind of sympathy that was accorded to other nations struggling for their freedom.10

On the other hand, there were opposing voices among the British members of the General Council. In 1869, Thomas Mottershead, representative of a small weavers’ union, claimed that Ireland should not be independent since it was needed as a bulwark against France. Moreover, he had found Irish workers too little supportive of initiatives of English workers.11 In a letter to Engels, Marx made fun of Mottershead’s John-Bull-attitude12 but there were further voices which saw Irish aspirations with reservations. In 1872, William Harrison Riley, editor of the *International Herald* newspaper, conceded the Irish right to self-government; at the same time, he chided the self-serving national character of Irish agitations and demanded self-government for all the people in the world.13

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10 Minutes of the General Council (26.11.1867), printed in MEGA² I/21, p. 531; Séan Daly, *Ireland and the First International* (Cork, 1984), p. 184. On John Hales see Bernard A. Cook, “Hales, John”, in Joseph O. Baylen and Norbert J. Gossman (eds), *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals*, 3 vols in 4 parts (Brighton [etc.], 1979–1988), 3, pp. 373–376.
11 Minutes of the General Council (23.11.1869), printed in MEGA¹ I/21, p. 732.
12 Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 4 December 1869, printed in MEGA¹ III/4, p. 253.
13 William Harrison Riley, “The Fenian Prisoners”, in *International Herald*, 2.11.1872, p. 4.
The Irish question had become particularly vexing in 1867, when the Fenians made their bid to achieve an independent Irish republic by force. Their uprising was quickly defeated by British forces, but in September 1867 a policeman died when the Fenians tried to liberate some of their imprisoned comrades from a Manchester prison. At first, the Irish revolutionaries received expressions of sympathy when three of their members were executed for the liberation attempt. However, in December 1867, twelve local people died and many were injured when the Fenians attacked Clerkenwell Gaol in Eastern London. This assault cost them a lot of sympathy in British radical circles. Violence was not generally seen as a political method to be applied in a constitutional state such as Great Britain. A heated debate on the Irish right to violence ensued. But as far as the debate among British members of the International was concerned, the General Council was sidelined in this major political dispute – the most excited discussions took place in the leading circles of the Reform League, a body set up by British radicals in 1865 to mount a campaign for suffrage extension.

George Odger, a leading member of both the Reform League and the International, publicly expressed his sympathy with the aims of the Fenians. This caused an outcry of protest from both working-class and middle-class radicals in the Reform League who refused to condone political violence. Odger had to issue a statement explaining his condemnation of violent political means, although he still defended the Irish claim to independence.

Marx was dissatisfied with such proclamations of political moderation, but for Odger and many of his fellow radicals, condemnations of political violence were an essential ingredient in their bid for political respectability. Workers’ movements easily faced the accusation of causing mayhem and advocating social upheaval. Among others, the reform struggle of the 1860s was an attempt by working-class radicals to underline their trust in the British constitutional order and to demonstrate the perfect capability of the working class to participate in the regular political life of the nation. This was not just strategy, but it reflected the self-conception of British working-class radicals as rational and respectable men who demanded their fair share of political participation.

14 See the documents from the Reform League printed in John Breuilly, Gottfried Niedhart, Antony Taylor (eds), *The Era of the Reform League: English Labour and Radical Politics 1857–1872. Documents Selected by Gustav Mayer* (Mannheim, 1995), pp. 264–277.

15 [George Odger], *Mr. Odger’s Speech, Delivered to the Council of the Reform League in explanation and defence of certain Remarks made by him on the subject of Fenianism* (undated pamphlet, Reform League Papers, Howell Collection, Bishopsgate Institute, London). On Odger see Fred M. Leventhal, “Odger, George”, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter: ODNB), vol 41, pp. 495–496.

16 See Keith McClelland, “Rational and Respectable Men: Gender, the Working Class, and Citizenship in Britain, 1850–1867”, in Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose (eds), *Gender and
The refusal of Fenian violence thus was supported by the central tenets of the reform movement of the 1860s. Labour radicals stubbornly followed their chosen course, without giving the General Council of the International the opportunity to alter their basic attitude. For the International, this meant that the General Council was unable to move beyond broad proclamations of support for the Irish right to autonomy; the debates on the Irish question petered out when its urgency diminished. The scope for action was limited rather than expanded by the politics of the British element on the General Council. Thus, in fact, Marx’ rationale behind the focus on the Irish question got mired in the intricacies of British radicals’ considerations. The General Council had the worst of both worlds from it: Neither did the focus on Ireland strengthen the political clout of the IWMA, nor did it bear out the hopes Marx had invested in British working-class leaders. This latter result, though, should not at this time have come as a big surprise. Right from the first moves of the IWMA, many British members of the General Council had shown a capacity for using the IWMA for their own purposes. In particular, this was the case with some trade union leaders.

Trade Union Leaders in the IWMA and the Lack of a British Federal Council

The article in *L'Égalité* had pointed out the fact that every country was represented in the IWMA by a national Federal Council – save Britain. There had been several attempts at forming such a national body, notably by John Hales, who occasionally brought up the idea in the General Council. However, each time the suggestion was refuted. Marx still clung to his conviction that England would be the lever for a coming revolution and used his influence in the General Council to thwart any attempt at changing the institutional set-up of the International in Britain. Besides, by thus empowering the General Council, he had no qualms about empowering himself. When he interrupted his work on *Capital* for several years to commit his time and energy to the International, he expected to hold the steering-wheel of the future revolution in his own hands. Some members of the General Council represented important British

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17 Henry Collins and Chimen Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement. Years of the First International* (London, 1965), pp. 85 and 190–191.
trade unions. Marx intended to exert his personal influence over these “worker kings” and repeatedly boasted to Frederick Engels that the International was a “mighty engine” in the hands of the two friends.

At first, Marx’ optimism seemed justified. Several important working-class bodies were set up in London in the 1860s with the participation of members from the General Council of the International. When the Reform League was founded in 1865 to campaign for manhood suffrage, its secretary George Howell was just one of a number of members from the General Council. Internationalists were also instrumental in creating the Land and Labour League, set up in 1869 to foster the idea of land nationalization as a cure for social ills. In these and other cases, Marx tended to see the British associations as the “creations” of the International. Temporarily, he even thought that the mighty London Trades Council (LTC) which had been established in the wake of a great builders’ strike in 1860, was in “our [meaning, his and Engels’] hands”. Among others, the LTC-secretary George Odger was a member – and for several years the President – of the General Council.

However, the British working-class leaders failed to consider themselves creatures of the German doctor who had emerged from more than a decade of study in the British Library. Many of the British contingent on the General Council were leaders of the most powerful trade unions of their time, within Great Britain and beyond. As Jürgen Herres has pointed out in his comprehensive introduction to the edition of the Council minutes, British trade unionists were perceived as role-models in much of Europe. Trade unions had become

18 Several dozen unions affiliated to the International, but it is difficult to provide a clear estimate of union membership. The aggregate numbers amounted to several thousands, but active commitment to the association can hardly be distinguished from mere formal membership. In any case, the membership fees of these unions were of great importance for the notoriously precarious finances of the International. For a list of affiliated unions see Collins/Abramsky, Karl Marx, p. 81.

19 See Karl Marx to Joseph Weydemeyer, 29 November 1864, printed in MEW, vol 31, pp. 428–429; Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 11 September 1867, printed in MEGA1 III/3, p. 420. Marx was particularly interested in the leaders of the so-called new model unions, big societies which amalgamated workers from trades such as bricklayers, engineers and carpenters into powerful centralized bodies. The London leaders of these unions were famously dubbed “the Junta” by Beatrice and Sidney Webb, The History of Trade Unionism (London, 1894).

20 See Detlev Mares, Auf der Suche nach dem “wahren” Liberalismus. Demokratische Bewegung und liberale Politik im viktorianischen England (Berlin, 2002).

21 Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 26 December 1865, printed in MEGA1 III/3, p. 299 (in the German original: “Gründungen”).

22 Collins/Abramsky, Karl Marx, p. 63.
well-established and well-funded organizations in Britain before significant union-building had as much as started in many countries on the “Continent”. The very terms “strike”, “meeting” or “trade union” were adopted into several European languages, the forms of union solidarity were eagerly copied. The British trade unionists on the General Council were well-versed, assertive working-class politicians, with a network of connections into middle-class radicalism, and they self-confidently expressed their views on political and social issues in speeches, print and personal meetings with members of parliament. They were above all interested in the International’s potential to act as a transnational agency during labour disputes, for example helping to prevent industrialists from importing foreign strike breakers into their country.

However, some of the trade unionists also were the standard-bearers of formerly Chartist ideas of political participation. Chartism had been a broad umbrella movement for democratic reforms in the 1830s and 1840s, with its main focus on the demand for an extension of the suffrage into the ranks of the working class. After 1848, the mass movement lost steam. Some of its supporters moved on into other areas of activity, such as trade unionism, seemingly signaling a new generation of moderate, even submissive labour politics. However, since the 1980s, historians of British popular radicalism have refuted earlier claims that the mid-Victorian generation of working-class leaders was an opportunistic labour aristocracy, led astray into the realms of false consciousness by the lure of personal respectability accorded to them by members of the middle class. A broader picture has emerged, showing the state flexible enough to offer the promise of social reform and political participation, while the British constitution provided a weapon that could be wielded in support of radical demands for reform. Shared values rather than raw class conflict shaped the politics of mid-Victorian working-class radicalism. These

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23 Jürgen Herres, “Einführung”, in MEGA I/21, pp. 1131–1139. For an Anglo-German comparison see Christiane Eisenberg, Deutsche und englische Gewerkschaften. Entstehung und Entwicklung bis 1878 im Vergleich (Göttingen, 1986).
24 From the wealth of literature, see Malcolm Chase, Chartism. A New History (Manchester, New York, 2007).
25 The labour aristocracy approach informs Royden Harrison, Before the Socialists. Studies in Labour and Politics 1861–1881 (London [etc.], 1965). The revisionist account was first developed by Gareth Stedman Jones, Languages of Class. Studies in English Working Class History 1832–1982 (Cambridge [etc.], 1983), and Eugenio Biagini, Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform. Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860–1880 (Cambridge, 1992). For the most recent treatment see James Owen, Labour and the Caucus. Working-class radicalism and organized Liberalism in England, 1868–1888 (Liverpool, 2014), esp. pp. 24–60. For biographical information see Fred M. Leventhal, “Howell, George” in ODNB, vol 28,
values also kept alive Chartist ideas of political participation. In the early to mid-1860s, a very active group of radical London trade unionists used virtually every opportunity to set up political bodies in order to start a broad movement for suffrage extension in the Chartist tradition. Among these, many were also to be found in the International. Apart from George Odger and George Howell, this applies to Robert Applegarth and William Randal Cremer from the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners. If the history of the International is integrated into this new framework of analysis, we find that many British unionist found the IWMA a useful tool in their attempts to organize a broad movement for suffrage reform. In fact, the demands of this campaign shaped their relationship with the General Council; rather than being a “parent body” to British radical associations, the General Council became an arena for British radical politics.

The rather unscrupulous utilization of the IWMA by some British trade unionists on the General Council can be seen at work in their struggle for dominance in the reform movement. Metropolitan working-class radicalism of the 1860s was hampered by the personal and political conflict between the leaders of the London Trades Council (LTC) and George Potter, the editor of the weekly newspaper The Bee-Hive. In contrast to the more risk-averse leaders of the LTC, Potter supported strike actions of small trade unions and founded the London Working Men’s Association, a rival to the Reform League in the struggle for suffrage extension. The majority of the British members on the General Council were in the anti-Potter camp. For them, the International served as a welcome instrument in their attempts to wrest power and influence from their old enemy Potter. In particular, this meant destroying Potter’s hold on the Bee-Hive and getting the paper into the hands of the leaders of the London Trades Council.

As early as November 1864, the General Council adopted the Bee-Hive as the official organ for publications of the International. At the same time, the General Council of the International.
Council resolved to establish a fund to buy up shares in the Bee-Hive-Newspaper Company. The obvious aim of this measure was to take the paper over. Marx reported this plan to "swamp the old majority"\(^ 29 \) in the Bee-Hive-company to Engels in December 1864. This has made some authors assume that Marx was the driving force behind the takeover scheme.\(^ 30 \) This may or may not have been the case. But it is absolutely clear that the Ltc leaders hardly needed Marx to hatch this idea. They had already tried – and failed – to do the same in 1863;\(^ 31 \) thus, it seems much more likely that they unapologetically used the International for their own purposes.

This suspicion is confirmed by the further steps the General Council took in its attempts to establish its own paper after the takeover bid for the Bee-Hive had failed. By acquiring a less influential paper and renaming it The Commonwealth in 1866, the International finally seemed to have succeeded in acquiring its own press organ. However, the precarious financial situation of the Commonwealth required additional funding, which only could be procured from Liberal radicals, such as Thomas Hughes, Peter Alfred Taylor or Arthur Miall. They belonged to a group of middle-class politicians with close connections to the Ltc leadership. Marx was not amused by middle-class Liberals gaining a foot-hold in affairs connected with the International. He managed to get his confidant George Eccarius accepted as one of the editors of the Commonwealth. Marx himself doubted his friend's ability for the job. Indeed, Eccarius quickly became unpopular with his British colleagues for whom he seemed just a less diplomatically sophisticated version of Marx himself.

The further history of the Commonwealth reveals the true intentions of the Ltc leaders: They wanted to use the paper as the press organ of the Reform League – again, the reform campaign emerges as the core interest of British working-class radicals. They were happy to receive support from the International in their attempts to dominate the reform movement, but they did not want the International or Marx himself to dominate their politics. When Marx was on holiday in Margate in March 1866, they used the opportunity to force Eccarius out of the editorship of the Commonwealth.\(^ 32 \)

With the reform campaign gathering steam, most Ltc leaders lost interest in the daily affairs of the International. Their regular attendance on the

\(^{29}\) Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 2 December 1864, printed in MEGA I III/3, p. 210.

\(^{30}\) Collins/Abramsky, Karl Marx, p. 63; Coltham, “George Potter”, p. 397; Stephen Coltham: “The Bee-Hive Newspaper: Its Origins and Early Struggles”, in Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds), Essays in Labour History. In Memory of G.D.H. Cole (London, 1960), pp. 174–204, 202.

\(^{31}\) Harrison, Before the Socialists, pp. 48–50; Coltham, “Bee-Hive Newspaper”, p. 200.

\(^{32}\) Collins/Abramsky, Karl Marx, p. 67.
General Council slackened. After the passing of the Reform Act in 1867, they even made their peace with George Potter. Although the Bee-Hive now published the statements and minutes of the International for a while, most of the leaders of the reform movement did not resume their active work on the General Council. George Howell is a case in point. He may have hoped to become editor of the Commonwealth. When he failed in this ambition, he ceased to attend the General Council, devoted his energy to the Reform League and moved on to become one of the founders of Liberal-Labour alliances in forthcoming elections.33

When L'Égalité published its attack on the General Council in December 1869, it did not mention the role of British trade union leaders in the International. But it might have done so – their actions made sure that at least part of the energies of the General Council were devoted to affairs that only were of “local”, British interest. Instead of transcending the British situation for moves directed at a universal application of internationalist principles, the General Council was drawn into local power struggles which did nothing to strengthen the world-wide clout of the IWMA.

Conclusion

The examples of the discussions on the Irish question and – even more so – of trade unionists’ political activities merge into a coherent narrative that presents British working-class radicals as autonomous political actors who managed to use the General Council for their own purposes. Rather than strengthening internationalist politics in Britain by doing without a separate British federal council, the General Council got dragged into the minefield of intrigues in London radical and labour politics, without being able to fundamentally alter their course. Of course, reading through the General Council minutes or the congress reports of the IWMA, the scope of the International’s activities appears much wider, as indeed it was. It would be a crude exaggeration to present the association as being exclusively devoted to British affairs. And yet, they were very prominent in the work of the General Council, both in terms of membership and preoccupations. If Marx’s expectations of social revolution had been correct, this favouring of the British dimension would have been adequate. As it was, the charges of L’Égalité did not lack plausibility.

33 Fred Marc Leventhal, Respectable Radical. George Howell and Victorian Working Class Politics (London, 1971).
After many trade unionists had lost interest in the General Council, only few of them remained committed members of the IWMA. For a while, Robert Applegarth, influential general secretary of the powerful Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, became active in the association and kept close contact to Marx. By the early 1870s, however, only George Odger remained from the prominent British founders of the International, until he resigned from the General Council in acrimony over the publication of Marx’ pamphlet on the Paris Commune, *The Civil War in France*.34 On the General Council, Marx was left with some reliable supporters from London clubland, such as the O’Brienites, but they only commanded a small metropolitan following.35 They were not the “worker kings” anymore who had prompted Marx to devote himself to the International (see Figure 3.1).

By 1871, it was clear that Marx’ strategy had unraveled. When British sections and a British Federal Council were finally established after the London conference of 1871, this marked the first time that the IWMA started to build up a noteworthy presence in Britain outside the metropolis. But as far as Marx was concerned, this new stage in the development of the International indicated his disappointment with the association. He gave in to Hales’ demands for a British Federal Council since he had abandoned his expectations of an imminent revolution in England. Instead, he invested his hopes in the new labour parties that started to emerge in some countries on the Continent, the German Social Democrats in particular.36 Although some English branches showed initial signs of considerable energy, their work and the activities of the Federal Council soon became entangled in the power struggles between different factions that heralded the end of the International. They never developed into a powerful political force.37

When *L’Égalité* published its accusations against the English focus of the London centre of the IWMA, this had been part of the emerging struggle between the Jura Federation and the General Council, between Bakunin and Marx. Yet the questions of the Swiss Internationalists do not seem unjustified:

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34 See Detlev Mares, “Odger, George (1813–1877)”, in Keith Gildart and David Howell (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol. x111 (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 292–300, 294–295.

35 For the connections between London clubland and the International see Keith Robinson, “Karl Marx, the IMWA, and London Radicalism, 1864–1872” (Ph.D., Manchester, 1976).

36 See Wolfgang Schieder, *Karl Marx als Politiker* (Munich, 1991), pp. 97–117.

37 See Henry Collins, “The English Branches of the First International”, in Briggs and Saville, *Essays in Labour History*, pp. 242–275; Detlev Mares, “Transcending the Metropolis: London and Provincial Popular Radicalism, c. 1860–1875”, in Cragoe and Taylor, *London Politics*, pp. 121–143, 136f.
The International was meant to be a globally acting and thinking organization. Marx’ attempts to combine this general direction with a focus on Britain failed. Would a Federal Council have been better placed to deal with British matters? Would it have left the General Council and the International more successful? These can only be moot questions. But it is evident that the English situation never evolved into the stepping-stone to revolution, as expected by Marx. Considering the importance of Great Britain in the mid-Victorian period and beyond, Marx had a point in maintaining the “trans-local” and trans-national importance of British developments. But the most important British members of the International remained inward-looking and showed no interest in the wider aspirations that – in their different ways – both arch-enemies, Marx and Bakunin, harboured for the IWMA. The British contingent of the International did contribute less to making it a powerful political instrument than expected by Marx. But although this gives plausibility to the charges leveled by L’Égalité, the British members at the same time never locked the International in confrontations that would spell the end of the association itself. Compared to the devastating effects of the Bakuninist claim for dominance, their reluctant Internationalism seems harmless enough. It indicated the self-sufficiency of mid-Victorian working-class radicalism which might make good use of an international labour organization but did not fundamentally depend on it in their struggles for reform.
**Figure 3.1** Attendance of members of the General Council of the IWMA, September–December 1870.