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Robert Owen: The Father of British Socialism?

In the early 19th century, Europe saw the emergence of “utopian socialism”. Whereas in France utopian socialism is associated with thinkers such as Henri de Saint Simon, Charles Fourier and Pierre Leroux, in Great Britain it is attached to the figure of Robert Owen (1771-1858). The essay reassesses Robert Owen’s legacy as the father of British socialism and explores the nature of his intellectual legacy on British politics.

The son of a Welsh sadler and ironmonger, Owen became an apprentice at the age of ten, at a time when the textile sector was undergoing huge expansion¹. During the next fifteen years, he climbed the spinning industry’s social and professional ladder, and these years as a self-made man undoubtedly played a prominent role in the interest he displayed early on in the plight of the labouring classes. In 1792, he became an under-manager in one of the biggest spinning mills in Manchester, and was there a first-hand witness to the social consequences of the Industrial Revolution on the working classes. Convinced that people were shaped by their environment, he wished to reform factory life in order to alleviate the workers’ plight. In 1800, he took up his father-in-law’s spinning factory at New Lanark, Scotland, and the industrial village soon became his doctrine’s major testing ground, with living and working conditions far superior to the average of the time. Owen also took part in a series of reforming campaigns, and progressively developed a social theory based on communitarian principles, largely inspired by the New Lanark experiment. In 1825, he left the concern and became a full-time reformer and community founder. One of these was New Harmony, Indiana (1825-1828).

In the last twenty years, French utopian socialists have been rediscovered², but Owen is still seldom known across the Channel, in spite of his being a ubiquitous figure in his country of origin. The *Communist Manifesto* denounced Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen as bourgeois, idealistic and anti-revolutionary socialists, and yet they saw them as pioneers of ‘scientific’ socialism – Owen especially. Both at New Lanark and in his numerous publications³, Owen was one of the first to denounce the flaws of capitalism, refusing to see the labouring classes as mere ‘hands’.

Marxists are not alone in holding such ambivalent views towards Owen, and it seems that the British left, both then and now, has always felt this way. Rendered obsolete in his own lifetime by Communists and Chartists, Owen’s thought – or Owenism – has nevertheless

¹ The author wishes to thank Catherine Crimp for proofreading this article.

² Thanks to the endeavours of such academics as Jonathan Beecher, Michèle Riot-Sarcey, Christophe Prochasson and, more recently, Ludovic Frobert and Pierre Merkelé.

³ *A New View of Society* (1813); *Observations on the Cotton Trade* (1815); *Report to the County of Lanark* (1820), among others.

remarkably endured, and has been found relevant in various ways. There is undoubtedly a certain feeling of uneasiness as regards the aspects of his doctrine that are deemed the most utopian, yet at the same time Owen is considered as a founding father. An early co-operatist, he is also a pioneer of popular education and is said to be one of the earliest representatives of a specifically British branch of socialism that emerged prior to Marxism and therefore owes nothing to it – a tradition now continued by the New Labour movement.

These interpretative ambiguities are quite revealing – for at the end of the day, what do we know about Owenism? It seems that “the competing voices of those who have sought to annex his memory have drowned out the presence of the man his contemporaries experienced. As a consequence, his significance remains both elusive and contradictory.”⁴ It is therefore necessary to reassess Owen’s theories from a historiographical point of view. First, in relation to a reflection on the origins of socialist thought, we need to look back to a pre-Marxian tradition of co-operation and communitarianism. We also need to analyse the complex legacy of Owen’s ideas against the backdrop of today’s crisis of the British left, torn between Old and New Labour and looking back to its non-Marxian past to redefine itself. Finally, we need to understand how and why ‘utopian’ socialism and its infamous idealistic overtones came to be seen as the origin of the British socialist movement.

From a Philanthropic Industrialist to a Socialist Thinker

Let us first briefly consider the founding principles of Owen’s doctrine. His first political treatise, *A New View of Society*, was published in 1813, thirteen years after he first came to New Lanark, but most of his ideas had been already formed in the 1790s as he became acquainted with Manchester’s enlightened and philanthropic circles. His theories are a direct outgrowth both of late Enlightenment thought and of a growing feeling of uneasiness towards the Industrial Revolution. Owen thought that industrialization had widened social divisions – between employer and worker, town and country, men and women – and he identified those very same divisions as the source of all human misery. His proposed solution was essentially deterministic. As a deist, Owen thought that man’s character is formed for him and not by him. This “doctrine of circumstances” is the cornerstone of his theories. To eradicate the vices that burden society, it is therefore necessary to create a favourable environment founded on principles of justice and benevolence.⁵ In keeping with Enlightenment thought, Owen wished to return the chaotic world he lived in to a state of order, and was also deeply confident in the perfectibility of human beings. He accordingly gave particular prominence to the idea of reason and to education as a means of social change. Drawing on his experience as an industrialist, he saw the factory as the ideal testing ground for his deterministic assumptions. He did not oppose industrialisation per se, which he saw as a vehicle of human progress, but only the irrational, immoral way in which it was conducted: “ True indeed it is, that the main pillar and prop of the political greatness and prosperity of our country is a manufacture which, as it is now carried on, is destructive to the health, morals, and social comforts of the mass of the people engaged in it.”⁶

⁴ Antony Taylor, “New Light on an Old View: An Appraisal of Robert Owen”, *Labor History*, n°36, vol. 1, 1995, p. 88-94.

⁵ Robert Owen, *The Life of Robert Owen, written by himself*, vol. 1, 1858, p. 60; G. Claeys (ed.), *Robert Owen : a New View of Society and Other Writings*. London, Penguin Classics, 1991, ix.

⁶ Robert Owen, *Observations on the Cotton Trade*, 1815., reprinted from Robert Owen, *Supplementary Appendix to the First Volume of “ The Life of Robert Owen, written by himself ”*, London, Effingham Wilson, 1858, Appendix F, p. 16.

These principles were put to the test at New Lanark, which Owen took over in 1799-1800. Founded in 1785 by his father-in-law, David Dale, a Glasgow industrialist, the factory had from the start established a reputation as an enlightened place of work. Owen followed the same route, but in a more systematic way. He progressively cut the day's work to ten hours and developed the New Lanark school well beyond the educational practices of the time. The industrial village became a tourist attraction, with the schools receiving special attention. Owen's ideas gradually came to prominence. He turned his company into a laboratory for his ideas while in turn drawing heavily on his experience as an industrialist to refine his theories. Even though New Lanark was run along paternalistic, not socialist lines, this experience foreshadows some of Owenism's later developments.

Owen's thought indeed underwent a process of radicalisation between 1816 and 1820. At the time, he was active in various reform campaigns, together with Wilberforce and Sir Robert Peel, and in 1815 he championed the creation of the "villages of cooperation". Partly modelled on New Lanark, these make-work schemes were meant to combine industrial and agricultural activities to counter both rampant unemployment and rural emigration. At around the same time, Owen and Peel drafted a bill for the regulation of factory children's working conditions. Both projects were met with great hostility and Owen responded with renewed radicalisation. Two years later, he publicly criticised religion as a major factor of human division, which made him quite popular in free-thinking and radical circles. And in 1820, when publishing his Report to the County of Lanark, he declared himself in favour of communitarianism, not only as a remedy against the plight of the working classes, but as the foundation of the ultimate reorganisation of society. This turning point in Owen's career also featured a rejection of all traditional means of political action, private property, and the search for profit as an end in itself. He was now advocating a fair wage system benefiting producers, not capitalists and their middlemen. This set of doctrines, which Owen called "social science" or "science of society", was popularized by his followers under the name of "socialism" from the 1830s.⁷

The Rise and Fall of Owenism

Between his departure from New Lanark and his death in 1858, Owen relentlessly promoted his doctrine through the publication of numerous books⁸ and the founding of various communities in the United States and Great Britain. New Harmony went bankrupt in 1828, and Owen went back to his native country, where he found he had a small number of followers who called themselves 'Owenites' or 'socialists'.

Firmly opposed to violent action and revolutionary principles – a major bone of contention with Communists – Owen and the Owenites set up their communities as examples to be followed, and believed that the human race would slowly yet steadily convert itself to their doctrine. These communities, however, all failed due to financial difficulties and internal disputes. Indeed, there was an ever-widening gap between Owen's paternalist attitude – the New Lanark legacy – and a minority of more radical disciples. During the Great Reform Act debates, Owen maintained a defiant attitude towards the working classes who were, according to him, much too prone to engage in subversive activities under unfavourable circumstances. He equated democracy with the dictatorship of the proletariat, which would only replace the

⁷ Gregory Claeys, " 'Individualism', 'Socialism' and 'Social Science': Further Notes on a Process of Conceptual Formation, 1800-1850 ", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 47, n°1, p. 83.

⁸ Notably the *Book of the New Moral World* (1840) and *The Revolution in the Mind and Practice of the Human Race* (1849).

current form of dictatorship, that of the aristocrats and capitalists. Moreover, Owen deemed the working classes incapable of governing themselves. They had to be taught to do so from above, that is by himself. With the rise of trade unionism and the labour movement, Owenism was increasingly viewed as obsolete. Their flagship community of Queenwood, Hampshire, went bankrupt in 1844, and this event marked the end of Owenism as an organised political movement.

An Ambiguous Legacy

In spite of all this, Robert Owen has enjoyed a remarkably enduring legacy in Britain. Seceding Owenites joined the communist and Chartist movements, and brought some of their former leader's ideas with them, thus ensuring their place in the British left's canon.

The Owenite legacy nevertheless remains somewhat problematic. Marx, Engels, O'Brien and the later socialist tradition all hailed Owen's anticapitalist stance while deploring his messianism and his patronizing attitude towards the working classes. Marxists also denounced Owen's hostility towards the idea of class struggle, while the British left as a whole has failed to grasp his late conversion to spiritualism. It is as though there were two Robert Owens – New Lanark's pioneer of socialism and New Harmony's utopian: "The importance of Owen's life and teaching does not lie in his social philosophy, which was crude and already out of date, but in the practical success of his experiments as a model employer, and his flashes of social intuition, which made him see, as by inspiration, the needs of his time."⁹ This orthodox view of Owen was validated with New Lanark's addition to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2001.

Apart from the most controversial aspects of his thinking, there is no denying that Owen was a pioneer. However, he has been celebrated less as a political thinker than as a social reformer. Socialists from all over the world celebrate Owen's pioneering work in the field of popular education, since the New Lanark schools – created by Dale but thoroughly restructured under Owen – are considered among education specialists to be the origin of both modern kindergartens and primary schools.

The idea of Owen as a pioneer has a special significance for British socialists, and members of the Labour Party in particular. As they predate the Communist Manifesto (published 1848), Owen's theories enabled Labour to construct a specifically British socialist tradition that owes nothing to Marxism. Despite his ambiguities, Owen has therefore remained a point of reference.

Robert Owen, The "Father of British Socialism"

Besides being considered the first "true" socialist, Owen as the benevolent industrialist epitomises an ideal of conciliation that is the exact opposite to the Marxist concept of class struggle. British socialism generally favours a more moderate stance than its continental counterparts, hence the appeal of Owen as a father figure. It is therefore no matter of chance that he was rediscovered by the Fabian Society in the late 19th century. His legacy was afterwards taken up throughout the first half of the 20th century by the various Labour governments. His action at New Lanark was revered, establishing his reputation as a pioneer of education, labour regulation and urban planning. For instance, Owen was a major source of inspiration for the 1946 New Towns Act:

⁹ B.L. Hutchins, *Robert Owen, Social Reformer*, Fabian Tract n°166, London, The Fabian Society, 1912, p. 6.

We must, by our planning, build up a new environment for the people of this country. In this Bill the Labour Government are returning to one of the great initial impulses that belonged to the movement in its earlier days. Indeed, it goes further back than the origins of the British Labour Movement. It goes back to the attempt by Robert Owen to establish communities at New Lanark and Orbiston to provide decent conditions for the mill workers, which was one of the things that gave birth to the whole idea of Socialism.¹⁰

Owen and his ideal of conciliation also inspired the British co-operative movement. The first co-operative was founded in Rochdale in Manchester, and their manifesto bears a strong resemblance to the tenets of Owenism. As early as the 1820s, Owenites decided to found co-operative retail shops drawing on their master's principle of fair wages. These first co-ops, whereby the workers were also owners and shareholders of the concern, were meant to raise funds for the building of future Owenite communities. Once the Owenite movement disappeared, the communitarian dimension was put aside, yet the idea of retail co-operation endured. Some of Owen's closest disciples such as George Jacob Holyoake, John Collier Farn and William Lucas Sargent were particularly active in promoting the early co-operative movement. A key component of British socialism, it hails Owen as its founding father and aims at perpetuating his legacy; in 1994, the first Owen monument was unveiled opposite the Co-operative Wholesale Society headquarters in Manchester¹¹.

Finally, Owen has appealed to the Labour Party every time it has attempted to (re)define itself, and this is still the case nowadays. With the rise of New Labour in the 1990s, the party tried to regenerate the socialist project by turning even further away from the Marxist tradition and embracing Owen's pivotal 'community' ideal. The principle of community was indeed perceived as a viable alternative to state interventionism and its alleged Marxist overtones – a departure from 'Old Labour' tradition. This has reinforced Owen's status as the father of British Socialism while adding a new layer of significance; no longer seen as a mere visionary, he is now considered a political thinker in his own right.

Towards a Rehabilitation of Political Owenism

Owenism and Blair's "third way" have actually much in common. First, New Labour's neo-centrist stance fully endorses Owen's moderate, anti-revolutionary socialism. There is therefore a certain ideological continuity between the two systems, which New Labour has tried to pinpoint.

As he wished to steer clear of Labour's interventionist tradition, Blair tried to go back to Owen communitarian ideals with a renewed perspective. This ideal was no longer perceived as a form of utopia, but as the cradle of British socialism as essentially co-operative and libertarian¹². Owen is now part of a tradition dating back to the *Diggers* - vindicating a return to traditional community and solidarity values as opposed to the almighty, abusive Cromwellian state – and New Labour established itself as the heir of a long-lost tradition which was however worthy of being rediscovered. This is the way Blair mentioned Owen in a 1996 pamphlet:

... early socialists like Robert Owen understood very clearly that a society which did not encourage people voluntarily to carry out their responsibilities to others

¹⁰ M. McAllister MP, Minutes of the House of Commons, HC Deb 08 May 1846, vol. 422 cc1072-184.

¹¹ Taylor, op. cit., p. 88.

¹² Ian Donnachie and Gerry Mooney, "From Owenite Socialism to Blairite Social-ism : Utopia and Dystopia in Robert Owen and New Labour", *Critique : Journal of Socialist Theory*, n° 35, vol. 2, 2007, p. 275-291.

would always be in danger of slipping either into the anarchy of mutual indifference (...) or the tyranny of collective coercion, where the freedom of all is denied in the name of the good of all.¹³

References to Owen have survived New Labour's loss of power in the 2010 general election and the ideological crisis that ensued. In early 2012, in reaction to the ongoing recession, Ed Miliband called for a responsible capitalism, based on a co-operative ethos directly borrowed from Owen.¹⁴ This context has provided the backdrop to yet another twist: the return of Owenite communities, 21st-century style.

Since 2009, the Hometown Foundation – a Scottish non-profit organisation with links to the co-operative movement – has been attempting to put Owen's ideals into practice with the proposed building of a new town based on community and co-operation ideals, only a stone's throw from New Lanark. Still a blueprint, the future city of Owenstown has been designed as a modern model community, much like New Lanark in its day. Unlike New Harmony, however, it is not intended as a perfect form of society, but as a way of fostering economic development in an otherwise deprived post-industrial area. Owenstown means new jobs and experimenting with new forms of local democracy, as the city would be managed by its own residents in accordance with co-operative principles. The proposed city ultimately aims at economic and energetic self-sufficiency, thus adapting the Owenite legacy to the modern issues of environmentalism, sustainability and citizenship. Despite Owen's paternalism, his theories still inspire the British left, thanks to their apparent adaptability to contemporary democratic principles.

Conclusion

An elusive historical figure, Owen's legacy has been constantly reinterpreted since the 1800s, generation after generation, thus informing most of the British socialist tradition.¹⁵ More than ever, he remains the 'Father of British Socialism'. Owing to an unexpected twist following many attempts at redefining socialist policies, what was once considered utopian has now been welcomed into a political tradition deemed essentially British, as it predates even the Labour movement. Due to his long career and the variety of topics he tackled, Owen has played the part of a blank canvas which British socialists have been able to use in their quest for founding myths. Indeed, it seems that this series of reinterpretations has not yet come to an end, as the Owenstown project revives a will to rethink the ideas of community and participative governance.

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¹³ Tony Blair, *New Britain : My Vision of a Young Country*. London : Fourth Estate, 1996 ; Donnachie and Mooney, op. cit., p. 282.

¹⁴ Bryce Evans, ““ Responsible capitalism : a return to ‘moral economy’ in England ? ”, February 2012, History and Policy website, accessed 12/08/2012.

¹⁵ Harrison, op. cit., p. 9.