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A Tale of Two Cities: Robert Owen and the Search for Utopia, 1815–17

Gregory Claeys

Every society which exists at present, as well as every society which history records, has been formed and governed on a belief in the following notions, assumed as first principles:

1st. That it is in the power of every individual to form his own character.

Hence the various systems called by the name of religion, codes of law, and punishments. Hence also the angry passions entertained by individuals and nations towards each other.

2nd. That the affections are at the command of the individual. Hence insincerity and degradation of character. Hence the miseries of domestic life, and more than one half of all the crimes of mankind.

3rd. That it is necessary that a large portion of mankind should exist in ignorance and poverty, in order to secure to the remaining part such a degree of happiness as they now enjoy.

Hence a system of counteraction in the pursuits of men, a general opposition among individuals to the interests of each other, and the necessary effects of such a system – ignorance, poverty, and vice.

Facts prove, however,

1st. That character is universally formed for and not by, the individual.

2nd. That any habits and sentiments may be given to mankind.

3rd. That the affections are not under the control of the individual.

4th. That every individual may be trained to produce far more than he can consume, while there is a sufficiency of soil left for him to cultivate.

5th. That nature has provided means by which population may be at all times maintained in the proper state to give the greatest happiness to every individual, without one check of vice or misery.

6th. That any community may be arranged, on a due combination of the foregoing principles, in such a manner,

as not only to withdraw vice, poverty, and, in a great degree, misery, from the world, but also to place every individual under circumstances in which he shall enjoy more permanent happiness than can be given to any individual under the principles which have hitherto regulated society.

7th. That all the assumed fundamental principles on which society has hitherto been founded are erroneous, and may be demonstrated to be contrary to fact. And

8th. That the change which would follow the abandonment of those erroneous maxims which bring misery into the world, and the adoption of principles of truth, unfolding a system which shall remove and for ever exclude that misery, may be effected without the slightest injury to any human being.¹

Students of early socialism, and of Robert Owen in particular, will be familiar with the ‘two Owen’ problem. After he assumed management of the New Lanark mills in early 1800 Owen became an enormously successful and wealthy manufacturer. He was a kind rather than a ruthless manager, but there was little indication that around 1815–17 he would shift from paternalistic management to proposing ‘villages of co-operation’ in which property would be shared in common – an enterprise to which he would devote the rest of his life. How should we account for this alteration, and Owen’s invention of ‘the social system’, as it was first termed, shortly, by the mid-1820s, to become ‘socialism’? The question of Owen’s motive for this momentous shift in opinion has never been adequately explained. We know, of course, that his outlook from the mid-1790s onwards was dominated by the doctrine that circumstances determined character; that he believed that producing a more charitable type of personality was possible; and that the industrial working classes provided, at least in the setting of New Lanark, the prospect of performing such an experiment. That an obsession with competition and private property generally generated the opposite type of character to that Owen sought to instil he had clearly believed for some years. Yet Owen could easily have rested with the paternalist system introduced at New Lanark, where food was secured at nearly cost price, morals and cleanliness were policed, and education provided for children, without embracing the communist system. Such was his starting-point in public life, as announced in *A New View of Society; Or, Essays on the Principle of the Formation of the Human Character* (1813–16). Here he placed himself beside Elizabeth Fry, William Wilberforce and other great philanthropists of the age – none of whom would embrace the social system. Why then did Owen shift his position so dramatically?

There are at least four, to some degree interrelated, ways of explaining this change. The first is that Owen’s system of education, as epitomized in the founding of the Institute for the Formation of Character in 1815–16, persuaded

him that the optimal character he sought to produce – epitomized by the word ‘charity’ – could only be created where private property had been largely eradicated.² To crave property engendered selfishness, which undermined all genuine charity. Since forming his new partnership in 1813 Owen had had more complete control over the educational process than previously. He genuinely believed – and there is enough auxiliary evidence to lend confidence to his view – that his educational system and other reforms had done much to improve the behaviour of the inhabitants of New Lanark. His grand conclusion from the experiment may have been that even greater benefits would be derived from sharing the rewards of labour much more equally.

A second, and related, hypothesis might be termed ‘creeping socialism’. Owen had begun his experiment at New Lanark with a limited degree of collective activity, but gradually expanded the public sphere, eventually opening a public kitchen and dining room in 1819 in order to reduce cooking costs by some £4,000 to £5,000 per year. The social system might be understood as gradually evolving out of the New Lanark model of 1800. Owen had created a manufacturing village in which ‘order, good government, tranquillity and rational happiness’ prevailed more than anywhere else, according to one American visitor, Mr Griscom. If these had been achieved by marginal collectivization, an extension of the principle on a grander scale might attain even more wondrous results.

A third hypothesis might be termed ‘ideological conversion’. Although Toryish in his practical politics in the 1790s, Owen had been exposed from at least 1813, through his connections with the most important radical philosopher writing in the 1790s, William Godwin, to collectivist proposals like the famous ‘pantisocracy’ ideal of settlement in the United States contemplated for a time by Robert Lovell, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey.³ He knew of the land nationalization proposals of Thomas Spence, with whom he was once famously confused.⁴ He was aware in addition of many strands of Christian communalism, including that associated with Thomas More, with whom Southey would later compare him at great length.⁵ In addition he became familiar with the more practically driven communal schemes for organizing the poor, such as John Bellers’ ‘Colleges of Industry’ proposals, which he reprinted in 1818 with the help of Francis Place (who also opposed community of goods in principle).⁶ He gradually became acquainted with successful communal experiments in Britain, in continental Europe, and in the new world. Certainly Melish’s description of the Rappite community in Pennsylvania was a source of this enthusiasm as early as 1815; Podmore was ‘tolerably certain’ that Owen had read the review in the *Philanthropist* if not the book itself.⁷ In 1824 he would acquire George Rapp’s Harmony community in Indiana, renaming it New Harmony. The attractions of one or several of these schemes may have persuaded Owen that only full-scale communalism would produce a genuinely ‘social’ humanity.

Finally, we may consider that Owen underwent something like a religious conversion in the years preceding 1820, driven perhaps in part by the enormous exasperation of advocating his plans *ad infinitum* to hundreds of possible supporters, and failing to achieve a substantial measure of factory reform, which was a key initial goal in widening the successes of New Lanark.⁸ Owen would of course both attack established religions, most publicly in August 1817, and advocate his own alternative 'New Religion' based upon the charitable ideal.⁹ By 1816 he spoke of hoping to see 'universal love prevail'. His language in 1817 in particular, and most notably at the City of London Tavern meeting of 21 August, became stridently millenarian, as has often been noticed.¹⁰ Indebtedness to Quakerism in many aspects of his thought is undoubted. This would help to account for the fact that the communal property proposals he now advocated had historically been associated with religious orders in particular, if not indeed Christ's own apostles. But many believed that they were practicable on a wider scale, if at all, only in the City of God, not in the fallen City of Man.

It is fairly evident that Owen's decision to embrace the 'social system' doubtless stemmed from some complex combination of these factors. Let us now look chronologically at Owen's development to see what evidence exists for prioritizing these hypotheses.

Owen's espousal of socialism – although the term itself of course was not yet in use – has traditionally been dated from 1817.¹¹ It was at this time that Owen, reporting to the Committee on the Poor Laws, attributed the great increase in pauperism to the effects of machinery. Large-scale unemployment could be solved only by employing the poor on the land, on farms of 1,000 to 1,500 acres suitable for about 1,200 people, set up by local authorities. The parallelogram model was introduced at this time, with proposals for children to be housed in dormitories in order to train them more effectively. Meals would be taken in common, and all would share equally in the profits of the enterprise. Competition and selfishness would be replaced by association. Shortly afterwards, Owen proposed that such plans might eventually be extended to the entire society. Communities might, he supposed, be subdivided according to wealth, religion and political outlook, in order to enhance their attractiveness, the wealthy bringing capital to employ the poorer. But the ultimately communistical bent of the whole scheme was quite evident. Some supporters, led by the Duke of Kent and David Ricardo, tried in 1819 to insist that community of goods was not crucial to the success of Owen's plans. But he was evidently wedded to the ideal, and Owen was a man unlikely to retreat once his mind was made up. Instead, in *Report to the County of Lanark*, of 1820, he announced his embracing of a labour standard of value, and his wish to supplant the system of competition entirely. There was no turning back after this point.

A focus on these proposals and Owen's millenarian language in 1817 must be balanced by evidence of the drift of Owen's ideas in the several preceding

years. His lament in 1815 that the progress of the manufacturing system had introduced 'a fondness for essentially injurious luxuries among a numerous class of individuals who formerly never thought of them', and had 'generated a disposition which strongly impels its possessors to sacrifice the best feelings of human nature to this love of accumulation' indicates, that the loss of the 'comparatively happy simplicity of the agricultural peasant' weighed heavily upon him.¹² This shows that Owen had already embraced a *systematic* rejection of competition and heavy factory labour. However, there is some evidence to suggest that Owen had already embraced some form of collectivist ideal. At the time that William Hazlitt was caricaturing Owen as a pale shadow of Godwin, preaching a doctrine 'as old as society itself', in August 1816,¹³ Owen visited Robert Southey, who shared his worries about the manufacturing system and described his judgement and feelings as 'entirely with him'.¹⁴ Southey was surprised to find during an hour-long conversation that Owen was 'neither more or less than such a Pantisocrat as I was in the days of my youth. He is as ardent now as I was then, & will soon be cried down as a visionary.' He described Owen's plans as including wanting the poor and unemployed to 'live in community', but warned that the plan for employing paupers in agriculture 'ought not to be confounded with his metaphysics'.¹⁵ When he visited New Lanark in 1819, however, he worried that Owen had not contemplated the difficulties of a system that 'took for its foundation the principle of a community of goods', which he feared could only be maintained 'by absolute power' – indeed he likened New Lanark to a plantation.¹⁶ The real, long-term division between them was that Owen, Southey thought, did not appreciate that building on any foundation other than religion, is 'building upon sand'.¹⁷ He would elaborate on this theme at length some ten years later, still noting that 'Owen's views tend to an entire community of goods' – a scheme he rejected on the basis of both 'theory and experience'.¹⁸

The Owen–Southey encounter sheds light on various aspects of our key question here. First, it is clear that Owen had embraced a communitarian ideal before 1817. Whatever Southey may have remembered by the term 'pantisocracy', it certainly implied an emphasis upon voluntary communal living and shared property.¹⁹ Second, it is entirely possible that Southey's insistence (among others) upon a religious basis for any such practice led Owen to concoct his 'new religion' of charity, upon which he lectured extensively in 1830, but which was chiefly a restatement of his original necessitarian principles.²⁰ This does not assist us in ascertaining the source of Owen's communitarianism, except to discount a religious conversion in 1817 as such. We can, however, probably exclude Thomas Spence as a source here, for Spence's schemes were not communitarian as such. Yet neither, on the scale proposed by Owen, were William Godwin's ideas, the source of Southey's own pantisocratic enthusiasms. As is well known, Owen met Godwin at least thirty times in 1813, eight times in 1814, seven times in 1816, five times in 1817, and

less often thereafter. Doubtless Godwin helped clarify Owen's philosophical necessitarianism, particularly the doctrine that 'the characters of men originate in their external circumstances'. But he is an unlikely source for the pauper relief schemes of 1816–17; the thrust of Southey's objections about the eradication of individuality in such communities would have been Godwin's first line of objection as well. More likely models, as Podmore has indicated, were Bellers' schemes, and reports of the Shaker communities in the United States. Bellers deserves priority here, as Owen would claim in 1817 that the 'combinations of these principles' had first been proposed by him in 1696.²¹ Yet Owen added that 'on discovering it, I had it reprinted'; the reprint was in September 1817. It would seem, then, that Bellers proved a point Owen wished to enforce, but he was not the source of Owen's communitarianism as such, even if, as Podmore suggests, Owen was indeed led to 'still further develop his Plan upon the lines laid down by Bellers'.²²

Given the paucity of correspondence and other evidence about Owen's opinions before 1817, and his own extraordinary coyness about the origins of some of his views, we cannot ascertain with any degree of certainty when his co-operative and communitarian ideals originated, and what their precise source was, indeed if there was one. There is no reason to doubt Owen's own view that the cumulative experience of his management of factories in Manchester and at New Lanark had led him to believe that he knew how 'ultimately to make the human race good, wise and happy'.²³ But it is equally beyond dispute that New Lanark was not conducted upon 'pantisocratic' principles – that it was not a profit-sharing enterprise based upon community of goods. Yet we also have no reason to doubt Southey's description of Owen's sympathy for such a scheme in 1816, even if the details of what he proposed did not become clear until 1817–18.

So there remains a mystery respecting Owen's 'pantisocratic' opinions, for Owen was doubtless well aware of the distance between New Lanark and utopia (a term Southey used with reference to Owen's plans). Podmore may have been right in supposing that New Lanark was for Owen 'the microcosm in which the discerning eye might trace the outlines of the larger cosmos',²⁴ but New Lanark was not Paraguay, not Harmony, not Sparta nor indeed Utopia. In New Lanark, profits were not shared, and it was not governed democratically by a committee of those of a certain age, as Owen would propose by 1817. It was, to all intents and purposes, Owen's personal fiefdom, less perhaps the City of Man than the kingdom of one man; and the fact that he governed it so benevolently was of course greatly to his credit. But all his achievements there paled beside the 'Plan', as it was usually termed around 1817. Self-educated, sometimes insufferably self-confident, Owen was nonetheless no fool, and knew what the communistical ideal stood for. The City of God was that of communal sharing; the City of Man stood for selfishness and private property. So had the Christian dualism run since time immemorial; yet there were many

instances where the City of God had been transformed on earth. Well might Owen in 1817 trumpet salvation by introduction of the language of the millennium. This reflected his acknowledgement that the 'Plan' had a sacred pedigree he had not formerly wished to associate with his proposals. The language of 1817, then, did not reflect Owen's 'conversion' to a millenarian outlook, but the recognition that the 'Plan' formed at least by 1815 was ideologically closer to the tradition of utopian communitarianism than the experimental developments at New Lanark had been. Owen now acknowledged that 'pantisocratic' opinions were not like piecemeal social engineering. Socialism lay closer to Utopia than to New Lanark by far, but a long journey lay ahead for Owen before the final shipwreck of the great Queenwood community in 1844 finally put paid to his most cherished ideals.