Towards Co-operative Politics: Using Early to Generate Late Socialism

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This paper uses the distinction between politics and anti-politics, deployed by Gregory Claeys in his Citizens and Saints (1989) to define what pre-1850 Owenites and Co-operators meant by 'socialism'. Building on their anti-politics or 'associationism', the paper identifies an inheritance of specifically co-operative politics which may be useable by co-operators in our time. 'Early' socialists (a better label for Owenites and Co-operators than 'utopian') started from the 'economic' world of thought and action; showed the determination and capacity to produce society rather than be determined by it; were committed to education, but in a sense of the word long buried by schools and colleges; and refused to separate moral reformation from social reform in ways not unrelated to many modern 'extremists'. If we are to develop an adequate 'late' (too late?) socialism, by means of modern co-operative and mutual enterprise, it may be worth revisiting Owenism with the help of historians like Claeys who work within the Cambridge school of intellectual history rather than the Communist school of labour history.

"A large literature about 'socialist politics' has grown up around the assumption that nothing very worthwhile or historically meaningful was written on the subject before Marx and Engels began their own explorations." (Claeys, 1989:7)

Introduction

It was as part of the story of co-operation and mutuality during the early-nineteenth century that the word **socialism** came into English in 1827.[1] For the next twenty years in Britain, the word indicated one of many strands of Owenite belief and practice and/or co-operation among working people. Socialism during the early nineteenth century had a very distinctive meaning, much of which had been lost by the early twenty-first century. Retrieval might be to the advantage of modern co-operators, remembering that the antagonist of socialism for early co-operators was **individualism**. (Claeys, 1986: 81-93) In our times too, individualism is a more widely acknowledged enemy than capitalism.[2] Individuals, with what we would call our own individuality, were not a problem for Owenites: indeed the early socialist project was to give back to each and every individual (a word which originally meant 'undividable from') the full range of human capacities which systematic, individua**list** competition was taking from them.[3] It may be important to remember that, while there were **capitalists** around during the first half of the nineteenth century – not enough of them, in fact, for co-operative socialists, who wanted to turn every labourer into a capitalist – **capitalism** was not labelled as such until the 1850s.

This paper will search for early-nineteenth century material for reviving a specifically **co-operative** politics – a co-operative socialism – which could still come into its own, proud of differing in critical ways from other kinds of politics and other socialisms. These other kinds of politics – all erstwhile rivals of co-operative politics on the Left – include, in rough chronological order: revolutionary; social democratic; labour; pressure-group, and single-interest politics. It is from all of these that effective, new/old co-operative politics need to be distinguished. If we could use **early socialism** to identify the unique offer which could again be made by **co-operative** politics, it might help towards making a socialist politics adequate for our times. Nothing is more urgent. Names may not matter. Jean Dubuffet's insight about art may also be true about socialism: "it loves to be incognito. Its best moments are when it forgets what it is called". (Hopkins, 2008)

To anticipate, co-operative politics would prefigure what they want rather than demand it from others; they would make things in associations rather than policies in Parties; they would be posited in particular kinds of membership/belonging, and they would be powerfully post-capitalist because they are rooted in pre-capitalism. (Yeo, 2008b) To modern Politicians, including Labour Party people, distinctively co-operative politics/co-operative socialism would probably be dismissed as un- or anti-politics. Such a caricature needs to be resisted as much by co-operators as by historians of co-operation. It is the fully political outlook which lay behind co-operators' critique of capital P Politics which we need to retrieve, for the sake of accurate history as well as good, future-bearing politics. Our times, after all, are as crisis-ridden as Owenites and early

co-operators felt theirs to be and our Politicians as partial as theirs.

A tribute

Thanks to the work of Gregory Claeys, to whom this paper is something of a tribute, we can now appreciate Owenite practices and ideas **politically** in a less condescending way than used to be common on the Left. The fact that Claeys works within the Cambridge school of intellectual history rather than the Communist and post-Communist school of Labour history makes it easier to work politically **with** Owen and the Owenites instead of **after** them. We can recover their meanings, using them to challenge our own rather than allowing them to be overlain by those of their would-be mature successors.

Claeys is conceptually as well as empirically alert. He uncovers a large-scale, innovative, working-class, non-violent, transformational and 'moral' socialism which is richer than that which post-1848 'revolutionary' socialists liked to relegate as 'reformist'. The revolutionary/ reformist fault-line which ran across the Left from the mid-nineteenth century onwards was always shallower than it seemed. The test of fully-politicised class consciousness does not have to be revolutions of the 1789 or 1917 types or, in Britain, electoral victories for Labour like 1945 or 1997. Instead, 'mature' class consciousness, born of conflict as well as struggle, can eventuate in continuous associations or societies – 'unions' of many kinds including co-operatives and mutuals – of which William Lovett's autobiography is such a singular record. (Lovett, 1876) Power may have to be dispersed by means of active co-operation and mutuality a long time before it can be 'won' or 'seized' with any degree of positive or permanent effect for working people. Being 'in' or 'out of' power is not the same as altering the nature of power with any degree of advantage for the majority.

In *Citizens and Saints …* Claeys also argues against the well-known Labour History antonym 'utopian/scientific'. He prefers 'early' socialism to 'utopian', at a time when an adequate 'late' socialism is urgently needed. It may already be too late to avoid anything other than a period of barbarism later in the twenty-first century. My contention, however, is that something like the self-sustainability of early socialism might contribute towards preventing this. The modern politics of sustainability, for example, beginning with Transition Town Totnes in October 2005 and now spread to more than a hundred localities, is, without knowing it, quite close in a number of respects to early socialism in Britain. (Hopkins, 2008)

Claeys organises his work around an analytical distinction between 'citizens' and 'saints': roughly speaking, between politics and anti-politics, allowing for tectonic shifts in the meaning of politics. This distinction, which it may be helpful to draw out into contrasting ideal-types, is so productive that it could enable him and others to move through the **narrative** of socialism in Britain from 1827 to the present day, in the thorough way that Sidney and Beatrice Webb moved through the narrative of trade unionism in Britain towards their *History of Trade Unionism* (1894). The Webbs were then able to publish their **analytical** masterpiece, *Industrial Democracy* (1897). These two books "still stand as the greatest achievements in the fields of study they inaugurated". (Harrison, 2000) When his narrative is done (it is already much more than a narrative) I have great but unfairly projected expectations of a 'Socialist Democracy' book from Claeys, building on the work of Cambridge-school intellectual historians of democracy and political theory like John Dunn. (Dunn, 1980; Dunn, 1984; Dunn, 2006) This could be as useful as *Industrial Democracy*, playing with the categories political and anti-political as the Webbs played with the categories primitive and expert. After all, Claeys continues to publish on an almost Webbian scale.[4]

Association, politics and anti-politics

Working mostly with *Citizens and Saints*, I will characterise 'early' or 'associationist' socialism in Britain in my own terms, using Claeys' work to develop my own on 'the three socialisms'.[5] His research extends what I continue to call **associationism**, helping to differentiate it from the other two socialisms which I proposed: **statism** and **collectivism**. Statism equates a magnified, central or local state with socialism. Collectivism, as developed particularly by the Webbs (once more with individualism as its antagonist) celebrates the rise of the professional and managerial class **as** socialism. It favours states and other 'collectives' run by experts which bear no necessary resemblance to co-operatives or to mutuals. I still want to stimulate interest among historians and co-operators who retain hopes of a distinctive

co-operative politics, and who still want to work as socialists, with or without the name, in the twenty-first century.

My argument is that co-operative politics, if they are to be adequate for modern times, which are surely as epochal as Owen's, will be associational in type. They will need to challenge ordinary **P**olitics, even Labour Politics, more than the Co-operative Party and Co-operative Politicians currently dare to do. And they will have many characteristics to carry forward from Owenite/early socialist models in Britain and America.[6] Above all else they will be rooted in their own activities in their own associations: Societies, co-operative and mutual enterprises, rather than projected onto Parties, Politicians, Policies and the practices which now confidently define what it is to be Political. As the Emperor Trajan feared in his correspondence with Pliny who had dared to recommend citizens' fire-brigades to him, and as the rulers of modern China also recognise, it is **association** itself, regardless of ideology, which threatens to replace statism as much as it challenges collectivism.[7]

Ideal-type politics

It may be helpful to get categories clear first. Politics as ideal-type may be said to sit at one end of a spectrum on which, at the other, sit 'anti-politics'. In modern times Politics in this sense has become a 'vocation' for what has recently become known as 'the political class'. As such they are specialised and professional and, since the second half of the nineteenth century, generally the perquisite of Party 'machines'. 'Modern Politics' describes a specific body of thought and activity clearly separable from 'economics', 'industrial relations', 'voluntary work', 'religion' and so on, all of which grew into their distinct, modern forms as part of the same, industrial-revolution division of labour, or – to use a term from functionalist sociology – 'structural differentiation'. The history is fascinating, important and relatively recent. Nineteenth-century liberals were often highly suspicious of Party Politics, from a democratic point of view. Since then, the 'political game' has become so much a part of the everyday furniture of our times – limiting the idea of 'democracy' itself – that further definitions need not detain us. (Yeo, 2008a) 'Politics' are well described as what 'don't knows' have in mind when they close the door on a pollster or a canvasser with a 'not today thank-you, we're not political here'. Ideal-

type politics are also well captured by what Political people and Parties are accused of doing in 'non-political' settings, namely 'playing politics'. Boundaries have become so well established, that when socialists of any kind challenge them, they are greeted either with incomprehension or with accusations of authoritarianism.[8] John Dunn has suggested that socialism is particularly hard to assimilate because it is such a uniquely political philosophy that boundaries get blurred. Politicians panic: if everything is politics, where is Politics? When Politics in ideal-typical form enter Co-operative Societies, particularly as Party Politics, they have generally been recognised as a cuckoo in the nest. The 'No Politics, No Religion' rule in co-operative societies was devised, however, not against Government or God as such and not against individual, strongly-based beliefs and affiliations beyond co-operatives. It was devised to counter the cacophony which breaks out when individualist, unfit for purpose Politics is imported into multi-part choirs of association, or disturbs – a cherished early socialist word – harmony.

Anti-politics as ideal-type.

At the opposite end of the spectrum sit ideal-type anti-politics. Less easy to identify in their pure form than ideal-type politics, they reject anything which calls itself or which may usefully be called 'politics'. For whatever reason, extreme anti-politics prefer to exist alone or in a group, without intended political effect or participation: on top of a pillar in the desert, in a withdrawn church or sect … or in any posture which casts out the things that are Caesar's. The salvation which anti-politics intend, if any, is moral, whether in this world or the next. Today, adversaries of anti-politics sometimes picture them in hiding, in a cave on the borders of one country or another, perhaps setting out towards 'Western democracy ' with a bomb on their back. 'Refuseniks' was an older way of talking about them from a Total-Political, statist point of view. Anti-politics is often moralised into 'apathy', a term much favoured by Political folk who forget that "anti-politics is as much a theory of politics as any other". (Claeys, 1989:14)

Claeys' use of 'saints' as his label for the anti-politics end of the spectrum, to contrast with 'citizens' at the other end, is apt. The roots of anti-politics run deep into religion, although religious soil has, of course, also nourished deeply political plants. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, it is the things of God which are

commonly contrasted with those of Caesar. Christ's "my kingdom is not of this world" was theorised for Catholic christians in deep and lasting ways by St Augustine during the late fourth century, working in North Africa:

> Let us pine for the City where we are citizens … By pining we are already there … I sing of somewhere else, not of here … The citizens of Babylon hear the sound of the flesh, the Founder of Jerusalem hears the tune of our hearts. (Brown, 1997)

Many modern Muslims might agree, sometimes with devastating personal and political consequences. Other-worldliness may also be found, more surprisingly perhaps, in the history of socialism, with socialist organisations sometimes playing a similar role to 'the church' of St Paul or St Augustine: waiting for something to happen, of which they cannot be the main agents.[9] A contemporary explanation 'for why the Socialists did not take part officially in the 1837 elections was that "their kingdom is emphatically not of this world"'. (Claeys, 1989:219) One of Robert Owen's many impulses was to transcend politics altogether, although, in spite of the words Owenites used, one must always be careful not to remove **this** world and the **social** from their ideas of 'salvation' and 'redemption'.

Real-world politics and anti-politics in early socialism

Politics
To move from categories into real time, if there was some almost ideal-type politics in the actual history of Owenism and early socialism, it was usually not at the extreme, Machiavellian end of the spectrum. And it had generally had more to do with Robert Owen himself than with Owenite socialism among his followers. Owen liked to appeal direct to heads of state whenever he could, inviting them to use Political Power to achieve his ends, at a stroke. He was more impatient for all-at-once change than co-operators later learned to be. This was a source of his disdain for daily working-class practice, as though ordinary people were not capable of changing the world in ordinary ways, like arranging their own powers differently – or keeping shop. Like many later socialists, Owen was unwilling to accept world-change in the quotidian forms in which co-operators produced,

distributed and exchanged it – and certainly not if High Politics could deliver a New World, for everyone, for all time and all at once.

It was, however, a creative, eclectic, un-functionalist, un-Western Marxist view of the state – as separable from rather than 'governing' society – which encouraged Owen to try to use the state top-down rather than feel shaped by it. This impulse was part of a wide-spread disconnect between state and society after 1750.[10] To attempt to arrange things with and through state servants was on a continuum, for Owen, with 'arrangements' to be made with and by other people in other ways. While railing against 'politics', as often he insisted that

> the real science of government is to form arrangements to produce the greatest amount of improvement in the state, and to secure the highest degree of happiness for the whole population. (Claeys, 1989:313)

In the end it was only after 'repeated failures (that) Owen finally became convinced that **only** the state could commence the new moral world'. (Claeys, 1989:162) But 'commence' is significant. Once land had been publicly acquired, the producers and exchangers of change would be working people husbanding that land with spades, building communities, in and through technically inventive forms of associated production. Owen ran for Parliament many times. But like J S Mill in 1865, this was more for the sake of argument or Public Address, than to join any Political cadre.

Anti-politics
More pervasive than ideal-type politics, there was also some **almost** ideal-type anti-politics in the real world of Owenism/early socialism. "Owen's wish to **transcend** politics was central to his life's work." (Claeys, 1989:66) The **trade** unionists who came together in extraordinary numbers in the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union shared his aspirations. They were proud that "politics, that care-worm of the heart, never yet lurked in our lodges". Political language insinuated "politics into a system which ought to be strictly social". The re-placement of political power was assumed in the pivotal letters on 'Associated Labour' by 'Senex' in the *Pioneer* in the Spring of 1834, but that was not where the **action** lay for James Morrison or J E Smith, the joint authors of these letters which, surely, found an echo in the passages in *Capital* volume 3

which deal with the 'associated mode of production'.[11] Morrison was committed to the organisation of independent production by labour and for labour, but 'labour' inflected thus:

> we have determined that REFORM shall commence from within. **We govern within ourselves** [my emphasis] and conceive it to be a duty to acquaint ourselves with the principles of government, consisting of good internal regulations. We feel that to regulate trade, or the several branches of labour by which we live, will most speedily regulate government. (Claeys, 1989:192-3)

Debates on the meaning of democracy between O'Brien, the GNCTU and Owen himself remain a vital resource for thinking about and developing the politics of anti-politics today.[12]

Owen's opinion that the Charter "would merely 'make all petty politicians' was widely repeated" among his followers. One such preferred "universal suffering and animal parliaments" to universal suffrage and annual parliaments. (Claeys, 1989:220) Owen could be devastatingly impolitic in the organisations he touched, including the first series of Co-operative Congresses from 1829 to 1832, the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union (GNCTU) from 1833-4 and the community at Queenwood (Harmony Hall) in Hampshire in 1839. E P Thompson judged that he "simply had a vacant place in his mind where most men have political responses". (Thompson, 1977) He had a tendency to confuse what he wanted to happen outside himself with the power of his own, almighty reasons. He and some of his followers **did** believe in quasi-miraculous, supra-Political change at some moments in the movement's history. During such times, they believed in change innocent of ends pursued by rationally chosen means. There were to be millennial happenings, arising from an outlook called 'pre-political' by E J Hobsbawm. (1959) Exemplary words or deeds were seen as capable of contagious effect, such as the simple act of founding New Harmony in the USA in 1825 or laying the foundation stone for Queenwood in 1839. The latter was inscribed 'YM 1', or Year of the Millennium One. Political follow-through was thought to be unnecessary. David Green, for example, a leading figure in the Leeds Redemption Society, was always hostile to the insinuation of political views into the socialist movement.[13] He said he:

always felt it a very difficult and delicate task to mix up politics with communism … Communism is of no party; it knows of no politics. The miserable distinctions of Whig, Tory, or Radical, belong to the old world. They could not exist in a new social state … I esteem politics as but a meretricious ornament to communism. The Redemption Society cannot recognise any faction in the political world, and more especially as it includes amongst its members men of all grades and politics. To introduce politics, would be to introduce another element of discord. (Claeys, 1989:267)

Political growth points in anti-politics.

For such as Green, 'faction' and 'party' could not be redemptive any more than 'competition' could. They would reproduce an old, anti-social state of affairs. "Communism knows of no politics." Listening more closely, however, there **was** politics in associations such as the Leeds Redemption Society even if, as St Augustine might have said, not yet. It was from anti-politics like theirs that socialism as an 'available form' for everyone could grow. "**At the present stage of progress**" Green wrote, "there is not any **necessary** connection between politics and association". "Labour" had to "prove itself **by practical illustrations over and over again** [my emphasis] that it is organisable". "When association has demonstrated itself to such an extent as to have become an important element of society, government must take cognisance of it. But that is the task of the future age …"

Government would, as it were, have to move over, displaced by associated self-organisation or self government. Green's **was** a political strategy, but not the same strategy as demanding universal suffrage and annual parliaments. To stay with this single example among many, his strategy was to prove, practically and continuously, that labour is (we are) organisable in its (our) own interests, and thereby to make the connection between politics and labour's (our) chosen associational forms **necessary** – thereby altering the very nature of politics.

By subscribing to 'union', 'community', 'association' … a whole politics – a **society** worthy of the name – could be produced, distributed and exchanged. This society would be very different from what representative democracy later became. Many associationists

thought and continue to think that such a society is best attainable by withdrawing demand for (as in William Morris's "policy of abstention"[14]) a rapidly emerging supply of representative or parliamentary democracy. It is surely revealing how parliamentarians in Britain continue to defend parliament and parliamentary **sovereignty** with more passion than they address popular democracy. It is as though they are either unaware or afraid of the difference between the two. Whether or not they have been 'enfranchised', ordinary people have often demonstrated a preference for building – often with enormous artistry and depth of culture – 'giant theatres of associated life' or 'parliaments of labour' which arrange their own powers for themselves.[15] The political class, Left and Right, then dub these associations un- or anti-political, or they legislate to ensure that they stay in their silos. Hence the long stream of Acts of Parliament which tell co-operative and mutual enterprises of all kinds – credit unions, clubs, trades unions, friendly societies, building societies – what they can and cannot do. Sociologists try to see such enterprises 'functionally', with subordinate roles within a 'system' which, in fact, it is their project to replace. Industrial and Provident Society legislation needs to be seen at one and the same time as enabling and licensing, liberating and controlling.

> Early socialist political thought has remained unexplored often because it has been dismissed as 'unpolitical'. But this, precisely, is part of its significance for the history of socialism. (Claeys, 1989:14)

It is from conjunctions between anti-politics and politics, achieved in actually-existing associational forms and large-scale social movements that we may be able to describe historically and develop politically, a useful line of theory and practice in Britain and elsewhere. This has its roots in early socialism and self-conscious 'moral economy' which lived on in extraordinary associations such as the Co-operative Wholesale Society and the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society and survives, somewhat buried, in ordinary, 'un-political' Co-operative and Mutual Enterprises today. Such enterprises saw themselves as constituting the change they were working for: "be the change" as Mahatma Gandhi put it later. This useable inheritance is still available to us

now, to fill the craters left by the failure – sometimes the defeat (which is not the same thing) – of later socialisms.

It was in the middle parts of the spectrum where politics and anti-politics met, that the substance as opposed to the ideal types of Left politics between c1800 and c1850 lay. Claeys invents the category 'social radicalism' for this conjunction. He deploys its details in highly original ways in the central chapter of *Citizens and Saints* [16] Owenites repositioned radicalism with "newly-created 'social' ideals", seeking

> to join political means to social ends as well as to link the moral and economic analysis of socialism to republicanism. (Claeys, 1989:14-15).

Claeys sees social radicalism as a separable body of ideas, but then also as a 'component' in the mix of many individual and organisational outlooks. He blends taxonomy with history to their mutual benefit. There were, of course, differences between many creative social radicals about **timing** – as to whether political reform preceded or followed economic activity on its way to making **society** social. There were also differences concerning **community** – as to whether it was the precondition or the result of society: whether Societ**ies**, communities, co-operatives and unions brought full sociality into being or depended upon it. But in most cases what *we* are constructing **now**, came before what **they** – what we now call 'the political class' – must be asked to do **then**.

Government meant what **we** can do among ourselves, co-operatively and mutually, as much as it means what **they** – the government – must be asked to do. Co-operatives and mutuals were more than campaigns.

> Owen's insistence upon the futility of parliamentary reform was repudiated by many of his working-class followers by the late 1820s. A select group of these attempted **in a successive number of organisations** [my emphasis] to unite radical objectives [many of them Political] with an Owenite programme of co-operation and community-building. (Claeys, 1989:170)

These organisations included the British Association for the Promotion of Co-operative Knowledge (1829-1834), the National Union of the Working Classes (1831-1834) and the Grand

National Consolidated Trades Union. My point of difference with Claeys is that whereas he sees most shades of social radicalism as remarkable but over and done with soon after the 1850s, I see them – with the help of Peter Gurney's work among others – as potential contributions to that 'great arch' of socialism's cultural revolution which was still being constructed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and which awaits completion.[17]

The flavour of the anti-politics of the GNCTU has already been conveyed. Un-parliamentary it was. But un-political? Just how un- or anti-political was, for example, the 1834 House of Trades scheme taken by James Morrison and Elisha Smith directly from Owen's plan for a national extension of the GNCTU? In late 1833, Owen proposed the democratisation of production, folding 'politics' into 'economics' in ways which have been attempted several times and in several places in the world since the 1830s. Owen proposed that Union branches,

> would form themselves into two lines of parochial, country and provincial lodges; the first consisting of parochial lodges of builders, shoemakers, tailors etc etc, respectively appointing a delegate [nb delegates not representatives] to represent them in the provincial lodge (of which there will be four). The second line of lodges will consist of the united trades formed into provincial, county and parochial lodges, as with those of the respective trades, whose business it will be to superintend the interests of the various workmen in their respective communities … The superintendents, **who will supply the place of masters** [my emphasis], will be men elected for their skill and integrity.[18]

An earlier historian of the GNCTU, W H Oliver, thought that, among trade unionists a 'plan for universal co-operative production' was being put forward from which new democratic arrangements 'inevitably' arise. (Claeys, 1989:197) Claeys attributes more of the positive, democratic thinking which informed these arrangements to Robert Owen's fertile brain than to any inevitability. *Citizens and Saints* rescues Owen as a creative contributor to democratic thought, just as *Machinery, Money and the Millennium from Moral Economy to Socialism* rescues many early-nineteenth century Ricardian and socialist thinkers as creative contributors to 'new economic' thought. There were trades unionists who proposed that Chartist demands like annual parliaments, universal suffrage, and no property qualifications could grow direct from the associational life of the GNCTU rather than be demanded from and 'granted' by Parliament. Democracy was to be constructed rather than demanded, produced rather than given. Such activists argued against Bronterre O'Brien's Political emphasis, as they saw it.

> Even if Owen never explicitly said that the union was to replace parliament, his position was nonetheless much closer to this (considering that he regarded the organisation of production as the chief task of government, next to education), and much more egalitarian than historians have hitherto indicated.(Claeys, 1989:199)

Starting from what we would call 'the economy' John Gray (1799-1883), John Francis Bray (1809-1897), William Thompson (1775-1833) have been rescued in Claeys' *Machinery, Money and the Millennium* and in *Citizens and Saints.* They have been retrieved not as precursors but as practitioner-theorists of new-old, co-operative relations of production which anticipated and sought to bring together what we now call 'economics' and 'politics'. As such, they were **social** scientists contesting what they identified as a less than fully social or positively anti-social science.

Associational forms were being brought into being which could create as well as propose; exchange[19] as well as produce; and deal in a sense of futurity for working people as well as in products necessary for sustaining life. Such associations were the means of production and means of belonging as well as forms of inclusive ownership for members and associates. These inclusive forms of ownership and belonging differed in detailed ways from emergent, exclusive public and private forms of ownership and **not** belonging. Consciously invented means of belonging define 'religion', as Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) proposed, with his roots in French, Saint-Simonian associationism. So it is not surprising that 'religious' constructions were not uncommon in early socialism and that they survived into the subsequent history of the co-operative movement. Radicals altered their positions over time, including on the sociality, or mix of politics and economics, which they favoured in one set of circumstances rather than another.[20] This makes them more than frozen

precursors unable to melt into Marxism or Social Democracy. John Gray may "merit recognition as the originator of the idea of the modern planned economy". (Claeys, 1987:111) But his early, under-consumptionist work was all about productive, creative, universal **labour**. Labour theories of value majored in **labour** in day-to-day practice as well as in *value* in eternal theory.

> ALL would be productive members of society; excepting only the persons **absolutely required** in unproductive occupations … Immoral professions, or those derived from the immoral effects of the present system, would be superseded and would in turn release more productive labour.

The end of wasteful competition would mean that

> *Everything that deserves the name of wealth shall instantly be accessible to all*: for then we should have as much wealth as we have the POWER OF CREATING! (Claeys, 1987: 117)

Bray's capital letters and italics are not just quaint, any more than the long titles Owenites chose for their associations or the long title-page of William Lovett's autobiography. They indicate the pitch, tenses and tone which they preferred. George Mudie, editor of the *Economist*, was a critic of Owen's labour exchanges of 1832 and of the French producer workshops of 1848 in ways which anticipate 'revolutionary socialist' dismissals of early socialism ever since. In his *A Solution of the Portentous Enigma of Modern Civilization* addressed to Louis Bonaparte in 1849, Mudie regretted,

> a direct tendency to create the Organised Labourers into competitors and rivals of the present Productive Capitalists now sustaining and carrying on all the business operations of society.

How often from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, co-operators had to listen to this criticism from socialists! This was why co-operators, for the most part, preferred not to call themselves socialists from that time onwards:

> productive associations of labour 'must necessarily prove abortive, in consequence of all the determined opposition and hostility

which (they) could not fail to encounter from all the powerful parties who would be deeply and indeed vitally interested in defeating (them).

So, likely defeat the first time round was turned into 'necessary' failure and for all time. Nevertheless, Mudie shared with Bray and with the socialism of his time an activist, 'physical' conception of what 'productive classes' could do if only adequate arrangements of production were made with them and by them. He went into some detail about what these arrangements should be, to

> enable the most suitable place in the Organisation to be found for every one, and every one in the Organisation to find his most suitable place.

He proposed a kind of internal market for labour, avoiding direct competition with capital:

> 'the market for all the productions, or the demand for them (would be) found in satisfying the wants, the duties, and the obligations of the Organised Labourers themselves'. This was a market which could 'never fail', and the supply of which could not 'injuriously affect any portion of the national interests'.

Co-operation, in other words, could only begin with co-operators, not with the whole society as competitors.[21]

This was a perspective that many Co-operators adopted as the Co-operative Wholesale Society grew during the second half of the nineteenth century into one of the largest businesses in the world. (Redfern, 1913; Yeo, 1995)

Some characteristics of early socialism

Allowing for overlap, the anti-political politics of early socialism had four characteristics which are still relevant. First they started from the 'economic' world of thought and action, that is from what 'civil society' originally meant to the political economists. Secondly, they showed the determination and capacity to produce society rather than to be determined by it. Their project was to meet fundamental human needs in Societies, preventing society from becoming a Thing and thereby reducing Itself, in Margaret Thatcher's way, to 'individuals and families'.

Thirdly, they were committed to education, but in a sense of the word long buried by schools and colleges.[22] Finally, early socialists shared a refusal to separate moral reformation from social reform in ways which were not unrelated to many modern 'extremists'.

A basis in the material or 'economic' world of thought and action
Early socialism rejected what would later become the a-social, a-political isolation of economics. This was made possible by the willingness of Owen and his contemporaries to enter the world of competitive political economy in sufficient intellectual depth and with sufficient brio to counter it with co-operative, 'social' knowledge or **science**. Early socialist thinkers and their associations set out from the material rather than from the ideal. They began – just as they wished to end – with making, producing, distributing, exchanging: in other words with activities which would now be known as necessary and basic. They understood government and education as being on a continuum with production, distribution and exchange, and thus equally available for **making** by means of 'associated labour'. Hence the Pioneers' commitment to "arranging the powers of production, distribution, education and government". Each of these four activities were later undertaken mainly by professionals, experts and managers rather than by members and associates of co-operatives, having been conceptualised as abstract nouns. For early socialists, producing, distributing etc were active verbs taking the first person plural as subject: we all … will produce, arrange the powers of … because they are powers which everyone has. Early socialists dealt in human powers more than in state-derived rights.[23]

It was from such an accessible, material base that early socialists debated with Radicals and Republicans who saw contemporary problems and solutions in terms of good governance and civic virtue, and with Chartists who saw the franchise and fair elections as the main priorities.[24] In practice many Radicals wanted to exercise more than the public virtues for which they stood, and many Chartists wanted more than the political democracy for which **they** stood. But the Radical and Chartist bias towards Politics, helped to define a language and structure of primarily **political** inclusion for the many who, willingly contained within such a language, quickly became 'the masses'. Against this bias, early socialists that politics should properly be about economic matters, as practised by labour.[25]

Making society by means of Societies
Early socialism was rooted, of course, in associations. The most characteristic of these have kept their shape until now, as productive **Societies** which are member-owned, member-governed and, in project at least, member-controlled. The active impulse towards member-ownership/member control is demonstrated by the fact that the Owenite associational forms which were **not** member-owned or member-controlled (including Owen himself!), generated intense, internal struggles 'from below', precisely **about** member ownership and member governance, indeed about democracy itself. (Yeo, 1971) Debates between Owen and Owenites were an essential part of the history, which is also our resource. Examples include local Branches, Communities, Halls of Science, Unions (Grand National Consolidated and otherwise) and early Co-operative Congresses, all of which were full of debate and pressure, sometimes successful sometimes not, towards belonging and control by a would-be active membership.

Early socialist associations produced, distributed and exchanged material goods. They also created social relations in opposition to the anti-social ones by which they were always surrounded and sometimes infected. Conceptual divisions of labour like those between 'politics' and 'economics' were one thing. But there were also practical divisions of labour, like those between producers and consumers, or managers and members, or shopping and learning, which also needed to be put together on a daily basis. The associations which resulted differed from the organisational forms which now get corralled into a 'sector': as 'voluntary organisations', 'social enterprises' and charities. With or without the label 'socialist' and often taking a co-operative and/or mutual form, early socialist associations grew in and against other Owenite initiatives. They were proudly *working-class*, self-generated, actively independent, 'from below' associations, often taking off against the wind of Owen's impatient waywardness.

Such associations became increasingly difficult to define in terms other than their own. Competitors still try to make them fit into categories to which they do not belong. They do

not fit easily into dominant 'business' 'voluntary', or 'political' categories, although they are businesses, they are voluntary and they are political. Members have sometimes been tempted to let them collapse into dominant versions of these categories, mainly through inactivity. Antagonists have often tried to encourage them to do so, mainly through regulation. It is noteworthy that co-operatives and mutuals as independent, mostly working-class associations, have lasted longer than most other categories of enterprise or association, coming through to us now from the early-nineteenth century. They have survived as Societies and 'Unions' of many kinds: co-operative, friendly, building, credit, trades, club-and-institute and so on. During the early- nineteenth century, such Societies and Unions constituted **the** *social movement* or, in France, *le mouvement sociale.* The social movement preceded *the labour movement* to which it became Politically subordinate during the late-nineteenth century as one of that movement's three 'wings', known as the 'consumer' wing. The other wings were the 'citizen' wing led by the Labour Party and the 'producer' wing led by **Trades** Unions, with the former increasingly in command.[26]

Member-owned, member-governed Societies saw themselves as entities capable of re-forming a complete, new/old **social** order, using the word 'social' in a stronger sense than is common today. Industrial and Provident Societies saw themselves as making a *new moral world.* They became known as 'I and Ps' for regulatory purposes, to distinguish them from capitalist Companies. They were oppositional in stance and hegemonic in ambition rather than safely alternative or subordinate. While voluntary as a matter of principle, they were not 'voluntary organisations' in today's sense of **not**-business, **not**-state organisations: in other words they were not confined within what has recently become known, against earlier usages of the term, as 'civil society'. As their enemies acknowledged, they constituted 'a state within the state'. Rather than licensing them to function, democracy would flow from their functioning. William Hawkes Smith's confidence went as far as to say that

> in truth, provided personal freedom be permitted in a country, it matters but little to the success of the co-operative scheme, what particular forms and institutions prevail. A community of mutual interests, be the Government what

it might, must be, within itself, essentially and practically a democracy. (Claeys, 1989:220)

The intention was not to leave 'business' and 'the state' in place, with a sprinkling of the 'social' added to each of them, as in 'social enterprises' or 'social democracy'. The project was, literally, trans**form**ational, constituting **different** forms of enterprise, **as** different forms of democracy. (Yeo, 2008a)

Education

Owenism was full of the language of *circumstances.* As notorious as Thatcher's nostrum on 'society' was Owen's proposition that 'the character of man is formed for and not by him'. It is less well known that Owen and his followers majored, quite specifically, in the **education** of circumstances and that this is how they used the word **education***.* The education of circumstance was what the construction of 'society' meant, first by means of communities, later by means of co-operative and mutual Societies. This is what member-owned, member-governed Societies were **for**: multi-dimensional, interactive, mutual education*.* This is what socialists were supposed to **do**: discover and practice the politics of detail, so that members, loosening their competitive, individualised and collectivised ('working **class**') chains, could **become** their own circumstances, thereby leading each other out (*e-ducere* in Latin). We will "surround ourselves with circumstances", "circumstances that will make (us) intelligent, rational and happy".[27]

> The knowledge he ['man'] has acquired – that he is under the control of circumstances – forms itself a new circumstance, which will give him the power to control a large range of circumstances relative to himself.[28]

It was the task of communities and of co-operatives to educate their members enough in the social science of co-operation to create their own, new circumstances. Socialism was social experimentation, social discovery, social **movement**. Education would "end the unconscious determination of character by circumstances". (Claeys, 1989:114) "Society shall be **taught** to govern circumstances". (Claeys, 1989:121) Familial achievement, political reform, and even economic justice were not enough. As Owen's future partner in New Harmony said when he first met him at New

Lanark, only an education which could "drown the self in an Ocean of Sociability" would be sufficient to create the moral environment of the new world. (Claeys, 1989:75)

This was why education was at the heart of the early socialist project, and with far fewer sorting and grading connotations than it has today. This may be the most useful of all Owenite meanings for us to listen to now.[29] Owen and his followers bled **education** into **government**. Education pointed to our understanding of the natural and social worlds and human nature and nurture in them, rather than any sequence of qualifications. It developed what G J Holyoake called our "associative intelligence". **Social science** was the main Owenite term for these understandings. Such science was to replace government as hitherto practiced.

> The Owenites were the first to popularise the notion of 'social science' in Britain, and clearly intended the concept to replace the older sciences of government as well as the practice of 'politics' generally. (Claeys, 1989:16)

Government was identified not with Politics as in Godwinian anarchism, but with **society** and thus with the task of education. Through education, society could be constructed not only as current limitation but also as future possibility. Early socialists were never afraid to contest dominant **meanings** and philosophies, whole ways of seeing and living in the world which they rejected. No one could afford for anyone to be deprived of the best available moral and social knowledge. If education was unequal, divisions of labour which were less than fully human would develop. This is what human membership, one of another, meant. It was best expressed in bridging bodies like deliberate communities and open and voluntary co-operatives rather than in bonding organisations like families and nations. Hence 'the educational principle of government'. In the end 'the world will be governed by education alone'. Although his behaviour in the old immoral world could be autocratic, Owen saw this as only temporarily necessary. Equality had to be established before everyone could participate. This required education. Transitional forms of government, even if unequal to the point of autocracy, could provide improved education, or what we might call consciousness-raising, towards a time when more adequate 'society' could educate – transform – 'government'

altogether. Without mutuality, taught and learned in Halls of Science, 'society' would be unknowable except as circumstance : it would have been abstracted, alienated from associated human 'arrangement'. In a word, it would have been de-mutualised.

Social reform included moral reformation

So the re-formation of society was what early socialist politics consisted of: new and different forms of association, federally linked in order to replace familial and national boundaries. Government in these settings included self-government, including the moral regulation produced by 'public opinion'. This was most effectively formed in communities of a certain size.[30] There were appropriate functions for individuals to perform at different stages of their lives. Age was a better way to move into and out of eligibility for formal, governmental functions than competitive bidding for power between parties, factions and interests. (Claeys, 1989:81) The latter could only reproduce individualism.

Owen was unafraid to challenge **family** and **nation** as the fixed points they later became in socialist discourse. It was for the same reason that Owenites were also suspicious of **class** when deployed by their antagonists. Any focus for membership and belonging which subtracted from humanity itself, serving as an inhibition on universal community rather than one component of it, was to be transcended. The early socialist challenge to lesser nuclei was moral as well as scientific, behavioural as well as conceptual. 'Family', as in the universal family of all human beings, was important to Owen. (Claeys, 1989:77) But not the small or nuclear family. This was the site of the competitive selfishness which was cause and effect of the crisis of the times.

> Every family made a little exclusive world seeking its own advantage … With these persons it is **my** house, **my** wife … **my** children …. Children are taught to consider their own individual family their own world'. 'We all know that when a family party converse together, they speak freely upon subjects which as soon as a stranger accidentally enters amongst them he never hears … But by a community education, you may all acquire the same general and particular ideas and feelings: consequently, into whatever circle you enter, you would still be in your family circle, and would converse with each other as freely as with a husband, wife or child.

Early socialists were unafraid to raise the moral and intellectual cost of entry to the movement by making these moral as well as intellectual challenges to capitalists and to their *dismal science* of competitive political economy. "The social mode of improvement", as it was described in 1856, demanded the education and moral improvement of all those who were to assist in the building of the new society, and thus the renewed pursuit of public virtue, and of "the knowledge of right and wrong, of true and false modes of action, and the culture of good habits". Owen:

> advised a higher moral purpose than mere partisanship offered and sought to refashion the ideas of public, national and international

interest to ensure greater peace, justice and well-being for all.

Such language survives, of course. Indeed it is being revived in the twenty-first century, but at some distance from socialism and from co-operative politics. Moral language tends to be deployed now either as rhetoric by statists seeking to rally voters to their side rather than to the side of their opponents, or seen by voters and non-voters as a private, individual or familial alternative to Political activity. It is deployed every day away from 'the' state rather than towards a different kind of state. For early socialists it was intrinsic to a carefully considered anti-politics from which a new politics could grow.

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Notes

1 In the London Co-operative Magazine, Nov. 1827. The reference was to the 'Communionists or Socialists' The word was not widely used by Owenites until the mid-1830s. In the 1820s they used phrases such as the 'new view of society', the '**social** system' [my emphasis] and 'co-operation'. See Bestor, 1948, pp259-302 and Harrison, 1969 p45. For earlier usages in Latin and Italian in the mid-eighteenth century see Claeys, 1989 p40.

2 Ian Macpherson's keynote 'The Values of Co-operation' at the 'Co-operative Values' Manchester conference in July 2009 for which my paper was also written, contained an interesting discussion of individualism and co-operation which generated a fruitful discussion, for and against allowing individualism into co-operation.

3 Divisions of labour between concepts as well as persons is a crucial, perhaps the crucial point of entry into the history and practice of different forms and periods of socialism. They are also a way of seeing a, or the, central concern of co-operatives and mutuals and need theorising and historicizing as such. The index references in Claeys, Citizens and Saints to the 'division of labour', and to 'specialisation' and 'all-rounded development' are particularly helpful, as are the index references in Claeys, 1987. See also Hunt, 1984; Rattansi, 1982; Draper, 1977; Bottomore, 1975.

4 And there is every indication that he has the stamina to continue: during 2009 he completed a 145,000 word book on the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century 'age of imperialism' phase of the story of socialism in Britain. A dozen articles in books and learned journals are listed in Citizens and Saints, pp348-9.

5 Yeo, 1987; Notes on Three Socialisms Collectivism, Statism and Associationism, mainly in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Britain, in Levy, 1987; Yeo, 1986.

6 Bestor, 1950 was important in identifying specifically 'communitarian' socialism and contrasting it with other socialisms. In a different discipline, 'communitarian' philosophers such as Alasdair Macintyre continue to point to small communities and co-operatives as cells for ethical transmission and growth against individualism in our times, see Macintyre, 2006.

7 In his correspondence (Book X) with the Emperor Trajan, from Bithynia where he had been sent as a Roman Senator, Pliny the Younger reported on a bad fire and asked Trajan to consider setting up a small fire

company or guild, small enough to be easy to keep an eye on. Trajan's reply is a wonderful example of the fear of any more or less free-standing associations which might turn into 'hetaeriae', like political clubs/ secret societies/ factions etc. "Give them the name we may and however good the reasons for organisation, such associations will soon degenerate …". He refused the request. I owe this reference to Stirling Smith. Statists are always wary of free associational life, however un-political. Pliny the Younger's Complete Letters translated by P G Walsh are in a Worlds Classics edition (Oxford, OUP, 2006).

8   For a defence of socialism against the Cold War assumption that it necessarily results in totalitarianism, see Claeys, Citizens and Saints, pp13-14 and for Owen's democratic thought, the whole of chapter 2 "Paternalism and democracy in the politics of Robert Owen", pp63-105, and "Communtarianism and personal liberty" pp119-129.

9   With the communist or socialist party or branch playing a similar role to the church as theorised by St Augustine: 'in waiting', representative of what **will** occur rather than agent. There was something of this in the 'religion of socialism' which I described in Yeo (1977). Such *attentisme* clearly has the effect of making tactical and strategic planning and organisation seem less necessary.

10 "It is now often conceded that the anti-political impulse in social and political thought after 1750 was much more extensive than was once believed and was built upon a widely circulated and powerfully articulated distinction between state and society", Claeys (1989),p15 at n17. Wolin (1969) is a key reference for this orientating, strategic observation by Claeys.

11 In chapter 27 of Capital 3, for which, alongside other treatments of co-operatives by Marx, see Yeo (1983)

12 For which see all of Part III of Claeys, Citizens and Saints, "The Origins of Social Radicalism", pp167-326.

13 The Leeds Redemption Society (1845) formed the last strictly Owenite community in Britain, in S Wales. It lasted from 1847 to 1855, see Harrison (1954).

14 Morris, 1936. The best modern exposition of this policy is in Anderson (1980).

15 Williams (1959) Conclusion argues for association as class culture.

16 Chapter 5 "Owenism and the emergence of social radicalism" pp169-207: "the specifically Owenite contribution to the radicalism of these years … has never been detailed and categorised adequately".

17 Gurney (1999). See also Gurney (1996) and Gurney (1988). Corrigan and Sayer (1982) inspired much of this work by using Marx's 'Great Arch' trope for the long transition to capitalism.

18 *Man*, no 14 (13 October 1833) p108, quoted in Claeys, Citizens and Saints, p197.

19 Claeys, 1989:148-50 and 159-161, on exchange as a focus for early socialist thought will be of interest to fair trade and trade justice activists. As with fraternity in liberty, equality and …, so exchange in production, distribution and … has been neglected in later socialist thinking.

20 Claeys, 1989:186, "the Owenites, as well, were capable of changing their minds on both strategic issues and the ultimate value of Owen's views on property, commerce and other matters".

21 The quotes from Mudie are in Claeys, 1987:86-87.

22 For the burying of 'education' in institutions during the nineteenth century see Williams, 1961 and Yeo (forthcoming) "Education and Association: re-membering for a new moral world".

23 "Liberty consists not in the *right* but in the *power* given to each individual in the community to develop his faculties …", an editorial in *Labour League,*16 Sept 1848, quoted in Claeys, 1989:316.

24 See chapters 6 and 7 of Claeys, 1989, "Owenism and Chartism, 1836-45" and "the legitimation of political socialism" pp208-273.

25 In chapter 4 of Claeys, 1989*,* "'A mere trifle by comparison': social science, republicanism and political economy", pp142-166 (with a useful summary on p145) Claeys analyses "the socialist notion of economic thought and development" in five ways, comparing it with the impact which classical political economy had on liberal political thought. He looks at "the machinery question"; the emphasis on **exchange** as a central social activity and the 'displacement' of issues of justice and rights to the exchange process; the rejection of political radicalism's description of taxation as the principal cause of economic distress; the use by Owenites of the American model as the main example of the inadequacy of merely political institutions; and the re-emergence of enriched political ideals within Owenite economic theory and of "quasi-political plans for future economic organisation".

26 These 'wings' were largely the creation of Sidney and Beatrice Webb.

27 For surrounding mankind with circumstances, see Henry Hetherington's "Last Will and Testament", as he was dying of cholera in 1849 in Claeys, 1989:229.

28 *New Harmony Gazette,* 12 July 1826, quoted in Harrison, 1969:82 n2.

29 Harrison, 1975 is a useful collection of documents; see also Silver, 1975.

30 Claeys, 1989:101: Communities should contain no more than 3,000 people "for very many important reasons respecting education, training, occupation, wealth, amusements, and the general enjoyment of life; but especially because by this simple arrangement every one from birth to death will have his physical, intellectual, moral, practical and spiritual character well formed for him, and will be without difficulty well cared for through life by society".