



Owen @ 250

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This essay takes the occasion of the 250th anniversary of Robert Owen's birth in 1771 to review some scholarship in the field since the last major commemoration of the event in 1971. It then contends that were Owen alive today he would apply his leading ideas on the relationship between wants, needs, and social progress to the climate catastrophe looming over us now. As is evident in Owen's works and in various communal experiments associated with the Owenite movement, a clear sense of exchanging unnecessary consumption with free time and creative activity emerged as early as the 1820s. Owen himself was particularly hostile to changes in fashion, insisting on a more stoic and Spartan approach to clothing in general. In the Owenite movement, however, a trend developed which was less puritanical in its approach to consumption, and argued instead that developments in production might well furnish the means to permit luxuries of various kinds to flourish in the new social system.

It is an honour to share in the commemoration in this location of the belated birthday of the man who made it famous. Two hundred and fifty is a ripe old age, and like good wine, I will try to persuade you that Robert Owen has aged very well. But, superficially, at least, it may not look that way.¹

On the occasion of the last great celebration of the man, the two hundredth anniversary of his birth, in 1971, the system he founded was, in the much-modified forms of the USSR and its eastern European satellites, China, Albania, Cuba, and a few other nations, still alive and well. The prehistory of Marxism-Leninism received some polite mention, at least from Soviet historians, if for no other reason than to prove the superiority of socialism as such. This is now no longer the case. The s-word is now rarely encountered in the mainstream media. Its stock is devalued, the discount extreme. Coteries of ageing followers gather occasionally to chant the old slogans, but they are few. Outside of China, the communist paradigm, the core ideals shared by Owen and Marx alike, seems to have no further purchase on the public imagination. And Owen's communitarian schemes seem even more remote and irrelevant to our own increasingly chaotic world.

The 1971 commemoration led to two collections of essays which celebrated Owen's achievements as an educator, a co-operator, communitarian, and thinker across many nations. The "paradox of Robert Owen" noted by the leading historian of Owenism of the period, J. F. C. Harrison, in the introduction to one of these volumes noted that "he remained a central figure in the English socialist tradition even though Owenite institutions failed and his version of socialism was already outmoded before his death" (Harrison, 1972, p. 1). In the other volume, John Butt

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noted the left's early ambiguity about Owen's paternalism, but equally his long-term contribution to a much more democratic co-operative tradition (Butt, 1971, pp. 12-15). The notable failure of communitarian socialism notwithstanding, we could today point to many other aspects of Owen's legacy which would render his contemporary relevance more obvious. In the fields of co-operation, humane employment, and infant education, his ideas remain, if not thriving, at least an obvious critical counterbalance to some of the leading trends of our times towards greater exploitation, increasing inequality of wealth, and the dismal tyranny of plutocracy. We do not require a precise "ism" to acknowledge that a more humanitarian attitude towards the working population underlay all of Owen's efforts, and that its relevance is timeless. His tireless opposition to coercion and violence mark a milestone in our ethical development as a species, and if Owen were today known for nothing else, this insistence on universal happiness without coercion would suffice.

There is another area, however, generally neglected in Owen and Owenite studies, on which I want to concentrate here. This respects what we might all concede is our own most pressing problem: the looming environmental catastrophe which may well bring about the extermination of human life on earth within a few short decades. It is worth briefly reminding ourselves that the comforting narratives of "climate change" and "global warming" of a few short years ago, with their prospective reduction of increased temperatures to 1.5-2° C, have been replaced within the last four to five years by the apocalyptic prospect of 3-4° rises as early as the mid twenty-first century. This scenario heralds large-scale deforestation, the degradation of agricultural land, desertification, and water shortages. Vast areas will soon be too arid to cultivate or live in. Coastal regions will be inundated. Huge movements of population will occur, and war over habitable land will become inevitable. Sea temperatures are rising, and the oceans, which absorb most of the heat, are becoming more acidic, spelling the end of coral reefs (99 per cent of the Great Barrier Reef is already doomed) and much marine life. As the poles and glaciers melt, they reflect less sunlight and thus assist greater warming.

Of course, even a visionary like Owen could not have foreseen a scenario this deadly being the result of the factory system whose then obvious defects, including environmental degradation, he did so much to protest against. What Owen did foresee, however, and the issue I want to concentrate on here, was the destructive results of the system we call consumerism, which he viewed as the proliferation of artificial wants. This is a key cause of our own current predicament. We live in a world where our consumption of resources not only vastly outpaces our ability to replace them, but where the process of the production, distribution, and consumption of goods equally destroys the rest of the natural environment. This process Owen did identify, and did try to remedy. Let us consider what in his view this consisted of.

The immediate problem Owen grappled with in the face of looming unemployment and social disorder in 1815-20 induced the communitarian scheme universally known as the "Plan", which was first delivered to the world in the famous lectures at the City of London Tavern in August 1817. These years saw the extension of Owen's original schemes for employing the poor to a universalist system of communitarianism which envisioned the great cities being emptied of their inhabitants, and all living on the land in communities of perhaps 500-1500, combining agriculture and manufacturing. This was the point at which the New Lanark model, which was never socialist in the sense of profit-sharing or communal ownership, was extended to what would become a large-scale communitarian movement which at its height in the early 1840s counted some 50,000 followers attending weekly lectures in the so-called Halls of Science, or branches of Owen's organisation. Amongst those who attended their meetings, in Manchester, was the young Friedrich Engels, then just commencing work in the family cotton mill there.

The development of the "Plan" in this direction entailed one assumption worth focusing on today (Claeys, 2022). As an extraordinarily successful cotton-spinner, Owen was well aware of sharply increasing demands for fashionable clothing at ever cheaper prices across the past decades. Britain had become the wealthiest society in the world in the middle and later eighteenth century. But, Owen insisted,

The acquisition of wealth, and the desire which it naturally creates for a continued increase, have introduced a fondness for essentially injurious luxuries among a numerous class of individuals who formerly never thought of them, and they have also generated a disposition which strongly impels its possessors to sacrifice the best feelings of human nature to this love of accumulation. (Owen, 1858/1993d, p. 112).

The lust for luxury, then, was a root problem in social development generally. The further artificial needs proliferated, the greater was the burden on the working classes: "The rich wallow in an excess of luxuries injurious to themselves, solely by the labour of men who are debarred from acquiring for their own use a sufficiency even of the indispensable articles of life". The wealthy, for example, demanded "to purchase fine lace and muslins at one-fourth of the former prices; but, to produce them at this price, many thousands of our population have existed amidst disease and wretchedness" (Owen, 1858/1993d, pp. 239, 244).

The answer, then, could only be to restrain desires for more than a reasonable amount of labour could create, thus exchanging artificial needs for free time. Fashion was a key target here. In 1820 Owen thought that "fashions will exist but for a very short period, and then only among the most weak and silly part of the creation". In future "All things will be estimated by their intrinsic worth, nothing will be esteemed merely for its cost or scarcity, and fashions of any kind will have no existence" (Owen, 1827/1993e, p. 70). Owen viewed his first communal experiment at New Harmony, Indiana (1824-28), as an exercise in personal, as well as collective frugality, reducing his meals to two per day, and rejecting changes of fashion in apparel. At New Lanark he had devised a kind of toga for the boys "somewhat resembling the Roman and Highland garb". Now he thought "a costume of the best form and material that can be devised" was preferable to "the waste of capital, materials and labour - the loss of health, the deterioration of intellect, and the immorality, which the manufacture and use of perpetually changing fancy dresses" (Owen, 1820/1991, p. 286; Owen, 1823, p. 70). Some members did sport distinctive attire, with pantaloons for both sexes, with women adding a knee-length jacket (Kolmerton, 1990, p. 56). What was intended as a gesture towards equality, however, became a cliquish distinction when the intellectuals, calling themselves the "literati", took to wearing it as a "badge of aristocracy" (Bernhard, 1828, p. 116; Bestor, 1950, pp. 178-9; Sutton, 2004, p. 10). In 1826 Owen reiterated that:

With regard to dress, an object upon which so large a share of the industry of civilized states is now so uselessly and injuriously expended, the members of the community, having once ascertained the best materials and the form best adapted to the health of the wearer, will have no disposition to introduce afterwards any of the frivolous, fantastical and expensive varieties that may be current elsewhere. They will adopt the rational course of employing the time which the manufacturer of such useless decorations would consume, in the pleasures of social intercourse, and intellectual pursuit, and in healthful recreations (Owen, 1827/1993e, pp. 70; 1835/1993b, p. 315).

Owen did not retreat from his views of fashion, reiterating in 1836 that under his Plan fashion would exist but for a very short period (*New Moral World*, 1836). Later, however, he conceded the need for the "merely ornamental", and occasionally he acknowledged that "beneficial luxuries" might exist in the future system (Claeys, 1993, pp. xxxvii; Owen, 1835/1993b, p. 316; 1832/1993c, p. 218). This retreat from a more austere ideal was common amongst socialists, and even more so amongst non-communitarian co-operators, who sought primarily a more just means of exchange rather than a new way of life and moral renovation on the land.

As the wider socialist movement developed in the 1830s and 1840s the issues raised by these experiments were widely debated. A basic trend in early socialism was that more puritanical attitudes to luxury and consumption were gradually displaced by concessions to the value of a higher standard of living, and greater variety of attire and decoration. Owen's followers thus oscillated between condemning luxury, grudgingly conceding demand for it, and embracing a vision of unlimited plenty based upon a just system of production and exchange. Owenism's attitude towards needs has been broadly described as implying "neither luxury nor want" (Harrison, 1969, p. 58; Thompson, 1988, pp. 58-118; Thompson, 2011). But we need to differentiate between attitudes towards luxury. A broadly puritan view of needs and consumption was adopted by many early Owenites, who were often former members of Dissenting Protestant

sects (Claeys, 1987, pp. xxviii, 153-5, 190-6). They also drew upon traditions of austerity associated since Thomas More with the utopian tradition. Some likened Owen's principles to those of Lycurgan Sparta, writing that any doubts about "the correctness and practicability of the New Views of Society, were entirely removed by reflecting upon the accordance of the whole with those principles which contributed to the establishment and prosperity of the Spartan government" (*New Moral World*, 1835). The purpose of socialism, many assumed, was that it "augments the productions useful to all by banishing luxury and idleness" (*New Moral World*, 1837). Condemning those "whose obvious interest it is to invent perpetual changes", one insisted that in a "rational society",

Something like a standard of good taste would be arrived at, because nobody would have an interest in capricious changes. Elegance would be only another name for comfort; and appropriateness would take precedence of variety. The labour of dress-makers, hair-dressers, plumassiers, florists, jewellers, and lace-workers would thus be sparingly required, and a hideous proportion of our 'staple manufactures' of 'new wants' in silks, cottons, and hardwares, would be discovered to be useless; the share of time and energy bestowed on them being directed to more profitable and more worthy objects. (*New Moral World*, 1838a).

Many Owenites thus readily embraced moralistic arguments against luxury and fashion. Like their contemporaries, they recognised that "every class, down to what is called the lowest, strives to imitate the appearance and fashions of the class above it" (*New Moral World*, 1838b). Many thought the present system of extreme inequality only generated unhappiness, even for the wealthy, amongst whom competition "in show and luxury" brought "jealousies, envyings, and many other evil passions, which disturb their peace". The solution was that:

If every one had the value of his labour, but of no more than his own, those irregularities in the condition of mankind would never arise, and all the evils attendant upon excessive luxury, and excessive poverty could be avoided" (Imlay, 1823, p. 15).

Owen's main socialist rival in the 1820s, the Irish landowner William Thompson, wrote of "all those extra articles of luxury called for by excessive wealth", and expected that under socialism "*the peculiar vices of luxury and want would almost cease*". In the new communities, moreover, any "motive for exertion arising from mere love of distinction, of excelling, of exciting envy, by means of individual accumulations of wealth, and thus attracting public sympathy", would disappear. Instead,

Objects of dress, elegance, luxury, will be estimated according to their intrinsic value, their real utility; not forgetting in the estimate any one pleasurable quality, the lustre and softness of the silk, or the peculiar flavour of the exotic production. All factitious importance given to articles of wealth as mere sources of distinction, will be forgotten with those distinctions which equality of wealth annihilates (Thompson, 1824, pp. 207, 259, 468, 533).

Another early Owenite, and founder of the short-lived Orbiston community (1825-8) near New Lanark, Abram Combe, distinguished between "the old system", where "the children are trained to believe that labour is degrading, and that Pomp, and Sloth, and Luxury are the *best*, if not the *only* means of obtaining happiness", and the "New System", where:

they will be trained to believe that useful Labour is a most honourable employment, without which the real dignity of our nature cannot be supported and that temperance and industry are the best, if not the only means of securing that health and independence, without which all other earthly possessions are worse than useless (Combe, 1825, pp. 43-4).

The Orbiston *Register* prophesied that "Grandeur, Rank, and artificial Riches, would not be desirable under the new system, because in themselves they give no rational title, in their possessors, to the approbation or respect of the Community". In the future, instead, "all the members would know this, those who assumed any superiority from the mere possession of those, would inevitably become objects of pity" (*Register*, 1827, p. 29). An early co-operative journal, the *Associate*, posited in 1829 that "Expensive luxuries (which have the effect of enlarging cupidity and diminishing our sympathy with others) [would] cease to be created when the producers of them shall have to weigh the trouble of producing them against the pleasure

of displaying them in their own persons". As late as 1842 a leading Owenite lecturer, George Alexander Fleming, proposed that if it was impossible to assuage every desire, a "dignified simplicity" might suffice (*Associate*, 1829, p. 15; *Union*, 1842, p. 69).

Owen's opposition to unnecessary luxuries did not represent asceticism for its own sake. As its etymology indicates, what he initially called the "social system", which was shortened in the mid 1820s to "socialism", meant united interests, and was contrasted to the "individual system" of selfishness, private property and market competition. It was also conceived as a "change from the individual to the social system; from single families with separate interests, to communities of many families with one interest" (Owen, 1827/1993e, pp. 46, 39). This opposition to competitiveness also implied a new theory of sociability, where something like a Christian doctrine of universal love would prevail in the quasi-millenarian atmosphere of the new communities. We recognise this ideal as akin to the solidarity which the European workers' movement began to herald at this time, which would eventually chiefly assume the more secular form of working-class consciousness.

By way of conclusion, the relevance of Owen's treatment of luxury and what the later social theorist Thorstein Veblen would term conspicuous consumption is obvious. New movements have arisen in the last decade indicating the harm caused by "fast fashion", in particular. The debates of the 1820s and 1830s on these matters are thus likely to be reiterated two centuries on.

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Note

1 This piece is the transcript of a plenary address given at New Lanark in March 2022.

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