

# Owenite Communitarianism in Britain and America

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IT IS APPROPRIATE for the theme of the tenth annual conference of the NHCSA on world Utopian communities, past and present, that some mention should be made of Robert Owen (1771-1858). He was in many respects an international man, and he saw nationalism as just another division of mankind, which hindered the promotion of harmony and unity. Owenism flourished on both sides of the Atlantic; and here in Indiana, at New Harmony, was established the greatest of the Owenite community experiments. This paper will not be concerned with details of the Owenite communities (about which there is already a considerable literature) but rather with the present state of Owen studies. It offers a few reflections on "the state of the question." What, if any, have been the main developments since the 1971 bicentenary celebrations? What are the problems and questions which are of concern to scholars in the field, and in particular what bearing has Owenite scholarship on the study of historic communities in general? It will be convenient to begin with one particular set of community problems in their Owenite context.<sup>1</sup>

When Owenites spoke of their "communional system" they had several things in mind: the concept or idea of community, the building of actual communities, and the theory of communitarianism. First, a sense of community was felt by Owenites to be essential for satisfactory human relationships in any society. The absence of such community was diagnosed by Owen as the chief ill of British society in the

John F. C. Harrison, Professor of History, University of Sussex, England, and biographer of Robert Owen, delivered the Helen Elliott Lecture at the 1983 meeting of the NHCSA. This paper is a summary version of that lecture.

1. For a fuller discussion and documentation of these issues see J. F. C. Harrison, *Quest for the New Moral World: Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969).

period 1814-19; society, he argued, was fragmented and turned against itself. In his efforts to restore harmony to society Owen became a "socialist" and was led to condemn all institutions which "individualized" man. Harmony, reconciliation and fellowship would be the dominant characteristics of the New Moral World, in place of the discord and division which marked existing society.

Second, Owen and his followers were concerned with the practical aspect of building communities. The community, or Village of Cooperation, was the central institution of Owenism. In America at least sixteen communities, either avowedly Owenite or influenced considerably by Owenite ideas, were founded. In Britain there were seven Owenite communities, and another three experiments in which Owenites participated. Further, there were in both countries several projected communities which never materialized. The "communal" system for many Owenites meant the holding of property in common and the abolition of individual ownership. Owen's position on this issue was not completely consistent, nor did he maintain the same views at different periods in his career. His followers similarly advocated varying degrees of communism, some wanting complete equality and community of goods, others content with a less absolute scheme.

Third, Owenite communitarianism was believed to be a method of social reform. Society was to be radically transformed by means of experimental communities, and this was regarded as a valid alternative to other means of effecting social change such as revolution or legislation. The realization of this significance of communitarianism as a theory of social reform was one of the great contributions made by Arthur Bestor in his pioneer study in which he reminded us of the way in which contemporaries regarded the matter.<sup>2</sup> "The whole arrangements form one grand moral as well as economical experiment," wrote William Thompson, arguing the case for community as a social experiment.<sup>3</sup> The appeal of Owenism as an intellectual belief is well brought out in a local example from New Harmony. Thomas Pears, writing in 1825 to his wife's uncle in Pittsburgh, declared:

I am not yet a complete Harmonite, but I am beginning to think that I have caught some of Mr. Owen's spirit; for the more I see of the Social System the more I wish it to succeed, and the more I am convinced it will succeed. But

2. A. E. Bestor, Jr., *Backwoods Utopias: the Sectarian and Owenite Phases of Communitarian Socialism in America, 1663-1829* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950; 2nd ed., Philadelphia, 1970).

3. William Thompson, *Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth* (London, 1824), p. 427.

whatever may be the fate of this establishment, its principles will never be lost; and if not suddenly, they will gradually bring about that change in society so ardently desired by its founder.<sup>4</sup>

It is in the light of such convictions that the continuous readings, addresses, and educational endeavor at New Harmony by the Reverend Robert Jennings and others have to be considered. Even Thomas Pears' wife, Sarah, who found life in New Harmony very hard, admitted: "The System I like, but I detest its practice here."<sup>5</sup> It was possible to argue that the collapse of a community did not necessarily invalidate the theory of communitarianism. Indeed Bestor concluded that although after June 1827, when Owen left, New Harmony as a community was dead, New Harmony as a theory and model was still alive: "It was no longer a communitarian colony in the strict sense of the term, but elements of the communitarian ideal had become part of its life."<sup>6</sup>

After the 1840's the Owenite communitarian vision faded. The Owenites founded no new communities, and their efforts were channeled in other directions such as secularism and cooperation. It used to be argued that this decline was because communitarianism was felt to be outmoded in England after 1850, since it no longer offered a practical possibility of changing a society based on industrial capitalism. Similarly in post-Civil-War America, with its industrial revolution going at full speed and individualism strongly entrenched, communitarianism no longer appeared as a viable alternative. But further research has cast doubts on this hypothesis. In America there were more communities after 1865 than before; and in Britain the hope of overturning capitalism and changing society fundamentally was not abandoned but incorporated in the modern socialist movement from the 1880's on. Clearly there is need for more work here, as with other social movements, in that still largely "unknown" period of British social history, 1848 to the 1880's.

In any re-evaluation of Owenite communitarianism we have to remember that community was not the only constituent of Owenism. Philanthropy, anticapitalism, Utopian socialism, millennialism, education, and producers' and consumers' cooperation were also present in varying degrees and at different times. Community was perhaps only a means to an end, not the end itself. There is some danger of distortion in overemphasising this one element to the exclusion of other

4. T. C. Pears Jr., ed., *New Harmony: an Adventure in Happiness. Papers of Thomns and Sarah Pears* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1933; reprinted, Clifton, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley, 1973), p. 14.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 79

6. Bestor, p. 201.

factors and phases of Owenism. Henry Travis, one of the last of the old Owenites and Owen's joint literary executor, put it thus:

Mr. Owen did not merely advocate "the promotion of human improvement and happiness" by such indefinite means as the "attacking of all barriers to freedom of thought and utterance upon political, theological and social subjects." [Rather, Owen] "pointed out, and demonstrated, as a Science, the means by which alone the improvement and happiness of the human race can be effectually promoted."<sup>7</sup>

The re-evaluation of Owenism is largely a matter of altering the context in which it is studied. Hitherto Owen has been presented as a typical representative of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought. He has been seen as a progressive educationist and as the spiritual father of the British cooperative movement. Owenism has a place in labor history as the main British version of Utopian socialism; and its role in the 1840's has been likened to a religious sect. The 1971 bicentenary produced essays and symposiums which echoed these themes and also added new ones.<sup>8</sup> Robert Owen as a business man in the early Industrial Revolution, as a factory reformer, as a millennialist, and New Lanark as a site for industrial archaeology—all attracted attention from scholars interested in different aspects of the period. The variety of these concerns suggests the possibility that Owenite communitarianism may be related to trends and sensibilities wider than those which we have so far envisaged. Conversely, the development of studies of historic communities during the last decade provides a new context for Owenism and prompts new questions and probings of old Owenite material. For instance, it is not clear to what extent Owen saw himself as part of a communitarian tradition. He always claimed, somewhat improbably, that all his ideas were entirely original, and that his social theories were derived from his experience at New Lanark. He was familiar with the Shakers and of course with the Rappites. He also reprinted John Bellers' 1696 pamphlet proposing a "college of industry." Fourierism he recognised only as an intermediate stage on the road to his Rational system, though he urged his followers to be friendly with the Fourierists.

It is at present perhaps too early to look for a major reassessment of Owenite communitarianism. But recent trends in Owen scholarship point the way to possible new approaches. First is the interest in

7. Henry Travis, in *The Secular Review* (1877).

8. See Sidney Pollard and John Salt, eds., *Robert Owen: Prophet of the Poor* (London: Macmillan, 1971); and John Butt, ed., *Robert Owen: Prince of Cotton Spinners* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1971).

local studies. Instead of looking at Owenism as a national or international movement, directed or inspired by Robert Owen, attention is focused on the Owenite branch in a particular place. Here we find "a large menu of recreational, educational and religious activities as well as a blueprint for the ideal community."<sup>9</sup> Owenism in this context was a radical culture, providing a social world of a distinctive character for the members. In the case of Chartism and other social movements of the 1830's and 1840's the local studies approach has yielded important results; it seems likely that a similar contribution could be made to Owenism.

Second, the emphasis recently has been on Owen's followers rather than on Owen himself. There is a shortage of external material on certain aspects and periods of Owen's life, with the inevitable result that we have to rely on Owen's own version of events. This was by no means the whole story. Hence the value of recent research into the careers of people like William Maclure, Owen's partner at New Lanark.<sup>10</sup> It is clear from recent studies that working-class cooperators and communitarians in England were more numerous than was once believed. Moreover, very few followers seem to have believed in all of Owen's teachings. Almost all had some reservations and doubts as a result of their experiences with him and his experiments, as for instance at New Harmony when almost millennial hopes were pinned on Owen's second visit to straighten things out. In England reformers took pains to distinguish their (Owenite) views from the doctrines of Mr. Owen himself. Owenism became a pool or reservoir from which one could draw as much or as little as one chose, according to individual needs. It was for this reason that, although Owenite institutions soon collapsed, Owenism (in Professor Foxwell's telling words) "gave resonance to all voices that were raised in the cause of social amelioration."<sup>11</sup>

Third, the interest in the history of women, in this as in other fields, has added a new dimension to Owenite studies. That Owen and his followers had unorthodox views about sex, marriage, divorce, women, and the family has long been acknowledged. Indeed, such views were one of the main reasons for the opposition to Owenism in the 1830's and 1840's. But recent research into the role of Owenite feminists has extended the story beyond the contribution of Anna Wheeler and Frances (Fanny) Wright.<sup>12</sup> Emma Martin and Margaret

9. E. Yeo, "Robert Owen and Radical Culture", in Pollard and Salt, p. 84.

10. Cf. the recent researches of Josephine Elliott.

11. H. S. Foxwell, in A. Menger, ed., *The Right to the Whole Produce of Labour* (London, 1899; reprinted New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1962), p. xciv.

12. See Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: virago, 1983).

Chapellsmith were Owenite lecturers who connected feminism with (religious) freethought. Frances Morrison addressed large audiences in the 1830's on women's rights and marriage reform. Kate Barmby, who with her husband, Goodwyn Barmby, founded the Communist Church in 1841, demanded the political and social emancipation of women. Such women looked forward "to a state of society very different from that which now exists"; they believed that Owenism was the only "scheme of social arrangements . . . which will completely and forever ensure the perfect equality and entire reciprocity of happiness between women and men."<sup>13</sup>

We cannot claim that these approaches at present amount to a new interpretation of Owenite communitarianism, but they do offer new contexts in which the problems of communitarianism might be studied. Already it is clear that old categories for the study of historic communities are increasingly unacceptable. For instance, most scholars would now be reluctant (as were most old Owenites) to use the success or failure dichotomy in relation to the communities. New Harmony may not have worked out as originally planned, but to write it off as a failure begs too many historical questions for comfort. Perhaps we should let Robert Owen have the last word. In his eightieth year he was convinced that the world was in reality nothing but a madhouse. His object therefore, in starting yet another new journal, he declared, was "to change this lunatic world into a rational world."<sup>14</sup>

13. William Thompson to Anna Wheeler, 1825, quoted in Taylor, p. ix.

14. *Robert Owen's Journal*, 2 November 1850.