

# The Co-operative Character: Alienation and the Search for Meaning in Early British Socialism

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Dedicated to the people of Palestine, who deserve justice.

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the significance of the emphasis on 'Character' in early British Co-operative thought. The Movement set itself the ambitious objective of ushering in a New Moral World by transforming the character of every individual in society. Over time, however, the emphasis on 'character' has waned and the Movement largely abandoned its utopian designs while changing into a consumer movement. This loss of idealism has preoccupied many histories of the movement, most of whom conclude that the shift is a result of the Movement's "appropriation" by a capitalist logic. In contrast with previous histories, this thesis argues that analysing the ontological and epistemic assumptions underlying the language of 'character' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century might yield more productive answers. I do this by adopting an archaeological approach, analysing the Movement's theoretical writings on pedagogy, psychology and political economy, as well as their pedagogical, medical and communitarian practices in order to ascertain the ontological and epistemological commitments that undergirded the Movement's grand project. To this end, I use a plethora of published materials, as well as making extensive use of original materials held in the National Co-operative Archive in Manchester.

I begin by framing the emergence of the Movement as a response to a perceived crisis of truth. I examine the different analyses of the crisis across the different strands of the Movement, comparing their ontological and epistemological commitments. This approach reveals that Co-operators developed innovative early conceptions of alienation and flourishing, as well as a radical critical capacity that enabled them to question many of the day's received institutions. However, I eventually conclude that the loss of the Movement's potency stems not from "appropriation", but rather from its reduction of human agency to mechanistic rationality and to epistemological problems, and from its fixation on regulating the conduct of individuals in a top-down, rationalist fashion. In doing so, the Movement failed to understand the significance of 'meaning' to human agency and to acknowledge meaning-formation as an essential human activity. I then propose that in order to regain its transformative potency, the Movement ought to develop new practices of collective meaning-formation "from below".

## Introduction

### Problem and Argument

This thesis examines the centrality of the concept of ‘co-operative character’ to the British Co-operative Movement during its early stages in the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. References to ‘character’ are abundant in the Movement’s early publications, and although these terms fell out of favour by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they never fully disappeared from the Movement’s vocabulary. Even as late as 1898, we find G.J. Holyoake proclaiming the purpose of Co-operative education to be:

primarily the formation of co-operative character and opinions by teaching the history, theory, and principles of the movement, with economics and constitutional history, in so far as they have bearing on co-operation, and secondarily, though not necessarily of less import, the training of men and women to take part in industrial and social reforms and civic life generally.<sup>1</sup>

Crucially, he adds, “education is not co-operative, because it is given by co-operators to co-operators, unless it is conducive to the formation of the co-operative mind [...]” This thesis seeks to elucidate the significance of ‘character’ in such statements, and its relationship to education.

I also ask why it is that references to ‘character’ declined so drastically after the 1840s.<sup>2</sup> In its inception, the Movement (or at least its more stringently Owenite parts) was decidedly anti-capitalist and rejected competition and individualism out of hand. It sought to abolish private property and forge a new society that would be arranged along co-operative lines, arguing that such a society would breed ‘rational’ character across the population. In fact, so central was character-formation to Owen’s work that William Hazlitt accused him of being “a man of one idea — namely, that Man’s character is formed for him, not by him” — a claim Owen would not deny, but to which he would merely add that “had [Hazlitt] said that I was a man of one fundamental principle and its practical consequences — he would have

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<sup>1</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *Essentials of Co-Operative Education* (London: The Labour Association for Promoting Co-operative Production based on Co-partnership of the Workers, n.d.), 7.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Hall & Watkins’ seminal *Co-operation* (1937) was commissioned by the Co-operative College for use in its classes. There, ‘character’ barely receives a mention, and there is instead a notable shift to notions of ‘citizenship’.

been nearer the truth.”<sup>3</sup> The “discovery” of this fundamental principle and of its practical implications was regularly referenced for decades by co-operators, who continued to view this assertion as an historic turning point, a watershed moment that would set humanity on the path from ignorance to happiness. So influential had Owen’s declaration of the principle of character-formation become by the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that Holyoake felt the need to remind his readers that, in the early days of Co-operation, “the effect of environment on character was not only disbelieved; it was denounced.”<sup>4</sup> One word, then — ‘character’ — keeps recurring in early co-operative literature, appearing as the primary object upon which Owenites directed their efforts and on the basis of which they constructed their social theories. Therefore, for all the Movement’s contributions to 19<sup>th</sup> century — be it through economic theories, its involvement with trade unionism, its setting up of experimental communities, or its capacity to stir organizational efforts on a huge scale — the Co-operative Movement cannot be understood unless we evaluate the underlying role ‘character’ played in its endeavours. Implicit in all Co-operative thought was the belief that the route to wholesale social change passed through ‘character.’ And yet, following the heady days of Owenism and communitarian experiments, the Movement settled into a consumer movement with more modest aspirations. References to character virtually disappeared, and the Movement’s educational methods changed considerably.

From our vantage point in the present day, where capitalism is regularly presented as natural and historically inevitable, it is useful to look back at a movement that emerged from the same Industrial Revolution that shaped capitalism as we know it. The Co-operative Movement was, for a while, perceived as enough of a genuine threat to the established order to warrant being attacked and vilified by the propertied classes. The Movement’s early days thus provide fertile ground for research, as they signified a pivotal moment in history in which the world could arguably have turned out differently, and when audacious claims about the end of history could not have even been entertained. Co-operative historian Peter Gurney has gone so far as to argue that there was a point in history at which

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Owen, *The Life of Robert Owen Written by Himself with Selections from His Writings & Correspondence (1857)* (Fairfield (NJ): A.M. Kelley, 1977), 76. Hazlitt’s quote also cited by Owen.

<sup>4</sup> Holyoake, *Essentials of Co-Operative Education*.

mass-consumerist capitalism was not an inevitability.<sup>5</sup> We therefore need to understand 19<sup>th</sup> century Co-operators as operating within a very different imaginary horizon, containing a genuine belief in the eventual triumph of Co-operation. But what has happened to this belief? Why is the same near-evangelical conviction not so explicit in Co-operative circles today? Indeed, this continues to be an issue for the movement to the present day: many Co-operators insist that Co-operation is an alternative, yet it operates within an overarching logic of marketisation, with many Co-operators believing that the role of co-operatives is to act as a mere rationalising agent within capitalism, without challenging the fundamental tenets of capitalism. Indeed, education still forms a key principle of the ICA's constitution:

the Co-operative 'fifth principle', which emphasises education, training and information. This principle states that, Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They inform the general public — particularly young people and opinion leaders — about the nature and benefits of co-operation (ICA, 1995).<sup>6</sup>

However, the emphasis on the creation of a Co-operative character and the transformation of society appears to have largely disappeared from the movement, which seems to have no clearly defined political philosophy. As Ratner suggests,

the absence of a political philosophy means that co-operation is vulnerable to co-optation, Co-ops are vulnerable to co-optation because they lack a political philosophy that can guide genuine cooperation and counter non-cooperative influences (Ratner, 2015:18).<sup>7</sup>

With the above context in mind, I ask the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** What exactly is meant by 'Co-operative Character'?
- **RQ2:** How has the Movement gone about forming this character?

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<sup>5</sup> See Gurney, *Co-Operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, 1870-1930*.

<sup>6</sup> <https://ica.coop/en/cooperatives/cooperative-identity#:~:text=Cooperatives%20are%20based%20on%20the,responsibility%20and%20caring%20for%20othe>  
[rs](#)

<sup>7</sup> Ratner cited in Joanna Dennis, 'Co-Operative Academies: A Transindividual Possibility in Individualistic Times?' (Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2018), 63.

- **RQ3:** Has the Movement's understanding of 'character' and of its own mission changed over time? If so, how?
- **RQ4:** What are some of the possible reasons behind the Movement's declining emphasis on social transformation and its transition to a consumer movement?

## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### (i) Defining the Co-operative Movement

Before I can begin to answer these research questions, I need to first define the Co-operative Movement. For the most part, historians of the Co-operative Movement have tended to divide the Movement's beginnings into two distinct stages – Owenite and post-Owenite. Sidney Pollard's work is a prominent example of this approach, demarcating the first stage as 'Owenite', starting "with the publications of Robert Owen in the second decade of the [19<sup>th</sup>] century",<sup>8</sup> peaking in 1828-34, and dying with the demise of the Queenwood community in 1846. The second stage, according to Pollard, is "heralded by the foundation of the Rochdale Pioneers' Society in 1844"<sup>9</sup> — the Pioneers representing a supposedly 'pragmatic' turn-away from utopianism and towards a preoccupation with more 'practical' matters. It is therefore tempting to think of each phase as characterised by distinct approaches: the first utopian and paternalistic, the second consisting of a bottom-up, 'self-help' attitude. However, Robin Thornes argues that there is no clear-cut second phase, and that the period up to 1844 cannot be described as simply Owenite.<sup>10</sup> Many co-operative societies were formed independently of Owen in the 1820s while he was in the U.S.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, while many societies were indebted to Owen's ideas, most were dismissed by Owen himself as missing his point altogether by dedicating themselves to mere buying and selling; and while Owen repeatedly attempted to assert his authority on the Movement, his

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<sup>8</sup> Sidney Pollard, 'Co-Operation: From Community Building to Shopkeeping', in *Essays in Labour History: In Memory of G.D.H. Cole 25 September 1889-14 January 1959*, ed. Asa Briggs and John Saville (MacMillan & Co, 1967), 74.

<sup>9</sup> Pollard, 74.

<sup>10</sup> See Robin Thornes, 'Change and Continuity in the Development of Co-Operation, 1827-1844', in *New Views of Co-Operation*, ed. Stephen Yeo (London: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Harrison points to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Woolwich and Chatham cooperative corn mills as well as various cooperative stores in Scotland and the North of England that antedated Owen. See J.F.C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: The Quest for the New Moral World* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 197.

authority was often disavowed.<sup>12</sup> Many co-operative societies were established independently of Owen, primarily during the periods between 1824-29, when Owen was away in the U.S. working on the New Harmony community experiment. During this time, the primary developer of the theory of Co-operation – and particularly of community organisation – was William Thompson rather than Owen. Owen even took a copy of Thompson's *An Inquiry into the Principles...* with him to the States. Owenism, then, was not a uniformly accepted doctrine among Co-operators, and even upon his return from the U.S., many co-operative societies openly shunned Owen's leadership. As the *Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald* stated at the time:

We do not like the term 'Owenism'; it is extremely vague; it defines nothing; [...] *The Co-operative Magazine* does not propose to support 'Owenism', but to call the attention of the public to the principles of mutual co-operation and equal distribution, of which Mr Owen is a very powerful advocate.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, John Finch, founder of the Liverpool Co-operative Society, declared that

[the] promoters of the First Liverpool Co-operative Society disclaim all connexion with the views or intentions of other Societies, or with any designs entertained by Mr Owen. [...] They acknowledge them as fellow labourers in the same great and good work.<sup>14</sup>

Note that Finch is not only disclaiming Owen's views, but those of any other Co-operative society. The movement was heterogenous from its very inception, because it did not sprout from a single, shared origin; rather, different co-operative societies emerged within different contexts, in response to varying needs, and with differing strategic aims that required specific tactical approaches. And though they shared the belief that "absence of [...] community was [...] the chief ill of British society",<sup>15</sup> they sought to address this by different methods. Most notably, some societies seemed less interested in the 'metaphysical knowledge' pursued by Owen, instead seeking to address issues of wealth-

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<sup>12</sup> So much so that, in 1835, Owen despaired of the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union and sets up the Association of All Classes of All Nations, from which he excluded all Co-operative trading societies. See Robin Thornes, 'Change and Continuity in the Development of Co-Operation, 1827-1844', in *New Views of Co-Operation*, ed. Stephen Yeo (London: Routledge, 1988), 38–39.

<sup>13</sup> *The Co-Operative Magazine and Monthly Herald*, n.d. February 1826, 56

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in R.G. Garnett, *Co-Operation and the Owenite Socialist Communities in Britain 1825-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), 43.

<sup>15</sup> Harrison, *Utopianism and Education: Robert Owen and the Owenites*, 18.

distribution and temporarily setting aside any utopian ambitions (if not discarding them altogether). The First Preston Society, for example, aimed to provide “capital sufficient to keep all members in constant employment” and wished to disseminate the principles of co-operation so as to “form a community of independent labourers”, while the Carlisle Co-operating Society wrote in 1829 that its objects were “[t]o form common capital upon which members may work, to support own poor and sick and provide employment for out-of-work members, to provide education for children, commodities of best quality at fair prices.”<sup>16</sup> Such aims are closer to the friendly and providential societies already rife across the UK than to Owenism, and it was such self-help-oriented organisations as the British Association for the Promotion of Co-operative Knowledge, and publications such as the *Associate* and the *Co-operator*, that were mostly responsible for the spread of Co-operation during Owen’s absence. Their efforts bore fruit in abundance: in 1828 the *Co-operator* listed nine co-operative societies across England. “By 1832”, says Thompson, “perhaps 500 cooperative societies were in existence in the whole country, with at least 20,000 members.”<sup>17</sup> Right from the beginning of the movement, then, there had sprung alongside Owenism a much more grassroots and decentralised wave of co-operatives that had no truly unified notion of what co-operatives should look like or how they were to be set up. Even Holyoake, one of Owen’s foremost missionaries, claimed that “the instinct of cooperation is self-help.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, the movement was heterogeneous from the start and cannot be thought of as consisting of sequential phases or of separate and clearly identifiable strands of thought. Instead, we ought to view the Co-operative movement as made up of a multitude of theoretical positions and practices that regularly came into contact with one another and overlapped considerably, with individuals continually moving between them, even occupying several positions simultaneously that may appear mutually exclusive.

In the face of such plurality, it becomes more difficult to answer the question, what is Co-operation and what are its aims and objectives? Certainly, some individuals may, at certain points, have declared themselves disciples of Owen. Yet, as R.G. Garnett reminds us, while

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<sup>16</sup> Cited in R.G. Garnett, *Co-Operation and the Owenite Socialist Communities in Britain 1825-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), 55.

<sup>17</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 872.

<sup>18</sup> Holyoake, *The History of Co-operation in England: Its Literature and Its Advocates*, 587.



Owen was an inspirational mobiliser, even his most loyal followers were “far from pale shadows, nor were they dogmatists. Their self-appointed mission was to reinterpret and apply Owen’s directives [...]”<sup>19</sup> In fact, many of Owen’s closest disciples were prolific writers and thinkers in their own right, with their own takes on questions of morality and agency. Furthermore, as McCann points out, the framework that informed large segments of the working classes by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century was drawn from a variety of sources, including

the analysis of political events dispensed by Cobbett's publications, the unstamped press and Chartist newspapers, [and from] a science of society, embodying the Owenite belief in the importance of the environment, and an analysis which pointed to social cooperation among equals; and theories which explained the inescapable facts of poverty and exploitation.<sup>20</sup>

While Owen prescribed the construction of communities which would follow his specific and absolute instruction, there were many others who believed that co-operative societies could and should be built from the ground up, by its members and using whatever means available, no matter how meagre. One such group was the London Co-operative Society set up in 1821, of which George Mudie was the most notable and well-documented member. Mudie argued that the principle of Co-operation could be of great use to the working-classes even when utilised for the modest aim of saving money on purchases. These Co-operators held a broader definition of ‘Co-operation’ than Owen’s, viewing it as the act of co-operating with one another for mutual security. There was also a self-help strand to the movement that was concerned with ‘civilising’ or ‘improving’ the working classes. Samuel Smiles encapsulated this strand, extolling co-operative societies for “[promoting] habits of saving, of thrift, and of temperance.”<sup>21</sup>

I will elaborate on these ‘self-help’ strands of the movement in Part III of this thesis. The important thing to note for now is that these different strands were not wholly separable, and that even many of these bottom-up Co-operators harboured communitarian

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<sup>19</sup> R.G. Garnett, *Co-Operation and the Owenite Socialist Communities in Britain 1825-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), 41, <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=5x-8AAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

<sup>20</sup> Philip McCann, ‘Review: Radicalism and Education in Britain’, *History of Education Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 237.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Smiles, *Thrift* (Vachendorf: Strelbytskyy Multimedia Publishing, 2020), 105, <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:101:1-2020080715365108334406>.

aspirations, determining to set aside a portion of the profits for the establishment of a Co-operative community. Indeed, the majority of the so-called 'rank and file' — the tens of thousands of people who set up co-operative societies, congregated in Halls of Science to attend public lectures, and who signed up to communitarian experiments — were part of a growing working-class movement that adopted and experimented with whatever strategies and ideas suited their needs at any particular time in their struggle for material and intellectual betterment, both from within and outside of Owenism. While there is no doubting the inspirational effect Owen had<sup>22</sup> on large tracts of the working classes, many Co-operators merely passed through Owenism before going on to become prominent Chartists or set up their own independent co-operative societies, taking from Owenism what they found useful to their political aims and rejecting whatever tenets they disagreed with. Harrison points out that:

It is very difficult in some cases to say whether a working-class leader was an Owenite or not. Many men absorbed Owenite views on social and economic questions, some has a definite Owenite phase in their career, most rejected the personal leadership of Owen himself.<sup>23</sup>

While Stedman-Jones says that Owenism “tended to be interpreted by different types of worker according to their different industrial situations.”<sup>24</sup> This trend continued beyond Owenism’s heyday, past 1834, with “Co-operation [becoming] more deeply entrenched as a strategy of the labour movement.”<sup>25</sup> Here, Co-operation became no longer just a doctrine (and certainly not a unitary doctrine), but a tool, a weapon added to an ever-growing working-class arsenal and adaptable to workers’ changing needs. It was already common for disenfranchised working people to use the threat of a trade boycott in order to pressure shopkeepers — many of whom had acquired the franchise following the 1832 Reform Bill — to vote for parliamentary candidates who would represent the interests of the lower classes. It was not long, therefore, before political radicals went one step further by setting

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<sup>22</sup> Membership of Owen’s Association of All Classes of All Nations was “claimed to be 70,000-100,000”.

<sup>23</sup> Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: The Quest for the New Moral World*, 229.

<sup>24</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 57.

<sup>25</sup> Thornes, ‘Change and Continuity in the Development of Co-Operation, 1827-1844’, 49.

up their own stores, owned and run co-operatively. As one correspondent argued in the *Voice of the West Riding*:

The evil that I complain of is people buying their groceries and all other kinds of goods at the shops of their enemies [...], they are the enemies of the Trade Union. They have opposed the enfranchisement of the people, they are the foes of Co-operation [...]. Now Co-operative shops at Halifax and Huddersfield have all kinds of goods necessary for the people, and at reasonable prices.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, many Chartists would come to take up the tactic of the co-operative store. The Stockport Co-operative Society, founded by Chartists, donated half its profits to the Chartist prisoners in Chester, while the Stainland store described itself as “The Radical Co-operative society of Stainland”.

[It] is now well understand [sic] the best mode of convincing the shopocrats of the justice of the People’s Charter is to keep our money out of their tills; the profits of which have been the lever by which they have long held us in bondage, and which used by ourselves, will in the end work out our salvation.<sup>27</sup>

Evidence shows that many working people were simultaneously political agitators and members of co-operative societies. Peter Bussey of Bradford agitated for parliamentary and factory reform at the same time as being secretary of the Bradford Moor Co-operative Society, and Thornes shows that he was not atypical of the time.<sup>28</sup> Taking all of the above into account, the establishment of the Rochdale Society in 1844 must not be viewed as a ‘break’ from an earlier stage of co-operation, nor as the ‘evolution’ of co-operation from one stage into another. This is because, from the very beginning, co-operation was neither a homogenous doctrine, ‘form’ or method. The term ‘co-operation’ in fact obscures a multiplicity of practices, beliefs and methods, often stemming from quite distinct origins, at times amalgamating, overlapping and combining into new forms, and in response to specific needs and conditions. As Thornes points out, to call the establishment of the Rochdale Society a ‘break’ is based on “the misconception that the movement in the early period was

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<sup>26</sup> *Voice of the West Riding*, n.d. 12 October, 1833.

<sup>27</sup> *Northern Star*, n.d. 22 February, 1840

<sup>28</sup> See Thornes, ‘Change and Continuity in the Development of Co-Operation, 1827-1844’. 35

an Owenite one", committed to communities, and that it died in 1834. Nor should we think of the movement as transitioning from Owenism to a sort of 'Improving', materialistic form of individualism, as the Rochdale Pioneers are portrayed in some quarters. Writing about the Rochdale Pioneers, Walton argues that "individualistic instrumentality" has been over-emphasised by most historians of the Co-operative movement because such an account fits more conveniently with dominant British histories of Victorian society, in which the working-classes are portrayed as having moved towards more 'respectable' aims, thus earning the right to vote in the Second Reform Act of 1867.<sup>29</sup> Michael Rose similarly picked up on the depiction of 'Rochdale Man' in historical accounts as:

the respectable, self-helping, self-educating working man with his co-operative society, savings bank and chapel' [who had been] 'severely tested by the experience of mass unemployment (during the Lancashire "cotton famine" of the early 1860s) and not found wanting. His reward for good conduct was to be the award of the franchise in 1867.'<sup>30</sup>

As Walton asserts, however, "[this] equation of Co-op membership with respectability was not universally shared at the time. The co-operative societies constituted a dangerous competitive challenge to private businesses, as well as [...] embodying economic heresy"<sup>31</sup> to such an extent that (if Holyoake's account is correct) co-operators were regularly denied access to charitable relief throughout the 1860s, as the shopkeepers on the local committees "took a shabby revenge upon their humble rivals".<sup>32</sup> It would be more accurate, as Thornes highlights, to view the Rochdale Society as shaped as much by Owenism as by traditions of self-help, individualism, respectability, and self-improvement. As E.P. Thompson echoes, co-operation's strength was not so much in its providing a wholly new vision of the world, but rather in that it "offered a movement in which rationalists and Christians, Radicals and the politically neutral, could work together."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See John K. Walton, 'Revisiting the Rochdale Pioneers', *Labour History Review* 80, no. 3 (December 2015): 222.

<sup>30</sup> M.E. Rose, "'Rochdale Man" and the Staleybridge Riot', in *Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain*, ed. A.P. Donajgradzki (London, Totowa, N.J.: Croom Helm ; Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), 185.

<sup>31</sup> Walton, 'Revisiting the Rochdale Pioneers', 225.

<sup>32</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *Self-Help by the People: History of Co-Operation in Rochdale*, 9th ed., 1878. Chapter 17.

<sup>33</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 871–72.

## **(ii) Framing the Early Movement's Emergence: Alienation and the Crisis of Truth**

Having just explained how the Movement has been defined in some of the historical literature, I will now move on to explain how the early Movement has been framed in historical literature and where this thesis fits in the literature. Primarily, the Movement has been framed as a response to the crises of immiseration and dislocation around the time of the Industrial Revolution, and to a perceived crisis of moral and social collapse. This tends to be the default explanation for the emergence of the movement within the fields of labour history and cultural materialism. The works of Harold Silver,<sup>34</sup> E.P. Thompson,<sup>35</sup> Gregory Claeys,<sup>36</sup> and Raymond Williams<sup>37</sup> have thoroughly charted the fear of moral decay and collapse of social order that underpinned many of the philanthropic endeavours of the day, as well as the ruling classes' responses to political agitation and revolutionary ferment. However, I argue that this anxiety was in fact itself grounded in a deeper anxiety around what Nietzsche termed "the Death of God" – the loss of moral certainty and authority that gripped the Age of Enlightenment. In effect, every Co-operative effort is part of a project to replace the uncertainty of a Godless world with something fixed – a universal and scientifically derivable source of truth and knowledge. This angle has not been identified in Co-operative studies and, I argue, completely changes what conclusion we may arrive at regarding the contested meanings of 'truth' and 'rationality' within the movement, both during its early years and over time.

I argue that while the Co-operative Movement on the whole was ostensibly a response to a crisis of poverty and exploitation, every strand of the movement was in fact responding to the crisis of truth, and that each had a different analysis of the crisis' causes. Fundamentally, each strand shared a belief in truth's unassailable power to rationalise everyone in its path and to eliminate suffering, if only the obstacles to its flow could be removed. The crisis, therefore, stemmed from the fact that human beings had become cut off — alienated — from an essential truth, and that this alienation was the root cause of all irrational conduct and misery. Here, then, lies another original aspect of this thesis. I frame the different

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<sup>34</sup> Harold Silver, *The Concept of Popular Education* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1965).

<sup>35</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*.

<sup>36</sup> Claeys, *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism*.

<sup>37</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture & Society, Coleridge to Orwell*. London: Hogarth Press (London: Hogarth Press, 1993).

strands of the movement in terms of their approaches to the question of alienation: i.e. their analysis of the causes of alienation, and their proposed remedies. I categorise these approaches as follows: Owenite Co-operation; 'Improving' Self-Help Co-operation; and Politically Radical Self-Help Co-operation.

Considering the angle of the crisis of truth has not been examined in any of the literature, this thesis addresses a glaring gap in the literature. While previous works have sought to situate the Movement in economic and political contexts, I argue that to fully comprehend the Movement's significance, we need to frame it *primarily* as part of the crisis of truth that characterised the Enlightenment – that is to say, a crisis of the ontological and epistemological foundations of morality. In this thesis, I show that the Co-operative Movement sought to re-establish a fixed source of truth in the face of a perceived crisis of truth, and that much of this endeavour is encapsulated in the Movement's discourses on character.

## **Methodology**

Most studies of early Co-operative history have been carried out in the field of labour history, examining the Co-operative Movement's role in the formation of the British working class and the labour movement, and largely using the methods of intellectual history. For example, Ophelie Simeon's *Robert Owen's Experiment at New Lanark* tries to elucidate Owen's thought and practice with reference to his membership of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society and the individuals he was likely to have met there, tracing his intellectual indebtedness to certain individuals (such as William Godwin), or trying to explain shifts in his thinking as precipitated by specific life events.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, J.F.C. Harrison's *Utopianism & Education* outlines the intellectual framework Owen supposedly shared with other contemporary social reformers and, as in Simeon's case, attempts an intellectual biography of Owen in order to trace his ideas to specific influences, as well as charting a developmental trajectory of Owen's ideas over time.<sup>39</sup> Another example comes

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<sup>38</sup> See Ophelie Simeon, *Robert Owen's Experiment at New Lanark: From Paternalism to Socialism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), ch. 2 and p.22-23.

<sup>39</sup> See J.F.C. Harrison, ed., *Utopianism and Education: Robert Owen and the Owenites* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), 7–12.

from Gregory Claeys, who carries on this tradition of tracing intellectual influences as well as seeking the origins of specific practices in predecessors, such as when he traces Owen's rejection of voting to Godwin's influence.<sup>40</sup> E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*<sup>41</sup> looks at the material conditions as well as the social, cultural and ideological histories that fed into what eventually became the working class's consciousness. In so far as he examines the idea of 'character' in the formation of the working class, he considers it as a cultural and social category — in other words, the worldview or socio-cultural framework that shaped their judgments, values, morals and conduct.

However, situating the Movement as a response to a crisis of truth requires a different methodological approach. For, I contend, a movement's relationship to truth cannot be studied by examining the political or cultural traditions to which the movement belongs. Rather, we need to examine the truth-structures that govern its thought: the ontological and epistemological axioms that underpin the movement's theories and practices. The extant studies of labour history fail to do this, concerned as they are with cultural, material and ideological history (e.g. the fermentation of revolutionary sentiment, and the counter-revolutionary response of the upper classes). Consequently, the scope of conditions of thought taken into account by them is too limited: it looks at the influences of political and social ideas and practices, but it neglects the ontologies of self that underpin these socio-cultural histories and which shape people's ability to conceive of agency and of change.<sup>42</sup> This thesis aims to rectify this omission by honing-in on the Co-operative Movement's relationship to truth and ascertaining the manner in which these conceptions of truth were made operative in the Movement's mission to transform humanity.

To illustrate my methodological approach, I will take an example from Harrison's approach and comparing it with my own. In *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America*,<sup>43</sup> Harrison revises his previous biographical approach from *Utopianism & Education*, now

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<sup>40</sup> See Gregory Claeys, *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 34.

<sup>41</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1991).

<sup>42</sup> For reference, *The Making of the English Working Class* is over 900 pages long and covers the period between 1780 and 1830; yet, staggeringly, the significance of Enlightenment notions of truth are barely touched upon.

<sup>43</sup> J.F.C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: The Quest for the New Moral World* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

arguing that there's no point trying to ascertain whether Owen had "borrowed" certain ideas from the likes of Rousseau or Bentham, or whether he was directly influenced by any of the individuals with whom he came into contact in Manchester. Instead, he uses the methodology of intellectual history and comparative studies, undertaking to consider Owenism as part of the whole complex of ideas of the late-18<sup>th</sup> and early-19<sup>th</sup> centuries:

The hypothesis underlying this is that the ideas of a period are contained within a framework and have a certain unity based on common assumptions and attitudes. Owenism thus becomes a cluster of social ideas drawn from several sources united within an overall intellectual boundary.<sup>44</sup>

In this thesis, I begin with a similar approach, establishing an overall intellectual framework within which the Co-operative Movement's conceptions of character were articulated. However, rather than take an 'intellectual history' or engage in comparative studies, I take a more archaeological approach,<sup>45</sup> focusing not simply on the intellectual horizon that these thinkers share, but on their epistemic and ontological horizon. Thus, in chapters 1-4, I examine the broad 'science of man'<sup>46</sup> that dominated European thought in the late-18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and which heavily informed the Co-operative project. In this 'science of man', which pervaded a host of fields and disciplines (including psychology, psychiatry, medicine, physiology, economics, pedagogy and more), character became a *de facto* metaphysical category through which to enquire into the nature of the self and articulate different formulations of agency. 'Character' here becomes what I would like to call a conjunctive concept, connecting, according to Ahnert and Manning, "the study of consciousness and identity with that of society, culture, and history. It offered a focus for the discussion [...] about the relationship in human nature between what was socially constructed and what determined by constitution or 'matter' [...]." <sup>47</sup> As I show in chapters 1-4, analysing the statements and practices of these fields reveals some broad epistemological and ontological

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<sup>44</sup> Harrison, 4.

<sup>45</sup> In the Foucauldian sense.

<sup>46</sup> What Hume termed the 'science of man', and what both J.S. Mill and Owenites (separately) referred to as a 'science of character-formation'.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas Ahnert and Susan Manning, eds., 'Introduction: Character, Self, and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment', in *Character, Self, and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 23.



commitments. I argue that Owenism formed part of this ontological and epistemological horizon, as it put forward its own 'science of character-formation' that claimed to explain the mechanisms behind human agency. As such, archaeology is important here because it looks to shine a light on "the problematizations through which being offers itself to be [...] thought."<sup>48</sup> Thus, the purpose of connecting thinkers and formulations from across several fields is not to compare them with Owenism or with other strands of Co-operation, nor to map out its precursors or to merely set out the "intellectual context" within which the Movement emerged. Rather, the purpose of linking together the different fields and thinkers drawn upon in this thesis is to trace the ontological and epistemological commitments that informed the Co-operative project. This is the crux of my archaeological approach, inspired in part by Foucault, for whom:

the question [...] would not be to determine from what moment a revolutionary consciousness appears, nor the respective roles of economic conditions and theoretical elucidations in the genesis of this consciousness; it would not attempt to retrace the general, and exemplary, biography of revolutionary man, or to find the origins of his project.

Instead, he is interested in explaining:

the formation of a discursive practice and a body of revolutionary knowledge [as] expressed in behaviour and strategies, which give rise to a theory of society, and which operate the interference and mutual transformation of that behaviour and those strategies.<sup>49</sup>

Similarly I analyse the statements and practices of the Co-operative Movement in order to extrapolate from them the ontological and epistemological assumptions that structured them. And while this thesis does not simply "apply" Foucault's approaches to a given field, I have attempted to map out the Co-operative conception of the self by pulling together a plethora of practices and theories from across the Movement's eclectic fields of interest, including pedagogy, moral philosophy, psychology, political economy, medicine, physiology, and community-building. This allows us to glean in depth the assumptions underlying the

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<sup>48</sup> Judith Butler, 'What Is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue', *Transversal Texts*, May 2001, 11, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/butler/en>.

<sup>49</sup> Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1972), 195.

Co-operative Movement and to illuminate the ways in which co-operators conceptualised the crisis of truth, as well as their proposed remedies for said crisis.

## **PART I – Character and the Science of Character-Formation**

## Chapter 1 – What is Character?

### Introduction

In this chapter, I will give an outline of the different uses of ‘character’, particularly in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The preoccupation with character was not unique to Co-operators; rather, the notion of character filtered through to a plethora of scientific disciplines and discourses across the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>50</sup>, cutting across fields as diverse as education, political economy, medicine, religion, moral philosophy, criminology, penology, and more, suggesting that ‘character’ is indicative of a broader problematic that dominated European and North American thought. In order to understand precisely what this problematic was, we need to first examine the prevalence of ‘character’ across these different fields and ask what unites them, which we will do in this chapter. This will allow us to understand the framework that shaped and informed the thought of the Co-operative movement. ‘Character’, I will argue, provides a conceptual vector through which to apprehend and discuss the self, and over chapters 1-4 I will outline the different conceptions of the self across this discourse, as well as highlight the fundamental rules and axiomatic assumptions that recur in all iterations of this discourse.

### 1.1. Emphatic and Descriptive Character

But first, what *is* ‘character’? Jerrold Seigel distinguishes between two prominent senses in which the term ‘character’ is used. First, the descriptive or classifying sense, in which one might speak of someone as having this or that character, such as when Johnson defines character as a “particular constitution of the mind” and “the person with his assemblage of qualities”<sup>51</sup>, referring to the ideas, impressions, inclinations, feelings and so on, of which the individual is made. Such descriptive examples of character tend to also be prescriptive and instructive. Handbooks like *Character Makeover: 40 Days with a Life Coach to Create the Best You*, identify desirable character traits, listing “Humility, Confidence, Courage, Self-Control, Patience, Contentment, Generosity, and Perseverance” among others, and provide

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<sup>50</sup> In fact, ‘character’ retains its fecundity throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and through to the present day, but we will leave this to one side until the final chapter.

<sup>51</sup> Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense*, ed. Aaron Garrett (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002), 184.

specific prayers for the cultivation of each trait.<sup>52</sup> Here, character appears to be made in a piecemeal fashion, the individual able to acquire different character-traits one by one. The second sense of ‘character’ is the “emphatic” one, in which we might speak of someone as either having or lacking character altogether, rather than possessing a specific *kind* of character. Thus, J.S. Mill uses the emphatic sense of character when claiming that:

[a] person whose desires and impulses are his own—are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture—is said to have a character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam-engine has a character.<sup>53</sup>

Alexander Pope similarly uses ‘character’ in the emphatic sense when proclaiming that “Most Women have no Characters at all.”<sup>54</sup> In this sense, ‘character’ appears to denote an innate volition and is seen as a prized quality acquired through struggle, forged by the individual as they grapple to turn their inherited attributes into something intentional. ‘Character’ here is something without which one cannot be considered a responsible agent. The emphatic sense survives to this day. Consider the way in which football managers and pundits often make references to character, whether bemoaning players’ “lack of character” or praising them for “showing character” after making an unlikely comeback, holding on to a precious lead under immense pressure, or overcoming a poor run of form. Teams with character always rise to the occasion, maintain their composure and do not buckle under pressure. Conversely, to say that someone lacks character might suggest that the individual in question is cowardly, weak, or perhaps even lacks integrity (i.e. they are not true to themselves in some way). Perhaps they lack a strong sense of themselves and their own values and might therefore be easily swayed into committing any misdeed given the right incentive. Hannah Arendt, for example, believed that in order to speak of ethics, we must think beyond normative moral codes and historical meta-narratives, emphasising instead individuals of exemplary character who can eschew such normative codes and “display

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<sup>52</sup> Katherine Brazelton and Shelley Leith, *Character Makeover: 40 Days with a Life Coach to Create the Best You* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 15.

<sup>53</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty, Utilitarianism, and Other Essays*, ed. Mark Philp and F. Rosen (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 52.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander Pope, *“Wit’s Wild Dancing Light”: Reading the Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. William Hutchings (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023), 280.

luminous qualities in 'dark times' and 'borderline situations'." <sup>55</sup> Of Martin Heidegger, she wrote that he completely lacked in character, "'in the sense that he literally has none and certainly not a particularly bad one'." She felt that he was "trying to 'buy himself loose from the world', fast-talk himself out of everything unpleasant, so he can do nothing but philosophise." <sup>56</sup> There is an implied concern with strength and agency, therefore, and even trustworthiness. The person who lacks character cannot be trusted to behave in a morally upright way when faced with temptation. Boris Johnson's character, for example, has often been questioned by his detractors. Here it is not so much suggested that he is not true to himself (though this may also be implied), but that he is not what he claims to be; that he is dishonest. To say that one 'has character', on the other hand, is to say that they have agency, that they are responsible, in control of their actions, and trustworthy. An individual of strong character has an understanding of their own motivations and values, and can be relied on to choose and act accordingly. Indeed, a prominent normative expectation in Victorian society was that one "earn" the right to participate in society by cultivating their moral character. As Stefan Collini points out, "to the Victorians, Character did not merely signify a collection of dispositions and habits, but conveyed a moral dimension. To form one's character unambiguously meant to morally improve it." <sup>57</sup> It is in this context that character was pivotal to the debate around the bill to extend the franchise in Britain in 1867, where parliamentary debates were dominated by the language of 'character' rather than 'interests' and 'balances' that dominated the debate. It was a question of the trustworthiness of the working classes. For them to be entrusted with the franchise, it had to be established that they possessed the required character to make responsible decisions. The outcome of the debate was that the urban artisans were predominantly viewed as finally having acquired the degree of rationality required to ensure they would not abuse the vote. "[I]t is an indication of the hold of the language of character that so much of the discussion in 1867 was not about the respectable workman's rights but about his habits." <sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ned Curthoys, 'Hannah Arendt: A Question of Character', *New Formations*, no. 71 (Spring 2011): 60.

<sup>56</sup> Curthoys, 60.

<sup>57</sup> Stefan Collini, 'The Idea of "Character" in Victorian Political Thought', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, no. 35 (1985): 32–33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3679175>.

<sup>58</sup> Collini, 45. (My italics)

## 1.2. Character-Formation: Regulating the Self

One thing that unites both the descriptive and emphatic conceptions of character is a tendency to think of it as plastic, this plasticity presenting both an opportunity for improvement and a danger. William James, for example, worried about one's character being "habitually [fashioned] [...] in the wrong way." The young in particular ought take heed and direct their conduct "while in the plastic state [...] [For every] smallest stroke of virtue or of vice leaves its never-so-little scar."<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Samuel Smiles believed that "the true character acts rightly, whether in secret or in the sight of men." It is a matter of:

Principle [...] dominating in the character, and exercising a noble protectorate over it; not merely a passive influence, but an active power regulating the life. Such a principle goes on *moulding the character* hourly and daily, growing with a force that operates every moment [...]; every [...] temptation succumbed to [...] causes self-degradation.<sup>60</sup>

The 'science of man' is therefore concerned with the malleability of character, its capacity for being shaped, as evinced by the use of terms such as 'scarring' and 'degradation', which evoke a sense of character being a kind of material or even an organic tissue. Such a material can be strengthened or weakened, bolstered or degraded – 'regulated', as Samuel Smiles puts it. For David Hume, it was this principle of 'regulation, the "great force of custom and education, which mould the human mind from infancy, and form it into a fixed and established character." It quickly becomes clear from the above quotes that this discourse is not merely dispassionately interested in character's capacity for being moulded, but rather contains an active urge to shape and regulate. It is important to draw attention here to this principle of 'regulation' as it forms a centre-point of this entire thesis that I will return to repeatedly. The notion that people's characters and conduct can be deliberately funnelled into more desirable channels underpinned the entire Enlightenment fascination with education. The belief in the malleability of character fuelled many Enlightenment thinkers' zeal for social transformation, as well as, in some thinkers, an apparent anxiousness for social control. In fact, the line between the two is often blurred. This

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<sup>59</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (La Vergne: Double 9 Books, 2023), 228.

<sup>60</sup> Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help: The Art of Achievement Illustrated by Accounts of the Lives of Great Men* (London: John Murray, 1958), 365.

principle informs Owenism as much as it informs its detractors – what differentiates the manifold interlocutors in this great debate is what they consider to be desirable character, and what they believe to be the appropriate form of education – the pedagogical techniques, practices and apparatuses – for achieving those ends. And what they understand to be the appropriate form of education depends on their understanding of the material with which they are working. In his *Moral Essays* (1734), under a section entitled “Of the Knowledge and Characters of MEN”, Alexander Pope complains of the unpredictable nature of people’s conduct, that there is often “no judging of the motives from the actions.”<sup>61</sup> The task, then, was to make sense of people’s conduct by ascertaining a person’s true character. To this end, “we can only take the strongest actions of a man’s life, to try to make them agree.” For “Actions, Passions, Opinions, Manners, Humours, or Principles [are] all subject to change [...]” As such, what is required is “to find [...] [Man’s] RULING PASSION.” To Montesquieu, it was the pursuit of honour that drove all human progress; it “brings life to all the parts of the body politic [by the principle] that everyone contributes to the general welfare while thinking that he works for his own interests.”<sup>62</sup> There is a dynamic tension in this field, then, between what is perceived to be malleable and what is perceived to be constant in people. As such, one may glean in these statements a mission – to identify and separate the contingent from that which is essential to human behaviour, the erratic from the consistent; and it is this debate around the ruling passion that forms much of the core of the liberal tradition. This mission belongs to what Hume termed the ‘Science of Man’. Similarly, Mill attempted in his *System of Logic* to codify the laws of character-formation under a new science: ‘Ethology’, or the ‘Science of Character.’ In this Science of Man we can identify a *discursive tradition*, one in which interlocutors from multiple fields participate. As such, the previous quotes by James, Smiles and Hume sit within this tradition – they constitute attempts at enquiring into the laws that govern the self’s formation – identifying its materiality, its properties, the elements that constituted it, the way these react to varying environmental pressures – and their regulation. For the sake of conceptual consistency, I will henceforth use the term ‘regulation’ to refer to this broad concern – so

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<sup>61</sup> Alexander Pope, ‘Argument to the First Epistle’, in *The Poems of Alexander Pope, Epistles to Several Persons (Moral Essays)*, ed. F.W. Bateson (New York, CT: Yale University Press, 1961), 13–14.

<sup>62</sup> Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws: A Critical Edition* London: Anthem Press, 775.



dominant in this character-discourse – with the moulding and shaping of people’s character and conduct. I will further argue throughout this thesis that Owenism forms part of this tradition, and I will sketch out some of the different positions on these questions within this tradition. The aim of tracing this tradition is to demonstrate that it constitutes a particular ontology of the self, the way in which “human beings came to be thought of and characterized as having a certain psychological interiority in which the determinations of culture could be inscribed, organized and shaped into a distinctive personality or character.”<sup>63</sup> In the words of Mitchell Dean, what we are interested in is understanding “the relation between the forms of truth by which we [...] come to know ourselves and the forms of practice by which we seek to shape the conduct of ourselves and others.”<sup>64</sup> ‘Forms of truth’ refer not to specific theories regarding the nature of ‘character’ or the self’, but rather to the prior ground of theories – their conditions of possibility. For instance, when the likes of James and Smiles say that the character is a material upon which imprints are left by the slightest action, they are speaking from within a discourse that already accepts the character as possessing a certain materiality. ‘Forms of practice’, meanwhile, are developed off the back of these truths. For example, if character is understood as a malleable, clay-like material that can be shaped while in a plastic state and which ossifies over time, then practices and techniques can be proposed for the shaping of character in accordance with its alleged qualities and attributes. This chapter, then, will outline some of the forms of truth and practices prevalent in this character-discourse.

### **1.3. Character-Formation as Science**

Quite how specific practices work to regulate the self depends on whether one is thinking of character in the descriptive or emphatic senses mentioned earlier.<sup>65</sup> In the emphatic sense, character tends to appear as something acquired through resistance and struggle, as in this entry on character in the 1930 edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*: “[T]he more resistance there is to overcome in order to achieve a desirable end, the more character is to

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<sup>63</sup> Dean, ‘Foucault, Government and the Enfolded of Authority’, 220.

<sup>64</sup> Dean, 220.

<sup>65</sup> Section 1.2, p.13

be ascribed to the successfully inhibiting individual.”<sup>66</sup> The subject, then, acquires character by *actively* inhibiting errant drives or unwanted desires. This understanding of agency conceives of the self as operating along a continuum stretching between weakness and strength, servility to the passions vs self-mastery. That the above statement appeared in an academic publication and purported to exude a scientific authority is not unusual – rather, the conception of ‘character’ as a scientific category to be deployed in discussions of human nature and agency can often be found across the 17<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and across a plethora of disciplines including psychiatry, political economy, pedagogy, penology, medicine, and more. This makes it possible for the psychiatrist Henry Maudsley to claim in 1867 that:

[t]he strong or well-formed character which a well-fashioned will implies is the result of good training applied to a well-constituted original nature; and the character is not directly determined by the will, but in any particular act determines the will.<sup>67</sup>

This statement makes a claim about some principles of human nature. Here every individual is endowed with an ‘original nature.’ ‘Training’ the individual’s original nature lends it a particular character, which in turn shapes the disposition and valence of the faculty of ‘the will’. Nature may thus be seen as a substratum that is given character by training, which in turn *disposes* the will. Is it, however, the individual who fashions their own character, or do they need to be trained by someone else? To J.S. Mill, the individual could fashion their own character thanks to an innate “desire to mould [one’s character] in a particular way”,<sup>68</sup> which frees the individual from their circumstances and endows them with the capacity for self-formation. “Though our character is formed by circumstances, our own desires can do much to shape those circumstances.”<sup>69</sup> Here, then, it’s not strength of character alone that gives one mastery over their will. Instead, in each individual there is a desire to shape one’s own character, and it is this desire that directs the will. For Rousseau, similarly, human

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<sup>66</sup> Edwin Robert Anderson Seligman and Alvin Saunders Johnson, *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 335.

<sup>67</sup> Maudsley, cited in Bruce Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 44.

<sup>68</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill. 7-8: A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive*, ed. F.E.L. Priestley and John Robson (Toronto/London: University of Toronto Press/Routledge, 1991), 466.

<sup>69</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography of John Stuart Mill* (Floating Press, 2009), 73.

beings are endowed with a power that allows them to transcend their circumstances. The 'freedom' inherent in every human being - is what,

constitutes the distinction of man among the animals [...]. Nature commands every animal, and the beast obeys. Man feels the same impetus, but he realizes that he is free to acquiesce or resist; and it is above all in the consciousness of this freedom that the spirituality of his soul is shown. For physics explains in some way the mechanism of the senses and the formation of ideas; but in the power of willing, or rather of choosing, and in the sentiment of this power are found only purely spiritual acts about which the laws of mechanics explain nothing.<sup>70</sup>

In Mill, however, there is a peculiar formulation, in that "our will, by influencing some of our circumstances, can modify our future habits or capabilities of willing." Nevertheless, Mill adds that this desire is only operable so long as one's "habits are not too inveterate"; meaning, one can act with relative freedom, except when the material of character has overly hardened. Mill's articulation appears to view the self as a kind of pliable material, perhaps clay-like, which can become ossified over time as the repetition of acts leaves ever more permanent indentations upon its character, to the point where the desire to form one's character loses its effectiveness. Similarly, Smiles asserted that while the environment was extremely influential in the formation of character, its effects could nevertheless be substantially reversed through self-culture.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, this was the foundation of his concept of 'self-help', which did not denote absolute self-responsibility, but rather a challenge to embrace the struggle against circumstances (which circumstances include both inherent character traits and external stimuli) in the formation of one's own character. What emerges from this broad discourse on character, then, is a science of human agency – what Hume termed "the science of man" in *A Treatise of Human Nature* – at the heart of which are character and the will. And though the relationship between the two is expressed in different formulations, most of these appear to feature character as caught in a tug of war between the self's capacity to form its own character through innate desire and willing on the one hand, and the shaping of character and will by environmental forces or

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<sup>70</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Roger D. Masters, trans. Judith Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), 39.

<sup>71</sup> See T.H.E. Travers, 'Samuel Smiles and the Origins of "Self-Help": Reform and the New Enlightenment', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1977): 174.

‘circumstances’ on the other. Whatever the precise formulation, agency appears as a product of the interaction between these polarities, with the ‘will’ acting as an executive faculty, the final point in the link-chain of agency, that can be directed to produce different effects to the ones it tends to produce at a given – actions more in line with what an individual might wish to become, or perhaps more in line with an “expert” wishes to produce in a top-down manner (for example a psychiatrist, a teacher, a warden, a politician, etc.). As Michel Foucault describes in his study of the rise of disciplinary power in Europe and the United States, this period was marked by a substantial and pervasive shift in our understanding of the relationship between the body and punishment, in which focus shifted from physical punishment such as torture and public executions, to viewing the body “as an instrument or intermediary”<sup>72</sup> to an individual’s soul. This shift precipitated the emergence of “a whole army of technicians: warders, doctors, chaplains, psychiatrists, psychologists, educationalists.” Instead of corporal punishment, the new age breeds a new set of experts or “technicians” of the self, specialising in a new kind of knowledge, whose aim was to regulate individuals and guide them from a state of irrationality or illness to one of health and harmonious rationality. Indeed, all sciences, claimed Hume, depend on the so-called science of man: “[knowledge of] the extent and force of human understanding [...], the nature of the ideas we employ, and [...] the operations we perform in our reasonings” is essential in order for all other human sciences to progress.<sup>73</sup> Part I of this thesis will trace the various iterations of this science of man as it was expressed across different fields and disciplines, including penology, medicine, psychology, education and political economy. The reason for this methodological choice is twofold: first, there was no definitive ‘science of man’ as such, nor any single field or discipline that could, as Hume had hoped, “explain the principles of human nature, [proposing] a compleat [sic] system of the sciences, [thereby providing] the only [foundation] upon which they can stand with any security.”<sup>74</sup> Instead, the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a proliferation of disciplines and scientific fields that were effectively attempting to tackle the same problems from various entry points. Nevertheless,

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<sup>72</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1991), 10–11, [https://monoskop.org/images/4/43/Foucault\\_Michel\\_Discipline\\_and\\_Punish\\_The\\_Birth\\_of\\_the\\_Prison\\_1977\\_1995.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/4/43/Foucault_Michel_Discipline_and_Punish_The_Birth_of_the_Prison_1977_1995.pdf).

<sup>73</sup> David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding. With a Supplement: An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Charles Hendel (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1957), 170.

<sup>74</sup> Hume, 170.

I argue that the various disciplines comprising this broad character-discourse relied on certain shared assumptions and epistemic axioms, and that delineating these can help us better understand the Owenite project. At their core, these disciplines all sought to identify, apprehend, contain, facilitate and shape the compound of the self – to *regulate* it. It is this overlap between the different fields that makes possible Pinel’s statement: “What an analogy there is between the art of directing lunatics and that of raising young people”<sup>75</sup>, or for the educator and phrenologist James Simpson to title his book *Necessity of Popular Education as a National Object; with Hints on the Treatment of Criminals, and Observations on Homicidal Insanity*.<sup>76</sup> We can infer from the juxtaposition of ‘education’, ‘criminality’ and ‘insanity’ that both Pinel and Simpson viewed all three as superficially different facets of the same problem. The pupil, the criminal, and the mentally ill are all merely ‘irrational’, in a sense, and require a *treatment* of rationalisation.

The second reason I have chosen to trace the science of man across several fields is that they were of direct concern to the Co-operative movement, as we will see in later chapters. While the movement was by no means homogenous, almost all documented Co-operators viewed Co-operation as a critique of what they variably termed the ‘Old’, ‘Competitive’ or ‘Individual’ system and its inherent assumptions about human nature – namely, that individuals are fundamentally self-interested, or even, in some cases, that individuals are born evil, dominated by destructive passions that needed to be subdued, or at least distracted by work and so-called “useful” occupation. As such, it makes sense to survey the different fields as constituting what Foucault terms an epistemic horizon, for Co-operators did not see themselves as critiquing any one particular tradition, but rather an entire ideology of social organisation that permeated into every discursive field. The decision to examine data from across the different fields is also theoretically significant. Many books in the traditions of labour history and intellectual history seek to trace a lineage of influence between thinkers or schools of thought, to prove who influenced who, which idea preceded which, and so on. For example, Tomlinson’s *Head Masters* seeks to demonstrate the origins

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<sup>75</sup> Philippe Pinel, *Treatise on Insanity* (Washington: University Publications of America, 1977), 100.

<sup>76</sup> James Simpson, *Necessity of Popular Education, as a National Object ; with Hints on the Treatment of Criminals, and Observations on Homicidal Instanity*. By James Simpson, Advocate. Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, Longman Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longman, London, 1834.

of phrenology and its influence on the American school system, to prove that such and such ideas and practices originate from – were “implanted” by, as it were – a particular discipline that hitherto had not been accorded due credit in American educational history. This thesis has little interest in proving any such “hidden” influences. Rather than prove the influence of any specific individuals or ideas on the movement, I wish to bring to the fore the very *conditions of thought* that governed the ideas and practices of the Co-operative movement – the particular epistemic horizon, forms of truth and discursive formations that operated in the background and which both enabled and constricted the thinking of Co-operators. Thus, for example, we will see when examining the various disciplines side by side, that each discipline has its conception of the constitutive elements of the self, a notion of the “mechanics” that governs the interaction between said elements, a notion of natural law, a materiality ascribed to character and to the self, and so on. And while the specific formulation of these factors may vary from thinker to thinker, there is nevertheless a shared overarching logic that appears to delimit thought within this overall discourse on the science of man.

Crucially, however, this work does not seek to replace or disprove the excellent and detailed work already carried out on the Co-operative movement in the traditions of labour and intellectual history, but rather to complement it. What I am proposing is merely a new angle on the role of ‘character’: I am claiming that it constituted both a scientific *and* moral concept, and that if we are to understand what has happened to this concept – which was so central to the movement across society at large at one point – we need to understand both aspects of it. We need to understand it both as part of a moral tradition and a scientific tradition. Thus, Thompson’s cultural-materialist approach needs to be complemented with an epistemic-scientific history. Ultimately, by drawing attention to the interplay between intellectual-moral traditions and epistemic-scientific genealogies I aim to demonstrate that we are still in the midst of this same “tradition”, to understand ourselves as still operating along the continuum of this Enlightenment problematic, this project to articulate a definitive science of man. My objective is to bring to the fore the rules, values and grammar that govern this debate today. With that in mind, I will now finally move on to surveying the Science of Man in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have set out the parameters for understanding the notion of 'character' around the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. I have shown that character in fact came to be conceived as an observable scientific category within a nascent 'science of man' (or 'science of character-formation' as it was sometimes referred to), which was in fact diffuse across a range of fields and disciplines rather than being a recognised standalone discipline. There were various iterations of this science, each with different formulations of the processes and mechanisms of character-formation and of agency. Nevertheless, these different iterations shared an ontological and epistemic horizon, and the 'science of man' as a whole was largely concerned with regulating the self. What differentiated thinkers within this field of character-formation was what they believed to be desirable character, and what techniques of character-formation were to be used to produce this character.

In the next chapter, I will elaborate on the ontological assumptions that underpinned this field and their implications for the regulation of the self.

## Chapter 2 – Character in Scientific and Philosophical Context

### Introduction

We have already noted the fact that the emphasis on the faculty of the will in this discourse belies a preoccupation with conduct; specifically, the prediction and regulation of conduct. Thus, ‘character’ was not merely a theoretical category but had practical implementations, functioning as a predictor of conduct in people’s dealings with one another. One observer of practices in the 1820s cotton industry noted that a person’s congregational affiliation often served as a character-reference for potential employers. Methodist and Dissenter employers tended to favour members of their own church, seeing membership as a “guarantee for good conduct” and “a consciousness of the value of character.”<sup>77</sup> That is, it rendered their conduct calculable.

We can witness a similar function in examples from penal practices such as at the Walnut Street Penitentiary in Philadelphia, where detailed reports were produced detailing the prisoner’s “crime, the circumstances in which it was committed,” as well as “notes on his behaviour before and after the sentence”, all of which were intended to help determine the prisoner’s character and the measures to be taken in order to reform their character.<sup>78</sup> Prisoners were divided into four classifications, not according to their crimes, but according to their *dispositions*. One class included those “known as old offenders [...] [who displayed] depraved morality, dangerous character, irregular dispositions, or disorderly conduct.” Another class covered those “whose character and circumstances, before and after conviction, led one to believe that they were not habitual offenders”<sup>79</sup> – that is to say, crime was not an essential part of their character, but an aberration. All such observations carried out within the prison were intended to ascertain “the potentiality of danger that lies hidden in an individual and which is manifested in his observed everyday conduct.”<sup>80</sup> In other words, the prisoner is made calculable. Once their character has been evaluated, their

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<sup>77</sup> Richard Guest, *A Compendious History of Cotton Manufacture* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 38–43.

<sup>78</sup> Negley King Teeters, *The Cradle of the Penitentiary*, 1935, 59.

<sup>79</sup> Negley King Teeters, *The Cradle of the Penitentiary*, 1935, 59.

<sup>80</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 126.



conduct could be calculated and an appropriate plan put in place for its regulation. Foucault believes this development to be at the heart of the 'humanist' turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century:

Here, the principle takes root that one should never apply 'inhumane' punishments to a criminal [...] If the law must now treat in a 'humane' way an individual who is 'outside nature' [...], it is not on account of some profound humanity [...], but because of a necessary regulation of the effects of power. It is this 'economic' rationality that must calculate the penalty and prescribe the appropriate techniques. 'Humanity' is the respectable name given to this economy and to its meticulous calculations.<sup>81</sup>

In other words, the idea that society has become more humane over the last three centuries, and that this is evidenced by the gradual disappearance of corporal punishment, is merely a retroactive projection imposed on the rise of disciplinary power. Instead, what this new techno-politics of punishment deals with is the idea of the 'ultimate crime': the core reason for a given crime, deep inside the offender's soul. "This fable of the 'ultimate crime' is, to the new penalty, what original sin was to the old: the pure form in which the reason for punishment appears."<sup>82</sup> This development is significant to Owenism's pedagogical approach, famed as it was for doing away with the use of rewards and punishments in favour of concentrating on the true 'motives to action' (more on this in Chapter 11). Just like in the Walnut Street Penitentiary, Owenism was concerned not with punishment as such, but with comprehending and regulating the self's constitutive elements.

## **2.1. The Drives and Instincts in Criminology**

But in order to understand and manipulate how choice occurs, there is a need to understand the nature of the creature making the choice – human nature. Regardless of the specific field, interlocutors within this discourse on character accept knowledge of human nature is key to modulating conduct. For Cesare Beccaria, whose writings spanned the fields of criminology, philosophy, economics and politics, "[it] is not only in the fine arts that one must follow nature faithfully; political institutions, at least those that display wisdom and

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<sup>81</sup> Foucault, 92.

<sup>82</sup> Foucault, 92.

permanence, are founded on nature.”<sup>83</sup> Human beings have a universal nature, then, consisting of laws that can be observed, understood and acted upon. Legislators, Beccaria claimed, must be familiar with these natural principles and become consummate technicians of the mind and its operations: “The legislator must be a skilful architect who knows how to employ all the forces that may contribute to the solidity of the building and reduce all those that might ruin it.”<sup>84</sup> As such, the penal reformer must dedicate themselves to the study of these laws, for, as 18th-century German military commander and author on the art of war, Marshal de Saxe, put it: “[it] is impossible to erect any building or establish any method without understanding its principles. It is not enough to have a liking for architecture. One must also know stone-cutting.”<sup>85</sup> Note again the materialistic metaphor. The ‘building’ in question refers to the human mind, though it may also refer to the body politic as a whole, composed of a multitude of minds, while the architect uses their knowledge to reinforce its ‘solidity’ and to remove any forces that corrode it. But what are these forces or principles? Within this discourse, the individual came to be increasingly understood as made up of drives, instincts, ideas, habits, dispositions, etc., which may develop in either a desirable or undesirable manner depending on how these are regulated, and which could be corrected and redirected. As such, penal practices in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were increasingly intended not merely to punish, but to correct and reclaim errant drives. As Foucault argues, rather than focusing on the crime itself, judgment increasingly focuses on “the passions, instincts, anomalies, infirmities, maladjustments, effects of environment or heredity; acts of aggression are punished, so also, through them, is aggressivity; rape, but at the same time perversions; murders, but also drives and desires.” What emerges here is a new “knowledge of the criminal, one’s estimation of him, what is known about the relations between him, his past and his crime, and what might be expected of him in the future.”<sup>86</sup> Thus, rather than seeking to punish or deter, this discourse is concerned with understanding what motivates the individual, with calculating their future conduct, and even controlling it. The Girondist and criminal theorist, Jazques Pierre Brissot,

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<sup>83</sup> Cesara Beccaria, *‘On Crimes and Punishments’ and Other Writings*, ed. Richard Bellamy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 114.

<sup>84</sup> Beccaria, 135.

<sup>85</sup> Cited in Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 139.

<sup>86</sup> Foucault, 17.

believed that ‘laziness’, not evil, was at the heart of beggars’ behaviour. Laziness was but an errant or under-exercised productive drive; therefore, “[o]ne will not succeed by locking beggars up in filthy prisons that are more like cesspools [...] The best way of punishing them is to employ them.”<sup>87</sup> Forced employment would correct the errant drive; the reformer’s task, then, is to identify the individual’s misguided drive or passion, and to reorient these towards their natural outlet using the proper means. Similarly, corporal punishment would entirely miss the point if a crime was driven, at its core, by vanity or the pursuit of glory, as was the case with some crimes in Beccaria’s opinion. In such cases, the way to correct this aberration in the soul is to “[r]educe it with ridicule and shame; if one humiliated the proud vanity of fanatics before a great crowd of spectators, one may expect happy effects from this punishment.”<sup>88</sup> In other words, one must “go straight to the source of evil.”<sup>89</sup> The rationalist philosopher William Godwin – Beccaria and Brissot’s contemporary from across the Channel and a close friend of Robert Owen’s, at least for a time – makes a similar argument:

There is no terror [...] that comes home to the heart of vice, like the terror of being exhibited to the public eye [...] [and] no reward worthy to be bestowed upon eminent virtue but this one, the plain, unvarnished proclamation of its excellence in the face of the world.<sup>90</sup>

Note that in all of the above examples, it is not the person themselves who is designated as evil. Rather, the ‘source’ of evil is not in the soul, not an impurity, but an irregularity of the mind. Whereas many religious preachers might have decried original sin and demanded atonement, the likes of Beccaria, Godwin and Brissot considered corporal punishment ineffective because it failed to grasp that people are not evil, they are merely *irrational*. This will, as we shall later see, come to be a fundamental axiom of Owenism. For the Owenites, the health of individuals and of society was a question of rationality. However, we ought to note two more things that are becoming clear: first, the idea of irrationality is itself

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<sup>87</sup> Cited in Foucault, 106.

<sup>88</sup> Beccaria, ‘*On Crimes and Punishments*’ and *Other Writings*, 113.

<sup>89</sup> Mably, G. de, *De la législation* (1789), cited in Johnson Kent Wright, *A Classical Republican in Eighteenth-Century France: The Political Thought of Mably* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 102.

<sup>90</sup> William Godwin, *Godwin’s Political Justice: A Reprint of the Essay on Property from the Original Edition*, ed. Henry Salt (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1793), 22.

undergirded by a notion of alienation, of sorts. That is, one behaves irrationally if they are alienated from some essential drive, or if the drive is alienated from its proper function.

The examples used so far roughly belong to the descriptive sense of character – that is to say, individual character as a collection of drives, inclinations, ideas, traits, etc., that can be arranged in different ways. However, this discourse contains another strand of the mechanics of conduct that is more in line with the emphatic sense of character, by which one acquires character through struggle and overcoming, by grappling with some resistant force deep inside oneself and taking responsibility for one's actions. This strand is evident in the increasingly prominent role given to isolation as a correctional technique in the new English model prisons that emerged in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Jonas Hanway, providing the outline for this new model in 1775, presented isolation not merely as a preventative measure (as in curbing the corrupting influence of inherent criminals on circumstantial criminals), but as productive of positive effects. The Quaker-run Walnut Street Penitentiary was modelled on Hanway's principles, with solitary confinement serving a central function in the corrective process:

[W]ithout occupation, without anything to distract him, waiting in uncertainty for the moment when he would be delivered, [the prisoner spends] long anxious hours, with nothing but the reflections that are present to the minds of all guilty persons.<sup>91</sup>

The implication appears to be that there is a truth, a natural, universal conscience, deep inside the soul, trying to reach the prisoner and to be heard by them. But the prisoner is 'distracted', misguided and led astray by all manner of malign external stimuli (or perhaps these distractions enable an internal resistance to confronting the voice of one's conscience). In isolation, the prisoner is removed from all distraction and can no longer escape the sound of their conscience. They are confronted with it and, having nowhere to hide, are forced to submit to its force. Here lurks a rationalist fantasy: the notion that the criminal is someone whose conduct has become cut-off from their grounding principle – the link-chain of rational agency has been interrupted. The penal reformer aims to repair the broken link and restore the uninterrupted flow between the individual's innermost drives

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<sup>91</sup> Teeters, *The Cradle of the Penitentiary*, 49.

and their will, such that, instead of running away from themselves, the subject will once again be made conscious of their own responsibility and agency. In other words, the reformer promises to restore a subject that has full insight into their own grounding, someone capable of agency and of responsibility – someone capable of rational choice. As Hanway stated, isolation would transform the individual and “restore to the state the subject it had lost.”<sup>92</sup> To some, it was not merely the voice of one’s conscience or one’s true interest that one is returned to with these techniques, but a drive essential to human nature and from which some individuals are led astray. For example, to the likes of Beaumont and Tocqueville, criminals are simply individuals who have lost touch with the ‘sociability’ innate to all humans, and the function of correctional techniques is to reconstitute these individuals as social beings, to have their “habits of sociability” restored.<sup>93</sup> “[A]lone in his cell, the convict is handed over to himself [...] [H]e descends into his conscience, he questions it and feels awakening within him the moral feeling that never entirely perishes in the heart of man.”<sup>94</sup>

The two versions of character – the descriptive and the emphatic – are not as strictly separate as one may think. Though seemingly mutually exclusive, they can often both be invoked by the same thinker. Indeed, as we have seen so far, the Hanway model prisons employed practices grounded in both assumptions. What is of more interest to me here is the fact that both were grounded in an even deeper assumption: that human nature is governed by a Will to Truth, which will is a condition of the individual’s capacity for rational choice, and that this will can become sidetracked or confused and needs to therefore be restored to its natural course. In the more descriptive sense of character, as I will show over the remainder of this chapter and in chapter 3, we find the assertion that the self seeks truth and happiness, guided by the instincts (such as the innate sociability alluded to above), but can be confounded by the assimilation of unnatural ideas or passions (such as the ‘vanity’ mentioned by Beccaria). While in the emphatic sense, the self is running away from

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<sup>92</sup> Jonas Hanway, *The Defects of Police the Cause of Immorality and the Continual Robberies Committed, Particularly in and About the Metropolis ... With Various Proposals for Preventing Hanging and Transportation ... Observations on the Rev. Mr. Hetherington’s Charity* (London: J. Dodsley, 1775), 15, [http://books.google.com/books?id=y\\_tBAAAYAAJ](http://books.google.com/books?id=y_tBAAAYAAJ).

<sup>93</sup> Gustave De Beaumont and Alexis De Tocqueville, *On the Penitentiary System in the United States and Its Application to France: The Complete Text* (Springer International Publishing: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 206.

<sup>94</sup> De Beaumont and De Tocqueville, 102.

the voice of conscience that grounds all healthy, decent individuals. It therefore needs to be reintegrated with this voice of conscience.

## 2.2. The Drives and Instincts in Political Economy

Roughly the same framework as in early criminology can be found in the fields of political economy and natural jurisprudence between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, consisting of attempts to delineate the roles played by the various instincts and drives in motivating people's conduct. As Francis Hutcheson described in his inaugural lecture 'On the Sociability of Mankind' (1730), the debate could be broadly divided into two positions: the position holding that human beings only form into societies because "living in this way will be of the greatest benefit to each man"<sup>95</sup> (Hume would later term this position the 'selfish hypothesis'), and the position holding that human sociability is not merely a matter of convenience, but that human nature is "in itself immediately and primarily kind, unselfish, and sociable without regard to its advantage or pleasure."<sup>96</sup> Much of this debate, then, centres on the opposition between 'self-interest' and 'sociability' and on proving which of these was the true motive to action. Mandeville, for example, diagnosed seemingly disinterested acts – such as pity – as being fundamentally motivated by self-interest. Rather than stemming from an innate desire to help others, he states, pity is but a means aimed at avoiding uneasiness, "a Pain, which Self-preservation compell'd us to prevent."<sup>97</sup> Displaying pity for others, then, is but a form of self-preservation. Nevertheless, Mandeville does not want to do away with pity. Rather, he sees it as evidence that this self-preservation instinct can be curbed and turned into an instrument for reinforcing the social order. So, in Mandeville's iteration, 'self-interest' constitutes the primary motivation of human nature and, paradoxically, the source of everything social. "[W]hat we call Evil in this World, Moral as well as Natural, is the grand Principle that makes us sociable Creatures."<sup>98</sup> This 'grand Principle' of self-interest is necessary, then. It just needs to be regulated correctly. To Mandeville, it is the role of politicians and moral philosophers to find ways of regulating the

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<sup>95</sup> Francis Hutcheson, *Logic, Metaphysics, and the Natural Sociability of Mankind* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006), 165.

<sup>96</sup> Hutcheson, 138.

<sup>97</sup> Bernard Mandeville, *Fable of the Bees* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924), 56.

<sup>98</sup> Mandeville, 369.

instincts in a socially productive manner. Thus, for example, ‘politeness’ is invented, followed by ‘honour’ as a means of rewarding compliance with the rules of politeness. Government is therefore necessary, for “no species of Animals is, without the Curb of Government, less capable of agreeing long together in Multitudes than that of Man.”<sup>99</sup>

Others saw things differently. Archibald Campbell, for example, believed a “Desire of universal unlimited Esteem” to be “the great commanding Motive that determines us to the Pursuit of [virtuous] Actions.”<sup>100</sup> As such, it was this desire for esteem that needed to be utilised in regulating people’s conduct. Richard Cumberland, similarly, posited a direct correspondence between the “greatest happiness of our Mind’ and “the Exercise and inward sense of Universal Benevolence”.<sup>101</sup> While for Shaftesbury, in opposition to Mandeville, society was not at all “a kind of Invention, and Creature of Art”, but rather the result of a type of species-instinct, “a herding Principle, and associating Inclination.”<sup>102</sup> To Shaftesbury, the universe consisted of a harmonious order, as part of which humans were naturally disposed towards virtue. To this end, human beings are bestowed with a moral sense that gives them a “Notion of a publick Interest.”<sup>103</sup> Shaftesbury was expressing what had by the 18<sup>th</sup> century become a dominant tendency to view nature as governed by rational natural laws, part of a divine order in which every component played a role. Thus Vico could exclaim in *The New Science* (1725) that the passions are in fact the causes of “the strength, the wealth, and the wisdom of the republics.” The passions are the manifestation of natural principles or “intelligent laws” that prove the existence of “divine providence”, through which the pursuit of individual passions “causes the civil happiness to emerge.”<sup>104</sup> To Adam Smith, similarly, every aspect of human behaviour is providential, and it would be unwise to dismiss any drives as superfluous, for this would “obstruct [...] the scheme which the Author of nature has established for the happiness and perfection of the world, and [...]

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<sup>99</sup> Mandeville, 41.

<sup>100</sup> Archibald Campbell, *An Enquiry into the Original of Moral Virtue; Wherein the False Notions of Machiavel, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Mr. Bayle* (Westminster: J. Cluer and A. Campbell for B. Creak, 1728), 257.

<sup>101</sup> Richard Cumberland, *A Treatise of the Laws of Nature* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2008), 1–5.

<sup>102</sup> Anthony Ashley Cooper Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 70.

<sup>103</sup> Shaftesbury, 18.

<sup>104</sup> Giambattista Vico, *The New Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 132.

declare ourselves [...] the enemies of God.”<sup>105</sup> The political economist’s aim, therefore, is to understand the laws that govern their modulation, and to regulate them towards a state of healthy balance. Where different thinkers differ is in their position on what constitutes a correct balance, and what should be the first principle – or ‘ruling passion’ – to guide this providential system. For Smith, self-interest is the first principle that guides all the other drives within the economic field and keeps them correctly modulated. On the other hand, Adam Ferguson, while similarly accepting that all instincts are essential, asserts that selfish passions must in fact be subordinated to the social ones in the hierarchy of passions. To him, it is ‘beneficence’ that keeps all other instincts from being incorrectly channelled. “‘Evil’”, for example, “is merely a function of error, a misunderstood aspect of divine beneficence.”<sup>106</sup> In other words, evil is caused only by the misapprehension of a necessary natural drive.

To both Smith and Ferguson, the passions were natural instincts implanted in humans by God as agents of His divine plan, though each thinker had their own interpretation of the logic behind the mechanism. To Smith, it was God’s will that the passions should overpower reason, because the “slow and uncertain determinations of [...] reason” were simply too unreliable a basis for the important task of “[raising and supporting the] immense fabric of human society.” Instead, our natural drives function as “the vice-regents of God within us [to] advance those ends”,<sup>107</sup> a conception mirrored in Ferguson, who defined instinct as “a propensity or disposition inspired by the Author of Nature”<sup>108</sup> as a means of producing order. The idea, then, that we are implanted by God with instincts and drives that propel us, unbeknownst to us, to contribute to the realisation of a great plan, is a given in this particular discourse. For both Smith and Ferguson, the overall machinations of society are encoded in our psychic constitutions, social order being “immanent in a ‘human nature’ which is universal and immutable.”<sup>109</sup> As such, every aspect of human nature has a part to

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<sup>105</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 166.

<sup>106</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science: Being Chiefly a Re Trospect of Lectures Delivered in the College of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: A. Strahan and T. Cadell, London, and W. Creech, 1792), 338.

<sup>107</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 95.

<sup>108</sup> Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science: Being Chiefly a Re Trospect of Lectures Delivered in the College of Edinburgh*, 20.

<sup>109</sup> Lisa Hill, ‘Ferguson and Smith on “Human Nature”, “Interest” and the Role of Beneficence in Market Society’, *History of Economic Ideas* 4, no. 1/2 (1996): 336.



play in generating and maintaining the social order. Where different thinkers differ is on the question of which propensity functions as the primary driver of all human action, and the precise nature of the relationship between the different drives. We can see that, while Smith's and Ferguson's positions may appear different, their debate is in fact carried out within the same rules of engagement: both accept the workings of society and the economy as part of a providential scheme in which no phenomenon is superfluous. Both thinkers are concerned with a given field of action (the individual, or society), within which various elements or forces (for example. the drives, instincts, passions, etc.) are constantly active, being expressed to different degrees, and as such they merely occupy different tactical positions within the same discursive framework. The ultimate objective of each participant in this debate is to arrange society in such a way that takes account of these natural principles and activates them in a manner that results in a stable social order – i.e. in the social field operating rationally.

Yet, if humans are naturally disposed towards virtue, why does evil occur? For the likes of Shaftesbury and Adam Ferguson, the answer lies in the fact that human beings were neither purely sociable nor self-interested. Indeed, Ferguson argued that the mistake of other systems had been to try and trace “our choice of character and action” to either sociability or the law of self-preservation, when “the fact is, that the laws of self-preservation, and of society, when well understood, coincide in all their tendencies and applications.”<sup>110</sup> Thus, rather than looking for a primary underlying motivation, this position viewed the mind as consisting of a variety of ‘principles’ and ‘inclinations’, all of which could be thrown off balance and needed to be either incentivised or inhibited to lesser or greater degrees as a means of regulating conduct. As such, any instances of “unnatural affection” – such as someone taking delight in another's distress – are the result of something unnatural, or, rather, an aberration in the natural harmonious order. Every creature contains both ‘social affections’ and ‘self-affections’, and as long as these were present in their “natural degree” they would invariably be “naturally good and promote the good of their species and the universe.” However, “lacking social affections, having too strong self-affections, or having unnatural affections in any degree, is against the creature's nature and leads to its

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<sup>110</sup> Adam Ferguson, *Institutes of Moral Philosophy* (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1978), 371.

misery.”<sup>111</sup> A concern for the social order was thus the basis for each position within this discourse. It is on this basis that Ferguson attacks the commercial society of his day, which he believed undermined the social order by corroding sympathy between individuals, for “Whoever heard of sympathising with a person who pays his debts?” And while Smith (and to a more extreme extent, Mandeville) believed that our innate “love of praise” would ensure that all would behave in a way that ultimately sustained the social bond, Ferguson argued that the “external conveniences” of commercial society in fact had an obverse effect on social bonds: “[people] are commonly most attached where those conveniences are least frequent: [...] where the tribute of their allegiance is paid in blood.”<sup>112</sup> Ferguson ascribes this fact to the two “Laws of the Will” that he identifies: ‘interest’ and ‘benevolence’, both of which are essential to the survival of the species. Ferguson rails against those who would interpret “interest” as expressive of an innate selfishness or “self-love”; rather, he argues, ‘interest’ is but an expression of “those objects of care which refer to our external condition, and the preservation of our animal nature.”<sup>113</sup> That is to say, it is fundamentally a survival instinct. But whereas Smith views “‘self-love’ as the governing principle in social life”,<sup>114</sup> Ferguson sees the ‘interest’ as merely one element in a harmonious balance between the drives, because the self-regarding drives are, in nature, subservient to something more substantial, a “fire” struck between human beings whenever they come into contact with one another: “Men assemble to deliberate on business [...] but in their several collisions, whether as friends or enemies, a fire is struck out which the regards to interest or safety cannot confine.”<sup>115</sup> This fire is “disinterestedness” or “disinterested benevolence”, and it reminds Lisa Hill of “the divine ‘mind-fire’ spirit which the Stoics imagined as uniting us all in a common humanity.”<sup>116</sup> And it is here that Ferguson’s problem with an overly-commercialised society arises. For Ferguson, ‘interest’ is in and of itself natural and indifferent, but in a society that disproportionately emphasises the accumulation of wealth,

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<sup>111</sup> Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 57.

<sup>112</sup> Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967), 226.

<sup>113</sup> Ferguson, 174.

<sup>114</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R.H. Campbell and A.S. Skinner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 53.

<sup>115</sup> Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, 32–33.

<sup>116</sup> Lisa Hill, ‘Ferguson and Smith on “Human Nature”, “Interest” and the Role of Beneficence in Market Society’, *History of Economic Ideas* 4, no. 1/2 (1996): 380.

‘self-interest’ goes into overdrive and expresses itself in an unhealthy manner, overriding the “disinterestedness” to which it is meant to be subservient, and leading people to desire the accumulation wealth over and above anything else. “Such behaviour represents a ‘corruption’ of our natural ‘wants and desires’ and has a tendency to ‘stifle affection’.”<sup>117</sup> Here, really, lies the crux of a new ‘experience’ of the Self that would not have been possible before this period: the idea that a given ‘character’ arises from an interaction between human nature and a ‘system’. The ‘system’ may denote the type of social, cultural, political and economic arrangements in which one lives, and which stimulate and guide human nature’s pre-existing dispositions this way and that. ‘Human nature’ is thought of as something fixed and universal, but which must always pass through the ‘system’, which may be thought of as something like an amplifier. Just like the amplifier receives a signal from a source and converts it into sound coming out of speakers, so human nature, in this discourse, emits a constant signal that is filtered through the system and comes out the other end in the form of conduct. Within this ‘experience of the self,’ the object of political economy is to arrange the system in such a way that allows for the expression of human nature ‘as it really is,’ without obstruction and distortion, and which would produce *rational conduct*.

What we find across the spectrum, however, is something similar to the principle we found in the earlier examples from criminology, wherein every instance of criminal behaviour is seen as merely the result of an errant drive which, if expressed correctly, could be made productive. And much like Beccaria, political economists and moral philosophers viewed ‘evil’ not as an inherent quality, but rather as a reflection of the over- or under-expression of a natural instinct to the extent that the harmonious balance towards which the mind tends is upset, leading to unvirtuous behaviour. While Mandeville held that it was the role of politicians to ‘manipulate’ or ‘govern’ these internal drives, the likes of Shaftesbury and Campbell (and later political economists such as Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson) articulate this “balance of instincts” as a matter of ‘rationality’. For Campbell, ‘rationality’ is a matter of one’s behaviour being in line with the principles of human nature, and “all rational Agents whatsoever are intirely [sic] under the absolute Government of Self-love, and can favour

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<sup>117</sup> Ferguson, 18.

Nothing, at any Rate, but as it serves to gratify this Principle, or to assist and relieve their natural Desire of Well-Being.”<sup>118</sup> Here we find an analysis of conduct in terms of rationality rather than moral condemnation. This conception of rationality contains also a notion of alienation, albeit not explicitly articulated: the individual is alienated, so to speak, when their conduct is unaligned with the ‘principles’ of human nature – i.e. with the true function of the drives and instincts, or when the expression of said drives and instincts is out of balance and disharmonious. Such a state renders the individual irrational and miserable. The role of the political economist here is to ascertain the drive’s correct function in nature and to regulate the individual accordingly – to rationalise them. Gregory Claeys points out the trend of thought we find in this discourse “strongly approximates [...] the later Marxist theory of alienation, itself first shaped in a commentary on Adam Smith’s treatment of the division of labour.”<sup>119</sup> Claeys considers “the republican critique of specialisation [...] an important source for [...] early socialist objections to specialisation” and he argues that early socialism thus forms an integral and under-researched phase in the evolution of the concept of alienation which must be mapped out if we are to fully appreciate the importance of this concept. Claeys identifies the question of alienation as a problem that originated in 18<sup>th</sup>-century republicanism and natural jurisprudence, whence from it passed through early socialism, acting as a bridge, or processing plant of sorts, in which the problem of alienation was reworked and “transmitted” to Marxism.<sup>120</sup> This formulation of the problem is not wrong, but it is guilty of precisely the kind of history I wish to move away from in this thesis – a history that sees ideas as ‘transmitted’ from one stage, movement, discourse or thinker to another, with some modifications occurring during each transmission. This is evident in Claeys’ statement that,

Early socialism is [...] an unexplored link in the stages of transmission of this aspect [namely the question of alienation] of republicanism into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, though [it] does not [...] [retain] all or even most of its republican attributes in the process.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Campbell, *An Enquiry into the Original of Moral Virtue; Wherein the False Notions of Machiavel, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Mr. Bayle*, 143.

<sup>119</sup> Claeys, *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism*, 51.

<sup>120</sup> Claeys, 50–51.

<sup>121</sup> Claeys, 51.

Understanding ‘alienation’ as a problem that is passed on and modified from one sociopolitical context to the next still amounts to a surface description of changes in thought. What such a history fails to take into account (as do all histories of alienation within labour history/intellectual history tradition) is the supposed *mechanics* of alienation – or rather the overall mechanics of the self – that framed this discourse. And it is precisely this approach to understanding the problem of alienation – that is, through an examination of the conceptions of the self that framed it – which sets this thesis apart in its effort to shed light on the meaning of Co-operative character. The problem with contemporary society, as Owenites saw it, was that it was based on the false doctrines popularised by the likes of Mandeville and his ilk, which asserted that humans were essentially selfish and that, therefore, a competitive system would bring about the best in human potential. Claeys argues that Owenites challenged this dominant position by re-activating a strain of natural jurisprudence that goes back to the likes of Shaftesbury, Pufendorf, John Locke and Richard Cumberland among others.<sup>122</sup> However, in keeping with the archaeological approach of this thesis, I am not interested in proving the exact “source” of Owenite ideas. Rather, I want to flesh out the epistemic rules and conditions of thought that made Owenite thought possible. The debates that comprised natural jurisprudence/moral philosophy and political economy would provide Owenism with an established discursive tradition and a conceptual framework within which to try and theorise a new vision of humanity based on the axiomatic assumption that human beings are essentially ‘sociable’ rather than ‘self-interested’. Yet this line of argument was articulated within new conceptions of the self understood primarily in terms of ‘rationality’. This will be explained in greater detail in Chapter 3.

### **2.3. Alienation**

We have discussed the fact that, in this discourse, the drives and instincts can be calibrated or regulated in various ways by the environment. But what is the precise mechanism through which this regulation occurs? The answer comes in the form of ‘ideas’ that reside in the mind and which inform the movement of the instincts. For David Hartley, the founder of

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<sup>122</sup> Claeys, 24.

associationist psychology, the drives and instincts are spurred to action by the ideas in the mind, which can be “associated” or “arranged” in any manner of ways. Hartley, believed that “due to physiological and psychological mechanisms, sensations turn into ideas, and simple ideas are transformed into more complex ones, which results in states of mind such as passions and affections”,<sup>123</sup> these passions and affections being “aggregates of simple Ideas united by Association.”<sup>124</sup> Thus, for example, ‘Compassion’, or “the Uneasiness which a man feels at the Misery of another,”<sup>125</sup> is engendered in children when their own past experiences of misery are processed via a combination of memory and imagination. Initially, these memories are merely internal and ‘selfish’, but they evolve into ‘Compassion’ by “Coalescence with the rest.” The passions and affections – these associations of ideas – stimulate conduct; one acts in accordance with the ideas in their mind. To the 18<sup>th</sup>-century lawyer and penal theorist, Joseph Marie Servan de Gerbey, ideas and actions “follow one another without interruption [...]. When you have thus formed the chain of ideas in the heads of your citizens, you will then be able to [guide] them and [be] their masters.” As such, force is an ineffective means of exerting control:

A stupid despot may constrain his slaves with iron chains; but a true politician binds them even more strongly by the chain of their own ideas; it is at the stable point of reason that he secures the end of the chain; this link is all the stronger in that we do not know of what it is made and we believe it to be our own work.<sup>126</sup>

The formation of ideas thus constitutes one aspect of the mechanics of conduct. And crucially, habituation forms one of the key mechanisms by which idea-formation can be effected:

[D]espair and time eat away the bonds of iron and steel, but they are powerless against the habitual union of ideas, they can only tighten it still more; and on the soft fibres of the brain is founded the unshakable base of the soundest of Empires.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Christian Maurer, ‘Self-Interest and Sociability’, in *The Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 305.

<sup>124</sup> Hartley, cited in Maurer, 305.

<sup>125</sup> Hartley, cited in Maurer, 306.

<sup>126</sup> Servan, cited in Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 102–3.

<sup>127</sup> Servan, cited in Foucault, 102–3.

The 'interests' are one kind of idea, and the problem was how to ensure people perceived their true interests, or, as in the case of Servan, how to manipulate their interest-perception. For, as some contended, individuals could not be relied upon to *identify* their true interest. "If men must be supposed always to follow their true interest", said the Marquis de Halifax, "it must be meant of a new manufactory of mankind by God Almighty; there must be some new clay, the old stuff never yet made any such infallible creature."<sup>128</sup> Similarly, for Alexander Hamilton, "while nations [...] are governed by what they suppose their interest, he must be imperfectly versed in human nature who [...] does not know that [...] dispositions may insensibly mould or bias the views of self-interest."<sup>129</sup> In other words, while people believe they are following their interests, their view of these interests is in fact being distorted. In Hamilton's case, they are being distorted by 'dispositions,' while to Cardinal de Retz, "one must join the inclinations of men with their interests and draw on this mixture in order to make a judgment on their probable behaviour."<sup>130</sup> Therefore, the key to governing the conduct of individuals, is ascertaining and describing the mechanism by which the perception of interests occurs. Foucault claims that this discourse sees the emergence of "a whole mechanics [...] of interest, of its movement, of the way that one represents [interest] to oneself and of the liveliness of this representation."<sup>131</sup> The individual understands their own interests through the 'chain of ideas' that dominates in their mind, and they choose in accordance with their perceived interests. Here, it becomes the technician's role to understand the process of interest-perception and -representation, and to utilise it. The mind becomes "a surface of inscription for power, with semiology as its tool; the submission of bodies through the control of ideas; the analysis of representations as a principle in a politics of bodies [...]"<sup>132</sup> We can see this clearly in early 19<sup>th</sup> century psychiatry. To Pinel, many cases of what he termed 'alienation' were caused by a mental imbalance, which occurred in one of two forms: either an erroneous 'chain of ideas' was

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<sup>128</sup> Marquis de Halifax, cited in Felix Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli, a Changing Interpretation, 1500-1700* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), 247.

<sup>129</sup> Hamilton, cited in Gerald Stourzh, *Alexander Hamilton and the Idea of Republican Government* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1995), 92.

<sup>130</sup> Jean François Paul de Gondi de Retz, *Memoirs of Cardinal de Retz* (New York: Merrill & Baker, 1903), 1008–9.

<sup>131</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 106.

<sup>132</sup> Foucault, 102.

solidified by the imagination, or the faculty of reason had been overpowered by one's passions.<sup>133</sup> Similarly, Condillac defined insanity as "an imagination that, without our noticing it, associates ideas in a completely disordered way, and sometimes influences our judgments or behavior."<sup>134</sup> As Tomlinson points out, such an understanding of the mind suggests "continuity between the normal and the alienated, [and] provided a key to the restoration of sanity" in certain cases.<sup>135</sup> If insanity was caused by the overcoming of reason by the passions, then certain techniques could be implemented to resolve this imbalance. Pinel often resorted to theatre – for example, conducting a mock trial or exorcism – to resolve a patient's impasse and re-establish the rule of reason. In other cases, moral treatment needed to be used directly on the 'artificial' passions – such as envy, pride, and lust for property – that arose from social conditions rather than genuine physiological needs. Thus, we can begin to see the emergence of a conception of rationality and irrationality in terms of the arrangement of ideas in the mind and the way they regulate conduct. Erratic or antisocial behaviour is simply the result of irrationality, meaning a 'disordered' association of ideas, or the failure of certain ideas or sentiments to develop in their natural course. In Pinel's terms, insanity is but a form of irrationality, caused by alienation – the alienated individual is one in whom the chain of ideas is out of sync with the true function of human nature's drives and instincts, giving rise to 'artificial' (i.e. unnatural) passions, which consequently affect one's judgment. In other words, understanding insanity as a form of alienation opens up new avenues and techniques for treatment centred around the notion of de-alienating the individual. Pinel, therefore, is a technician of the mind, who operates on the mechanisms involved in idea-formation to recalibrate these dysregulated processes and help the irrational individual to perceive their interests correctly. He helps to regulate the errant mind.

As I will show in Chapters 6, 10 and 12, the Owenite conception of rationality is almost identical Pinel's. To Owenites, criminal behaviour (or any sort of behaviour conducive to

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<sup>133</sup> See Stephen Tomlinson, *Head Masters: Phrenology, Secular Education, and Nineteenth-Century Social Thought*, n.d., 11.

<sup>134</sup> Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Philosophical Writings of Etienne Bonnot, Abbé de Condillac*. [Vol. 1], ed. Franklin Philip and Harlan Lane (New York: Psychology Press, 2009), 289.

<sup>135</sup> Tomlinson, *Head Masters: Phrenology, Secular Education, and Nineteenth-Century Social Thought*, 11.



misery) is but the extension of an irrational character, at the core of which is alienation – a self alienated from its own true needs and desires by an ‘erroneous’<sup>136</sup> chain of ideas.

At the heart of the various conceptions of rationality and theories of ‘alienation’ are axiomatic beliefs in the possibility of a self-transparent subject and in the mind’s natural tendency to seek truth, both of which can be traced across early socialist writings. William Godwin asserted that once individuals understood their true position, “men must feel [...] the restraints that shackled them before, vanish like a mere deception.”<sup>137</sup> Indeed, it was this belief in the irresistible power of the truth present in the heart of every individual which guaranteed the eventual peaceful transformation of society:

When the true crisis shall come, not a sword will need to be drawn, not a finger to be lifted up. The adversaries will be too few and too feeble to dare to make a stand against the universal sense of mankind.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated in detail the constitutive elements of the self that cut across the different disciplines that together constituted a loose ‘science of man’. I outlined a new psychological model that viewed agency in terms of the regulation of drives and instincts by the ideas in the mind. Consequently, I show how this conception of the self gives rise to a framing of conduct in terms of ‘rationality’ rather than good and evil, and to a notion of alienation – alienation as the errant (or irrational) regulation of drives and instincts. Here, then, knowledge of human nature becomes necessary in order to rectify conduct.

In the next chapter, I will show how morality and physiology become merged into a single problematic under this conception of the self.

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<sup>136</sup> The term ‘disorder’ never makes its way into the Owenite vocabulary. Instead, other binary couplings tend to dominate, such as error/truth, or artifice/nature.

<sup>137</sup> Godwin, *Godwin’s Political Justice: A Reprint of the Essay on Property from the Original Edition*, 844.

## Chapter 3 – Rationality and Physiology

### 3.1. The Self as a Muscle

So far we have seen that, in this discourse, the self consisted of various elements, the interaction between which determined an individual's state of rationality. But there is also a material dimension to this discourse of rationality that we have not yet examined, in that 'character' was regularly discussed as something couched or housed in the body, linked with physical health, capable of being strengthened or degraded, and requiring continual care and maintenance. This materiality of character is most noticeable in descriptions of its reactions to external stimuli, pressures, resistances, etc., and through temporal categories, such as habit, practice, repetition, consistency, inconsistency, and so on. For example, 'habit' is often mentioned as holding particular influence in moulding the character, as in this example from Samuel Smiles:

The young man, as he passes through life, advances through a long line of tempers ranged on either side of him [...]. Resist manfully, and the first decision will give strength for life; repeated, it will become a habit. It is in the outworks of the habits formed in early life that the real strength of the defence must lie; for it has been wisely ordained, that the machinery of moral existence should be carried on principally through the medium of the habits, so as to save the wear and tear of the great principles within.<sup>138</sup>

The imagery conjured up in the above passage suggests an organic conception of the self. Smiles conceives of the self as something that is to be formed, maintained, or damaged through habit, almost like some organic tissue; it can be strengthened and fortified through resistance, much like a muscle can, or it can equally succumb to "wear and tear" by the force of the "tempers" that assail it. It is not abstract human nature with which Smiles is concerned, but the way in which its principles are inscribed in the body – 'the great principles within', as Smiles terms them in the above quote. Thus, while he acknowledges that the principles of human nature are inherent, he identifies their capacity for disintegration through over-exertion, leading him to conclude that the role of habits is to take some of the burden off the mind's organisational efforts. After all, vice and temptation

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<sup>138</sup> Smiles, *Self-Help: The Art of Achievement Illustrated by Accounts of the Lives of Great Men*, 28.

are persistent dangers, and the self could be overstrained if it needed to constantly be on guard against them. To alleviate the burden, virtuous conduct must be exercised regularly until it becomes a habitual reaction, much like muscle-memory. “The character may be strengthened and supported by the cultivation of good habits”, such that they become “second nature.”<sup>139</sup> When Smiles refers to habits as ‘second nature’, we must not understand this to mean that habits have a merely ancillary function, propping up and sustaining the character. Rather, the function of habits is to *shape* the character, cultivating in it fixed traits:

The growth of [decision and promptitude] may be encouraged by accustoming young people to rely upon their own resources, leaving them to enjoy as much freedom of action in early life as is practicable. Too much guidance and restraint hinder the formation of habits of self-help.

Furthermore, excessive “guidance and restraint” act like “bladders tied under the arms of one who has not taught himself to swim.”<sup>140</sup> And just as a muscle will remain underdeveloped when overly supported by an aid, so the instincts of self-help will fail to grow unless they undergo resistance training. If we recall the earlier examples from political economy, criminology and penology, there was a conceptualisation of the self as made up of drives and instincts that could be calibrated or guided by external stimuli and by modifying the chains of ideas in the mind. In this physiological or organic conception of the self we likewise find the notion that human nature can become errant; but here, rather than ‘reordering’ the ideas in the mind in a mechanical manner, the self is understood as something that requires constant ‘training’. Note that the two conceptions of the self are not mutually exclusive and in fact often overlap. The equation of character with a muscle was not merely metaphorical, however. There was a real connection between character and the body in this discourse. Smiles’ conception of the self as a kind of muscle was not unique, with similar examples present across the discourse. Stefan Collini reminds us that there was at the time a prevalent psychological model “that predisposed discussion towards indirect effects and long-term results”, which model was given added force by the suggestion that it

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<sup>139</sup> Smiles, 365.

<sup>140</sup> Smiles, 309.

might have a physiological basis.<sup>141</sup> The likes of Alexander Bain, Herbert Spencer, Carpenter and Maudsley all disseminated similar ideas through their popular publications to:

[a] scientifically semi-educated audience, which nurtured a fascination with the idea that in properly exercising the muscles of the will the individual might be acquiring a new capacity that could operate instinctively on future occasions and, through the related Lamarckian belief in the inheritance of acquired characteristics, could determine the behaviour of future generations.<sup>142</sup>

In some quarters, even mental processes were seen as having a physiological basis. Pierre Cabanis, an *Ideologue* and physiologist, viewed the formation of ideas as an organic, physiological process. Impressions were received by various sense organs and transformed into ideas “expressed in the language of physiognomy and gesture, or the signs of speech and writing”, as though “the brain in some way digests impressions [and] produces organically the secretion of thought.”<sup>143</sup> Viewing the mind as a purely physiological organ, Cabanis rejected the existence of faculties such as ‘attention’ and ‘judgment’ on the grounds that they did not resemble organic processes. When we come to examine Co-operative thought in parts II and III, we will find that although the descriptive sense of character was the one most commonly employed, many Co-operators in fact adopted physiological and material conceptions of the mind, often describing certain ideas as resembling a virus, or a fever that needed to be abated before reason could be employed.

### 3.2. Merging Morality and Physiology

In this physiological turn, character and conduct – especially moral conduct – become increasingly medicalised. As Neil Vickers explains, 18<sup>th</sup> century medical practitioners and theorists began to “present character [...] as a function of the soul or the sentient principle” and to reconceptualize it as “working by analogy with nervous sympathy.”<sup>144</sup> In one short story, Tobias Smollett ascribed a character's temper to his spleen and his fits of gloom to his

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<sup>141</sup> Stefan Collini, ‘The Idea of “Character” in Victorian Political Thought’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, no. 35 (1985): 35, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3679175>.

<sup>142</sup> Collini, ‘The Idea of “Character” in Victorian Political Thought’, 35.

<sup>143</sup> Cabanis, cited in Elizabeth Williams, *The Physical and the Moral: Anthropology, Physiology, and Philosophical Medicine in France, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 95.

<sup>144</sup> Neil Vickers, ‘Aspects of Character and Sociability in Scottish Enlightenment Medicine’, in *Character, Self, and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Thomas Ahnert and Susan Manning, n.d., 146.

“charitable disposition”, while George Cheyne, in his seminal work *The English Malady* (1733), traced certain prevalent moods, such as hypochondria and hysteria, to an excess of luxury and refinement in the English leisured classes, which sinks men into “Effeminacy” and “Diseases.”<sup>145</sup> In Cheyne’s particular iteration of this discourse, the nervous system acts as “the seat of the soul.” Thus, for example, “people with unusually active souls [...] - were liable to wear out their nervous systems with too much thinking and feeling.”<sup>146</sup> As Cheyne puts it: “Nervous affliction never happens [...] to any but those of the liveliest and quickest natural Parts, whose Faculties are the brightest and most Spiritual, and whose Genius is most keen and penetrating [...].”<sup>147</sup> Here, the soul and the body are bound by a reciprocal causal relationship with one another, in which developments in one leave a mark on the other. Character is here presented as rooted in a physical organ, and therefore as an expression of said organ’s state of health. Cheyne’s work did not constitute a mere fad. He had a close friendship with Samuel Richardson, and his influence on the likes of Pope and Hume helped create “a climate of opinion in which diseases of sensibility came to be equated with admirable intellectual or moral qualities.”<sup>148</sup> And while this appears to be a reiteration of the ancient medical doctrine of the “humours”, the Scottish Enlightenment made these connections as part of a new paradigm, one in which rationality and morality become domains of medical authority. It is useful at this point to compare this physiological formulation with the likes of Pinel, the political economists and the moral philosophers. To Pinel, Ferguson, Smith and the like, individuals developed “artificial” desires as a result of a disordered chain of ideas, or through human nature being unnaturally stimulated by the environment (including the political and social conditions in which one lived). Here we have a physiological dimension of a broad conception of human nature’s relationship to the environment: “luxury” – a condition proliferated by the new commercial society – had a potentially corrosive effect both on the character and the body. Indeed, what made late-18<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish medicine unique, according to Christopher Lawrence, was its vision of the human frame as “an integrated totality of mind and body, mediated by the nervous system, and its concept of the reactive organism, that is, of living entities functioning

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<sup>145</sup> Vickers, 146–47.

<sup>146</sup> Vickers, 147.

<sup>147</sup> George Cheyne, *The English Malady* (1733) (London: Routledge, 1991), 353.

<sup>148</sup> Vickers, ‘Aspects of Character and Sociability in Scottish Enlightenment Medicine’, 149.

biologically by reacting to stimuli in the external world.” In this discourse, changes in the body have an effect on the soul, shaping and moulding the character, and thereby imbuing physiology with a *moral* dimension. Morality and physiology become increasingly intertwined, and this can be detected in the prevalence of physicians who use their position to make moral pronouncements, as well as that of moral and religious thinkers who make recourse to medical explanations in order to make moral arguments. It is therefore no surprise to see Samuel Smiles – a physician by trade – quote a 17th-century English cleric, Jeremy Taylor, on the importance of ‘active employment’:

Avoid idleness [...] and fill up the spaces of thy time with severe and useful employment; for lust easily creeps in at those emptinesses where the soul is unemployed and the body is at ease; for no easy, healthful, idle person was ever chaste if he could be tempted; but of all employments bodily labour is the most useful, and of the greatest benefit for driving away evil.<sup>149</sup>

And just below the above quote, Smiles lays bare his explicit belief in the link between the health of the body and the fortitude of the soul:

It is perhaps to the neglect of physical exercise that we find amongst students so frequent a tendency towards discontent, unhappiness, inaction, and reverie, – displaying itself in contempt for real life and disgust at the beaten tracks of men, – a tendency which in England has been called Byronism, and in Germany Wertherism. The only remedy for this green-sickness in youth is physical exercise – action, work, and bodily occupation.<sup>150</sup>

The thinking in the above quotes is physiological, mechanical, and spatial. Evil is a constant threat, an ever-present poison lurking in the margins, waiting for the soul to let down its guard in order to infiltrate it and spread into the vacant spaces of the unsuspecting mind. There are vacuums, empty spaces of distraction where the mind, caught off guard, may trip and fall. Evil is an illness, a parasite that lays its eggs in the empty interstices of the soul and whose larvae feed on inactivity. It is because of this that the indolent and the idle are most susceptible to this malady. In this formulation, the self is not merely an organic tissue, but also a *physical space*, a domain whose every corner must be kept under constant watch. It is

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<sup>149</sup> Smiles, *Self-Help: The Art of Achievement Illustrated by Accounts of the Lives of Great Men*, 304.

<sup>150</sup> Smiles, 304.

when the self is left to itself, unregulated by deliberate and ‘useful’ activity, that things get out of hand – pulses are misdirected, energy currents that could have been healthful break free from the reins, become malevolent and wreak havoc. The medical analogy is everywhere in Smiles’ thinking on character and morality. The frail body, vulnerable to infiltration and corruption by viruses, simultaneously weakens the defences and vigour of the character housed within. The references to Byron and Goethe’s *Werther* are highly illuminating; here, ‘Byronism’ is an idea, and ideas can either be invigorating and ‘healthful’, or they can be corruptive. In other words, certain ideas are viruses of sorts. If young people develop a tendency towards despair and nihilism, it is because they have become gripped by a virus that confuses their bodily and mental energies and degrades their bodies and souls. Accordingly, they must be treated as for an illness, through a prescription of ‘useful’ occupation. The anatomical conceptualisation of character and its transformation into an object of medical knowledge and of medical care is ubiquitous:

A healthy breathing apparatus is as indispensable to the successful lawyer or politician as a well-cultured intellect. The thorough aeration of the blood, by free exposure to a large breathing surface in the lungs, is necessary to maintain that full vital power on which the vigorous working of the brain in so large a measure depends.<sup>151</sup>

He then references the likes of Brougham and Lyndhurst – “all full-chested men” – as examples of political figures who excelled in no small part thanks to their physical robustness. Smiles could just as easily have concluded that these men’s full-chestedness was a marker of their social class and privileged education and that these may also have accounted for their political success, but his mind was likely already made up as to the causal foundations of their success. What is most of interest to us, however, is the fact that Smiles’ position as a physician allowed him to become a best-selling figure of authority on moral matters, when he was indeed only reiterating and reinforcing the prejudices of an established social order. It is his position as a physician that he believes allows him to proclaim certain *ideas* as unhealthy from his position as a physician – the ultimate marriage of physiology and morality. His logic extends beyond the individual and to the entire field of which they are a unit (be it a society, a culture, a community, and so on). There is a fear that

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<sup>151</sup> Smiles, 306.

individuals could not only be corrupted – they may also contaminate others. In a manner reminiscent of Smiles’ description of evil spreading through the unregulated spaces of the soul, Jean-Baptiste de La Salle described an ideal school in which things would be arranged such that:

those whose parents are neglectful and verminous must be separated from those who are careful and clean; that an unruly and frivolous pupil should be placed between two who are well behaved and serious, a libertine either alone or between two pious pupils.<sup>152</sup>

The risk of infection is always present, then, but it can be contained through the proper arrangement of the field such that the contaminating elements are prevented from overpowering the healthy body. If poor pupils carry a thought virus, then the virtuous and clean pupils are the white blood cells tasked with containing, neutralising, and even converting the virus so long as they are strategically arranged. As Foucault describes it, “in organizing ‘cells’, ‘places’ and ‘ranks’, the disciplines create complex spaces that are at once architectural, functional and hierarchical. It is spaces that provide fixed positions and permit circulation; they carve out individual segments and establish operational links [...]” This division of a multiplicity into ordered segments makes possible the use and control of the ensemble: “The base for a micro-physics of what might be called a ‘cellular’ power.”<sup>153</sup> The health of the field, then, is a question of correct and rational regulation. The flows, drives, instincts and passions of every unit within the field are to be regulated in such a way as to ensure their natural, healthful, rational circulation. This same logic acquires a hereditary dimension in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the advent of phrenology in the early 1800s, we see a clear, scientifically described conception of the physiological nature of corruption. Like the political economists before him, Johann Spurzheim, one of the most instrumental figures in the popularising of phrenology in the UK, believed that each faculty performed a positive function in human life. However, while the mind was naturally inclined to virtue, “generations of abusing the principles governing this organization” had resulted in people inheriting “imbalanced, deranged, and diseased brains, the physical embodiment of human

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<sup>152</sup> La Salle, cited in Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 147.

<sup>153</sup> Foucault, 148–49.



sin.”<sup>154</sup> Both Spurzheim and Herbert Spencer regularly discussed the need to prevent certain segments of the population from propagating on the grounds that physiological and moral deformities are hereditary and, if unchecked, could promote the degeneration of the nation’s character.<sup>155</sup>

The purpose of describing these developments in the field of medicine across the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries is not to trace the precise origin of the discourse from which Owen, Smiles or any other social thinker of the time articulated their conceptions of character. Nor is the aim of this thesis to disprove the veracity or scientific objectivity of the various conceptions of the mind contained in this discourse. Rather, I am trying to illustrate the way in which conceptions of the body, character, and moral conduct increasingly merged with one another, the lines that once separated them becoming blurred and repositioned to the point where it became possible for morality and rationality to be transformed into a matter of physical hygiene, and where it became the physician’s role “to guide the patient toward the right lifestyle”<sup>156</sup> required by their particular constitution. Consider the way in which Joseph Priestley (a founder of the Unitarian church) reacts when an attendee at one of his sermons tells him of his wish for his son to keep a mistress rather than enter an imprudent marriage. Rather than invoke the fires of Hell and denounce lust of the flesh, Priestley puts forward:

a cool and carefully argued materialist case against 'excessive venery' in youth and in favour of marriage. Extra-marital sexual intercourse was inconvenient, expensive and dangerous, causing nasty illnesses and a minimal degree of happiness. Sexual gratification, he argued, was greater within marriage: 'all the pleasure of the sex in the human species [...] depend much upon opinion or particular mental attachments, and consequently they are greatly heightened by sentiments of love and affection'.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Johann Spurzheim, *Phrenology, or, the Doctrine of the Mental Phenomena: Vol. 1* (New York: Harper & Bros, 2010), 283.

<sup>155</sup> See Tomlinson, *Head Masters: Phrenology, Secular Education, and Nineteenth-Century Social Thought*, 95–96.

<sup>156</sup> Vickers, 'Aspects of Character and Sociability in Scottish Enlightenment Medicine', 150.

<sup>157</sup> John Seed, 'Gentlemen Dissenters: The Social and Political Meanings of Rational Dissent in the 1770s and 1780s', *The Historical Journal* 28, no. 2 (1985): 311. Contains citations from Joseph Priestly, *Considerations for the use of young men and the parents of young men* (London, 1775), Works, xxv, 77.

Notice the merging of several themes in a new way: the substituting of medical arguments for moral puritanism in the invocation of ‘nasty illnesses’; the alleged optimisation of a natural physiological function – sexual gratification – when exercised under rational and well-regulated conditions and when conducted in accordance with the principles of human nature, the “species”, which, in order to be healthy, needs to be motivated by “love and affection.” Priestley’s insistence on linking sex with love may be nothing new in itself, but here it is framed by a new experience of the self, in which the self becomes the domain of an amalgamation of discourses combining medicine, rationalism, and natural law, and the way in which all of these are brought together in a newly-sharpened preoccupation with individual conduct. Casting our minds back to Cheyne, we find a similar way of thinking in *The English Malady*, “a theodicy according to which nervous diseases are God’s way of goading”<sup>158</sup> people towards virtuous behaviour, echoing Priestley’s suggestion that virtuous conduct is concomitant with human nature. Here, the malfunctioning body is an indication of a conduct incongruent with the principles of human nature; in other words, it is ‘unhealthy’ because it is unnatural. Under this logic, it is both the physician’s and the priest’s role to guide the conduct of the patient or member of the congregation in such a way as to achieve the most natural and maximal expression of our innate drives. The physician becomes the possessor of knowledge that allows them to trace the source of physical and mental ailments back to some irrationality in the conduct and character of the individual. Here, the body is a cryptic text containing the soul’s secrets. And just as it was incumbent upon the penal reformer to be versed in the laws of the mind’s “architecture”, so it was for the physician, the educator, the psychiatrist, the politician, and the political economist. ‘Human nature’ becomes the base upon which all of these fields are to be constructed.

To recap, this wedding of character to physiology introduces a new aspect to the themes of alienation and rationality. If alienation appears somewhat abstract or immaterial in the examples from political economy and moral philosophy, here alienation is presented as having material or organismic consequences. While Immanuel Kant believed “[...] character

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<sup>158</sup> Vickers, ‘Aspects of Character and Sociability in Scottish Enlightenment Medicine’, 147.

is only revealed over a temporal duration and is exemplified in a variety of situations”,<sup>159</sup> the introduction of a physiological dimension transforms character into something that can be empirically observed and measured, and makes possible the emergence of new types of experts on the self, whose role it is to regulate body and character as a unified category. What the alienated body or individual is alienated from are God’s laws as they are inscribed in biological functions, and what this new way of conceiving of the self allows is an ability to adjudge every action, choice or belief as right or wrong, good or bad, without having to refer to a set of written laws or commandments. Effectively, this is a recasting of morality in the guise of medical and scientific knowledge. This move thus tethers Christian morality – the threat to which is anxiously sensed by many of the interlocutors in this discourse, even if on a barely conscious level – to a “fixed standard” in the form of a natural order. Furthermore, the entire discourse is underpinned by an unquestioned axiomatic assumption: that human nature tends towards truth and virtue (the two being practically synonymous). In other words, this belief holds that there is Will to Truth coursing through everything. If channelled naturally, all forces would express themselves truthfully and healthfully. If, however, their natural path becomes confused, this will result in malady and disintegration.<sup>160</sup> The idea that there is a fixed human nature, the conditioning of which determines an individual’s character, cradled within and manifested as an organic body, throws up a new problem: the potential dangers of imposing on society an “unnatural” system that misdirects the natural drives, instincts and dispositions and causes the body politic to degrade or corrupt. Thus, into this new experience of the self is introduced the notion of ‘corruption’, one that superficially resembles older Christian notions of the corruption of the soul, and which even inherits some of its vocabulary, but which is nevertheless fundamentally different in at least two ways:

1. The self comes to be seen as a kind of organic material that can be either nourished and strengthened, or, conversely, damaged and degraded. Although this concept is itself not new (much of the discourse that saw the self as a degradable material can be found in ancient Greek medical discourse and the idea of the ‘humours’), conduct

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<sup>159</sup> Curthoys, ‘Hannah Arendt: A Question of Character’, 192.

<sup>160</sup> I mention this now because, as I will show in the chapters on Owenism, this search for a fixed standard and the belief in a universal Will to Truth underpins the entire Owenite project.

here ceases to be a question of sin, of good and evil, and instead becomes a matter of *rationality*. Conduct and character are here understood as rational if they correspond to the principles of human nature, and irrational if they go against them. Furthermore, one's physical and mental wellbeing are interlinked under this rubric of rationality, such that an unhealthy body is seen as either the cause or expression of an unhealthy mind, and vice versa.

2. Nature forms a fixed source of guidance on both physical and moral conduct.

'Corrosion' is framed not as the corruption of a soul measured in terms of good and evil, but rather as the misdirection of a divinely ordained human nature, a kind of code that must be read and deciphered. Thus, the gateway to truth is entirely different to earlier Christian notions. If in Christianity the path to truth passes through confession, soul-searching and the removal of evil from one's soul, then in this new experience of the self, truth is attained by scientifically ascertaining the natural instincts inscribed in the mind and body, assessing their intended functions, describing the relational mechanism by which they are governed, and reconfiguring the way individuals are governed accordingly.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have shown a dimension of this 'science of man' that conceived of character as something organic and therefore as connected to physical health. As character could corrode, it required continual maintenance through various forms of conditioning and strengthening. In this new turn, mental and moral processes come to be seen as having a physiological basis, such that if the body isn't correctly calibrated, it can result in morally degenerate conduct. Consequently, morality becomes increasingly medicalised, such that physicians often use their medical authority to make moral pronouncements, while moral and religious thinkers make recourse to medical explanations in order to make moral arguments. The physician becomes the possessor of knowledge that allows them to trace the source of physical and mental ailments back to some irrationality in the conduct and character of the individual. Furthermore, morality becomes tethered to a 'human nature' that can be empirically observed. Nature here provides a fixed source of truth from which all moral and physiological knowledge can be extrapolated. Morality becomes subsumed into a

broad notion of 'health', in which morality and rationality correspond to an alignment with the laws of nature.

## Chapter 4 – Character and Anxiety

### 4.1. The Lower Classes as an Economic and Political Problem

So far I have examined the notion of character as a scientific and philosophical category used to theorise about the self. However, in order to give a fuller picture of the context within which the British Co-operative movement emerged and operated, I will now focus on the political, social and material conditions that framed this character-discourse. For the movement was shaped by the Industrial Revolution, the counter-revolutionary wave that coincided with it, and the widespread immiseration that followed the Napoleonic Wars. If the political economists constituted a more systemic approach to the problem of social order, then there was simultaneously a more immediate, one might say “practical”, facet to the problem in the form of immiseration, unemployment and crime. Between the years 1790 and 1810 especially, and in the period following the Napoleonic Wars, parishes were facing a significant growing burden in the form of the poor rates. Swelling poverty raised the poor-rates to over £6,000,000 at a time when agriculture had fallen from its war-time prosperity,<sup>161</sup> presenting a significant financial burden, while simultaneously stoking a burgeoning insurrectionary temper about which many of the upper classes were anxious.<sup>162</sup> E. P. Thompson argues that “England differed from other European nations in this, that the flood-tide of counter-revolutionary feeling and discipline coincided with the flood-tide of the Industrial Revolution.”<sup>163</sup> This unique combination of circumstances made the poor into both an economic, political and moral problem for the middle and upper classes. The dislocation of traditional rural populations and their concentration in new urban centres, combined with excitation stirred by the French Revolution, created the perception that the character of the lower classes was changing and becoming an imminent threat. In 1792, William Wilberforce (then MP for Yorkshire) received a report from Wyvill on the “disposition of the lower people in the county of Durham”:

Considerable numbers in Bernard Castle have manifested disaffection to

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<sup>161</sup> See Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 860.

<sup>162</sup> The middle classes also posed a potential insurrectionary threat, at least until after the 1832 Reform Bill was passed. This bill quelled middle-class grievances and left the lower classes on their own. This has been covered extensively by Thompson in *Making of the English Working Class* (see ch.16 in particular).

<sup>163</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 195.

the constitution, and the words, 'No King,' 'Liberty,' and 'Equality,' have been written there upon the Market Cross. During the late disturbances amongst the keelmen at Shields and Sunderland, General Lambton was thus addressed: 'Have you read this little work of Tom Paine's?' 'No.' 'Then read it – we like it much. You have a great estate, General; we shall soon divide it amongst us'.<sup>164</sup>

While Powditch wrote in a letter to Pitt:

When I look round and see this Country covered with thousands of Pittmen, Keelmen, Waggonmen and other labouring men, hardy fellows strongly impressed with the new doctrine of equality, and at present composed of such combustible matter that the least spark will set them in a blaze, I cannot help thinking the supineness of the Magistrates very reprehensible.<sup>165</sup>

The sense that the character of the population was changing was a regular theme among observers between the years 1790 and 1850. "The instant we get near the borders of the manufacturing parts of Lancashire [...] we meet a fresh race of beings, both in point of manners, employments and subordination [...]", wrote a rural magistrate in 1808. While Robert Owen proclaimed in 1815 that "the general diffusion of manufacturers throughout a country generates a new character in its inhabitants [...] and essential change in the general character of the mass of the people." And it was not merely the change in the labouring classes' character, but their consolidation into "dense masses [...] of the most obnoxious description"<sup>166</sup> that most terrified Peter Gaskell. While Cooke Taylor would later write:

As a stranger passes through the masses of human beings which have accumulated round the mills and print works [...] he cannot contemplate these 'crowded hives' without feelings of anxiety and apprehension almost amounted to dismay. The population, like the system to which it belongs, is NEW; [...] There are mighty energies slumbering in these masses. [...] The manufacturing population is not new in its formation alone: it is new in its habits of thought and action, which have been formed by the circumstances of its condition, with little instruction, and less guidance, from external

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<sup>164</sup> Robert Isaac Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce. Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 134.

<sup>165</sup> Powditch to Pitt, 3 November 1792, H.O. 42.22, cited in Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 112.

<sup>166</sup> P. Gaskell, *The Manufacturing Population of England; Its Moral, Social, and Physical Conditions, and the Changes Which Have Arisen from the Use of Steam Machinery; with an Examination of Infant Labour* (1833) (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 6.

sources [...].<sup>167</sup>

As far as the upper classes were concerned, it is guidance and instruction that this population needed. The imagery of crowded hives suggests a logic of infection, of the spreading of ideas – ideas that may turn out to be dangerous:

It is an aggregate of masses [...] that express something portentous and fearful [...] as of the slow rising and gradual swelling of an ocean which must, at some future and no distant time, bear all the elements of society aloft upon its bosom, and float them Heaven knows whither.

This swelling ocean needed containing and regulating. As Frances, Lady Shelley noted in her diary at the time: “The awakening of the labouring classes, after the first shocks of the French Revolution, made the upper classes tremble.”<sup>168</sup> And it’s from this anxious source that there flowed an impulse to control and rationalise the poor, and a wave of repressive and moralising measures, at times in the guise of the benign philanthropist, and at others in plain sight, in imprisonment and penal measures. There is, furthermore, a concern with making the poor productive, not only because of the burden placed on the parishes by the poor rates, but because, in amongst comments professing a fear of insurrection and concerns around the poor’s character, we can also glean a ruling class anxious about its wealth. The poor are seen as an unpredictable, unstable mass, a potentially dangerous force, yet one that cannot simply be done away with, because it is also necessary for manning the ever-expanding industrial behemoth and for the continual extraction of wealth. The question, then, is how to regulate the poor in a productive manner and steer them away from incendiary ideas or from activities that might corrode their character. Owenism constitutes but one approach to this broader problem of regulating the poor. To Owenites, the problem was one of rationality – the poor were irrational and simply needed to be rationalised. But Owenism competed with other strands of thought that considered the lower classes to be, at best, innately indolent and in perpetual need of being incentivised. To Mandeville, for example, poverty was not to be eradicated, only relieved,

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<sup>167</sup> Taylor, *Notes of a Tour in the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire: In a Series of Letters to His Grace the Archbishop of Dublin*, 4–6.

<sup>168</sup> Frances Shelley, *Shelley, Frances The Diary of Frances Lady Shelley* (New York: C. Scribner’s, 1913), 8–9, <http://books.google.com/books?id=PsQEAAAAYAAJ>.



otherwise the poor would have no motivation to be usefully occupied: “[The] poor have nothing to stir them to labour but their wants, which it is wisdom to relieve but folly to cure.”<sup>169</sup> Instead, the poor must be tethered to productivity. They must be made predictable, both as a biological and an economic force. The problem of productivity could further be mapped onto – and justified by – the same framework that presented nature as part of a divine plan: the social order was as an extension of the providential natural order, with its harmonious laws and hierarchies. Wilberforce elaborated on his ‘grand law of subordination’:

[...] [That the poor’s] more lowly path has been allotted to them by the hand of God; that it is their part faithfully to discharge its duties and contentedly to bear its inconveniences; that the present state of things is very short; that the objects, about which wordly men conflict so eagerly, are not worth the contest [...].<sup>170</sup>

Just as every passion and instinct had its role to play in God’s plan, so could social hierarchies be justified by arguing that every class had its role to play in a rational social order aimed at achieving the rationality and wellbeing of the field as a whole. As John Mason contended:

[a] man that knows himself, will deliberately consider and attend to the particular Rank and Station in which Providence hath placed him; and what is the Duty and Decorum of that Station. [...] [It] is always self-ignorance that leads a Man to act out of Character.<sup>171</sup>

Davies Giddy, giving a speech in the Commons in 1807, warned that

Giving education to the labouring classes of the poor [...] would be prejudicial to their morals and happiness; it would teach them to despise their lot in life, instead of making them good servants in agriculture and other laborious employments. Instead of teaching them subordination, it would render them fractious and refractory.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Mandeville, *Fable of the Bees*, 71.

<sup>170</sup> William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes in This Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity* (London: Cadell, 1830), 405–6, <http://books.google.com/books?id=9JkwAQAAAMAJ>.

<sup>171</sup> Mason, *A Treatise on Self Knowledge: Showing the Nature and Benefit of That Important Science, and the Way to Attain It: Intermixed with Various Reflections and Observations on Human Nature* (1745), 76.

<sup>172</sup> Quoted in J. L. and Barbara Hammond, *The Town Labourer*, London, 1917 (Guild Books revised edition, 1949, Vol. I, p. 66). Cited in Silver, *The Concept of Popular Education*, 7.

Of course, the same formulation extended to gender relations, to calls for education for women and claims to equality between the sexes. Thus Spurzheim, in considering Mary Wollstonecraft's assertion that the differences between women and men were culturally generated, concluded that God had made "the two sexes different but concordant, so as to produce together a delicious harmony [...] prepared for their future destinations by a particular modification of feelings and intellectual faculties."<sup>173</sup>

To summarise, the poor become an economic, political and moral problem. As Silver points out, "[the] problem of moral conduct, in its simplest terms, [...] cannot be separated from the wider issues of social stabilisation."<sup>174</sup> And it is upon this stabilisation – the regulation of the poor as a mass – that the upper classes' efforts are centred during much of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Edmund Burke summed this up in his message to the poor in 1795:

"Patience, labour, sobriety, frugality and religion, should be recommended to them; all the rest is downright fraud." As Thompson describes it: "The sensibility of the Victorian middle class was nurtured in the 1790s by frightened gentry who had seen miners, potters and cutlers reading [Thomas Paine's] *Rights of Man*, and its foster-parents were William Wilberforce and Hannah More."<sup>175</sup> However, I argue that this anxiety, while inarguably nurtured by specific material conditions, germinated in the already existing ontological and scientific frameworks of the character-discourse we have been covering in this chapter, in which the conception of individual character and the body politic as corrodible was already established. Indeed, Spurzheim's intervention in the last paragraph is a reminder of how the scientific, the moral and the political all become distilled into this discourse of rationality. This aspect is neglected in histories of the Co-operative movement. Even those that survey the movement as part of a tradition of moral philosophy completely neglect to examine 'character' as a scientific category and as part of an ontology of the self. And even those authors who emphasise the role of the idea of providence in the 18<sup>th</sup> century stop short of interrogating the broader concept of 'rationality' into which providence morphed, such that the body politic and the market came to be seen as a field whose rationality was determined by the individual units that comprised it. Analyses of the labour history tradition

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<sup>173</sup> Spurzheim, *Phrenology, or, the Doctrine of the Mental Phenomena: Vol. 1*, 301.

<sup>174</sup> Silver, *The Concept of Popular Education*, 11.

<sup>175</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 61.

tend to focus on the moral panic around character as part of a class struggle. And while this is certainly correct, it is only part of a wider picture which this thesis provides the contours for. It is in this context that the burgeoning obsession with education during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries can be understood. In keeping with the discourse traced so far in this chapter, dominant views on education belong to a line of thought that perceives the self as essentially fragile, vulnerable, innocent and in need of being protected, bolstered and trained to withstand the influence of passions that might otherwise corrupt it. The textbook quoted below, which was intended 'For the Use of Schools, as well as of Private Gentlemen', chose Virgil as the perfect educational tool as:

his style is so strictly pure and chaste, that the most raw and unexperienced might be left to steer their Course through the whole of his Works, without meeting with those Rocks [...] on which unpractised Virtue runs no small Hazard of being shipwrecked [...]. He animates the Soul to the love of Virtue [...] corrects the Passions [...] makes us feel the Peace and Serenity they bring, when conducted by Reason, and regulated within the Bounds of Prudence and Moderation [...].

#### **4.2. Regulating the Lower Classes**

John Sterling, close collaborator of the Christian Socialist and Co-operator F.D. Maurice, urged caution at the leisure activities of the working-classes:

Periodicals and novels are to all in this generation, but more especially to those whose minds are still unformed and in the process of formation, a new and more effectual substitute for the plagues of Egypt, vermin that corrupt the wholesome waters and infest our chambers.<sup>176</sup>

As there was an abundance of immoral leisure activities waiting to corrupt the unformed minds of the young and uneducated, mutual-improvement societies took it upon themselves to introduce “improving”, rational activities into the lower classes’ leisure time, providing:

nightly entertainment, consisting of readings, music, singing, &c., of a superior kind that might serve as a rival for the Music Hall and the Free and Easy, together with every facility for chess, draughts, and other similar

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<sup>176</sup> John Sterling, *The Christian Observer*, vol 52. Cited in Thomas Carlyle, *The Life of John Sterling: And the Life of Friedrich Schiller* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1893), 266, <http://books.google.com/books?id=a1UwAQAAIAAJ>.

means of amusement.<sup>177</sup>

And one could go one better by instilling industry and thrift from an early age: “It has always been reckoned Wisdom and Policy in a Nation to have as few Beggars, and idle Strollers about their Streets as possible. And how is this so effectually prevented as by these (Charity) Schools [...]?”<sup>178</sup> Idleness leads to moral corruption. It would be much more profitable, therefore, and for their own good, to keep the lower classes occupied and without much time on their hands with which to corrupt themselves and deprive the rich of their rightful profits:

It is a fact well known [...] that scarcity, to a certain degree, promotes industry, and that the manufacturer who can subsist on three days work will be idle and drunken the remainder of the week. [...] The poor in the manufacturing counties will never work any more time in general than is necessary just to live and support their weekly debauches. [...] We can fairly aver that a reduction of wages in the woollen manufacture would be a national blessing and advantage, and no real injury to the poor. By this means we might keep our trade, uphold our rents, *and reform the people into the bargain.*<sup>179</sup>

To summarise: work, education, and rational leisure activities. These are the three prongs by which lower-class dangerousness would be apprehended, diffused, and transformed – “improved” – into something more rational and productive.

## Conclusion

Before moving on to discussing the Co-operative movement, I would like to return momentarily to the science of man and the scientific conception of rationality. For, ultimately, the counter-revolutionary and paternalistic drives described in this chapter were grounded in, and executed with reference to, the science of man outlined in chapters 2 and

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<sup>177</sup> Crust, Frederick. “Mutual Improvement Societies.” *Birmingham Mutual* 1: 1 (1870): 101–04. Cited in Anna Baltz Rodrick, ‘The Importance of Being an Earnest Improver: Class, Caste, and Self-Help in Mid-Victorian England’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 29, no. 1 (March 2001): 46.

<sup>178</sup> Hendley, *A Defence of the Charity-Schools ...*, 4.

<sup>179</sup> John Smith, *Memoirs of Wool, Woollen Manufacture, and Trade, (Particularly in England) from the Earliest to the Present Times ; with Occasion Notes, Dissertations, and Reflections* (London: B. Law in Ave-Mary-Lane, 1765), 308,

[http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?contentSet=ECCOArticles&docType=ECCOArticles&bookId=1363500101&type=getFullCitation&tabID=T001&prodId=ECCO&docLevel=TEXT\\_GRAPHICS&version=1.0&source=library&userGroupName=norm94900](http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?contentSet=ECCOArticles&docType=ECCOArticles&bookId=1363500101&type=getFullCitation&tabID=T001&prodId=ECCO&docLevel=TEXT_GRAPHICS&version=1.0&source=library&userGroupName=norm94900).

3. As such, the Science of Man is not concerned with dispassionate, ‘objective’ observation, with gathering knowledge for knowledge’s sake. Rather, in this discourse, knowledge of man is continually bound up with the exertion and dissemination of power. And this thread arguably runs right through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as well: Character — both that of the individual and of society — is at the centre of a multitude of scientific and philosophical fields, in which we find a desire not merely to study humans, but to shape them and their conduct. And this remains the objective throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and right up to the present day. The neo-classical economist Alfred Marshall went so far as to claim that it was a central part of the economist’s task to identify those forces which “will help to build up a strong and righteous character.”<sup>180</sup> As one Socialist commentator put it in the 1890s: “[The reason] why individualist economists fear socialism is that they believe it will deteriorate character, and the reason why socialist economists seek socialism is their belief that under individualism character is deteriorating.”<sup>181</sup> Marx and Engels, too, were primarily concerned with ‘character’. For them, revolution was not an end, but the means through which human character would be transformed: “[T]he class overthrowing [the ruling classes] can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.”<sup>182</sup> In other words, the present system was deemed irrational and corruptive by Marx and Engels. The working classes needed to be rationalised, and this would occur through active participation in the revolution, which will be in and of itself a transformative act for the workers. As we will see later, character and rationality were central to the Co-operative project. However, as this thesis argues, these two interlinked concepts occupy a central role in our political, economic, penal and pedagogical thought to this very day. Therefore, in a manner similar to Foucault’s genealogical critique of the human sciences, this thesis is concerned with:

[bringing] to light the conditions that had to be met for it to be possible to hold a discourse on madness – but the same would hold for delinquency and for sex – that can be true or false according to the rules of medicine,

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<sup>180</sup> Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics. Volume 1. (1890)* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2011), 723, <http://www.freading.com/ebooks/details/r:download/MzQyMTQyNTg=>.

<sup>181</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Social Reform (1898)*, p.895, cited in Collini, ‘The Idea of “Character” in Victorian Political Thought’, 30.

<sup>182</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Karl Marx Frederick Engels: Collected Works. Vol. 29, Karl Marx: 1857-61* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1987), 53.

say, or of confession, psychology, or psychoanalysis.<sup>183</sup>

What gives political significance to this kind of historical analysis is not whether particular scientific judgments and theories were objectively true or false, but “the determination of the regime of veridiction that enabled them to say and assert a number of things as truths [...]”.<sup>184</sup> That is to say, this kind of critique asks: who has authority to speak on certain matters? And on what grounds, claims, assumptions, do they possess this authority? This is what I have been trying to answer in these opening chapters, delineating the axiomatic assumptions and regimes of truth that underpinned discourse on character, which is ultimately a discourse on rationality and agency. I have done this in order to contextualise the Co-operative movement, situating it as part of a broader concern with regulating the self and with determining a standard by which one could speak of rationality and irrationality, or agency and determination by the environment, health and alienation. As I have mentioned, previous histories of the movement have tended to understand the movement only in the political, social and cultural context set out in this chapter. The originality of this thesis becomes apparent in part II, where I will demonstrate that while this context is correct, it is incomplete, and that the Co-operative project only fully makes sense when we understand the epistemological assumptions and ontology of self within which it operates. As stated earlier, this discourse on the self cuts across a plethora of scientific fields, disciplines, traditions and practices; and while this thesis cannot explore the entire genealogy of the modern self, I will focus on the Co-operative movement as a particular iteration of this discourse, one that provided the working classes of the time with many of the conceptual and analytical tools they used to make sense their position in relation to a newly emerging form of capitalism.

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<sup>183</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, ed. Michel Sennelart, trans. Graham Burchell (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 36.

<sup>184</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, ed. Michel Sennelart, trans. Graham Burchell (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 36.

## **PART II – Owenism**

## Chapter 5 – Key Principles of Owenism

### Introduction

In Part I, I outlined the discursive confluence within which notions of character, rationality and alienation were articulated in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. I will now move on to exploring the Co-operative Movement's emergence within this context, starting with Owenism. I will be guided by the following questions:

- How did this context inform the conceptual repertoire of the Movement?
- Where do the Movement's various conceptions of the self fit into the discourses outlined in Part I?
- Why did the Movement come about?
- What were the Movement's aims and purposes?
- To what extent was the Movement homogenous?
- What set its various strands apart, and what did they have in common?

I will start with Owenism before moving on to the self-help wing of the Movement. The reason for starting with Owenism is that the more one delves into the history of the Co-operative Movement, the clearer it becomes that Owenism appears as something of a movement within a movement – one which, though not constituting a fully cohesive body of thought, nevertheless coalesced around a set of key ideas that can be easily identified and mapped out. Furthermore, Owen and some of his more fervent followers put their theories into a fascinating array of practical experiments — most famously the New Lanark mills with its Institute for the Formation of Character — and left behind sufficient evidence of both theories and practices to warrant being examined in dedicated chapters. Owen's influence on the Movement across a period of over thirty years is difficult to overestimate, winning support across all classes of society, at least for a while. To the upper and middle classes, Owenism reinforced the “belief that an educational ‘plan’ [...] could help solve the problem of juvenile delinquency”; while, to the lower classes, Owen gave the hope that “a radical pedagogy, based on the doctrine of circumstance, [...] could transform both individuals and society” and bring about a better, more just future. So extensive was Owenism's reach that even the ideas and writings of many non-Owenite co-operators are articulated in reference



to Owenism. There was a five-year period, from 1829 to 1834, in which huge tracts of the working classes rallied behind Owen specifically, and which truly could be described as ‘Owenite’ in a way that no other period in the movement’s history can be ascribed to any kind of ‘-ism’.

Owenism also maps on to the framework outlined in Chapter 1: it elaborated its own ‘science of man’, with its own formulation of the ‘ruling passion’ and a mechanics of self underlying all human conduct. Like most 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> Century thinkers, Owenism viewed nature as the manifestation of a divine code that tended towards rationality and needed to be elucidated. What truly set Owenism apart from any other movement of the time, however, was the scale of its ambition: it sought to create an all-encompassing programme of social transformation, a ‘social science’ that drew on virtually every field of knowledge — including medicine, education, political economy, and moral philosophy — in order to transition humanity from what it termed the ‘old irrational system’ to a ‘new moral world’. Furthermore, Owenism shared the widespread anxiety regarding the collapse of the social order and the degradation of character, which we charted towards the end of Chapter 1. And much like the thinkers examined in that chapter, Owenism sought to save society from collapse by apprehending and regulating the population’s conduct. We begin the analysis on Owenism by fleshing out the contours of this anxiety. Using the alleged crisis as a starting point for understanding the Movement is not merely a personal preference. Rather, the context of the crisis forms part of the narrative through which the Movement has historically viewed itself. The story of the Co-operative Movement as emerging out of the context of working-class distress could be found in the courses on Industrial History taught at the Co-operative College throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,<sup>185</sup> in the texts of prominent Co-operative authors (such as Hall & Watkins’ *Co-operation* from 1937), and in the works of the Movement’s most eminent figures and historians, such as G.J. Holyoake.<sup>186</sup> There was, of course, a very tangible material crisis: widespread poverty, crime, violence, disease. Owen’s plans for resolving the crisis came of age in this context between 1816 and 1820,<sup>187</sup> and

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<sup>185</sup> Anthony Webster, Linda Shaw, and Rachael Vorberg-Rugh, eds., *Mainstreaming Co-Operation: An Alternative for the Twenty-First Century?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 84–85.

<sup>186</sup> Webster, Shaw, and Vorberg-Rugh, 47–55.

<sup>187</sup> See Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: The Quest for the New Moral World*, 11.

proceeded in two parts: first, alleviation of the poor's material and living conditions; and, second, the education of the poor. As far as the first part is concerned, Owen's *New View of Society* is very much in the paternalistic tradition of middle-class philanthropy. In his analysis, the lower classes' immiseration and unemployment had two primary economic causes. First, a sharp fall in demand from 1815 following the end of the war. "The war was a great and most extravagant customer to farmers, manufacturers, and other producers of wealth. [...] And on the day on which peace was signed, this great customer of the producers died."<sup>188</sup> Second, the fall in demand occurred simultaneously with the introduction of machinery that vastly increased the powers of production: "Thus our country possessed, at the conclusion of the war, a productive power which operated to the same effect as if her population had been actually increased fifteen- or twenty-fold."<sup>189</sup> Under this analysis, Owen understood poverty as the combined effect of reduced demand and increased productivity. As such, he took a targeted approach to the alleviation of poverty, informed by his experience as a manufacturer and a practical businessperson. He proposed a reform of the Poor Laws and "a programme of public works to provide employment [...] on road and canal construction"<sup>190</sup> and, later on, the creation of self-sufficient communities providing accommodation and employment, as well as catering for the inhabitants' educational and social needs.

Owen is unremarkable in this sense. As Harrison points out, the Poor Laws were the most widely covered subject in England between the 1780s and 1834, and poverty was tackled primarily as a matter of 'relief'. "In a rural society [...] the poor were taken for granted,"<sup>191</sup> and though the problem of the poor occasionally reached such proportions as to create a dilemma for English society, those in power showed an inability to think beyond the normal confines of Christian charity. However, Owen's thinking evolves during the period between 1816 and 1820, and there emerges in his writings something new, a perspective that stretched beyond mere relief and which began to understand poverty not as an isolated problem, but rather as a symptom of a wider *systemic* issue that could only be cured

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<sup>188</sup> Robert Owen, *The Life of Robert Owen Written by Himself with Selections from His Writings & Correspondence (1857)* (Fairfield (NJ): A.M. Kelley, 1977), 124.

<sup>189</sup> *Report on the Poor (1817)*, in Owen, 54–55.

<sup>190</sup> Owen, 12.

<sup>191</sup> Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: The Quest for the New Moral World*, 13.

through the wholesale reorganisation of society. That is, rather than being rooted in economic causes, Owen came to see immiseration as a symptom of the dominant system's irrationality – specifically, what he termed the Individual System,<sup>192</sup> and the principle of 'competition' by which it was guided. But to understand how this system was supposed to produce irrationality and immiseration, we first need to understand some of the key metaphysical assumptions of Owenism. These are: first, the belief that nature is governed by rational universal laws; second, that there is a Will to Truth coursing through everything in nature and guiding it towards harmony and consistency; third, that any contradictions, unhappiness or irrationality are the result of error or distortion, which divert the Will to Truth from its natural course. I will expand on these in this chapter. By focusing on Owenism's axiomatic assumptions, I will argue that Owenites effectively develop an early theory of alienation, in which people are alienated when society is governed by a system that runs counter to the laws of nature, and the Will to Truth becomes confused.

### 5.1. Nature as Unity and Will to Truth

The idea that nature is concomitant with truth and harmony is everywhere in Owenite writings. To James Elishama Smith, editor of *The Crisis* over a period of two years, "Nature [...] is one splendid unity — connected in all its parts — and although apparently at times in violent opposition to itself, yet this opposition is only local and always tends to the restoration of tranquility."<sup>193</sup> Any discord, then, signalled the presence of confusion and error. If people disagreed on anything, it must have been because there was some irrationality in the system that framed society. The reason contemporary society produced so much misery was that it was founded on 'inconsistencies.' Truth, however, is never inconsistent: "The only certain criterion of truth is, that it is ever consistent with itself; it remains one and the same, under every view and comparison of it which can be made [...]"<sup>194</sup> Thus, society can only be rational if managed in accordance with natural principles.

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<sup>192</sup> At least up until 1820, the term 'individual system' in Owenite writings referred to "what was taken to be the core teaching of the new system of political economy: the view that aggregate needs would be best satisfied by each individual following his or her own self-interest." By the mid-1830s, the term becomes largely replaced by 'individualism' in Owenite periodicals.

<sup>193</sup> Smith, *The Shepherd, a London Weekly Periodical Illustrating the Principles of Universal Science*, n.d. 22 August 1835

<sup>194</sup> Robert Owen, *A New View of Society*, Third (London, 1817), 103,

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=P80PAQAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=owen+new+view+of+society>

In his eulogy to Owen's New Lanark experiment, Macnab wrote that "[it] is a vain presumption to attempt to promote the improvement of society in opposition to those laws by which Providence directs the magnificent machinery of the universe: nature can be improved and delighted only by obeying her laws."<sup>195</sup> The primacy of truth thus underpins all Owenite thought and forms *the* condition of possibility for rationality. Abram Combe, for example, expounded a version of co-operation as given in Divine Revelation. This "Beneficial Truth" is "Evident or Demonstrable [...] as that which comes directly from God."<sup>196</sup> Truth's progress may be slowed down, however, by the presence of distortion and ignorance, and these need to be removed for nature to take its course. The co-operators' is a "struggle between knowledge and ignorance," wrote T.W. Thornton.<sup>197</sup> "[W]e were always taught that vice proceeds from the 'inborn depravity' of man; that misery and bondage are consequences of the 'fall', and trials sent by Heaven to chasten its favourites." But now, claims the author, we know that misery will not be eradicated by contrition, but when "the people become enlightened enough to see their real interests, and possessed of the power of directing and controlling the social arrangements."<sup>198</sup> Nevertheless, truth's progress is inevitable. "The Pioneers of Progress, the soldiers of the army of Truth [...] in the end [...] are sure of a victory as beneficial to the conquered, as honourable to the conquerors."

## 5.2. The Crisis as a Systemic Problem

Under this conception of nature, a crisis would result if the system governing society was founded on 'error' and in contradiction with natural principles. Consequently, Owenism's critique of the existing Individual System was centred around the argument that this system was founded on erroneous principles and went against nature.<sup>199</sup> More specifically, the

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&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjho8f57avoAhUGilwKHUERCOoQ6AEIKDAA#v=snippet&q=Truth%20must%20ultimately%20prevail%20over%20Error&f=false.

<sup>195</sup> Henry Grey Macnab, 'The New Views of Mr. Owen of Lanark Impartially Examined, as Rational Means of Ultimately Promoting the Productive Industry, Comfort, Moral Improvement, and Happiness of the Labouring Classes of Society, and of the Poor; and of Training up Children in the Way in Which They Should Go', in *Owenite Socialism: Pamphlets & Correspondence, v.1, 1819-1825* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 32.

<sup>196</sup> Combe, quoted in Garnett, *Co-Operation and the Owenite Socialist Communities in Britain 1825-45*, 68–69.

<sup>197</sup> T.W. Thornton, 'Signs of Progress', in *The Reasoner: And 'Herald of Progress'*, 1846, 237.

<sup>198</sup> T.W. Thornton, *The Reasoner: And 'Herald of Progress'*, 1846, 244.

<sup>199</sup> The terms 'Competitive System' or 'Old System' are sometimes used interchangeably with the 'Individual System'. There is a qualitative difference between the three uses. However, for convenience, and because unpacking the distinction would be a distraction from the point I am trying to make, I have decided to settle

Individual System was seen to produce a degraded, irrational character in people, which contributed to immiseration and crime. According to Owenites, this system was characterised by two erroneous core tenets: first, the 'doctrine of responsibility' – the belief that people have free-will, that they are responsible for their own character, and that they merit reward or punishment accordingly. Second, the belief that people are primarily motivated by self-interest and that the wellbeing of society would be best served by incentivising everyone to follow their own economic interests. While the likes of Adam Smith and David Hume extolled commercial society for its 'civilising' effects, Owen decried it for producing "the mere commercial character" that cared for little aside from "buying cheap and selling dear."<sup>200</sup> Owenites believed that the "selfish and antisocial principle which has [...] gradually established its unnatural and colossal power over the hearts of mankind, has reduced the civilized world to a condition [...] most deplorable."<sup>201</sup> By the mid-1830s, this definition of 'Individualism' can be found regularly in Owenite periodicals.<sup>202</sup>

Against this Individual System and its erroneous assumptions, Owenites developed a definition of 'socialism' – or the 'Social System'<sup>203</sup> – which posited its own founding principles: first, rather than blame individuals for their 'bad' character, they reframed the issue in terms of rationality and argued that people received their character entirely from 'circumstances.' Thus, if people displayed irrational character, it was because they had been brought up under 'irrational circumstances' rather than because they were bad. Second, against the idea that self-interest was humanity's 'ruling passion,' Owenites proposed that "good-will, love, charity, and mutual interest are the bonds of society." As Claeys points out, this amounted to "an assault upon the central premise of individual reform movements, and

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for 'Individual System'. It is more important to me to focus on delineating the key principles of Owenite critique rather than dwell on semantics.

<sup>200</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 61.

<sup>201</sup> Macnab, 'The New Views of Mr. Owen of Lanark Impartially Examined, as Rational Means of Ultimately Promoting the Productive Industry, Comfort, Moral Improvement, and Happiness of the Labouring Classes of Society, and of the Poor; and of Training up Children in the Way in Which They Should Go', 45.

<sup>202</sup> Though it should be noted that 'individualism' came to mean something different in later years, referring more to a spirit of nonconformity and an independence of thought, but which needed to be guided by the principle of association or co-operation. This, for example, was Holyoake's definition of individualism. See Claeys, *Citizens & Saints*, 60-61

<sup>203</sup> While the term 'Socialism' does not appear in print in English until 1835 (though 'Socialist' appears in print as far back as 1827, and even earlier in manuscript form. See Claeys, *Citizens and Saints*, 60

upon the individualistic psychology and economics” dominant at the time, not least the type of evangelical morality that sought to blame for poverty on the poor.<sup>204</sup>

### 5.3. First Error: Belief in the Primacy of Self-interest

The first axiomatic error identified by Owenites was the belief that ‘self-interest’ was man’s ruling passion, and that competition was therefore the most effective way to regulate human conduct. We find this not only in Owenite writings, but across the co-operative movement. William King, for example, believed that self-interest was a part of human nature, but that human nature also contained “a compensating principle—a principle of sympathy [...] and compassion [...]. Those err much who denounce human nature as entirely made up of gross selfishness: man is not a creature of any single principle.”<sup>205</sup> To King, these two elements exist side by side in human nature. The first, “ambitious of power, tyrannical in its use, and looking at the miseries of man with a dry eye: the other spirit is soft and yielding [...]” What made the critique of self-interest so important is that the belief in the primacy of self-interest was not merely academical, but a dominant ideological belief that underpinned and justified a form of economic organisation that dominated everyday life: the ‘competitive system’. The Owenite John Gray lamented that:

there is not a man in this country who depends, in any way, on commerce for subsistence, who has not a thousand commercial enemies [...]. The present system of human affairs is calculated, in almost all its parts, to bring the principle of self-love into competition with benevolence.<sup>206</sup>

As such, the Owenite critique of ‘competition’ and of the view of human nature contained therein is essential to understanding their conception of human nature and the objective of transforming society. This critique contained two facets which, while not mutually exclusive, need to be separated in our analysis of it: First, the critique of ‘competition’ contained a critique of dominant political economists’ claims on wealth-production. Whereas orthodox political economists asserted that competition led to a greater generation of wealth,

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<sup>204</sup> Gregory Claeys, ‘From “Politeness” to “Rational Character.” The Critique of Culture in Owenite Socialism 1800-1850’, in *Working Class and Popular Culture*, ed. Lex Heerma Van Voss and Frits Van Holthoon (Amsterdam: Stichting Beheer IISG, 1988), 28.

<sup>205</sup> William King, *The Co-Operator*, No. 25, 1st May 1830, n.d., 1.

<sup>206</sup> John Gray, *A Lecture on Human Happiness (1825)* (London: Routledge, 1997), 45.

Owenites – even those, like William Thompson, who did not reject competition out of hand – argued that ‘competition’ was economically wasteful, requiring “ten or twenty-fold more waste of labour, and unhealthy and disagreeable occupation, than would be necessary under a well-devised system of society.”<sup>207</sup> Competition,

compels [individuals] to apply much capital and labour in their individual establishments [...], and gives a wrong direction to a great part of that labour and capital, by holding out inducements to create many things possessing little or no intrinsic worth or usefulness.

While not all co-operators held exactly the same position on competition, what the Owenites contributed to the emerging analyses of exploitation and growing inequality – key features of the crisis – was an interpretation of these phenomena as “products of a system of competition.”<sup>208</sup> Furthermore, competition was seen as not only wasteful of materials, capital and labour, but also of an oft overlooked resource – raw human talent. Holyoake comments on the talents of pick-pockets, shoplifters and burglars, lamenting the fact that these potentially useful talents are pushed into useless vectors under an irrational system: “What a picture of great ingenuity and talents misapplied and lost to the community, to which they might be made most profitable in a rationally organised society!”<sup>209</sup> The Owenite Samuel Bower quotes Harriet Martineau stating that a great “amount of time, thought, and energy [...] would be set free by the pressure of competition and money-getting being removed; time, thought, and energy, now spent in wearing out the body, and in partially stimulating and partially wasting the mind.”<sup>210</sup>

Examination of the first facet – the critique of competition as economically wasteful – will have to be set aside over the course of this thesis, as I will focus on the second facet: the effects of competition on human nature and the production of character.<sup>211</sup> Owenites

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<sup>207</sup> Robert Owen, *Manifesto of Robert Owen: The Discoverer, Founder, and Promulgator, of the Rational System of Society, and of the Rational Religion: To Which Are Added, a Preface and Also an Appendix*. (Marlborough, Wiltshire: Adam Matthew Digital., 1844), 46.

<sup>208</sup> Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982*, 120.

<sup>209</sup> *The Reasoner: And ‘Herald of Progress’*, 269.

<sup>210</sup> Samuel Bower, ‘Competition in Peril; or the Present Position of the Owenites, or Rationalists, Considered; Together with Miss Martineau’s Account of Communities in America’, in *Owenite Socialism: Pamphlets & Correspondence*, v.5, 1838-1839, ed. Gregory Claeys (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 392–93.

<sup>211</sup> Although it should be pointed out that the two facets were not entirely separate. To William Thompson, for example, the irrational distribution of wealth and the corrosion of character caused by competition were inseparable. To him, competition exacerbated wealth inequality, leading to “moral degeneracy, and the abuse

argued that a system grounded in the assumption that people are motivated by self-interest produced a degraded, irrational character. For, while ‘competition’ functions as a means of “producing and distributing wealth”, it meets these objectives only “by creating and calling into full action the most inferior feelings, the meanest faculties, the worst passions, and the most injurious vices, which can be cultivated in human nature.”<sup>212</sup> Here we start to see one aspect of the Owenite conception of ‘alienation’: competition alienated people by appealing to baser elements of the nature. As well as having a corrosive effect upon character, ‘competition’ undermined social cohesion. It created a forced inequality of wealth in favour of the already wealthy and privileged, leading to “economic waste, moral degeneracy, and the abuse of political power.”<sup>213</sup> Furthermore, rather than making the rich happier, it “made them vicious; and their vices through imitation corrupted the rest of society.”<sup>214</sup> Unchecked competition, then, had a corrosive and contagious effect upon the nation’s character. To Dr William King, rampant competition prevented ‘association’ by stimulating “self-interest, rivalry, jealousy, and envy.”<sup>215</sup> And though King (who developed his theories on co-operation in parallel with Owenism) was not strictly opposed to competition between capitalists, he nonetheless argued that competition between labourers was wholly corrosive and proposed that ‘Co-operation’ be placed as a guiding principle for the formation of good character amongst the poor and working classes. Co-operation “promotes this brotherly sentiment, this spread of friendship among people.” For most Owenites, however, competition was presented as an unambiguously destructive force. Owen himself complained that competition:

destroys the finest and best faculties of our nature [...] [T]here can be no superior character formed under this thoroughly selfish system [...]. Under this system there can be no true civilization; for by it all are trained civilly to oppose [...] one another by their created opposition of interests. [...] [N]o [...] improvement can arise until it shall be superseded by a superior mode

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of political power”, whilst rendering the rich more “vicious; and their vices through imitation corrupted the rest of society.”

<sup>212</sup> Owen, *Manifesto of Robert Owen: The Discoverer, Founder, and Promulgator, of the Rational System of Society, and of the Rational Religion: To Which Are Added, a Preface and Also an Appendix.*, 46.

<sup>213</sup> Fred Hall and W.P. Watkins, *Co-Operation: A Survey of the History, Principles & Organisation of the Co-Operative Movement in Great Britain & Ireland*, 1946th ed. (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1937), 53.

<sup>214</sup> Fred Hall and W.P. Watkins, *Co-Operation: A Survey of the History, Principles & Organisation of the Co-Operative Movement in Great Britain & Ireland*, 1946th ed. (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1937), 53.

<sup>215</sup> T.W. Mercer, *Co-Operation’s Prophet: The Life and Letters of Dr. William King of Brighton with a Reprint of The Co-Operator, 1828-1830* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1947), 76.



of forming character and creating wealth.<sup>216</sup>

Similar examples abound in Owenite literature:

Individual and national competition and contest are the best modes that have been, or perhaps can be, devised, under the existing irrational notions of the world, by which wealth can be created and distributed; [...] But it is obtained by creating and calling into full action the most inferior feelings, the meanest faculties, the worst passions, and the most injurious vices, which can be cultivated in human nature.<sup>217</sup>

Competition was seen to dissolve ‘sincerity’, considered by Owen to be “the highest virtue, because its universal practice would produce high intelligence and a universal happiness to the human race.”<sup>218</sup> One practice used to help combat the corrosion of sincerity was the preclusion of voting by ballot, which many Owenites perceived as encouraging “concealment and deceit [...] wholly inadmissible in a co-operative community, where truth, candour, sincerity and the utmost openness and plain dealing ought to be predominant.”<sup>219</sup> This rationale survived beyond Owenism’s heyday. As late as the 1850s, James Hole was still decrying the effects of the Industrial Revolution and the capitalist division of labour:

In the smaller industrial and commercial businesses there exists between employer and employed something more than a mere cash *nexus*, but the relation of natural sympathy and goodwill has diminished as the magnitude of our undertakings has increased. [...] [D]ependence, coupled with the extensive division of labor, and not counteracted by any education worthy of the name, has greatly retarded the progress of the English operative, and repressed the sentiments of self-respect and moral responsibility.<sup>220</sup>

Thus, competition and division have a corrosive effect on both the social bond and personal character.

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<sup>216</sup> Owen, *The Life of Robert Owen Written by Himself with Selections from His Writings & Correspondence* (1857), 186–89.

<sup>217</sup> Owen, *Manifesto of Robert Owen: The Discoverer, Founder, and Promulgator, of the Rational System of Society, and of the Rational Religion: To Which Are Added, a Preface and Also an Appendix.*, 45.

<sup>218</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 118.

<sup>219</sup> Owen, 212.

<sup>220</sup> James Hole, *Lectures on Social Science and the Organization of Labor* (London: John Chapman, 1851), 144, <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=2zEoAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

## 5.4 Competition and the Formation of Erroneous Ideas in the Mind

So far, we see that the Owenite critique of the Individual System is grounder in the same ontology of the self broadly outlined in chapter 1, with its conceptions of human nature as consisting of various passions, appetites and sentiments that need to be maintained in a state of balance. Owenites merely hold a different position regarding what they believe to be the correct balance, and what they consider the primary passions. Furthermore, Owenites argued that ‘competition’ corroded character by filling people’s minds with falsehoods, thereby confusing their natural motives to action and disorienting the will. As things stood, under the ‘competitive’ system:

each individual is so organized, that he must necessarily become irrational, [for] he is made, from infancy, to receive as truths, false notions; [he] can only become rational, when he shall be made, from infancy, to receive true ideas, without any admixture of error.<sup>221</sup>

A society built on the principle of competition implanted erroneous ideas in people’s minds and confused them as to their interests, teaching them to “despise those who lodge, clothe, and feed them, and to respect those whose occupations are useless, and worse than useless.”<sup>222</sup> Indeed, the main problem with a society founded on competition and class-hierarchy was that it kept people from perceiving their own oppression by keeping it “concealed on the one side by ignorance, on the other by an artificial social organisation.”<sup>223</sup> Competition was thus seen as the source of all social division because it impressed people’s minds with erroneous ideas that obscured from them the fact that their happiness is bound up with that of others rather than emanating from their self-interest, narrowly conceived. Competition encouraged the pursuit of ‘individual interest’ alone, and its divisive effects would only be overcome:

when the whole interest of the individual, and of society is identified as one family, whose powers, faculties, properties, and possessions shall be

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<sup>221</sup> Author unknown, ‘An Analysis of Human Nature: A Lecture Delivered to the Members and Friends of the Association of All Classes of All Nations, by One of the Honorary Missionaries to That Institution.’, in *Owenite Socialism: Pamphlets & Correspondence*, v.5, 1838-1839, ed. Gregory Claeys (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 14.

<sup>222</sup> Abram Combe, ‘The Definition of Education’, in *Utopianism and Education: Robert Owen and the Owenites*, ed. J.F.C. Harrison (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), 194–95.

<sup>223</sup> *The Reasoner: And ‘Herald of Progress’*, 245.

directly applied to promote the well-being and happiness of each individual, without partiality, according to the peculiar constitution of each member of this large family.<sup>224</sup>

False ideas also corrupt the individual by misdirecting the instincts or 'motives to action' at the heart of all human activity:

Why does [a person] seek to obtain riches? Is it for their own intrinsic value? Does the man of business [...] devote all his early life to confinement and anxiety [...] [so] that he may in his old age gratify his palate and encompass himself in luxury? Such [...] seem the objects of his ambition, but not for themselves are they prized: it is because they draw the esteem of the world on their possessors.<sup>225</sup>

Such thinking exemplifies the conception of agency that underpinned the Owenite 'science of man', much in the same vein as some of the frameworks outlined in chapter 1. It understands society and individuals as made up of components (e.g. passions, instincts, sentiments, dispositions, etc.) that can be conducted in different directions. As such, the desire for esteem is in itself neither good nor bad - it is simply an aspect of human nature; but it can be "directed to produce good or evil", conducted or led down either a 'natural' path - whereby it will lead to happiness - or misdirected along an 'artificial' path (e.g. through competition) - which leads to confusion, a misidentification of one's interests and, ultimately, unhappiness. The author of the above quote argues that the desire for goods is the result of a confusion - that the individual *thinks* they want these goods only because they have been brought up in a system that's incongruous with the true principles of human nature, but that the true motive behind this desire is, in fact, the innate desire for love inherent in human nature. To the Owenite, the person seeking to obtain riches will inevitably remain unhappy, because they fail to understand that their desire originates in this desire for love. Forever seeking satisfaction in the wrong place, no amount of wealth will ever satisfy them. As we will shortly see in more depth, it is their conception of agency

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<sup>224</sup> Robert Owen, *The Catechism of the New Moral World* (Poitiers: Service Commun de Documentation de l'Université de Poitiers, 1838), 7, <https://premierssocialismes.edel.univ-poitiers.fr/viewer/show/338#page/n0/mode/2up>.

<sup>225</sup> Author unknown, *An Essay, in Answer to the Question: Whether Does the Principle of Competition, With Separate Individual Interests; Or, the Principle of United Exertions, With Combined and Equal Interests; Form the Most Secure Basis for the Formation of Society?* (London: J. Watson, 1834), [https://ia804706.us.archive.org/cors\\_get.php?path=/1/items/essayinanswertoq00philrich/essayinanswertoq00philrich.pdf](https://ia804706.us.archive.org/cors_get.php?path=/1/items/essayinanswertoq00philrich/essayinanswertoq00philrich.pdf).

and of its relationship to truth that Owenite critique of competition is couched in. Under a system of competition, argued Owenites, people were taught “to accept shadows for substance, and to live a life of insincerity, and of consequent discontent and misery”, while others “actively engaged in propagating imaginary notions.” For, though the will consistently seeks the truth, a society that holds self-interest to be humanity’s ruling passion misleads people into believing that they are in competition with one another, and breeds a character-type with “strong powers of deception.”<sup>226</sup>

### **5.5. Co-operation as a Remedy for Individuation**

Above, then, is a key aspect of the Owenite theory of alienation. Individuals become alienated when they possess erroneous ideas that give them a mistaken perception of reality, and especially of their true interests.<sup>227</sup> And one of the main erroneous ideas of the Individual System, as I have just explained in this chapter, was the belief in the primacy of self-interest. The Individual System undermined the unity and harmony of nature by promoting the idea that self-interest was human nature’s ruling passion – or, at best, the interests of the nuclear family.

[It is in the traditional institution of marriage that children acquire] all the most mean and ignorant selfish feelings that can be generated in the human character. The children within these dens of selfishness and hypocrisy are taught to consider their own individual family their own world, and that it is the duty of all within this little orb to do whatever they can to promote the advantage of all legitimate members of it. With these persons, it is my house, my wife, my estate, my children, or my husband [...] thus is every family made a little exclusive world seeking its own advantage, regardless, and to a great extent in opposition to all other families.<sup>228</sup>

In other words, ‘interest’ is distorted when viewed only at the level of the individual, as is the case in the Individual System. To comprehend the full breadth of one’s interests, one had to be made to see it as part of a wider picture that viewed the whole of humanity as

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<sup>226</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 121.

<sup>227</sup> I will cover this aspect in much more depth in Chapter 12 – ‘Reason and the Senses’.

<sup>228</sup> Owen, *The Life of Robert Owen Written by Himself with Selections from His Writings & Correspondence* (1857), 136.

held together in mutual interest. Thus, “[the] most distinctive characteristic of the future social family was its unity through common endeavour.”<sup>229</sup>

If we view Owenism as a re-working of the tradition of fraternity, then we may understand all Owenite challenges to existing political and social institutions as following a simple pattern and premise: that humans are naturally sociable, that this sociability is eroded by an individualist system, and that humanity needs to be rescued from this system. Thus, when Owenites challenged the institution of marriage, they were not simply trying to resist an inherited social structure for the sake of it; rather, they were informed by a coherent analytic framework that allowed them to understand marriage as yet another apparatus of individuation that chipped away at society by dividing it into small family units which were then arranged into a state of competition with one another. By challenging existing marital traditions, Owenites were seeking to extend the notion of a ‘family’ to mankind as a whole, eliminating “single families with separate interests” and creating “communities [...] with one interest [...] arranged as one family.”<sup>230</sup> The point of challenging the dominant model of the family, then, was to reveal individuals as being held together by mutual interest, thereby de-individualizing society.

The link between individual character and a social vision continued to be a recurring theme within Co-operative thought as well as in the various thinkers who inhabited the movement’s orbit. Holyoake spoke of a ‘spirit of association’, William King held on to Christianity as an essential foundation for the ‘spirit of Co-operation’, while Samuel Smiles, who dedicated much of his work to expounding the notion of ‘character’, asserted that self-cultivation must always be guided by the principle of ‘duty’. These thinkers deemed any notion of culture, education or improvement to be hollow and meaningless - indeed pernicious - unless guided by a principle that made intelligible the *a priori* bond between each and every individual, the link that sits between them and which totalizes them into a whole from which every individuality emanates, and through which one is bound to every

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<sup>229</sup> Owen, *The Catechism of the New Moral World*, 7.

<sup>230</sup> Robert Owen, *The Book of the New Moral World: Containing the Rational System of Society, Founded on Demonstrable Facts, Developing the Constitution and Laws of Human Nature and of Society*. (London: Effingham Wilson, Royal Exchange, 1836), 48, <https://archive.org/details/bookofnewmoralwo00owen/page/n3/mode/2up>.

other individual in the mutual interest that is usually obscured by the artificial principles of competition and material gain. Owenites go a step further. Not content with relying on the bible or invoking a vague sense of duty, they attempt to theorise the bond that holds humanity together, or rather, to reinvent it altogether. This point about reinvention is an important one to bear in mind: for all its paternalism and its refusal to acknowledge class antagonism (more on which later), Owenism was neither blindly conservative nor reactionary. Indeed, their concern for the moral state of humanity led them to critique such pillars of the contemporary social order as organised religion and marriage, which critique carried considerable risk. As such, a commitment to critical practice is at the very heart of Owenite socialism, which could be thought of a truly radical. As Owen himself stated:

no part of the New System which I advocate can be united, in principle or practice, with any part of the Old or existing System; and [...] it would be as vain to attempt their union as to endeavour to unite oil and water, or any other two opposites in nature.<sup>231</sup>

## 5.6. Second Error: The Belief in Free-will

The second erroneous assumption of the Individual System was the belief that people possessed free-will and that they were therefore responsible for forming their own character. This is captured most succinctly in an oft-referenced proclamation by Owen:

[...] it is a law of nature obvious to our senses, that the internal and external character of all that have life upon the earth, is formed *for* them, and NOT *by* them; [...] in accordance with this law, the internal and external character of man is formed *for* him, and NOT *by* him [...].<sup>232</sup>

In 'An Analysis of Human Nature', an anonymous author identifies this core principle of the 'Old System':

The theories [of human nature] hitherto adopted have been all founded on the supposition, that man was created with a will, or power, to choose, and to do that which is good, or evil without restraint or hindrance; and that he

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<sup>231</sup> Owen, *Manifesto of Robert Owen: The Discoverer, Founder, and Promulgator, of the Rational System of Society, and of the Rational Religion: To Which Are Added, a Preface and Also an Appendix.*, 6.

<sup>232</sup> Owen, 62.

also possesses an inherent knowledge of what is good and evil.<sup>233</sup>

And yet, they point out, despite this supposed inherent knowledge of good and evil, every society differs in its definitions of good and evil. The author sees these two premises as contradictory, for “we know that, by a positive law of nature, every element is the same in one situation as in another”, and that the same must apply to human nature. The fact that moral values vary from place to place even though human nature, at its elemental level, must remain the same under all conditions, suggests to this Owenite “that man in his collective, or combined state, as in nations or tribes, is not directed in his social conduct by an instinctive knowledge of good and evil, and free will.” Choice, then, must be subject to a different kind of mechanism. The Owenite asks what would happen if we examined the opposite supposition:

that man does not by his nature possess an instinctive knowledge of good and evil, with a will free to choose between them, but that he is altogether the creature of the circumstances surrounding him, acting upon all occasions as the impulses are made upon his feelings, according to the strength of their impressions; and that his knowledge of good and evil does not depend upon an intelligent instinct of his nature, but upon a conventional instructive influence, giving to it forms differing as the sets of circumstances producing them.<sup>234</sup>

One’s ‘knowledge of good and evil,’ then, is not innate but socially received and dependent on the contingent circumstances (e.g. social norms, education) that moulded it. In this model of human nature, there is no internal mechanism that would allow someone to choose of their own volition or to shape their own character. Furthermore, one has no power to resist the force of either their internal organisation or external circumstances, as stated in the Orbiston community’s founding declaration:

[The] formation of the judgment and inclinations of individuals is not in any way under their own control, and [...] from these alone do the voluntary actions of every human being proceed; [...] the origin of uncharitableness, and almost all violence, may be justly ascribed to the prevalence of notions

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<sup>233</sup> Author unknown, ‘An Analysis of Human Nature: A Lecture Delivered to the Members and Friends of the Association of All Classes of All Nations, by One of the Honorary Missionaries to That Institution.’, 3.

<sup>234</sup> Author unknown, 5.

which are opposed to these truths.<sup>235</sup>

### 5.7. The Doctrine of Circumstances

This, then, is what Owenites often referred to as the ‘doctrine of circumstances’, which holds that rather than acting of their own volition, an individual’s socially received “feelings or [...] convictions”, combined with their “ideas and habits [...], are the powers that govern and direct his conduct.”<sup>236</sup> In other words, their *character*. And the doctrine of circumstances underpins Owenism’s critique of the Individual System – insisting that the belief in free-will and in an innate knowledge of good and evil is the origin of ‘almost all violence’. The belief that people were not responsible for their own actions continued to form a core tenet of Owenism throughout the movement’s history. It is a folly, wrote William Thompson, to “suppose that, within children themselves resides some mysterious internal power of resisting the effect of external circumstances on their feelings, opinions, and actions, and of self-forming their character in spite of external agencies.”<sup>237</sup> While Holyoake adds:

What is the good [...] of hating the unfortunate any more than in hating a clock which is false to time, owing to defective machinery? Those who have received an inferior nature and an unhappy destiny have no demerit therein [...].<sup>238</sup>

One might assume that the logical conclusion of such one-sided determinism would be nihilism, yet for the Owenites it was a source of hope, holding the key to social transformation. George Combe said of his brother, Abram, that prior to his encounter with Owen’s thought, he had been “a firm believer in the doctrine that man formed their own characters and dispositions; and hence, when any one acted contrary to what he conceived to be right, he did not spare severity of remark on his conduct.” Yet, after undergoing what George terms a ‘conversion’, Abram came to believe that the “characters of men are formed

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<sup>235</sup> *Orbiston Register*, n.d. No. 1 (10 November 1825): 1–2

<sup>236</sup> Abram Combe, *Metaphorical Sketches of the Old and New Systems: With Opinions on Interesting Subjects* (Edinburgh: Bell & Bradfute, 1823), 99, <http://books.google.com/books?id=8fpeAAAAcAAJ>.

<sup>237</sup> William Thompson, ‘Practical Directions for the Speedy and Economical Establishment of Communities on the Principles of Mutual Cooperation, United Possessions and Equality’, in *Utopianism and Education: Robert Owen and the Owenites*, ed. J.F.C. Harrison (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), 220.

<sup>238</sup> Holyoake, *Essentials of Co-Operative Education*, 16–17.



by their natural constitutions and external circumstances.”<sup>239</sup> This allowed him to treat people with compassion rather than scathing judgement and, most importantly, it gave him a belief in the possibility of changing society. It is important not to underestimate the effects that embracing the doctrine of circumstances might have had on people who had been brought up to believe from infancy that they are to blame for their own unhappiness – George Combe’s use of the word ‘conversion’ is surely not misplaced. Yet one wonders whether the effect of such a conversion truly resulted in the subject’s becoming more accepting of others as they are, or whether in fact the judgmental, moralising urge was not displaced or even deferred, as it were, in the case of utopians, to some future to come, in which all the irrationality and malice that can be so insufferable in earthly existence would be eradicated. Under such utopianism, Combe (or any other Owenite) did not need to accept people as they were; he merely had to wait patiently for nature to make people rational (by his definition). Indeed, Owen believed that the transformation could be absolute, encompassing every single individual:

[As] far as such circumstances can influence human character, the day has arrived when the existing generation may so far control them, that the rising generations may become in character, without any individual exceptions, whatever man can now desire them to be, that is not contrary to human nature.<sup>240</sup>

As such, punishment is the wrong way to effect change in an individual’s conduct and to solve the crisis:

It is a fact, that every infant has received all its faculties and qualities, bodily and mental, from a power and cause, over which the infant had not the shadow of control. Shall it, then, be unkindly treated? And, when it shall be grown up, shall it be punished with loss of liberty or life, because a power over which it had no control whatever, formed it [...]? – Has the infant any means of deciding who, or of what description, shall be its parents, its playmates, or those from whom it shall derive its habits and its

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<sup>239</sup> George Combe, *The Life and Dying Testimony of Abram Combe in Favour of Robert Owen’s New Views of Man and Society* (London: V. Torras & Co., 1844), 7–10.

<sup>240</sup> Owen, cited in Arthur Leslie Morton, *The Life and Ideas of Robert Owen* (New York: International Publishers, 1978), 135, <https://archive.org/details/LifeIdeasRobertOwen/page/n3/mode/2up>.

sentiments?<sup>241</sup>

If people are not motivated by innate good or evil, but rather by the ideas and habits instilled in them by circumstances, then the correct way to effect change is to alter one's circumstances:

Withdraw those circumstances which tend to create crime in the human character and crime will not be created: replace them with such as are calculated to form habits of order, regularity, temperance, and industry, and these qualities will be formed.<sup>242</sup>

The above words echo, almost identically, Owen's own words:

In those characters which now exhibit crime, the fault is [...] not in the individual, but the defect proceeds from the system in which the individual has been trained. Withdraw those circumstances which tend to create crime in the human character, and crime will not be created.<sup>243</sup>

The identification of "discomfort, discontent and misery [as] the certain harbingers of degradation, immorality and violence"<sup>244</sup>, is shared unwaveringly by every single Owenite, ceding no ground to even the slightest suggestion of personal responsibility. The individual is purely a product of circumstances, and as such, its character will only change through a change of circumstances. For, all individuals "partake of that plastic quality, which, by perseverance *under judicious management*, may be ultimately moulded into the very image of rational wishes and desires."<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Robert Owen, 'An Address Delivered to the Inhabitants of New Lanark, on the First of January, 1816, at the Opening of the Institution Established for the Formation of Character', in *Utopianism and Education: Robert Owen and the Owenites*, ed. J.F.C. Harrison (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), 94.

<sup>242</sup> *British Statesman*, cited in Macnab, 'The New Views of Mr. Owen of Lanark Impartially Examined, as Rational Means of Ultimately Promoting the Productive Industry, Comfort, Moral Improvement, and Happiness of the Labouring Classes of Society, and of the Poor; and of Training up Children in the Way in Which They Should Go', 67.

<sup>243</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 59.

<sup>244</sup> Anonymous, 'A Vindication of Mr. Owen's Plan for the Relief of the Distressed Working Classes, in Reply to the Misconceptions of a Writer in No.64 of the Edinburgh Review', in *Owenite Socialism: Pamphlets & Correspondence, v.1, 1819-1825*, ed. Gregory Claeys (London and New York: Routledge, 2005). In reply to the misconceptions of a writer in No.64 of the Edinburgh Review, p.141

<sup>245</sup> Owen, cited in Morton, *The Life and Ideas of Robert Owen*, 134.

## Chapter 6 – The Mechanics of Agency and its Role in Alienation

### Introduction

As I showed in the previous chapter, Owenism considered the Individual System to alienate people from the laws of nature by promulgating the errors of free-will and self-interest, which produce an irrational character and irrational conduct. However, to say that a system results in irrational conduct implies that there must be some sort of mechanism that the system interacts with in the production of conduct. The next step, therefore, is to ask: in the absence of free-will, what precisely are the mechanism and the causal chain by which circumstances shape action? Owenism does not stop at arguing against free-will, but continues to expound this choice-making mechanism, arguing that immoral conduct is a question of irrationality rather than of evil, and that irrational conduct is, in a sense, but a malfunctioning of our choice-making mechanism. Consequently, when we say that Owenism understood lower class distress as a systemic issue, what is meant by this is that it viewed phenomena such as poverty as stemming not from individual free choice, but rather from the manner in which a given system affects choice-making in individuals.<sup>246</sup> In this chapter, therefore, I will outline the mechanics of agency contained in the Owenite framework and explain its role in the production of alienation.

### 6.1. The Will and the Understanding

I have already shown that Owenites believed the two errors of the Individual System to result in a distorted perception of reality. In order to understand the precise mechanism by which this distorted perception produces irrational conduct, we need to examine the faculty of the will, which in Owenite thought functions as an executive faculty: the force “which stimulates [the individual] to act, and decides his actions.”<sup>247</sup> The question for Owenites is: on what basis does the will decide on a course of action at any given point? For, under the

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<sup>246</sup> I am only referring to the part supposedly played by the poor themselves in their own poverty. Owenite analysis also extended to the upper classes, whose exploitation of the lower classes Owenites viewed not as malevolent, but as driven by their erroneous pursuit of their immediate self-interest.

<sup>247</sup> Author unknown, ‘An Analysis of Human Nature: A Lecture Delivered to the Members and Friends of the Association of All Classes of All Nations, by One of the Honorary Missionaries to That Institution.’, 13.

doctrine of circumstances, the will has no inherent preferences. Rather, it is a neutral force that is guided by the 'knowledge' or 'understanding' presented to it by the mind:

The will of most men is supine or weak, save when impelled by the passions; but when impelled by right knowledge it is the eternal element of advancement. It is the will which vivifies life, as electricity vivifies nature; but, like electricity, its energy destroys unless its current be directed by the sense of humanity and equity. It is then the wise inciter, inspirer, impeller, the advancer - the conqueror of apathy and stupidity - the creator of enthusiasm!<sup>248</sup>

In the above conception, the will is a force whose current flows like electricity. To say that "the will [...] vivifies life" is to say that the will is the current of agency. And, much like electricity, the manner in which its current is conducted determines its instrumentality. A member of the Orbiston community, writing in one of the early issues of the *Orbiston Register*, declared that should the community experiment fail,

it is because a better mode has not been revealed to [the members'] understanding. All that is requisite, is to convince [them], how the general welfare of mankind can be augmented; and they will be less than human beings, if they resist such conviction.<sup>249</sup>

In other words, once their 'understanding' of the world shifted, the members' wills would choose accordingly. The way to regulating the will passed through the understanding. But an 'understanding' of what? Towards what end? Why is the will propelled into action at all? To answer this question, the Owenites posit a natural mechanism, a 'motive to action': "[It] is an instinct of human nature, to do that which is likely to preserve or promote man's happiness."<sup>250</sup> Owenite arguments all start out from the assumption that happiness is "our being's end and aim,"<sup>251</sup> that "happiness is the true object of human exertions."<sup>252</sup> Therein lies the will's motive to action: it always chooses that which it 'understands' to promote one's happiness. This instinct to preserve or promote happiness is a naturally occurring

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<sup>248</sup> Holyoake, *Essentials of Co-Operative Education*, 6.

<sup>249</sup> *Orbiston Register*, 75.

<sup>250</sup> Author unknown, 'An Analysis of Human Nature: A Lecture Delivered to the Members and Friends of the Association of All Classes of All Nations, by One of the Honorary Missionaries to That Institution.', 5–6.

<sup>251</sup> Dale Robert Dale Owen, 'An Outline of the System of Education at New Lanark', in *Utopianism and Education: Robert Owen and the Owenites*, ed. J.F.C. Harrison (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), 12.

<sup>252</sup> London Co-operative Society, 'Articles of Agreement for the Formation of a Community on the Principles of Mutual Cooperation, within Fifty Miles of London.', 1825.

desire that always seeks to be satisfied. It spurs the will – the force of agency – to act on its behalf and to satisfy it. So, here we have a very basic outline of the mechanism of agency: the individual is imbued with a natural desire for happiness. This desire drives the will, which always produces actions calculated to result in happiness, based on the ‘understanding’ with which it is presented. There are several factors involved in forming the ‘understanding’ and ‘judgment’ of individuals. First, although human nature is universal, the degree and valence of each constitutive element differs from person to person, ensuring that “the same circumstances do not produce the same effect upon the feelings, convictions, and actions of the different individuals exposed to their influence [...]” Second, every individual is imbued with ‘convictions’ and ‘impressions’ stamped upon their minds by circumstances that are beyond their control. Thirdly, these convictions and ideas will excite certain ‘feelings’ in the individual in response to specific situations, which in turn generate an “effect of the will” – i.e. action. In summary, the ‘understanding’ is the sum of an individual’s inclinations, dispositions, ideas, impressions, feelings, convictions, habits, etc., which result from an interaction between an individual’s ‘internal circumstances’ and the external circumstances to which they have been exposed. In other words, the understanding is the sum of an individual’s character. The author illustrates this mechanism with an example: “suppose three persons walking together in the [...] street should meet with a beggar, apparently in the possession of health and strength.” The first person’s unique set of convictions will excite certain ‘feelings’, which would then interact with the ‘instinct’ to do “that which is likely to preserve or promote man’s happiness”; in his case, this interaction would impel him “to relieve what appeared to be [the beggar’s] necessities”, because he would be led to conclude that this action would promote man’s happiness. The second person, however, “may be less prompt to act because a conviction is formed in his mind that will check the activity of the sympathies of his nature” – a belief that the beggar is not in genuine need, but is merely looking to “impose.” While the third person might be inclined to “receive the impression on his convictions, that the beggar ought to be punished for vagrancy.” In all three cases, the instinct to happiness is a constant, and its interaction with one’s character produces an “effect of the will.” If one individual chooses to be kind to the beggar, it is because their ‘understanding’ has led them to believe that this is the best way to promote happiness. While the one who chooses to react violently does so because

his 'understanding' has led him to believe that this is the best way to satisfy that instinct to happiness. Following this formulation, it becomes clear why agency should be considered a matter of rationality rather than of blame. Reflecting on the dominant view that people could choose between good and evil through their own free-will, Robert Owen's son, Robert Dale Owen, asked:

[C]an we suppose it a possible case that [a child who has behaved inappropriately] knew what he was choosing? It is admitted that he had a choice, and that he chose evil, and rejected good. But should we therefore assume that he himself created the preference which gave rise to that choice? that he wilfully formed an erroneous judgment? and that he merited pain and punishment [...]? [...] Could we avoid remarking, that circumstances which he had not created, and which he could neither alter nor regulate, induced a preference, and thus determined his choice?<sup>253</sup>

The child makes a choice, but it is not through their own free-will. Rather, something in the child makes the choice – something beyond the child's control. It is the "feelings and [...] convictions", which are received from "circumstances", which form the understanding, through which one forms a "judgment", and which ultimately "determine [one's] choice."<sup>254</sup> From this it follows that if an individual does something that renders them and those around them unhappy, it is due to ignorance, a misunderstanding of one's true interests and motives, rather than a genuine choice. But if one was to be reoriented towards the truth, "he could not deliberately make himself miserable, in preference to making himself happy; otherwise the desire of happiness cannot be a universal law of our nature."<sup>255</sup> The fact that the desire of happiness is a law of nature means that once individuals have been impressed with correct and natural ideas, they will form a rational understanding, and will undoubtedly make rational choices, for no individual could "willingly hold erroneous ideas."<sup>256</sup> Nobody wills to act upon a principle which they know to be false – their will is simply confused by irrationality. The purpose of rational education, then, is "to give a right direction to this all-

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<sup>253</sup> Dale Owen, 'An Outline of the System of Education at New Lanark', 137–38.

<sup>254</sup> Author unknown, 'An Analysis of Human Nature: A Lecture Delivered to the Members and Friends of the Association of All Classes of All Nations, by One of the Honorary Missionaries to That Institution.', 13.

<sup>255</sup> Dale Owen, 'An Outline of the System of Education at New Lanark', 138.

<sup>256</sup> Abram Combe, *The Religious Creed of the New System: With an Explanatory Catechism, and an Appeal in Favour of True Religion, to the Ministers of All Other Religious Persuasions and Denomination*, 1824.

powerful stimulus”<sup>257</sup>, echoing Owen’s promise that his new system “will create a *rational will* and a charitable spirit in all of human kind, and thus induce each, by an *irresistible necessity*, to become kind, just, consistent, and *rational*, in mind and conduct.”<sup>258</sup>

A number of themes emerge from the thought covered in this sub-section: rationality and happiness are bound up with knowledge and truth. The human will, just like everything else in nature, tends towards truth, unity and harmony. In other words, nature is a ‘Will to Truth’. The will only acts on what it believes to be *true*, and what it truly believes to be conducive to happiness, based on the ‘understanding’ that guides it. If it acts irrationally, it is only because it has been confused by a distorted understanding of reality. This is another aspect of alienation, therefore. People are alienated (i.e. they have irrational character) when their will is guided by an erroneous understanding of reality. Under the Individual System, people are convinced to believe that pursuing their immediate self-interest is the course of action most conducive to happiness. However, the social system proposed by Owenites emphasised the primacy of the social instincts and would therefore lead to true happiness:

Social virtue, [...] when sufficiently known and appreciated, [...] must inevitably become the fruitful source, duly directed by judgment, reason and conscience, of all excellence and happiness. Like gravitation, in the physical world, attracting bodies to the centre of light and heat, it will attract the hearts of men [...].<sup>259</sup>

The social system would transition people from a state of alienation to one of rationality. Or, as the title page of *The Crisis* read: “the change from error and misery, to truth and happiness” (see Fig. 1).

## 6.2. A Physiological Conception of Alienation

As I have just argued, one way in which the Will to Truth can be frustrated is through the presence of erroneous ideas. However, there is also a physiological conception of

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<sup>257</sup> Combe, ‘The Definition of Education’, 191.

<sup>258</sup> Owen, *Manifesto of Robert Owen: The Discoverer, Founder, and Promulgator, of the Rational System of Society, and of the Rational Religion: To Which Are Added, a Preface and Also an Appendix.*, 8–9.

<sup>259</sup> Macnab, ‘The New Views of Mr. Owen of Lanark Impartially Examined, as Rational Means of Ultimately Promoting the Productive Industry, Comfort, Moral Improvement, and Happiness of the Labouring Classes of Society, and of the Poor; and of Training up Children in the Way in Which They Should Go’, 46.

‘alienation’ in which ‘error’ is understood more as a kind of infection that prevents the mind from perceiving the truth, and therefore prevents the Will to Truth from flowing correctly. This is most evident in Owenite writings regarding the body, hygiene and medical practices in which, much like the moral-medical discourse outlined in part I, Owenism links rationality and morality to physical health and hygiene. An apt expression of this fusion of rationality and a notion of ‘decontamination’ comes in one of Holyoake’s magazines from 1901, many decades after the decline of Owenism. The paper advertises the promotion of ‘Freethought’, described as something that “purges superstition and ignorance.”<sup>260</sup> On the opposite page, a medicinal product, Electrozone, is advertised, claiming to “destroy all disease germs”; it is a “disinfectant” consisting of “electrolytes – or special treatment by electric current – of sea water” (see Fig.2 and Fig.3). There is a drawing of a woman clad in white, the epitome of cleanliness and purity, holding a bag of Electrozone, which she sprays in the direction of a cluster of ghoulish germs skulking in the dark. Electrozone purges and illuminates the darkened recesses. The theme of purification is clear, and the advert’s positioning in- amongst articles on Freethought is telling: just as a medicine disinfects the body, so does Freethought disinfect the mind from the malady of “superstition and ignorance.” Are we detecting a germaphobic strain in Owenite rationalism?

This physiological-rationalist thread runs throughout the history of Owenism, and stretches further into the Twentieth Century. Owenism as a whole viewed hygiene as an inseparable aspect of the journey to rationalise society. An issue of *The Crisis* from 1832 contains some medical ads, including one for the ‘Hygeian Theory and Practice’ of Dr James Morison of the British College of Health, promising a new era in medicine.<sup>261</sup> Morison was one of the most successful quack doctors of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, peddling what he termed the ‘Universal Medicine’, reputed for its “numerous cures . . . in all kinds of diseases, surgical cases, and mental derangements.”<sup>262</sup> His philosophy rested on the principle of ‘purging’:

All the lingering chronic diseases and infirmities one witnesses are only owing to not having been purged in some previous diseases, such as fevers, colds, inflammations, measles, smallpox, or lyings-in. [...] — it is impossible

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<sup>260</sup> *The Sun*, in Owen Greening’s papers, box 17, item 19, National Co-operative archive

<sup>261</sup> *The Crisis*, April 21 1832, p.8

<sup>262</sup> Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture*, 14, note 36.



there can be any real cure but by sound purging.<sup>263</sup>

Furthermore, like Owenism, Morison drew a link between morality, physical health and the laws of nature. “Morison claimed that in purging the blood of its “bad humours” he was only assisting Nature, which “is constantly (though silently) counteracting the vices of man, for the preservation and health of the species.”<sup>264</sup> This was no fringe phenomenon. As Haley points out, “a large and influential body of medical opinion [...] usually included some sort of appeal to “natural law” or the “laws of nature” in their rationales.”<sup>265</sup> We find the linkage between morality, physiology (or hygiene) and natural law among the Victorian era’s foremost thinkers, such as Herbert Spencer, who wrote:

Perhaps nothing will so much hasten the time when body and mind will be adequately cared for [...] as a diffusion of the belief that the preservation of health is a duty [...]. The fact is, that all breaches of the laws of health are physical sins.<sup>266</sup>

Owenism was no exception, and we find ample evidence of this merging of the physical and the moral throughout its writings. “For let it not be supposed that the moral condition of men can be disconnected from the physical. Cleanliness is next to godliness, says a wise adage”<sup>267</sup>, so ran a *Times* article reprinted in *The Reasoner*. Elsewhere, Holyoake himself described “Faith” as being “like fever.” Religious faith and superstition are often spoken of in co-operative publications as resembling a virus or a form of contamination, a mind-altering parasite causing temporary insanity, keeping one trapped in a state of ignorance and irrationality. Yet Holyoake had “perfect confidence in the efficacy of reason on all men.” For, much like a fever, faith “is intermittent; and when the temporary aberration subsided, argument is operative.”<sup>268</sup> Once the virus subsides, reason can return to functioning as intended and help separate truth from error. Truth, therefore, is equated with a state of health and purity, freedom from infection; and the will always seeks truth and happiness, to the best of its ability.

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<sup>263</sup> Haley, 14. Note 38

<sup>264</sup> Haley, 15. And note 41.

<sup>265</sup> Haley, 15.

<sup>266</sup> Cited in Haley, 17.

<sup>267</sup> *The Reasoner: And ‘Herald of Progress’*, 238.

<sup>268</sup> *The Reasoner*, vol. VI, 1849, 245.

To rationalise in this sense is to purify and decontaminate. It is to remove virulent agents that have infiltrated the system and replace them with healthy cells that restore the system's optimal functioning. "The acquisition of true principles, of real knowledge, [...] will be a progress [...] which will lay a solid foundation for health of body and mind, and active happiness [...]." <sup>269</sup> This purification or recalibration can only be achieved through an education designed to help a person,

attain a rational state of existence, to know himself and humanity, to acquire useful and valuable knowledge, to be advanced from being the slave of inferior and vicious circumstances, to a condition in which he will comprehend what [...] circumstances [...] are superior and virtuous [...]. In fact, this is the education that will elevate man to a permanently rational and superior state of existence.

Indeed, once the fever subsides, the workings of truth would be unstoppable: "The errors of all opposing motives will appear in their true light, and the ignorance whence they arose will become so glaring, that even the most unenlightened will speedily reject them." <sup>270</sup> This belief in the Will to Truth is still reiterated decades later, long after the disappointments of the community experiments:

The advance of truth is slow, but sure, since there is no retreating; a point once carried is never more lost, but serves as a stepping stone to some fresh gain, and becomes a weapon wherewith to achieve a new triumph [...]. <sup>271</sup>

And so, it is not enough to point out that the Owenite conceives of nature as essentially unified and tending to rationality. To fully appreciate how this overarching rationality is achieved at the level of the system, it is necessary to show how this rationality is brought into realisation via an underlying force, a Will to Truth that operates through each individual mind and body. Its primary obstacles are distortion, contamination, confusion, artificiality. What this Will to Truth requires in order to be fully operative is transparency, clarity, purity, decontamination. Under a framework that linked together morality, physiology and natural law, the alienated individual is conceived of not only as someone who holds erroneous

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<sup>269</sup> Robert Owen, 'The Book of the New Moral World', in *Utopianism and Education: Robert Owen and the Owenites*, ed. J.F.C. Harrison (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), 127.

<sup>270</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 22–23.

<sup>271</sup> *Times*, April 8, 1847, cited in *The Reasoner: And 'Herald of Progress'*, 237.

ideas, but who is also physically compromised. While to be rational is to be free of contamination and in a state of harmonious balance between the mental and the physical, in accordance with the laws of nature. Nature, then, is viewed as the source of all truth. While alienation is conceived of as a state of being cut off from truth/nature. 'Truth' equals unity, harmony and clarity, while 'error' equals division, the separation of constitutive parts, confusion and distortion.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have traced the role of the mechanics of agency in the Owenite conception of alienation. Whereas the Individual System held that individuals chose through an entirely free Will, the Owenite framework reduces the Will to a choosing faculty of sorts, but one conceived of as entirely neutral, with no preferences of its own. Instead, the Will's only driver is an inclination to choose whatever it perceives to be true and to lead to the subject's happiness. However, in making this choice, it is guided only by the 'understanding' with which it is presented, and if individuals choose poorly, it is only because their understanding of reality and of the true consequences of their actions is distorted. This, then, is an example of the role of the Will to Truth in the Owenite framework: the Will is naturally inclined to seek the truth on every occasion, with only ignorance of the truth preventing it from doing so. If the individual could be inculcated with a correct understanding, however, then the Will would naturally make the right choice.

The above refers to the mechanical conceptualisation of rationality in the Owenite framework. There is also, as I have shown, a physiological conceptualisation that conceives of ignorance as a sort of infection that stops the Will to Truth from flowing healthily. Once the malady is 'purged', truth becomes operant again, rationalising the individual. In both cases, however, we find that what the Will to Truth requires in order to operate optimally is clarity – the removal of a distorting element that is preventing the Will from choosing rationally.

Here I would like to make a central point to which I will return repeatedly: in both the mechanical and physiological conceptualisations of agency, Owenism reduces human agency to *mere choice-making*. The Owenite framework makes no space for the creation of

the new. Owenism's objective is merely to *regulate* the Will along natural and rational lines. This leads us to the next chapter: the replacement of the Individual System with a 'Social System'. In the next chapter, I will explain what the 'Social System' consisted in, and how it was intended to interact with the mechanics of agency to rationalise the Will and produce a rational, happy and un-alienated character.

## Chapter 7 – Installing the 'Social System'

### Introduction

As I have shown over the previous two chapters, Owenism was born in response to a perceived crisis. Its analysis of the crisis held that the Individual System produced irrational character as it was grounded in axiomatic errors which alienated people from human nature – from truth – and divided society by driving people to compete against one another. The objective, therefore, was to rationalise society – giving people a “sophisticated, rational will” – by aligning society with the truth of natural law. This would “end the unconscious determination of character by circumstances” and transform society “from a state of passive, mechanical necessity to one of collective, voluntary control, as a movement from the present state of society, governed by circumstances to that which will arise when society shall be taught to govern circumstances.”<sup>272</sup> In other words, the purpose of the movement is to create responsible agents, as evidenced by this question from an exam for prospective members of the Universal Community Society’s London branch:

Why is it necessary, in the state of transition between the present state of society and that proposed by the Socialists, to make man responsible for his actions in violation of principles which declare him to be irresponsible?<sup>273</sup>

This would be achieved by replacing the Individual System with the ‘Social System’, which would remove error by working *with* the laws of human nature rather than against them, arranging all institutions and relations around the social instincts rather than around self-interest. In chapters 7 and 8, I will explain how the system was supposed to produce rational character and usher in a state of community, as well as how the Owenites inferred this system’s principles.

### 7.1. Sociability at the Core of Human Nature

As I have already shown, Owenism is an iteration of a much broader debate regarding human nature’s ‘ruling passion’, adopting from a preceding line of moral philosophers the

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<sup>272</sup> Claeys, *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism*, 120–21.

<sup>273</sup> “System of Examination for Candidates for Membership”, 1840, Robert Owen Correspondence, letter No. 1249, National Co-operative Archive.

argument that human beings are fundamentally sociable rather than self-interested. But it is in Owenism that this line of thought becomes part of a popular quasi-doctrine and gives birth to a new term: 'socialism'. While 'socialism' does not appear in print in English until 1835 ('Socialist' appears in print as far back as 1827, and even earlier in manuscript form), the term derives, according to Claey's, from a description of Owen's doctrines as the 'Social System', which was juxtaposed to the 'Individual System' before 1820.<sup>274</sup> According to Harrison, in the 1820s "Owenites used phrases such as the 'new view of society', the 'social system' and 'cooperation'" interchangeably. By 1840, however, "socialism [became] virtually synonymous with Owenism."<sup>275</sup>

It is important to note that even though 'sociability' or the 'social instinct' played a key role in the thought of most prominent political economists (as we saw in chapter 1), the socialist position was articulated in direct opposition to what socialists viewed as a system of pure competitive individualism. As Yeo explains, co-operators used the term 'social' to oppose "the antisocial, competitive society which surrounded [them]. Co-operators [...] were developing their own moral tradition concerning matters like debt, equitability, independence and unity."<sup>276</sup> At its core, this entire endeavour was grounded on the assertion that 'sociability' is the primary motive to action in all humans. Indeed, 'the social principle' was seen as "[the] great directing power of all the virtuous movements of the hearts of men, [...] built on the universal principles of the unity, consistency, and dignity of truth."<sup>277</sup> As such, the social instincts could be used to regulate and rationalise conduct: replace the competitive system with the social system, and watch as error dissipates and all elements of the field begin to flow in a healthy and rational manner. To do this, Owenites first had to dissuade people from the notion that selfishness is the route to happiness and help them understand their true motives to action:

If by competition be meant that individuals are stimulated to exertion by

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<sup>274</sup> See Claey's, *Citizens and Saints*, 60-61

<sup>275</sup> Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: The Quest for the New Moral World*, 45–46.

<sup>276</sup> Yeo, Stephen, 'Holyoake: A Resource for a Journey of Hope?', in *Mainstreaming Co-Operation: An Alternative for the Twenty-First Century?*, n.d., 48.

<sup>277</sup> Macnab, 'The New Views of Mr. Owen of Lanark Impartially Examined, as Rational Means of Ultimately Promoting the Productive Industry, Comfort, Moral Improvement, and Happiness of the Labouring Classes of Society, and of the Poor; and of Training up Children in the Way in Which They Should Go', 106.

the desire of surpassing each other, we venture to affirm that such cases are extremely rare. [...] [In] the best schools it is found that the pleasures and advantages of knowledge are sufficient to draw forth all desirable exertion. So with the production of wealth; higher and more enlarged views being introduced, motives of a merely personal and selfish character must be superseded.<sup>278</sup>

If such a goal sounds like a tall order, to the Owenites it was a mere formality, because the ‘social instinct’ was already the primary driving force in all human endeavour – it merely needed to be coaxed and nurtured. As James Hole argued, socialism had always been inseparable from society:

Wherever there is an attempt to introduce the laws of justice and kindness into social relations [...], –wherever wisdom and love preside of the politics and economics of mankind,–there is Socialism. In truth, Socialism is no chimera lately started by a few theorists; it is a fact founded on the social necessities of human nature.<sup>279</sup>

While Owen believed his own proposals to be:

the result of a patient observation and extensive experience of human nature; of human nature, not indeed as it is explained in legendary tales of old, but as it now may be read in the living subject – in the words and actions of those among whom we exist.<sup>280</sup>

Indeed, this is precisely why socialism is unstoppable – because it is merely a vehicle for the truth etched into the laws of nature, carrying society towards a state of community.

Following the principle of the Will to Truth I expounded earlier, socialism’s truth-spreading effect is irresistible – people just need to be recalibrated to be able to perceive it correctly:

The [social] system has been predicted thousands of years, it was concealed in the womb of nature; [...] Nothing can stay it; you may just as well attempt to prevent all the trees from putting forth their leaves and their blossoms in the spring. The times and seasons of nature are fixed, and there is a spring for the human mind and for society, as well as for the trees. [...] Man, long afflicted by tyranny, long deceived by [...] superstition and ignorance, now demands a renewal of his nature [...] and some grand political experiment

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<sup>278</sup> Hole, *Lectures on Social Science and the Organization of Labor*, 156.

<sup>279</sup> Hole, *Lectures on Social Science and the Organization of Labor*. ix

<sup>280</sup> Owen, ‘The Book of the New Moral World’. v

hitherto unattempted.<sup>281</sup>

However, society's organisation along the principles of 'competition' steers society away from natural organisation: "The false notions [...] and the unsocial system that prevails, have made men cruel and proud, wicked and avaricious."<sup>282</sup> But this irrational state will end once a co-operative system is instated: "Under wise arrangements - that is, when their interests shall cease to be opposed to each other - they can be rendered humane, generous, full of every good quality, and capable of almost infinite improvement." It is not a matter of 'if' but 'when' it will finally work its way through society, rationalising the mind of every single individual in its path:

[The] mind of man, formed on the old system, [can no] longer interpose obstacles capable of retarding the progress of those truths which I am now about to unfold to you. The futile attempts which ignorance may for a short time oppose to them, will be found to accelerate their introduction. As soon as they shall be comprehended in all their bearings, every one will be compelled to acknowledge them [...].<sup>283</sup>

In other words, if the crisis of irrationality can be resolved it is because the potential for rationality and happiness is already built into human nature, and because the universe is governed by a Will to Truth. All that's needed is for people to be dissuaded from the 'false notions' that confuse them and to be recalibrated with the true principles of human nature. And this will be achieved by implementing co-operation as a regulating principle – co-operation will make people rational; it will transform the human material. Yet, although the "form [of future Socialism] may be left to time", Socialists must first win the battle of ideas. "That is, it must be shown that [Socialism] is not absurd, self-contradictory, or at war with the inherent tendencies of human nature."<sup>284</sup> This is the ongoing struggle to prove that human nature is governed by the 'social' and not the 'selfish' principle. Hole quotes at length from a 'Mr M'Culloch' (presumably the Ricardian political economist John Ramsay

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<sup>281</sup> Rev. J.E. Smith, 'Lecture on a Christian Community', in *Owenite Socialism: Pamphlets & Correspondence, v.4, 1832-1837*, ed. Gregory Claeys (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 199–200.

<sup>282</sup> First Armagh Co-operative Society, 'Words of Wisdom Addressed to the Working Classes, 1830', in *Owenite Socialism: Pamphlets & Correspondence, v.2, 1823-1831*, ed. Gregory Claeys (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 329.

<sup>283</sup> Owen, 'An Address Delivered to the Inhabitants of New Lanark, on the First of January, 1816, at the Opening of the Institution Established for the Formation of Character', 82–83.

<sup>284</sup> Hole, *Lectures on Social Science and the Organization of Labor*. vii



McCulloch), who dismissed communism on the argument that, under such a system, individuals would not be incentivised to work as their gains would be the same no matter how great their labour. “Under such circumstances, it is clear the community would make no progress [...]. Instead of being annihilated, the principle of self-interest would be as strong as ever.” Hole, however, retorts that this would only occur in a:

Communism [...] guided only by low impulses (the result in part of previous misdirected training [i.e. under the Individual System] [...]). This however no more disproves the communist principle, than the necessity of using arms establishes the inexpediency of peace [...] [Does] genuine Human nature, properly trained and conditioned really prefer idleness to activity?<sup>285</sup>

Human nature, then, already contained within it the blueprints for the New Moral World. And as Owenism held a providential conception of the universe as built on natural laws propelled by Divine Wisdom, it was not uncommon to find adaptations of the notion of Divine Revelation among Owenites who, despite their deism and their rejection of original sin, did not reject the Bible or Christianity wholesale. As Elishama Smith argued:

The Bible is written for both worlds, the old and the new; it is the tyrant’s book and the people’s book [...]. Like nature itself it contains good and evil, and you may take which you choose. It writes lies for the old world and truths for the new.<sup>286</sup>

“What is a Christian?” asks Smith elsewhere.

A true Christian is one who turns the world upside down [...]. Christians ought, in imitation of their master, to serve one another, to participate in each other's joys and sorrows, mutually to assist and comfort one another, to become as one family, to partake of one common store, and to acknowledge no interest but one.<sup>287</sup>

Indeed, to many co-operators, Owenism was but one useful set of ideas among many from which they could borrow in order to further the socialist cause. Smith himself viewed Saint-Simonism, Owenism and Fourierism as all contributing to the “religion of progress, which [...] is now forming the brain and intellectual system of the new world.”<sup>288</sup> For Nature is

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<sup>285</sup> Hole, 153–54.

<sup>286</sup> Elishama Smith in *The Crisis*, 4 January 1834.

<sup>287</sup> Smith, ‘Lecture on a Christian Community’, 192.

<sup>288</sup> *The Shepherd*, 14 March, 1835

essentially characterised by *unity*, and the goal was to bring under one roof all that could further the realisation of this unity:

Mr Owen is a disciple of Nature, and only opposed to Revelation so far as he thinks it disagrees with Nature; but he is perfectly willing [...] to see the two reconciled, for the leading feature of his system is 'unity'.<sup>289</sup>

From this we may conclude that all appearance of disunity and division are but a distortion of nature's reality, this distortion resulting from the Individual System's 'artificiality'. Indeed, to Owenites, the Individual System is the source of all division and error. "If Nature and Revelation can be married together, it must be a most social union."<sup>290</sup> Only socialism is aligned with human nature, and society must be built upon its precepts:

The Socialist believes this [inconsistency] to arise from man's ignorance of his own nature; and he therefore looks with animated hope for its certain removal, as he shall acquire more knowledge, and shall have formed his social arrangements in strict conformity with the laws of his nature.<sup>291</sup>

## 7.2. Creating Rational Character

Implementing the 'social system', then, would create a character in line with the laws of human nature. This will correct the distortions caused by the Individual System, remove error, heal the antagonism caused by competition, and ultimately bring about a state of 'community'. As Stedman Jones points out, while "[the] older radicalism of the pre-1820 period had tended to juxtapose competition to monopoly [...], Owenism and co-operation [...] juxtaposed competition to community, with the contrast between competition and association as an important intermediate stage."<sup>292</sup> This is effectively the Owenite formulation of the path from alienation to rationality: Competition sows division, alienating people from one another and from their essential nature. Its corrosive effects are to be cured by implementing the social system, which would result in the arrival of 'community' –

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<sup>289</sup> Elishama Smith, *Crisis*, 14 September 1833.

<sup>290</sup> Elishama Smith, *Crisis*, 14 September 1833.

<sup>291</sup> Author unknown, 'An Analysis of Human Nature: A Lecture Delivered to the Members and Friends of the Association of All Classes of All Nations, by One of the Honorary Missionaries to That Institution.', 6.

<sup>292</sup> Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982*, 122.

referring to a state of things to come, a utopian ideal, yet one which Owenites believed would undoubtedly arrive.

As already noted, the Owenite concept of 'community' traversed parochial identities and extended "universally that love which is now pent up within the narrow circle of a family."<sup>293</sup> In this sense, therefore, 'community' encompassed the whole of humanity, with each member being inextricably bound to every other member. Talk of 'rationalisation' and the arrival of community was often reminiscent of a transmutation in which human nature would undergo a permanent transformation and constitute a new type of society. In Christ's image, writes Smith, human nature has two states: "the first corrupted and evil, though inherently good [...]; the second purified and glorified, when the first is destroyed."<sup>294</sup> We see again the idea that the potential to transform humanity does not come from without, but is rather already embedded at the core of human nature. Thus, though the 'old system' produces irrational people, the essence of human nature, "the true word of God", makes salvation possible.

[Whilst] the death of Christ is merely a beautiful little picture of the death of evil or corruption, and his resurrection in a more refined body, [so is] the resurrection of human nature at the millennium, when the old system of society is crucified.

The image is one of a transition from one state of being to a higher one, with the first and inferior state becoming obsolete in the process. The 'old system' was founded on the two errors of self-interest and personal responsibility, while the new stage of humanity, in which human nature would be purified, would be founded "on the original principle of a community of goods." Indeed, Owenite ideas were often delivered in a millenarian, messianic tone, promising the wholesale transformation of society and the arrival of a New Moral World that would entirely do away with the selfishness of the old world as though through a purging of the soul, promising that "motives of antipathy and individualism [such as] love of money [and] love of accumulation, of distinction, of rank, of privilege, of domination", would evaporate once a "state of community" had been achieved.<sup>295</sup> The

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<sup>293</sup> John Bray, *Labour's Wrongs and Labour's Remedy* (1839) (London: Routledge, 2016), 12.

<sup>294</sup> Smith, 'Lecture on a Christian Community', 198.

<sup>295</sup> Samuel Austin, *The Pioneer*, n.d. No.26 (1 March 1834)

principle of co-operation, then, would facilitate the transformation of character from a low state to a higher one, in which people would become responsible agents. "I think [...] that [...] co-operation [...] tends to elevate character", wrote Robert Dale Owen:

[...] it is steadily strengthening and purifying the daily lives of a great section of our people [through its capacity] to bring about fixity of employment; to create new ties, new forms of fellowship, even a sort of family feeling [...]; and thus, after a time, *to develop a new type of workingmen*, characterized not only by honesty, frankness, kindness, and true courtesy, but by a dignity, a self-respect, and a consciousness of freedom which only this phase of labour gives.<sup>296</sup>

Co-operation appears as an organisational principle and a means by which to facilitate the formation of a new, rational character. Robert Owen himself was unequivocal in his belief that character-formation was an objective of government. The character and overall happiness of a community depends on the individuals that compose it, making it the role of government to ensure proper character-formation for each and every individual:

Any character, from the best to the worst, from the most ignorant to the most enlightened, may be given to any community, even to the world at large, by applying certain means; which are to a great extent at the command and under the control, or easily made so, of those who possess the government of nations.<sup>297</sup>

In Holyoake's words: "It is not the 'survival' of the fittest, but the creation of the fittest, to which co-operation is committed. This is the co-operative education which is needed."<sup>298</sup> And even as far forward as the 1890s, Holyoake could still be found claiming that co-operation's foremost importance is in its creation of "a new person, a new character [...]; the new knowledge required is as extensive and various as that which has perfected the science of antagonism which we call 'civilization'." <sup>299</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Robert Dale Owen, *Threading My Way* (London: Trubner, 1874), 272–73.

<sup>297</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 169.

<sup>298</sup> Holyoake, *Essentials of Co-Operative Education*, 6.

<sup>299</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *The Co-Operative Movement Today (1891)* (London: Methuen, 1906), 86.

### 7.3. Practices of The Social System and Experiments in Its Implementation

Thus, Owenites embarked on numerous educational endeavours in their quest to prepare people's character for the advancement of community and the arrival of New Moral World. They set up schools, sent forth missionaries to spread the word among industrial districts, and built 'Halls of Science' (which Claeys identified as "an alternative set of local cultural institutions")<sup>300</sup> in which a new type of culture could be developed to counteract the effects of competitive commercial society. These were mostly erected between 1837-44, and the fact that at least £22,000 was spent on them in 1839-40 gives us an indication of how important these were to the Owenites. The activities that took place in these Halls of Science is of interest to us as they give an insight into the kinds of changes in character and conduct Owenites hoped to produce. For example, in some social events, each family would be asked to bring its own food, which would then be "united in common stock"<sup>301</sup> and shared between everyone at the event. The purpose of this was to teach communal distribution, to erase learnt self-regarding behaviour and replace it with a new understanding. Co-operation, then, is a guiding principle used to frame every single practice in order to retrieve humanity from the unnatural and corrosive effects of competition, and cultivate a spirit of association by awakening the social instincts at the heart of the human constitution, simultaneously eradicating the division and antagonism of the Individual System and replacing it with what Owenites termed the 'social system', 'rational system' or socialism.<sup>302</sup> Owenites also established several co-operative communities<sup>303</sup>. William Thompson defined a co-operative community as "an association of persons in sufficient numbers, and living on a space of land sufficient extent, to supply by their own exertions all of each other's wants."<sup>304</sup> These communities functioned as de facto experiments in living

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<sup>300</sup> Claeys, 'From "Politeness" to "Rational Character." The Critique of Culture in Owenite Socialism 1800-1850', 20.

<sup>301</sup> *New Moral World*, n.d. 11 June 1836, 261

<sup>302</sup> The terms are often used interchangeably. Cf Owen, *Manifesto*, p.3-4, where the author also refers to himself as the Founder of the Rational System.

<sup>303</sup> Owenites set up several community experiments, the most notable of which were New Harmony, Orbiston, Queenwood, and Ralahine. Though there were also Wisbech, Manea Fen, and other communities. These were not directly associated with Owen but were established by groups with deep Owenite sympathies and employing Owenite pedagogical principles, often mixed with Pestalozzian methods.

<sup>304</sup> Thompson, 'Practical Directions for the Speedy and Economical Establishment of Communities on the Principles of Mutual Cooperation, United Possessions and Equality', 2-3.

under the social system. Here, individuals could be removed from the malignant circumstances of the competitive system and be transformed by life under the social system, in which all arrangements and activities were designed to regulate human proclivities along natural lines and to promote social cohesion. We already find an early version of such arrangements at New Lanark:

the [Institute for the Formation of Character] was home to New Lanark's community life [...]. Owen also planned to add a communal kitchen and dining room to the building. Musical activities were particularly encouraged among children and adults alike as a means of generating social cohesion through amusement. In addition to daily singing and dancing classes, weekly balls and concerts were held in the Institute [...].<sup>305</sup>

Under community (either in the utopian sense of the word or in the sense of a small physical community), individual flourishing would still be pursued:

In a community of free and intelligent men and women, all liberally educated, and all left to their own choice to select that mode of life which was most compatible with their natural capacities and inclination, there would be an astonishing increase of mental vigour and genius to the world.<sup>306</sup>

However, what makes human flourishing under community different to the Individual System is that here flourishing would be governed by the principle of “mutual co-operation”:

every individual entering a community [would be] willing to direct his or her labour, mental or physical, or as is most frequently the case, both combined, to whatever objects may be deemed by the general voice, most conducive to the general good.<sup>307</sup>

Every individual would employ “the talents with which Nature had endowed him, not for his own personal advancement, but for the good of all.”<sup>308</sup> Community, then, is a state in which all elements of the system — including the individuals of which it is made up — are

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<sup>305</sup> Simeon, *Robert Owen's Experiment at New Lanark: From Paternalism to Socialism*, 78.

<sup>306</sup> Smith, ‘Lecture on a Christian Community’, 205–6.

<sup>307</sup> Thompson, ‘Practical Directions for the Speedy and Economical Establishment of Communities on the Principles of Mutual Cooperation, United Possessions and Equality’, 3.

<sup>308</sup> Charles Bray, *The Philosophy of Necessity; or, the Law of Consequences as Applicable to Mental, Moral and Social Science* (London: Longmans, 1841), 435.

rationally configured, and where all individuals would possess the means to pursue their flourishing and explore their talents and proclivities, yet not in competition with one another. So powerful was the principle of mutual co-operation, in fact, that it would make the social body virtually *self-regulating*, requiring minimal external intervention. George Mudie, for example, had largely adopted aspects of contemporary Scottish social theory, developing the argument that during the ‘agricultural stage’ of human history, “the pernicious consequences of the principles of separation and disunion, that is, of the opposition of interests, and the consequent misapplication of productive powers, began to be manifest.” Consequently, “so unnatural a state soon required severe laws, or the terrors of punishments, to hold societies together.”<sup>309</sup> A co-operative community, however, would fix all of this. Not only would resources and labour be efficiently managed in a society of common interest, but the social field as a whole would become rationalised and containable. So unshakeable was the Owenite belief in the rationalising power of co-operation that nobody’s application to Orbiston would be refused on account of “previous bad character.” After all, the whole purpose of the community was, ultimately, to be character-forming in and of itself. The community was meant to facilitate the transition from the Old System to the new, Rational System: “We set out to overcome Ignorance, Poverty and Vice; it would be a poor excuse for failure to urge that the subjects of our experiment were ignorant, poor, vicious.”<sup>310</sup> This belief in the unstoppable power of co-operation to rationalise people meant that a selection process was virtually absent. “[Applicants] were not selected. We took them as they made application, as long as we had accommodation of any sort.”<sup>311</sup>

However, while the movement contained a near-fanatical belief in the power of rational circumstances to rationalise society wholesale, this was tempered by the competing belief that the available human material, formed as it had been under irrational circumstances, was not yet ready for the social system. Many socialists, like the Rational Community Friendly Society, were forced to admit that they had “committed errors in attempting to apply to the present generation principles applicable only to a much higher state of intellect

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<sup>309</sup> *The Economist*, n.d. 1, no.2 (3 February 1821), 20; no. 4 (17 February 1821), 55-56;

<sup>310</sup> *Orbiston Register*, 19 August 1826, 125.

<sup>311</sup> p. 26. Henry Hetherington was one of the signatories.

and morality”, and that if there was any chance of “their ever looking upon the reality of their visions, it must be by adapting their measures, as far as possible, to the materials on which they are to operate.”<sup>312</sup> This theme is never fully resolved throughout the movement’s history. As late as 1874, we still find Owen’s son remarking that “[man] has acquired [industrial powers] in advance of the capacity to take advantage of them [...]”. Material, even intellectual, progress brings scanty result, unless moral and spiritual progress bear it company.”<sup>313</sup> The culture would need to be right before the system could be effective:

The shrub of co-operation often requires an unconscionable time to take root [...]. The best of seeds will not quicken anywhere. The fault is less in the seed than in the conditions of its culture. A new system, like a new character, cannot be formed right off.<sup>314</sup>

Nevertheless, all Owenites were united in the sanguine belief that with the right knowledge, human beings could undoubtedly be altered and prepared for the New Moral World:

It is as necessary that individuals should be trained for a Community; as it is necessary they should be trained for any trade; [...] There is as certainly a science of society as there is of mathematics.<sup>315</sup>

## Conclusion

Having outlined the Owenite analysis of the crisis as stemming from the Individual System’s axiomatic errors, I have just outlined its proposed response to said crisis. Where the Individual System created alienation – both that of individuals from their essential nature and from one another – Owenites proposed the practical implementation of a Social System that would produce rational character and ultimately usher in a state of community, in which all of humanity would be bound together in mutual-interest. The Owenites considered these outcomes unstoppable because, as they saw it, the blueprints for socialism are already inscribed into the human constitution – all that is required is a system that would guide the social instincts as they are intended to be guided. The principle of the Will

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<sup>312</sup> Bower, ‘Competition in Peril; or the Present Position of the Owenites, or Rationalists, Considered; Together with Miss Martineau’s Account of Communities in America’, 390.

<sup>313</sup> Dale Owen, *Threading My Way*, 271–72.

<sup>314</sup> Holyoake, *Essentials of Co-Operative Education*, 13–14.

<sup>315</sup> ‘Report of the Second Co-Operative Congress, 1831’, n.d., 16.



to Truth guarantees that, given the right circumstances, people's social instincts will find their way towards happiness and community.

Owenism was not the only reaction to the crisis of lower-class distress, nor was it unique in its articulation of 'community' as an objective (this notion being a direct reworking of a Christian tradition). However, I argue that what set it apart from other contemporaneous responses was its formulation of the crisis as a *systemic* issue, including the formulation of an early notion of alienation as the foundation for a critique of contemporary society. Approaching the problem as a systemic one allowed Owenites to promulgate an all-encompassing project for social transformation, grounded in the assertion that sociability was the primary driving force behind all human endeavour. However, one more aspect sets the movement apart from its contemporaries: it took the thematic concepts and timbre of Christian millenarian movements (the coming of a new moral world, the corruption of the human material and its impending transmutation to a state of purity) and recast them as a scientific problem and as a question of 'rationality'. As Owenites perceived the crisis of the day to be one of rationality and truth, they needed to articulate a set of epistemological principles and methods by which to construct and implement the Social System. Over the course of the following two chapters, I will explain precisely what these were, outlining what Owenites termed the 'Social Science', as well as their science of character-formation, and the particular version of empiricism that framed these sciences.

## Chapter 8 – Social Science and the Role of Empiricism in the Owenite

### Framework

#### Introduction

How, one might ask, did the Owenites know that the Individual System's axiomatic assumptions were erroneous? The answer lies in the Owenites' own axiomatic ontological assumption: that nature and truth are inherently unified, consistent and universal. Working from this axiomatic foundation, Owenites argued that any variability in moral and cultural standards across societies was proof that these were grounded in error. Any discrepancies between different value systems meant that they must be founded on the wrong standards. The aim, therefore, was to find a fixed, universal standard from which to extrapolate social, economic and moral laws that could be applied universally, and by which to also judge and regulate conduct. Thus, for example, John Minter Morgan could look forward to the day when representatives from all nations would sit together and "submit their various institutions and customs to a strict comparison and scrutiny, and then synthetically form a scheme of universal polity."<sup>316</sup> This would be done by developing a science of society, or what Owenites termed 'Social Science'. In this chapter I will show how the Owenites sought to develop an empiricist Social Science that would guide the installation of the Social System.

The term 'Social Science' first appeared in William Thompson's *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness* (1824),<sup>317</sup> where he attempted to outline a "master-science" that does not so much supplant political economy as furnish it with "higher, guiding principles [...]."<sup>318</sup> For Thompson, the application of Social Science was "the art of social happiness."<sup>319</sup> Its ultimate purpose was to provide people with an unambiguous moral code and aid in the creation of the social system – "a system

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<sup>316</sup> John Minter Morgan, *Hampden in the Nineteenth Century: Or, Colloquies on the Errors and Improvement of Society ; in Two Volumes* (London: Edward Moxon, 1834), 87.

<sup>317</sup> See Claey's, *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism*, 83.

<sup>318</sup> Claey's, 84.

<sup>319</sup> William Thompson, *An Inquiry Into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness: Applied to the Newly Proposed System of Voluntary Equality of Wealth* (Longman, 1824). viii-ix

deduced from experience upon the clearest principles of science.”<sup>320</sup> Similarly, the *Economist* spoke of “the construction of a great social and moral machine, calculated to produce wealth, knowledge, and happiness, with unprecedented precision and rapidity [...]”.<sup>321</sup> In this chapter, I will show what this Social Science consisted of and how the empirical method grounded the entire Owenite project, providing Owenites with a fixed source of knowledge and removing the uncertainty caused by a Godless world.

### 8.1. Establishing a Universal Standard

The idea of using an empirical science makes sense within a framework that views rationality as rooted in natural laws: as morality and physiology were deemed to be equally subject to natural law, Owenites believed that the workings of social organisation could be understood and governed using the same observational methods that were applied to study of the natural world. Indeed, the laws of nature underlie everything. “The physical sciences, by the profound and modest Newton, *were established on first truths*”, claimed Macnab. And on these truths were erected works “which do honour to human nature [...]”. These sciences have:

demonstrated the existence of the Divine Being, who directs and governs the universe by perfect and immutable laws. [...] It is only by obeying them that nature can be *subdued, improved, and delighted*. [...] The integrity and continuity of relations must be known, respected, and obeyed. It is thus that the unity, consistency, and perfection displayed in the works of creation are manifested, and that *knowledge becomes power*.<sup>322</sup>

Thompson, meanwhile, divided ‘useful knowledge’ into two branches: “Physical knowledge” (knowledge of the natural world) and “Moral knowledge”, which he treated as any other scientific field and defined as “Knowledge of Human Actions and of their Consequences.”<sup>323</sup> This field includes a knowledge of “Rules, Laws, Treaties, etc. for the REGULATION of the

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<sup>320</sup> Morgan, *Hampden in the Nineteenth Century: Or, Colloquies on the Errors and Improvement of Society ; in Two Volumes*. iii

<sup>321</sup> *The Economist*. 4 August 1821

<sup>322</sup> Macnab, ‘The New Views of Mr. Owen of Lanark Impartially Examined, as Rational Means of Ultimately Promoting the Productive Industry, Comfort, Moral Improvement, and Happiness of the Labouring Classes of Society, and of the Poor; and of Training up Children in the Way in Which They Should Go’, 41–42. (Italics in the original)

<sup>323</sup> Thompson, ‘Practical Directions for the Speedy and Economical Establishment of Communities on the Principles of Mutual Cooperation, United Possessions and Equality’, 198–200.

actions of masses of men towards each other, so as to produce the greatest sum of happiness [...], and comprehending Legislation, Political Economy [...]", etc. Social Science refers to the application of these two branches of knowledge to social organization, and its purpose is:

to produce, by the development of all the faculties of every individual, the means of insuring permanent health for the longest life, with the means of physical, mental, and social pleasures, in the highest degree, impartially to every human being.

In other words, its purpose is to produce rational character across society. Owen similarly spoke of a "master science":

by which the population of all ranks and degrees may gradually pass from the old world, without the slightest inconvenience, into the new world; and by which the angry and injurious passions and violent proceedings of the human race shall be made peaceably to terminate, and all evil shall be changed to good.<sup>324</sup>

Elsewhere Owen describes Social Science as a "scientific union" that allows one to harmonise the great four departments of life: "—1st, The production of wealth ;—2nd, The distribution of wealth;—3rd, The formation of character ;—and 4th, Governing, locally and generally."<sup>325</sup> Owen refers to this as the 'Rational System'. An almost identical formulation can be found in a public lecture from 1838, in which the 'science of Society' is divided into the four branches of "PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, EDUCATION, and GOVERNMENT."<sup>326</sup> The final branch, 'Government', is:

that department, whose business it is to see that the three preceding ones are properly conducted; by making regulations for the production of wealth; for its fair or equitable distribution, and providing for the education and training of all the population.<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> Owen, *Manifesto of Robert Owen: The Discoverer, Founder, and Promulgator, of the Rational System of Society, and of the Rational Religion: To Which Are Added, a Preface and Also an Appendix.*, 26.

<sup>325</sup> Owen, 25.

<sup>326</sup> Author unknown, 'An Analysis of Human Nature: A Lecture Delivered to the Members and Friends of the Association of All Classes of All Nations, by One of the Honorary Missionaries to That Institution.', 11.

<sup>327</sup> Author unknown, 12.

Here the author refers to the ‘Social System’. The ‘Social System’ and ‘Rational System’ are often used interchangeably in Owenite literature, and both are juxtaposed to the ‘competitive’ or ‘Individual’ system. The aim of Social Science is clearly, therefore, to facilitate the replacement of the old erroneous system with a rational system, scientifically constructed on sound, empirically deduced first principles. It was essential for this science to be empirical, as Owenites considered empiricism – the steady accumulation of facts from experience, which are then used as first principles for the construction of theories – to be the only sound means of producing an error-free system. For “[the] only safe method consists in proceeding from the known to the unknown [...]”<sup>328</sup> These first principles would be the laws of nature, for “[...] nothing is less elastic, more stubborn than the unchangeable laws of Nature [...]”<sup>328</sup> Thus, in his *Manifesto*, Owen can say that “until the progress of mind, collecting fact upon fact, age after age, forced the discovery of this *new knowledge* upon some individual, no-one possessed sufficient [...] varied experience”<sup>329</sup> to deliver Mankind from its wretched state. Indeed, says another Owenite, “with the help of [empiricism] we shall be able to build up the last and most important and comprehensive [science] of them all, and of which [the Pure and Experimental Sciences] are merely the materials — the Social Science.”<sup>330</sup> The empirical method would eradicate ambiguity by proceeding methodically, gradually removing error until there was nothing left but the naked laws of human nature.

[K]eep always in view, the complicated nature of man, the instrument to operate with and the creature to be operated upon. Without a constant reference to it, the regulating principle of utility is sacrificed, and the grand object of political economy, the indefinite increase of the accumulations of wealth or of its yearly products, become worthless objects consigning to the wretchedness of unrequited toil three-fourths or nine-tenths of the human race.<sup>331</sup>

Thus, the implementation of the social system would be done empirically, through the gradual accumulation of knowledge and its continual re-evaluation. The same belief can be

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<sup>328</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *The Reasoner*, 1853 *Onwards*, n.d., 246, [https://archive.org/details/ldpd\\_12356300\\_000](https://archive.org/details/ldpd_12356300_000).

<sup>329</sup> Owen, *Manifesto of Robert Owen: The Discoverer, Founder, and Promulgator, of the Rational System of Society, and of the Rational Religion: To Which Are Added, a Preface and Also an Appendix.*, 3–4. (Italics in the original)

<sup>330</sup> *The Reasoner: And ‘Herald of Progress’*, 246.

<sup>331</sup> Thompson, *An Inquiry Into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness: Applied to the Newly Proposed System of Voluntary Equality of Wealth.* viii-ix

found in the Orbiston community's rules and regulations, where it is stated that: "Every year, the rules and regulations of the society will be revised, democratically, according that what knowledge members have accumulated through 'experience'."<sup>332</sup> In *Lectures on Social Science and the Organization of Labor* from 1851, James Hole describes 'Co-operation' and 'Socialism' as a 'system' that progresses gradually, increasingly smoothing out any rough edges through 'experiment' – betraying again the faith placed in empiricism. Hole compared the development of Socialism to the perfection of the railway system, which must have begun in a basic way, strewn with difficulties, yet gradually improved. The same applies to the social system: "as practice develops the advantages of the system and exposes its weak points, the former will become increased, the latter remedied, until the principle has been carried to the greatest extent to which it can subserve human happiness."<sup>333</sup> Empiricism and the discovery of human nature, then, would make it "possible to found a natural and therefore durable code of morals, legislation, and social economy."<sup>334</sup>

## 8.2. The "Death of God" and Scientific Millenarianism

The fixation with establishing a universal standard of knowledge on moral and physical matters betrays, I argue, the anxiety underlying the Owenite analysis of the crisis. One detects an anxiety in the face of one of the most philosophically significant aspects of the Enlightenment – the "Death of God." As Arendt put it:

It is obvious that the advancing [...] de-Christianization [...] of the modern world, coupled, as it was, with an entirely new emphasis on the future, on progress, and therefore on things neither necessary nor sempiternal, would expose men [...] to the contingency of all things human more radically and more mercilessly than ever before. What had been ever since the end of antiquity the "problem of freedom" was now incorporated, as it were, in the haphazardness of history [...], to which there corresponded the random character of personal decisions originating in a free will that was guided neither by reason nor by desire.<sup>335</sup>

The entire Owenite project can be viewed as a deep anxiety-response to the problem described by Arendt – 'the contingency of all things human', 'the haphazardness of history'

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<sup>332</sup> *Orbiston Register*, 2.

<sup>333</sup> Hole, *Lectures on Social Science and the Organization of Labor*. ix

<sup>334</sup> *The Reasoner: And 'Herald of Progress'*, 246.

<sup>335</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind – Part 2*, n.d., 28.

and the problem of freedom and of a random free will. And so, I would like to make a small aside here, and consider a particular Nietzschean angle from which the co-operative movement could be studied in some future research. Nietzsche critiqued contemporary European society's reaction to this crisis of meaning and certainty. In his analysis, European thought was reacting by simply trying to replace God with a new universal standard, insisting on "a world that is not self-contradictory, not deceptive, does not change, a *true* world [...]." Owenism could be viewed as an example *par excellence* of the process Nietzsche was describing. This response is nihilism, Nietzsche claimed. The nihilist is "a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought *not* to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist [...]." <sup>336</sup> Nietzsche would surely have said precisely this of the Owenites: that they rejected the world as corrupt, self-contradictory, untethered from truth. And that, feeling a deep horror and anxiety at this loss of all solid meaning, they constructed an imaginary redeemed world. <sup>337</sup>

I will leave the Nietzschean angle behind now, but I believe it provides an enriching layer to our understanding of the Owenite relationship to the crisis, and of the profound anxiety Owenites might have been driven by. It can help us explain the manner and intensity with which they turned to science to resolve this state of uncertainty, placing their faith in empirical science to save society from contingency, and to guide the otherwise arbitrary will along a rational path. In fact, I argue that this is one of the facets that sets Owenism apart from the tradition of simple millenarianism, to which the movement is regularly imputed in historical literature. <sup>338</sup> In most studies of the movement, Owenism is given the labels of 'millenarianism' or 'rationalism' and is left at that. However, I argue that, while it can be thought of as a kind of secular millenarian movement, the key difference is the role that 'science' plays in its millenarian vision. Owenites, like many Enlightenment thinkers, merely replaced God's will with a Will to Truth diffused throughout nature, and turned to empirical science in order to regulate this Will to Truth and correct its errant flow. What was unique about Owenism was neither its millenarianism nor its scientism, but its fusion of the two.

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<sup>336</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 73–84.

<sup>337</sup> In fact, taking Owenism as a case-study, it might be possible to carry out a genealogy of nihilism.

<sup>338</sup> See, for example, Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites...*, 100

What separated Owenism from the millenarian movements of the time was that it did not believe the transformation of humanity would be precipitated by divine intervention, but rather by the implementation of a scientifically derived 'system'. As such, what matters is to explain the deep epistemic and axiomatic principles that frame this pseudo-scientific project. I have been unable to find any other studies of the movement that do this, and so this angle will form another original aspect of this thesis. In chapters 9-12, I will explain how these principles supposedly operated at the level of the individual.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have demonstrated some of the ways in which the Owenite project proceeded from certain ontological and epistemological assumptions. First was the ontological commitment to nature and truth being inherently consistent and universal. Second was the ontological assumption that the natural world and the laws of society were governed by the same natural laws, and that the laws of society could therefore be inferred through the same empirical methods used to study the natural world. Upon these two assumptions, Owenites set out to construct an empirical 'Social Science' through which to ascertain the fixed and universal principles on which the Social System would be established.

Finally, I further argue that behind the drive to establish an empirical Social Science lies an anxiety regarding the historical contingency exposed by the 'Death of God', even if this is not consciously expressed by Owenites. In chapters 9-12, I will continue to outline the ontological and epistemic assumptions underpinning Owenism by exploring the movement's theories of character-formation and pedagogical practices.



## Chapter 9 – ‘Useful Knowledge’ and the Owenite Critique of Old Education

### Introduction

I have already shown that Owenism aimed to devise and install a Social System in place of the Individual System. To this end, Owenites sought to develop a Social Science that would harmonise the great four departments of life in a “scientific union.” These are: wealth production; wealth distribution; the formation of character; and government. Thus, education (or character-formation, as it was often described in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) formed an integral part of the Social System. And just as Owenite analysis of the crisis entailed a critique of the Individual System’s assumptions regarding self-interest and free-will, it also contained a critique of the day’s dominant forms of education, which Owenites believed to be key factors in the diffusion of irrationality and the retardation of progress. In this chapter, I will outline the Owenite critique of the ‘Old System of Education’, and situate it within the context of a broader battle over the definition of ‘Useful Knowledge’ which occupied much of late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup>-century thought in Britain.

### 9.1. Background to the Debate on “Useful Knowledge”

Donnachie connects the emergence of Owenite education with the increasing concern with “knowledge diffusion” in Britain and the proliferation of publications and schemes designed to attain knowledge. “[There] was [...] an unprecedented increase in the number of publications devoted to the dissemination of knowledge including a wide range of instruction manuals, which mediated complex subjects like science for both children and adults.”<sup>339</sup> Indeed, education was a central concern – almost an obsession – in 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain. But underneath the thirst for knowledge diffusion lies the question of the ‘usefulness’ of knowledge. A debate over what constitutes ‘useful knowledge’ thus forms one of the most prominent intellectual battlegrounds of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, with participants drawn from all classes of society, including the most well-known thinkers of the day. We find societies for the dissemination of knowledge established all over the country, such as the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, founded in 1754, which was

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<sup>339</sup> See James Burns, ‘From “Polite Learning” to “Useful Knowledge”’, *History Today*, April 1986, 6, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/polite-learning-useful-knowledge>.

dedicated to utilitarian research and 'useful knowledge'.<sup>340</sup> There is the Royal Institution, established by Count Rumford in 1799, and described in its constitution as:

A Public Institution for diffusing the Knowledge and facilitating the general Introduction of useful mechanical Inventions and Improvements, and for teaching by Courses of Philosophical Lectures and Experiments the Applications of Science to the common Purposes of Life.<sup>341</sup>

These are but a couple of examples among thousands. However, although 'diffusion' was the primary aim of these societies, these bodies were more often than not intended for the benefit of the upper and middling classes, and not for the lower ranks. Burns points out that "[even] Bentham's projected chrestomathic scheme of education – the term derived, as he pointed out, 'from two Greek words, signifying conducive to useful learning' – was intended for 'the higher ranks of life' as well as for 'the middling'".<sup>342</sup> Nevertheless, Bentham, like many social reformers and educators of the day, also hoped that the diffusion of knowledge could prove instrumental in pacifying and rationalising the lower classes. Indeed, Bentham sought to allay the 'superior classes' fears over the provision of education to 'their now inferiors':

From any such increase in the quantity of useful knowledge possessed by the middle classes, the only manifestly natural and probable results are, improvement in respect of health, domestic economy and personal comfort; a more extensive disposition than at present to look for amusement and recreation in art, science, or literature, in preference to sensuality and indolence. In all these ways will the condition of the middle classes be made better; and it appears not how, in any of them, the condition of their superiors should be made worse.<sup>343</sup>

As such, the drive for a national education imbricates with the anxiety regarding the character of the lower classes (outlined in more depth towards the end of chapter 1). After all, we should recall that there was, by and large, intense opposition from among the ruling classes to providing education to the lower classes. It was only really once education came

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<sup>340</sup> James Burns, 'From "Polite Learning" to "Useful Knowledge"', *History Today*, April 1986, 6, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/polite-learning-useful-knowledge>.

<sup>341</sup> Burns, 6.

<sup>342</sup> Burns, 8.

<sup>343</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *Chrestomathia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). Notes to the chrestomathic tables.

to be seen as a possible means of control, of giving the lower classes a ‘civilised’, ‘polite’ or ‘rational’ character, that the idea of widespread education gains broad traction, with the urge to tame the working classes dressed up in the garb of benevolent philanthropy. This disciplinary and neutralising function of education can be traced throughout statements on education from the time. James Mill, for example, considered education essential for the protection of the social order, for “[the] first object undoubtedly to be provided for in the formation of a government [...] is the obedience of the governed.” This could be obtained either by,

force or affection [...] Every where, with variation only in degree, the object has been to accumulate force enough, [while] To train the minds of the people to a virtuous attachment to their government [...] has every where been left to chance [...].<sup>344</sup>

Joseph Priestly shared these concerns, adding that the need for state-provided education is for the purpose of “the forming of wise and virtuous men.”<sup>345</sup> While Adam Smith argued that “[a national system of education] is necessary, in order to prevent the almost entire corruption and degeneracy of the great body of the people.”<sup>346</sup> While Godwin opposed a system of national education “on account of its obvious alliance with national government... Government will not fail to employ it, to strengthen its hands, and perpetuate its institutions [...], [and retain the population in a state of perpetual pupillage.”<sup>347</sup> What he desired instead was an education that would teach each individual to use the power of reason in order to figure out what happiness meant to them. Each thinker, it appears, defines the ‘usefulness’ of a given form of education or knowledge according to how conducive it is to producing what they consider to be a desirable character and ideal social order. Hence, for example, Cobbett’s distinction between education and what he pejoratively termed ‘heddekashun’. The latter forced people to learn useless knowledge from books, and meant “taking boys and girls from their father’s and mother’s houses, and

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<sup>344</sup> James Mill. Review of Owen’s *New View of Society*, published in *The Philanthropist*, Vol. III, No. X, 1813, p.100. Cited in Silver, *The Concept of Popular Education*, 103.

<sup>345</sup> Joseph Priestley, *An Essay on the First Principles of Government* (1771) (Norderstedt: Hansebooks GmbH, 2020), 83.

<sup>346</sup> Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 416–17.

<sup>347</sup> William Godwin, *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners and Literature* (1797) (Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 1994), 1.

sending them to what is called a school [...].”<sup>348</sup> In place of this, Cobbett aimed for a holistic education with an emphasis on ‘practicality’. Thus, emphasis was placed on the skills of husbandry, gardening, the cultivation and preparation of food, hunting, and account-management. Yet he did not dismiss book-learning: “Book-learning is by no means to be despised; and it is a thing that may be laudably sought after by persons in all states of life.”<sup>349</sup> But what determined whether or not book-learning amounted to mere ‘polite knowledge’ was its use. Speaking of the editor of the *Morning Chronicle* and similarly glib members of the literati, Cobbett commented that “they were extremely enlightened, but they had no knowledge.”<sup>350</sup>

A tussle emerges, then, over what counts as ‘useful’ or ‘practical’. Richard Johnson makes the point that within radical circles, the definition of usefulness was less politically charged, and that ‘truth’ was prized over and above anything else, as a good in and of itself. Therefore,

The ‘practical’ and the ‘liberal’ were not seen as incompatible as they tend to be in modern education debates. For the practical embraced ‘all known facts’ and ‘the attainment of truth’. Despite the stress on a relation to the knower’s experience, there is no narrowly pragmatic conception of knowledge here. Knowledge is not just a political instrument; the search for ‘truth’ matters.<sup>351</sup>

As Samuel Johnson exclaimed: “a desire of knowledge is the natural feeling of mankind: and every human being, whose mind is not debauched, will be willing to give all that he has, to get knowledge.”<sup>352</sup> This indicates another layer of meaning hidden in the term ‘useful knowledge’ – it’s not just about the kind of character one wishes to produce, but about what they consider to be essential to human nature. To Samuel Johnson, human beings are

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<sup>348</sup> *Political Register*, n.d. 7 December 1833

<sup>349</sup> William Cobbett, *Advice to Young Men, and (Incidentally) to Young Women, in the Middle and Higher Ranks of Life*. (London: Mills, Jowett and Mills, 1829), 40, <https://archive.org/details/cobbettsadvicet00cobbgoo/page/n4/mode/2up>.

<sup>350</sup> William Cobbett, *The Autobiography of William Cobbett: The Progress of a Plough-Boy to a Seat in Parliament* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 194.

<sup>351</sup> Richard Johnson, “‘Really Useful Knowledge’: Radical Education and Working-Class Culture, 1790–1848”, in *CCCS Selected Working Papers Vol.1*, ed. Ann Gray (London: Routledge, 2007), 760.

<sup>352</sup> Quoted in Burns, ‘From “Polite Learning” to “Useful Knowledge”’, 1.

imbued with a natural ‘desire of knowledge’, meaning that all knowledge may be useful.<sup>353</sup> We might think of the way in which moneymaking is today broadly considered to be ‘practical’, while the arts and humanities come under increasingly heavier pressures to justify their existence, as part of the same debate. In fact, in the earlier quote regarding the ‘practical’ and the ‘liberal’, Richard Johnson seems to be insinuating that most of these 19<sup>th</sup> Century radicals would have rejected the subservience of the liberal arts to moneymaking. And yet, some radicals rejected certain forms of knowledge, including the liberal arts, as not only useless, but mendacious. The Radical Richard Carlile, for example, disliked poetry for its uselessness:

[Don Juan was] in my opinion mere *slip-slop*, good for nothing useful to mankind [...]. I am not a poet, nor an admirer of poetry beyond those qualities which it might have in common with prose – the power of instructing mankind in useful knowledge.<sup>354</sup>

Similarly, Boswell believed that knowledge of Latin was unnecessary to getting on in life and constituted ‘useless knowledge’<sup>355</sup>. Yet many a radical’s rejection of classical education may have partly stemmed from the suspicion that an attempt was being made to tame them and, as Burns puts it, “[render] the recipients fit for ‘polite society’.”<sup>356</sup>

As I will shortly show, many Owenites also rejected the liberal arts. However, I will demonstrate that they rejected the liberal arts as part of their analysis of the old system’s tendency to generate a distorted impression of reality and consequently alienate the subject from their own nature. I will return to this point momentarily.

## 9.2. Owenite ‘Useful Knowledge’ and Critique of the ‘Old System’

The debate over ‘useful knowledge’ provides a convenient framework through which to understand the Owenite approach to education. If, within this discourse, an education’s ‘usefulness’ was defined according to the kind of character and behaviour it was deemed to

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<sup>353</sup> As I will show in this chapter and in Chapters 10-12, Owenites also believed in an inherent desire for knowledge. Though their specific formulation of the structures of the self means that they do not consider all knowledge as useful, and indeed consider some knowledge as pernicious.

<sup>354</sup> Quoted in W. Hardy Wickwar, *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press, 1819-1832* (London: G. Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1928), 272.

<sup>355</sup> Burns, 1.

<sup>356</sup> Burns, ‘From “Polite Learning” to “Useful Knowledge”’, 2.

engender, then it follows that Owenite critique of the old system of education hinged upon its alleged effects on people's character and upon its alleged incompatibility with the principles of human nature.

Complaints over the 'uselessness' of education are ubiquitous in Owenite writings. William Maclure, for example, complained that the classical education he had received as a child meant that he was "launched into the world as ignorant as a pig of anything useful."<sup>357</sup> He sought to reduce mass education to only that which was of proven utility in everyday life:

CHEMISTRY, like all other sciences is only useful to the individual as far as he is likely to practise it, such as that of the kitchen and wash-house, of food and cleanliness, two of the most indispensable operations of life, of soap-boiling, candle-making, and dying, with all applications to any of the useful arts, agriculture, &c. The higher branches of speculative analysis, ought to be left to those qualifying themselves for professors.<sup>358</sup>

Likewise, with 'zoology:'

or the nature and properties of animals, may in a useful education, be limited, 1<sup>st</sup>, to those we use for food: 2<sup>nd</sup>, those that assist us, when tamed, in the different necessary operations, our wants (multiplied by civilization) require, and 3<sup>d</sup> [sic], all those that from their instinct are led to prey on our property.<sup>359</sup>

Furthermore, Maclure draws a parallel between dichotomy between, 'useful' and 'ornamental' knowledge, and the 'productive' and 'non-productive' classes:

Education may be divided into two species, like mankind; that is, the productive and non-productive, the useful and ornamental, the necessary and amusing, &c. &c. It is the productive, useful and necessary, that constituted the comfort and happiness of the millions, and ought alone to occupy the care and attention of all [...] governments [...]. The millions have a right to what they produce; and all appropriations out of the public treasury, for teaching the non-productive knowledge which is merely ornamental or amusing to the possessor, may perhaps be considered as a deviation from right and justice [...].

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<sup>357</sup> Letter, Maclure to Benjamin Silliman, 19 October 1822, in Maclure and Duclos Fretageot, *Education and Reform at New Harmony; Correspondence of William Maclure and Marie Duclos Fretageot, 1820-1833*, 293.

<sup>358</sup> William Maclure, 'Opinions on Various Subjects', in *Utopianism and Education: Robert Owen and the Owenites*, ed. J.F.C. Harrison (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), 233.

<sup>359</sup> Maclure, 238–39.

The liberal arts, then, are viewed by Maclure as the indulgence of an “idle and non-productive” class that “expends the fruit of the labour and toil of the productive classes [in teaching their own children] how to consume their own time and the public property, in learning to amuse themselves and kill time agreeably.”<sup>360</sup> Similarly lamenting his own upbringing, Abram Combe remarked that the circumstances of his childhood amounted to the “absence of everything that could gratify his moral or intellectual faculties in a natural manner”, rendering his youth “essentially dreary and melancholy.” He liked “utility” and therefore detested being forced to study Latin as a child, as he could find no “practical advantage” in it.<sup>361</sup> To Owenites, not only did the supposedly ‘civilising’ kind of knowledge pushed by so many reformers not help abate the crisis, it actively exacerbated the problem by keeping people in a state of ignorance:

[We] make no progress in assuring [the labouring classes’] independence—quite the contrary. The tendency of the age in England is to degrade the peasant as an intelligent being [...].

The children come out pretty nearly as incapable [...], as mere parrots as they went in [...]. They have learnt their catechism [...], they can do a little writing and a very little ‘summing,’ but now they know as much as their teacher [...]. [Yet this] is the man who is expected to [...] form the material of new empires.<sup>362</sup>

Similarly, Maclure warned that the old system was actively ‘injurious’ to society. He described the old system as:

the imprisoning of children for four or five hours in the day, to a task of irksome [...] study, which nothing but the fear of punishment, could force them to perform; after which they are let loose on society for eight hours, full of revenge and retaliation against their jailors [...]. This, [is the cause of] the [...] violence of the rebellious riots and mutinies in Europe as well as in this country, being in exact proportion to the rigor and strictness of their restraints and condiment [...] the originating [and] creating [...] all the malevolent passions of hatred, revenge, cruelty, etc., entail upon mankind through future generations an immensity of evils and crimes, which giving an excuse for further pains, penalties, imprisonment and tortures, add to the general demoralization of society and can only be cured by a more

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<sup>360</sup> Maclure, 231–32.

<sup>361</sup> Combe, *The Life and Dying Testimony of Abram Combe in Favour of Robert Owen’s New Views of Man and Society*, 4–6.

<sup>362</sup> *The Reasoner: And ‘Herald of Progress’*, 241.

rational system of education [...].<sup>363</sup>

“[The] old artificial system of education” needed to be replaced with a mixture of Owen and Pestalozzi’s methods, which Maclure termed “the natural system.”<sup>364</sup> Under the old system, said Combe:

“Education” [...] conveys the idea of acquiring the arts of reading and writing; and also an acquaintance with the dead and foreign languages, and other branches of polite learning. An Individual who has been made skilful in these acquirements is generally considered to have got a “Good Education.”—In this view, the New System differs completely from the old.—The New System calls Education the “*Acquisition of Ideas*,”—and the ideas which convey correct representations of *Realities*, it calls “*Sound Ideas*.”<sup>365</sup>

The last sentence in this paragraph is of especial importance in the Owenite definition of rational education: it is, simply, the acquisition of ‘sound ideas’, or ‘correct representations of Realities’. Only ‘correct’ or ‘natural’ ideas can rectify the distorted image of reality conveyed by the old education. The Owenite distinction between alienation and rationality parallels a distinction between distortion and clarity of perception. To Owen himself, what stood in the way of rational conduct was ‘ignorance’:

[...] from this day a change must take place; a new era must commence; the human intellect, through the whole extent of the earth, hitherto enveloped by the grossest ignorance and superstition, must begin to be released from its state of darkness [...].

For the time is come, when the means may be prepared to train all the nations of the world [...] in that knowledge which shall impel them not only to love but to be actively kind to each other in the whole of their conduct, without a single exception.<sup>366</sup>

In Owenism, ‘ignorance’ does not so much signify a lack of knowledge, but the holding of erroneous knowledge, or erroneous ideas, such as ‘superstitions’, which hold the intellect in a state of ‘darkness’. Correct knowledge, or sound ideas, as per Combe’s definition above, can liberate and improve it. This much is stated time and again in Owenite writings. A useful

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<sup>363</sup> Maclure, ‘Opinions on Various Subjects’, 246-247.

<sup>364</sup> Maclure, 246.

<sup>365</sup> Combe, ‘The Definition of Education’, 189.

<sup>366</sup> Owen, ‘An Address Delivered to the Inhabitants of New Lanark, on the First of January, 1816, at the Opening of the Institution Established for the Formation of Character’, 120.



education is one that impresses ideas that give the individual a clear, undistorted representation of reality. It is also for this reason that Owen poured so many resources into the education of children, “as their minds had not yet been stained by the ignorance and prejudice of their forebears.”<sup>367</sup> Children were unencumbered by ‘artificial’ ideas, or what Marx would later refer to as “the tradition of all dead generations [which] weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”<sup>368</sup> At times, the term ‘imagination’ is used rather than ‘ignorance’:

The Author of Nature has decreed that Human Beings shall find the means of satisfying their mental desire of Liberty and Security, by following a system of strict justice and integrity, in mutual dependence upon the friendship and good will of one another. The Imagination has led them to believe that this desirable object can be best obtained by taking advantage of the ignorance or necessity of one another; by using force or fraud, to rob, or swindle, the workman of the fruit of his labour.<sup>369</sup>

We ought to say something in defence of the Owenite rejection of ‘imagination’ here. It would be easy to dismiss the rejection of ‘ornamental knowledge’ decried by Maclure, or of the ‘imagination’ scorned by Combe, as mere philistinism or puritan joylessness. However, it's worth remembering that, at its core, this suspicion was a reaction to what Owenites and assorted rationalists experienced as the dogmatic and suffocating modes of thinking that served to trap people in a state of captive irrationality and subjugation:

[...] not satisfied with our own absurd fancies, the heads of our youth are stuffed full of ancient mythology, and our school books filled with Roman and Grecian dreams, held forth as models of eloquence and taste. [Imagination] causes us to imagine the [...] most useless and too often corrupt actions of humanity, to be the most meritorious [...].<sup>370</sup>

Consequently, the old system’s irrationality, through its rootedness in ‘imagination’, is responsible for the inequality and deprivation that plague society:

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<sup>367</sup> ‘House of Commons. 1816. Report of Minutes of Evidence Taken before the Select Committee on the State of Children Employed in the Manufactories of the United Kingdom. Parliamentary Papers 1816 (397)III 235.’, n.d., 22.

<sup>368</sup> Karl Marx and David McLellan, ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.’, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 300.

<sup>369</sup> *Orbiston Register*. February 16, 1826. 89.

<sup>370</sup> Maclure, ‘Opinions on Various Subjects’, 244–45.

We stand in a condition unparalleled in the history of nations. We have immense stores on hand of all that human beings require for the supply of their wants. We suffer distress for want of profitable consumers, while the individuals whose labour produced these supplies [...] are, with their helpless offspring, actually dying for want.<sup>371</sup>

Owenites reject 'imagination', 'useless knowledge' and 'artificial ideas' as entrenching inequality and irrationality. Furthermore, as we will see in Part III, such formulations of 'imagination' and 'useless knowledge' would later provide the more politically radical co-operators and several Chartists with their formulation of ideology as an instrument of class-domination. As such, the analogous dichotomy between useful/ornamental knowledge and productive/non-productive classes is more than mere rhetoric – it forms part of an analysis rooted in the social conditions of the day, no matter how reductively polarised this analysis may be. Seen in this context, education and the battle over the definition of 'useful knowledge' constitute a battle for the very soul of humanity. People who are alienated from their own nature tend to accept the most unjust circumstances. Therefore, "It is by EDUCATION, rightly understood and wisely applied to practice, that this greatest of all changes in the condition of humanity is now to be effected, to regenerate the human race from its gross irrationalities."<sup>372</sup> Education, in fact, is a key component of the 'social system'. So much so that Owenism can be defined as one grand educational project, for only by being educated could people be made rational and therefore capable agency. That education was prized by Co-operators is attested by the sheer volume of educational projects they undertook, of which Richard Johnson lists but a few:

In 1830, John Finch of Liverpool planned a college to provide a 'superior' residential education for hundreds of children of Co-operators. The Birmingham Co-operative Herald enlarged this scheme: there should be preparatory schools in every town and country colleges with model farms and small-scale manufactories. In 1833 this plan was revived by two groups. One scheme, proposed by a Mr Reynolds, was supported by Monsieur Philip Baume, a French philanthropist, who offered to lease fourteen acres for a college and give 'everything I possess'. In the same year a group called 'the Social Reformers', meeting in Lovett's Coffee House, planned a boarding school to be supported by 'the intelligent and well-disposed among all classes'. In 1835, an Owenite lecturer called Henderson described a plan for

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<sup>371</sup> *Orbiston Register*. February 16, 1826. 89

<sup>372</sup> Owen, 'The Book of the New Moral World', 122–23.

‘a very superior school’ before an audience at the Charlotte Street Institute. [...] In 1838 there was a debate in the *New Moral World* about whether to accept £1000 from William Devonshire Saull, a London wine merchant, for educational purposes. The money was eventually used to start an ‘Educational Friendly Society’, one object of which was to found an ‘Educational Community’. At the same time, plans for a Co-operative College were revived. There was more than a hint of education project-building in the programme of the Association of All Classes of All Nations and in the Rational School Movement of 1839 to 1843. In 1839, ‘Socius’ in the *New Moral World* advocated converting Halls of Science into schools and the setting up of a ‘Model Normal School’.<sup>373</sup>

However, because present society is so mired in error and confusion, empirical science must be applied if it is to make its way out of the labyrinthine quagmire in which it was lost:

[...] [B]y gradually [...] introducing a new, scientific, and very superior combination of external arrangements, which shall possess the essence of all that is of real use to man in these old random combinations, leaving out all their inconsistencies and absurdities [...] to form around man, from his birth, those rational and consistent external circumstances, within which, alone, man can ever be made to become a rational and consistent, and therefore intelligent, good and happy being.<sup>374</sup>

In a sense, though Owenite ‘science’ was naive pseudoscience at best, it was nevertheless in this aspiration to *systematise* education and social organisation that its ingenuity lay. Indeed, similar methods had been touted and implemented by the likes of de Fellenberg, Pestalozzi and Hamilton, and Owen himself admitted the unoriginality of his ‘principles’ of character-formation. Yet it was their combination under an all-encompassing system that made Owenism unique:

The principles on which this practical system is founded are not new; separately, or partially united, they have been often recommended by the sages of antiquity, and by modern writers. But it is not known to me that they have ever been thus combined. Yet it can be demonstrated that it is only by their being *all brought into practice together*, that they are to be rendered beneficial to mankind; [...].<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Johnson, “‘Really Useful Knowledge’: Radical Education and Working-Class Culture, 1790–1848’, 771.

<sup>374</sup> Owen, ‘The Book of the New Moral World’, 122–23.

<sup>375</sup> Owen, ‘An Address Delivered to the Inhabitants of New Lanark, on the First of January, 1816, at the Opening of the Institution Established for the Formation of Character’, 105–6.

Owen was undoubtedly partly referring to the educators Pestalozzi and Fellenberg, whom he so greatly admired<sup>376</sup> and who had already devised similar educational methods based on their own theories of learning and human development. However, Owenism expands its theories of learning and human development into a science of community-formation rather than stopping at individual character-formation, and brings its theories to bear on an analysis of rationality as a structural problem, encompassing the role played by both social and economic factors. As Silver puts it,

Owen [...] spelled out more fully and urgently the case for a basic revolution in thinking about educations than anyone since Locke. [...] [It] is purely that Owen, for the first time, in a critical stage of British social development, made what had been a by-product of radical philosophy (and of radical politics, in the case of Paine, for example) a central feature of the analysis of social problems.<sup>377</sup>

Furthermore, Owenite theories are put into practice in the form of exceptionally ambitious, all-encompassing pedagogical and communitarian experiments aimed at the comprehensive transformation of society. In fact, so impressive was the Institute for the Formation of Character at New Lanark that Marx, despite his objections to the rigid determinism of the doctrine of circumstances, was moved to proclaim the school a pioneer in “the education of the future, [...] the one and only method to produce complete human beings.”<sup>378</sup>

### 9.3. Alignment with Human Nature

What was needed, then, was an education that would realign people’s character and conduct with the principles of human nature. This was a feature of all Owenite educational endeavours. Apart from New Lanark’s Institute for the Formation of Character and the school at New Harmony, Owen had also established, around 1831, the ‘Association of the Intelligent and well disposed of the Industrious Classes, for removing the Causes of Ignorance and Poverty, by Education and Employment’. Its aim was to establish “Seminaries for young persons of all ages and both sexes, to form a useful and superior character from

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<sup>376</sup> Owen in fact sent his children to be educated at Hofwyl.

<sup>377</sup> Silver, *The Concept of Popular Education*, 81–82.

<sup>378</sup> Quoted in Simeon, *Robert Owen’s Experiment at New Lanark: From Paternalism to Socialism*, 6.

infancy to maturity.”<sup>379</sup> These would deliver “regular... Lectures... on the Science of Society, with the view of forming a public opinion based on TRUTH,”<sup>380</sup> while lessons would be conducted in line with the “general laws of human nature.” Furthermore, “Every child... shall gradually be made acquainted with his *own nature*. [...] [Instruction would be] adapted also to the *peculiar organization* of each child.”<sup>381</sup> This is the aspect of Owenite education I most want to draw attention to for the moment: its alleged compatibility with the laws of human nature. Indeed, all forms of education – even technical education – were to be subordinate to and utilised for the formation of character along co-operative lines, for the dissolution of individual interest, and the extension of mutual co-operation. In *A Development of the Principles and Plans on which to Establish Self Supporting Home Colonies*, Owen argued that, in the ideal society, even a child’s technical education must be kept useful by being subordinated to “knowledge of himself and of human nature, to form him into a rational being, and render him charitable, kind, and benevolent to all his fellow creatures.”<sup>382</sup> More specifically, however, Owenism was keen on forming the people’s character around the social instincts. For Macnab, an individual’s development needed to be guided by “The social principle [...], the axis on which turn all the actions of men [...]”<sup>383</sup> That is to say, humans have an innately social instinct which motivates all their actions. This objective was pursued not only in formal education, but in every activity. The Owenites even employed ‘social missionaries’ whose “chief object”, according to erstwhile missionary Holyoake, “was the formation of associative character [...]”<sup>384</sup> As per the usual Owenite analysis, if society was irrational it was because it was not in alignment with nature. As Owen himself put it, his system of education was bound to produce happiness “because all will be done in

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<sup>379</sup> ‘The Resolution Intended to Be Proposed at the PUBLIC MEETING to Be Held on the 12th Instant, at the ROYAL LONDON BAZAAR, 1832’, n.d.

<sup>380</sup> *The Crisis*, n.d. May 25, 1833, p.155

<sup>381</sup> Association to Remove Ignorance and Poverty by Education and Employment, *Address to All Classes in the State from the Governor, Directors, and Committee of the Association* (Marlborough, Wiltshire: Adam Matthew Digital, 1832),

[http://www.povertyinVictorianBritain.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/FWA\\_Case\\_Ag27\\_004\\_b16500040](http://www.povertyinVictorianBritain.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/FWA_Case_Ag27_004_b16500040).

<sup>382</sup> Robert Owen, *A Development of the Principles and Plans on Which to Establish Self-Supporting Home Colonies (1841)* (New York: AMS Press, 1975), 77.

<sup>383</sup> Macnab, ‘The New Views of Mr. Owen of Lanark Impartially Examined, as Rational Means of Ultimately Promoting the Productive Industry, Comfort, Moral Improvement, and Happiness of the Labouring Classes of Society, and of the Poor; and of Training up Children in the Way in Which They Should Go’, 106.

<sup>384</sup> Holyoake, *Essentials of Co-Operative Education*, 16–17.

accordance with nature, while heretofore and now all is done in opposition to nature.”<sup>385</sup> As such, the purpose of education was to calibrate conduct in line with natural principles, removing any circumstances that contradict the principles of human nature and replacing them with circumstances that facilitate a more ‘natural’ flow of our constitutive elements:

In order to effect any radically beneficial change in their character, [the poor] must be removed from the influence of [erroneous] circumstances, and placed under those which, being congenial to the natural constitution of man, and the well-being of society, cannot fail to produce [a] melioration in their condition [...].<sup>386</sup>

In this sense, true education must be founded on an exact science of human nature. If done correctly, education will “[lead] the mind naturally to virtue... [It] can only be reared on the two distinguishing parts of the constitution of man, namely, the rational and social principles of his nature.”<sup>387</sup> The “health, strength, and happiness of individuals and of nations” results from “the harmony of these two principal primordial parts of the constitution of man.” By altering circumstances and impressing ‘true ideas, without any admixture of error’ on the mind, we prevent the “appetites, desires, and passions, and even the moral and religious affections” from becoming errant, and instead ensure that they are “directed, controlled, or strengthened by judgment, reason and conscience.”

An education aligned with the laws of nature, then, will produce a rational character. A crucial aspect of the definition of ‘rational character’, however, is that it is intended to be ‘active’ and ‘independent’, rather than become rational through the top-down transmission of knowledge. Rational education will “lay a solid foundation for health of body and mind, and active happiness through a long life of satisfied existence.” It will help people to “comprehend what are inferior and vicious circumstances, and what are superior and virtuous, how to remove the former, and to replace them with the latter...”<sup>388</sup> It will do this by “[forming] the Human Judgment upon more correct principles” and “[making people]

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<sup>385</sup> Owen, ‘The Book of the New Moral World’, 126–27.

<sup>386</sup> Macnab, ‘The New Views of Mr. Owen of Lanark Impartially Examined, as Rational Means of Ultimately Promoting the Productive Industry, Comfort, Moral Improvement, and Happiness of the Labouring Classes of Society, and of the Poor; and of Training up Children in the Way in Which They Should Go’, 97.

<sup>387</sup> Macnab, 31.

<sup>388</sup> Owen, ‘The Book of the New Moral World’, 127.

follow their Natural Inclination, in a course that will inevitably promote their Happiness...”<sup>389</sup> This is an important point to bear in mind, and I will be returning to it shortly. That despite its mechanical conception of human agency, Owenism aimed, at least on some level, to create active agents capable of evaluating every course of action independently. The arousal of the faculties was in fact also the case among those on the periphery of Owenism. Dr William King taught a course in ‘Practical Education’, reported in the Brighton Gazette as consisting of:

a plan to be pursued in calling into action the mental faculties of the pupil at the time he is receiving the more elementary parts of his education, and thereby forming the moral character previous to his entering on the chequered path of life [...].<sup>390</sup>

Indeed, to King, the new Mechanics’ Institutes ought to “impress a new character on society [and] arouse the faculties of men...”<sup>391</sup> While the stated aim of James and Caroline Hill’s<sup>392</sup> infant school at Wisbech, which used both Pestalozzian and Owenite methods, was “to make the infancy of children of poor and labouring people happy and pleasurable to themselves and enable them to become intelligent rational beings - free from vice, errors and superstitions.”<sup>393</sup>

This adds a nuance to the Owenite conceptions of alienation and rationality. The alienated (irrational) individual is somebody whose character and conduct are out of alignment with the principles of human nature, as we’ve already repeatedly seen in this chapter. But now we are also beginning to get a more detailed picture of the rational individual: they are not merely sociable and charitable, but also lively, active, and independent.

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<sup>389</sup> Owen, *The Life of Robert Owen Written by Himself with Selections from His Writings & Correspondence* (1857), 297.

<sup>390</sup> Brighton Gazette, 1825. Quoted in Mercer, *Co-Operation’s Prophet: The Life and Letters of Dr. William King of Brighton with a Reprint of The Co-Operator, 1828-1830*, 10.

<sup>391</sup> King, letter to the Brighton Gazette, 28 April, 1825, quoted in Mercer, 6.

<sup>392</sup> Parents of Octavia Hill, who went on to co-found the National Trust.

<sup>393</sup> Harry Jones, *Free-Thinkers and Trouble-Makers: Fenland Dissenters* (Wisbech: Wisbech Society & Preservation Trust Ltd., 2004), 28.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I outlined the Owenite critique of contemporary forms of education, and the situatedness of this critique within a broader battle to define the purposes and education, encapsulated in the term 'Useful Knowledge'. The 'usefulness' of a given type of education or knowledge was clearly determined by how conducive it was to the production of one's ideal character. To Owenites, then, the purpose of education and knowledge was to produce a rational character, whereas the Old System of Education produced a degraded character, one that holds erroneous ideas about reality which it merely learns to parrot, with no awareness of the reasons behind the ideas it holds. Thus, Owenite education aims to rationalise by impressing clear representations of reality on people's minds, and by cultivating the faculty of reason in order to create independent learners, rather than expecting pupils to learn by rote. Furthermore, however, I argue that it is possible to glean in this critique of Old Education the presence of Owenism's ontological commitments and its implications for their epistemological framework. The Owenites appear to posit a dichotomy between 'imagination' and 'representation', 'ornament' and 'usefulness', and 'nature' and 'artifice', which I argue is grounded in their ontological commitment to nature as a unified field governed by a Will to Truth. This appears to give rise to a binary form of thinking in which all has to be designated either natural or artificial, accurate representation or imagination, etc. Of course, this has implications for their notion of alienation: the alienated individual is one who has a false or distorted understanding of reality, and in order to become rational they need to acquire correct representations of reality. Rationality, then, implies clarity and transparency between the subject and objective reality. Another way to understand this is that the Individual System and its system of education create an alienated (irrational) character as they impart a distorted perception of reality grounded in the imagination, while a rational education would need to inculcate accurate representations of reality. This, then, has epistemological repercussions: Owenites have to decide what practices and forms of inquiry facilitate the acquisition of *true* knowledge, and what leads to the acquisition of erroneous (i.e. artificial or imaginary) knowledge, as making use of the wrong epistemological tools would lead to alienation. To acquire 'natural' ideas, therefore, would require a pedagogy in line with the principles of nature.



In chapter 10, I will outline the ways in which the Owenite science of character-formation and their pedagogical practices were purported to be in line with natural principles: First, in their organisation of the individual's development around the 'social instincts', and second, by training the *natural tools* that every individual possesses for the purpose of acquiring knowledge from the world around them. By analysing the principles and practices of this science of character-formation, I will infer their epistemological foundations, which are rarely explicitly or systematically laid out in Owenite writings.

## Chapter 10 – A Science of Character-Formation

### Introduction

To understand precisely how Owenite education was intended to work with the principles nature, I will need to first outline how Owenites conceived of the self. There is no literature, as far as I am aware, that undertakes an in-depth study of the Owenite methods of education. This is astonishing considering the fact that education was the most valued facet of Owenism and that there is surviving evidence – both written accounts and material artefacts – that could be used to piece together the practices and underlying rationale of Owenite education. Though many studies are dedicated to the *concept* of education in Owenism, this is usually restricted to examinations of its socio-political significance.

Nowhere, however, have I found a study that considers Owenite education in the context of a history of the self, examining its underlying conceptions of the self and of agency. As far as I am aware, therefore, what I do over chapters 10-12 amounts to an original framing of Owenite education and its theorising of agency, alienation and rationality, approached from a philosophical and genealogical angle that has not been attempted in previous studies of Owenism. In part II, I will outline the constitutive elements of the self in the Owenite framework, and how these elements were to be regulated through a variety of practices and technique in the process of forming rational, independent individuals. Owenites elaborated their own models of developmental psychology, which they used to guide their pedagogical practices. Owenite education essentially worked by cultivating the foundations required for independent learning – these are, in a sense, the ‘building blocks’ of rationality.

### 10.1. Owenism and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Science of Man

Owenism was not merely expressive of the broad ‘science of man’ charted in chapter 1, but was in fact a major contributor to it, producing and engaging with some of its most revered thinkers. This is in part due to the fact that, for all the pseudoscience contained in Owenism, it actually largely followed what was widely considered a legitimate mode of enquiry into the nature of the mind and of agency, regularly engaging with and referencing thinkers from political economy, moral philosophy and other related fields, as well as articulating their theories along the same discursive rules as these thinkers. Abram Combe, for example, was

the brother of George and Andrew Combe. George was one of the leading phrenologists of his day and author of *The Constitution of Man*, one of the biggest best-sellers of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, while Andrew was also a renowned phrenologist, physician and author. And while various historians have argued that phrenology was considered a marginal quack science by most Victorian scientists, Tomlinson has shown that it in fact played a central role in the human sciences during the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century and, perhaps more relevantly, was taken seriously by a significant portion of the lay public, and therefore will have had a real impact on the manner in which people thought about human nature and agency.

That character-formation be done scientifically was of the utmost importance to Owenites. Indeed, if they were so sanguine about the possibility of fully transforming society, it is because they fundamentally conceived of human nature as obeying the same laws as any other natural field. One Owenite describes this science as no different from “Mechanics, Chemistry and Electricity”, which had brought about great improvement in “the promotion of the comforts and happiness of man.”<sup>394</sup> And yet,

Man, who has reduced a large portion of the powers of science to his use, has not yet investigated his own nature. [...] [H]e has yet to learn THAT SCIENCE by which the superior order of intellectual nature is constituted, and by which alone it can be governed.

The role of scientific analysis, claims the author, is to ascertain “the primary elements of nature [in order to] acquire a knowledge of the effects produced by the arrangement of quantities and qualities [...]”, through which knowledge we can “improve [the quality of these effects]” or “discover new applications of them [...]”. The success of analysis depends,

firstly, upon our knowledge of the nature of the primary, or elementary, constituents of the subject under inquiry; secondly, upon our knowledge of the affinity existing among such primary or elementary bodies; and, thirdly, upon our knowledge of the proportions in which they unite or combine.

Finally, “by having [...] accumulated the facts, we may so direct their arrangement that all their varied operations may be continued in strict conformity with the laws of their nature.” The formation of human character was no different, being merely another “organic form”

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<sup>394</sup> Author unknown, ‘An Analysis of Human Nature: A Lecture Delivered to the Members and Friends of the Association of All Classes of All Nations, by One of the Honorary Missionaries to That Institution.’, 1–2.

among many. Owenites believed that human character could be directed by understanding its primary or elementary constituents, understanding the relationship between them, and understanding the dynamics between them. Once understood, the educator could rearrange the elements in order to produce better (more rational) effects.

As well as comparing the mind to the operations of any organic form, we also find examples of it being compared to a machine. Owen was, after all, a mill owner and a businessman, and while the benefits of his philanthropic endeavours cannot be doubted, it is worth remembering that he was generally motivated by increasing productivity and efficiency in order to maximise profits. As a result, we find repeated examples of Owen comparing workers to machines:

Experience has [...] shown you the difference of results between mechanism which is neat, clean, well arranged, and always in a high state of repair; and that which is allowed to be dirty, in disorder, and without the means of preventing unnecessary frictions, and which therefore becomes, and works, much out of repair. [...] If, then, due care as to the state of your inanimate machines can produce such beneficial results, what may not be expected if you devote equal attention to your vital machines [...]? When you shall acquire a right knowledge of these, of their curious mechanism, of their self-adjusting powers; when the proper mainspring shall be applied to their various movements– [...] you will discover that the latter may be easily trained and directed to procure a large increase of pecuniary gain, while you may also derive from them a high and substantial satisfaction.<sup>395</sup>

Thus, the individual, though made up of feelings, sentiments, affections and moral qualities, is essentially nothing more than a feeling machine whose mechanical operations can be studied and governed scientifically, and the machine's 'mainspring' be calibrated to become 'self-adjusting'. Under such a conception, the educator's role is to reconfigure the relations between constitutive elements and ensure that they operate optimally and healthily, so as to produce happiness in the machine. Catherine Vale Whitwell similarly believed that she had discovered the "metaphysical works and the laws of the human constitution", and that general educational principles could be deduced from these.<sup>396</sup> The notion that human nature could be reduced to general principles that are replicable under different conditions

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<sup>395</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 119.

<sup>396</sup> Donnachie, "We Must Give Them an Education, Large, Liberal and Comprehensive." Catherine Vale Whitwell: Teacher, Artist, Author, Feminist and Owenite Communitarian'.

was no Owenite quirk, as demonstrated by *The British Statesman's* lauding of Owen as a master of the Science of Man who had already proven his acumen during his time in Manchester:

This individual [Owen] had been previously in the management of large establishments [...] in [...] Manchester; and in every case, by the steady application of certain general principles, he succeeded in reforming the habits of those under his care [...]. With this previous success in re-modelling English character, but ignorant of the local ideas, manners, and customs of those now committed to his management, the stranger commenced his task [at New Lanark].<sup>397</sup>

To Owenites, then, character-formation was a scientific area concerned with the optimisation and rationalisation of human conduct, starting with the most elementary compounds of human nature.

## 10.2. The Constitutive Elements of the Self

What, then, was the Owenite conception of the self? And what are the self's constitutive elements, that are to be regulated through education? To Abram Combe, character was formed by two sets of 'circumstances': internal and external. The first, "physical organization, ...forms our natural character" and gives each individual a particular character, rendering "a dull uniformity of character impossible."<sup>398</sup> The second, "external circumstances", forms our "artificial" character, and can give one's character any shape. Crucially, the powers of the natural character "are capable of being improved [...] or rendered almost useless [...]. They may receive a beneficial, or injurious, or merely useless direction."<sup>399</sup> Either way, "you may give them what direction you please", especially during infancy.<sup>400</sup> Here, Combe is echoing the conception of the self outlined in the *Book of the New Moral World*, in which Owen states that,

Man is a compound being, whose character is formed of his constitution or organisation at birth, and of the effects of external circumstances upon it

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<sup>397</sup> *British Statesman*, cited in Macnab, 'The New Views of Mr. Owen of Lanark Impartially Examined, as Rational Means of Ultimately Promoting the Productive Industry, Comfort, Moral Improvement, and Happiness of the Labouring Classes of Society, and of the Poor; and of Training up Children in the Way in Which They Should Go', 63.

<sup>398</sup> *Orbiston Register*. May 9, 1827, 44–45

<sup>399</sup> *Orbiston Register*. May 9, 1827, 44–45

<sup>400</sup> *Orbiston Register*. May 9, 1827, 44–45

from birth to death; such original organisation and external influences continually acting and reacting upon each other.<sup>401</sup>

At the heart of the Owenite notion of character-formation, then, was the belief that every individual could be shaped into whatever form of character one wished to mould them into. “Children are, without exception, passive and wonderfully contrived compounds; which... may be formed collectively to have any human character.”<sup>402</sup> This conception of the self as a compound recurs regularly both in Owen’s writings and those of his followers. In a lecture delivered in 1838 to the members and friends of the Association of All Classes of All Nations, an unnamed ‘missionary’ sets out some of the principles of human nature:

1. Human nature, in the aggregate, is a compound, consisting of animal propensities, intellectual faculties, and moral qualities.
2. These propensities, faculties, and qualities are united in different proportions in each individual.
3. The different proportions of the same propensities, faculties, and qualities, constitute the sole difference by which one individual is distinguished from another.

[...]

9. Each individual is so organized, that he must necessarily become irrational, when he is made, from infancy, to receive as truths, false notions; and can only become rational, when he shall be made, from infancy, to receive true ideas, without any admixture of error.<sup>403</sup>

Each individual, then, is made up of “constitutive elements”: ‘propensities, faculties, and qualities’. An individual’s character is the effect of the particular ‘organization’ of said elements in the individual, and their interaction with the environment (or ‘circumstances’). The rationality of one’s character depends partly on the veracity or falseness of the ‘ideas’ they receive from their environment. In order to become rational, then, one must be impressed with ‘true ideas’. As such, rationality is bound up with a relationship to truth. The

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<sup>401</sup> Robert Owen, ‘The Book of the New Moral World’, in *Utopianism and Education: Robert Owen and the Owenites*, ed. J.F.C. Harrison (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), 104.

<sup>402</sup> Owen, cited in Morton, *The Life and Ideas of Robert Owen*, 134.

<sup>403</sup> Author unknown, ‘An Analysis of Human Nature: A Lecture Delivered to the Members and Friends of the Association of All Classes of All Nations, by One of the Honorary Missionaries to That Institution.’, 14.

opposite poles of rationality and irrationality being coextensive with the continuum of ignorance and knowledge. In other words, the self's constitutive elements, which are part of a fixed human nature, can be steered in a rational direction if they are governed by external circumstances that are compatible with the principles of human nature, while alienation may be said to occur when the self is moulded by external circumstances that are incompatible with its constitutive elements' true tendencies. For the constitutive elements are formed into a distinct character by the unassailable power of circumstances:

[...] [Children] in all parts of the earth have been, are, and everlastingly will be impressed with habits and sentiments similar to those of their parents and instructors; modified [...] by the circumstances in which they have been, are, or may be placed, and by the peculiar original organization of each individual.<sup>404</sup>

So much so that one cannot form an ounce of their own character:

whatever [the faculties and qualities] may be in each child, he could not create the smallest part of them; whether those faculties and qualities are inferior or superior, it is contrary to reason to say that the infant can be entitled to merit or deserve any blame for them.

Of course there are other constitutive elements of human nature, such as "The affections..., in alliance with judgment, reason, and conscience [...]." These elements are not in and of themselves social, but it is only when they are "duly ripened and regulated" in accordance with the social principle that they become "perfect expressions of the powers of man as a rational and social being." Education, then, becomes a balancing act in which the social principle guides the regulation of the various constitutive elements of the human compound in the creation of a delicately managed harmony. Too much of either element will result in a corruption of the compound:

The relation between affection and judgment must be preserved. When the affections prevail exclusively, man is governed by instinct and the animal principles of his constitution. When reasoning which is not founded on self-evident truths predominates (except in abstract speculative truths), weakness and error are inevitable.

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<sup>404</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 33.

This, then, is an Owenite iteration of the broader ontology of the self outlined in Part I, in which people were understood as composed of various affections, faculties, instincts, drives, desires, etc., all of which need to be cultivated to the right degree and governed by a correct judgment, or by 'reason' correctly used, attuned by 'self-evident truths'. And the role of education is to implement the correct balance between constitutive elements:

To attempt to qualify man to make the voyage of life, by training him practically in the exercise of his active powers and faculties alone, is to adopt in a great measure the system of Epicurus. It is [...] impracticable to qualify mankind to pursue the steady path of honour and virtue [solely] by a system of self-gratification by the benevolent affections [...].<sup>405</sup>

The role of education, for Macnab, is to allow 'reason' to be "compass and pilot" of the constitutive elements, regulating their flow towards harmony. The imagery of 'currents', 'flows', 'channels' and such like abound in Owenite thought. The constitutive elements, like chemical compounds or electrical currents, can be steered in any which direction. "...[O]ur nature is a delightful compound, capable, no doubt, of being formed to deceit and to wickedness, but inherently imbued neither with the one nor the other."<sup>406</sup> Apprehending the affections as the constant emission of an energy-flow, the role of the Owenite educator is to divert them away from channels of selfishness and "direct their feelings towards persons into the opposite channels of sympathy."<sup>407</sup>

As such, as I will soon show in greater detail, the aim of Owenite education functions by apprehending the constitutive elements in every individual and guiding them in order to shape them into a rational character. In line with the discourse on the self outlined in previous chapters, the Owenite science of character-formation views character as an object of government, seeking to 'form' it the way an artist might shape a material. If character is the material, the shaping of it is achieved by ascertaining the true nature of the relationship between its constituents, extensions and appendages, and acting on them in order to change and re-shape the soul. Owen virtually mimics Beccaria's language from Part I, stating

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<sup>405</sup> Macnab, 'The New Views of Mr. Owen of Lanark Impartially Examined, as Rational Means of Ultimately Promoting the Productive Industry, Comfort, Moral Improvement, and Happiness of the Labouring Classes of Society, and of the Poor; and of Training up Children in the Way in Which They Should Go', 107.

<sup>406</sup> Dale Owen, 'An Outline of the System of Education at New Lanark', 166.

<sup>407</sup> Thompson, 'Practical Directions for the Speedy and Economical Establishment of Communities on the Principles of Mutual Cooperation, United Possessions and Equality', 217.



that the educator “governs [individuals] as their architect.”<sup>408</sup> The consummate architect can form “any character... by applying the proper means.”<sup>409</sup> Owenite education, then, is concerned with regulation. And just as the constitutive elements need to be guided by the social principle, their growth must also be kept in a state of balance. Thus, William Thompson argued that while some division of labour was necessary, communities should not become specialised. Owen, similarly, while advocating for the teaching of reading, writing and accounts, also recommended “A practical knowledge of agriculture and domestic economy” and “knowledge of some one useful manufacture, trade, or occupation” for their importance to self-fulfilment and “for the improvement of his mental and physical powers”. The division of labour was as malignant as competition, as it alienated each person from their own nature. To remedy this, “each man and woman should be trained and educated to... become in his or her own person a superior domestic assistant..., a superior instructor or former of character, - and a superior legislator, statesman, and governor. Thus only can men and women... [live] a life of rationality in strict accordance with nature and with the laws of God.”<sup>410</sup> The principle of holistic character education was thus embedded in every Owenite endeavour, where labour, social arrangements and education were never separated.

### **10.3. An Owenite Developmental Psychology**

The above views on the constitutive elements of human nature formed the foundation for various Owenite theories of developmental psychology, in which they outlined the development of each element from infancy to adulthood. And although different Owenite psychological models differed from one another to some degree, they shared an overall ontological framework and understanding of child development and of the learning process. Most Owenite models follow the same formulation: first comes the basic constitution of human beings. Every person is the same in their basic organisation. “[That] is, he commences his existence with a physical organization, consisting of the same number of relative parts, though differing in every instance, in feature, strength, or proportion; but

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<sup>408</sup> Owen, *A Discourse on a New System of Society*, cited in Claey's, *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism*, 67.

<sup>409</sup> Owen, *A Statement Regarding the New Lanark Establishment*. Cited in Claey's, 67.

<sup>410</sup> Robert Owen's *Millennial Gazette*. 15 June 1856

always helpless [...].”<sup>411</sup> The same goes for one’s ‘mental organization’, which in every individual consists of “the animal instincts, the moral feelings, and intellectual faculties”, though again different from one individual to the next and “equally useless for his support”, as they depend “upon the external aid” given to them. The ‘quality’ of this aid (or education) is decisive:

[...] [The] same infant may be trained, or moulded, either into the most perfect form of its species, or the most deformed, according to the care taken of its growth, by avoiding too much pressure or exercise of those parts which may be the weakest [...], and so, also, with its mental organization.

So, the 'cultivation' of the individual must be approached like any other form of physical exercise or cultivation. It has to apply the correct pressure, at the right time, to the different faculties, instincts, affections, etc. To stimulate those that are underdeveloped, and to stop others from becoming over-active:

[Thus], in the earliest indications observing which is the most predominant, the animal instincts, the moral feelings, or the intellectual faculties: and where either appears in undue proportion, or likely to obstruct the growth of either of the others, to apply such stimulants as may excite the deficient quality to more lively action, or restrain the over active from gaining too much influence.

In *Principles of Natural Education*, Jane Dale Owen writes that “During the first years of infancy [...] the child [...] does receive his strongest impressions.” Yet, “under the present irrational mode of proceeding”, the child’s mind is usually “filled with superstitious notions and fears concerning Deity, yet is left wholly uninformed about himself.” What is needed is a system of education “founded upon the unerring laws of our nature. [...] A system of education [...] which, by co-operating with, instead of counteracting nature, would infallibly prove successful.”<sup>412</sup> This system takes “an extended view of man’s constitution, and of the order in which his various powers are developed.” A model of developmental psychology is then proposed. In the earliest stages of infancy, the child “primarily exercises his instructive

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<sup>411</sup> Author unknown, ‘An Analysis of Human Nature: A Lecture Delivered to the Members and Friends of the Association of All Classes of All Nations, by One of the Honorary Missionaries to That Institution.’, 7.

<sup>412</sup> Jane Dale Owen, ‘The Principles of Natural Education’, in *Utopianism and Education: Robert Owen and the Owenites*, ed. J.F.C. Harrison (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), 177–80.

impulses. Next, his moral qualities. Thirdly, his intellectual faculties.” Subsequently, in Owenite education, every pedagogical activity fitted within the contours of this framework and was designed to stimulate or curb the relevant inclinations at the right time. “In the same order [in which they develop] do they call for... regulation.” We find a similar formulation in Henry Macnab’s conception of developmental psychology, which ran as follows: First came “the physical movements, the health and strength of the body”, which act reflexively. Therefore, the first object of education ought to be “the due direction of the instinctive power in infants and children.”<sup>413</sup> Second, “The due direction of the appetites, passions, and dispositions of children, and of the affections of the mind.” Third, “[the] exercise suitable to their age, of their simple judgment and memory, on objects and subjects which, when fairly presented, are instantaneously conceived, without acts of reasoning.” These three areas of education comprise the early stages of child education, during which the teacher should aim to work primarily with the “instinctive and imitative power” of the child, until they can be entrusted to form their own judgments. This instinctive and imitative power,

is as perfect, and perhaps more so in children than it is in men. The manner they acquire at an early age spoken language, and good or bad habits, indicates evidently the great importance of directing with care [...] the physical health and strength, and the salutary movements of the animal appetites and passions.

In the early stages, then, ‘reasoning’ is not yet used, though the cultivation of the faculty of reason is one of the key end goals of Owenite education, as we will see. Instead, ‘simple judgment and memory’ are utilised first.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated the principles of the Owenite science of character-formation, outlining its conceptualisation of the self’s constitutive elements. Owenite education was designed to apprehend these constitutive elements and shape them into a rational character, with every pedagogical activity calculated to stimulate or curb the

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<sup>413</sup> Macnab, ‘The New Views of Mr. Owen of Lanark Impartially Examined, as Rational Means of Ultimately Promoting the Productive Industry, Comfort, Moral Improvement, and Happiness of the Labouring Classes of Society, and of the Poor; and of Training up Children in the Way in Which They Should Go’, 117.

relevant elements at the right time and to a necessary degree, in alignment with the principles of human nature, until the pupil is sufficiently calibrated to make rational decisions independently and without the need for supervision. In chapter 11, I will show how these theories were put into practice in Owenite pedagogy.

## Chapter 11 – Laying the Foundations for Independent Learning

### Introduction

I have just outlined the basic constitutive elements of the Owenite conception of the self and the manner in which Owenite education sought to create rational individuals by regulating these constitutive elements along their natural developmental trajectory. However, the ultimate purpose of Owenite education was to create *independent* learners. As such, Owenite pedagogy was designed to cultivate capacities for independent learning in the individual. These capacities were believed to be inherent to human nature but in need of cultivation through education. Once cultivated, these capacities would form learning tools that would serve the individual throughout their life. Over the next chapter, I will explain precisely what these capacities were and how they were to be cultivated.

#### 11.1. Early Habits of Independence

I have already touched on the fact that, in Owenite education, the different elements of the self needed to be developed in the right measure and at the right time. The best way to achieve this was to give the child tools with which to curb certain impulses and with which to continually safeguard themselves against pernicious external circumstances: “checks to be placed [...] in the hands of the taught themselves.” First, children need to be taught to moderate the gratification of their ‘instructive impulses’.<sup>414</sup> “[Providing] he is denied nothing [...] which nature demands, he will, assuredly, thenceforth practice that moderation.” Then, the ‘moral qualities’ are to be cultivated by ensuring that “from the moment [...] in which the infant first awakes to consciousness, [...] he begins to acquire [...] right ideas”, and guarding against the child receiving erroneous ideas. Unless these checks are inculcated in the individual as a foundational layer, they will not develop the ability to reason for themselves and distinguish between false and true idea and ensure that their ‘motives to action’ are stimulated correctly and naturally. For example, ‘sympathy’ constitutes a ‘motive

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<sup>414</sup> In present day psychological terminology this is termed ‘self-regulation’, while a person who struggles to moderate their gratification is termed ‘dysregulated’. There may be some interesting research to conduct examining the emergence of modern terms such as ‘self-regulation’ and ‘dysregulation’ in the historical context of a liberal governmentality whose aim is the regulation of conduct.

to action' that can "be safely used in education."<sup>415</sup> However, it is just one impulse among many and as such is open to abuse. It must be carefully regulated, therefore, and "used in conjunction with... Reason or the prospective pleasures of Utility." Without proper guidance, 'sympathy' "may degenerate into a mere animal impulse, a species of instinct, regardless of the [...] consequences."<sup>416</sup> It must not be over-extended towards any single individual. Rather, "as the understanding becomes developed, the direction of sympathy should be regulated by a review of the remote as well as the immediate consequences of actions..." Abuse of 'Association' must similarly be guarded against. It must, "as much as possible, go hand in hand with a perception of the good qualities which excite and justify it, to regulate... its energy... and to encourage... kindness towards all companions, instead of isolated groups or individual capricious attachments."<sup>417</sup> As ever, the purpose of education was to divert the constitutive elements of the self away from any deleterious uses founded in ignorance and towards that which is truly useful. By nurturing a "cautious mode of using the pleasures of sympathy and [...] of activity, we shall find the best guard to children against the misdirection of their faculties, against the formation of erroneous judgments, or of any opinions without appropriate evidence."<sup>418</sup> Jane Dale Owen even goes as far as recommending that the child be removed from the care of their parents in order to prevent 'sympathy' from developing unnaturally:

However endearing the tie [between a child and their mother], it may be questioned whether she is the fittest person to undertake the task [of educating her child]; and, certainly, as the education of females is at present conducted, no one can be less so.<sup>419</sup>

Therefore, until parents have themselves been rationally educated, "the superintendence of the child ought to pass into other hands, or, at least, be shared by the mother with qualified individuals." The child should be removed from their parents "because affection is apt to warp the judgment." The affections, sympathies, passions, etc., must be brought under the control of rational 'judgment' and not be allowed to override it. Other foundational habits

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<sup>415</sup> Thompson, 'Practical Directions for the Speedy and Economical Establishment of Communities on the Principles of Mutual Cooperation, United Possessions and Equality', 211–12.

<sup>416</sup> Thompson, 212–13.

<sup>417</sup> Thompson, 215.

<sup>418</sup> Thompson, 221.

<sup>419</sup> Dale Owen, 'The Principles of Natural Education', 187.

and powers<sup>420</sup> included those of observation, attention, and the spirit of inquiry, which needed to be developed prior to other mental habits.

The formation of 'habits' occupied a prominent role in Owenite education, though the intention behind this was not to create mere virtuous automatons. Rather, the function of certain habits was to prepare the mind for the higher cultivation of the faculties. Expressing his admiration for the Greeks, whom he claimed had "exercised their physical and mental powers more equally than any other nation of antiquity", Owen sought to inculcate all children at New Lanark with "habits of attention, celerity and order."<sup>421</sup> All exercises and activities at the school in New Lanark were designed to develop the child's different powers in the appropriate order. First, during the early stages, the infant's faculty of 'observation' was allowed to develop through play:

Following Owen's desire to adapt the educational system to children's cognitive development, the youngest ones did not receive formal lessons. Under the aegis of Molly Young, toddlers played either indoors or in a walled playground at the entrance of the school when weather allowed. Toys such as balls, hoops, marbles and spinning tops were provided at Owen's expense.<sup>422</sup>

In keeping with Owen's model of developmental psychology, children under the age of five at New Lanark were,

occupied only in those amusements which are suitable to their age, playing about in the area before the school [...] under the charge of a male and female superintendant [sic], and whose principal office it is to encourage amongst them habits and feelings of good-will and affection towards each other.<sup>423</sup>

The methods used in the Natural History classes at New Lanark were based on the assumption that infants,

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<sup>420</sup> Which today might be termed 'capacities'.

<sup>421</sup> Claeys, 'From "Politeness" to "Rational Character." The Critique of Culture in Owenite Socialism 1800-1850', 23.

<sup>422</sup> Simeon, *Robert Owen's Experiment at New Lanark: From Paternalism to Socialism*, 75–76.

<sup>423</sup> *British Statesman*, August 9, 1819, cited in Macnab, 'The New Views of Mr. Owen of Lanark Impartially Examined, as Rational Means of Ultimately Promoting the Productive Industry, Comfort, Moral Improvement, and Happiness of the Labouring Classes of Society, and of the Poor; and of Training up Children in the Way in Which They Should Go', 59.

can understand and become interested in a few simple particulars regarding such domestic animals as come under their own observation, if these are communicated in a sufficiently familiar manner; for this, indeed, is almost the first knowledge which Nature directs an infant to acquire.<sup>424</sup>

So much so that:

As soon [...] as the child exhibits signs of intelligence, he should, in order to strengthen and develop his faculty of observation [...], be permitted and encouraged to examine minutely whatever comes under his views, or appears particularly to attract his attention. Thus, a spirit of inquiry [will be] awakened in his mind, and a habit fixed, of keen and accurate observation [...].<sup>425</sup>

This 'spirit of inquiry', Jane Dale Owen claims, will assist the individual in acquiring 'precise' "knowledge of all facts, particularly of the natural world", while the development of the power of observation is of paramount importance "inasmuch as it assists in the exercise of many of the other mental powers." In other words, it forms the foundation for later independent learning. She then lists some key rules for the development of the faculties: "1st. Never to demand attention from a child to any subject unsuited to his years or capacity." 2nd. To only tax his memory with facts that he can corroborate through observation of the natural world, that "he may be able to recall, at pleasure, the ideas at first communicated to him." "3rd. To encourage [the child] to dwell on each of these ideas separately" in order to cultivate in him "the power of abstraction." 4th. To only teach the child 'facts' that can be ascertained "by the test of consistency." This will aid in the "foundation of an accurate judgment." 5th. To accustom him early on to "the practice of comparison and inference." 6th. To always keep the 'imagination' in subservience to the 'judgment', and to excite "the young mind [...] to form occasionally new combinations of ideas for itself." 7th. To develop all of the faculties equally.<sup>426</sup> Effectively, these amount to the building blocks of rationality. This is achieved through a careful regulation of the educator's comportment around the child. The child,

ought never to be made the recipient of anger, nor be witness to it; the tone of voice ever expressing to him feelings of the utmost kindness. He ought

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<sup>424</sup> Dale Owen, 'An Outline of the System of Education at New Lanark', 153.

<sup>425</sup> Dale Owen, 'The Principles of Natural Education', 183.

<sup>426</sup> Dale Owen, 183–84.



[...] to be presented with no objects but those which it may be beneficial for him to examine; as his natural curiosity prompting him so to do, he is often, upon refusal led into ebullitions of passion, which gradually become habitual. He should have no deceit practised upon him [...]. Thus guarding, in the earliest period of his existence, against every contingency which may communicate to him evil habits, we shall, when he has attained sufficient age, have a fair field upon which to enter, in the cultivation of his moral qualities.<sup>427</sup>

By completely controlling the child's interaction with the environment, then, the educator ensures that the infant receives a foundation upon which to begin cultivating the moral qualities in a healthy, natural manner. As ever with Owenites, every subject and activity was calculated to instil habits or pleasures that would facilitate the development of faculties in a rational way. Even dancing and music had a role to play in rationalising the child:

Dancing [and] music [...] will always be a prominent surrounding in a rational system for forming character. They give health, unaffected grace to the body, teach obedience and order in the most imperceptible and pleasant manner to make progress in all mental acquisitions.<sup>428</sup>

### **11.2. Cultivating the Moral Qualities**

Following the cultivation of the early power of observation and attention and the spirit of curiosity, come the moral qualities. Now that the infant has habits of,

moderation, mildness, and candour, [he should] be made acquainted with the great laws of our nature, and especially of the important one, that man forms not his own character, and consequently is not responsible for his actions. Thus, he would acquire just ideas [...] and [...] would there be withdrawn from his mind all motives to anger, revenge, hatred, jealousy, or other malevolent passions. He would next be led to observe the happy consequences resulting to himself and others from a virtuous and amiable mode of conduct, and the evil consequences which would ensue by his pursuing an opposite course.<sup>429</sup>

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<sup>427</sup> Dale Owen, 180–81.

<sup>428</sup> Owen, *The Life of Robert Owen Written by Himself with Selections from His Writings & Correspondence* (1857), 195.

<sup>429</sup> Dale Owen, 'The Principles of Natural Education', 181–82.

Furthermore, activities were designed to teach the child to discern the true consequences of their actions, which in theory would allow the child to form rational judgments. Thus, if a child acts improperly,

a practical knowledge of the effects of his conduct is all that is required, in order to induce him to change it. And this knowledge [the teachers] endeavour to give him. They show him the intimate, inseparable, and immediate connection of his own happiness, with that of those around him [...].<sup>430</sup>

Again, what is in evidence here is the idea that all that is required for rationality to prevail is knowledge of the truth, an unobstructed view of reality; whenever a child is made aware of the true consequences of their actions, they will invariably choose to act rationally. We find the same principle in the way Geography was taught at New Lanark:

[The] children are taught the form of the earth, its general divisions into Land and Water, [etc.] [...]; then the names of the principal countries [...], together with the most striking particulars concerning their external appearance, natural curiosities, manners and customs, &c. &c. The different countries are compared with our own, and with each other.<sup>431</sup>

The comparison of the different countries' 'manners and customs' is carried out with a specific end in mind:

The minds of the children are thus opened, and they are prevented from contracting narrow, exclusive notions, which might lead them to regard those only as proper objects of sympathy and interest, who may live in the same country with themselves—or to consider that alone as right, which they have been accustomed to see—or to suppose those habits and those opinions to be the standard of truth and of perfection, which the circumstances of their birth and education have rendered their own. In this manner are the circumstances, which induce national peculiarities and national vices, exhibited to them; and the question will naturally arise in their minds: "is it not highly probable that we ourselves, had we lived in such a country, should have escaped neither its peculiarities, nor its vices—that we should have adopted the notions and prejudices there prevalent? [...]" A child who has once felt what the true answer to such a question must be, cannot remain uncharitable or intolerant.

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<sup>430</sup> Dale Owen, 'An Outline of the System of Education at New Lanark', 135.

<sup>431</sup> Dale Owen, 154.

I have chosen to quote at length from the above section because the exercise described therein is exemplary of a number of key functions and principles of Owenite education. Firstly, there is the emphasis on the widening of 'sympathy' beyond the family unit or the nation and its extension to humanity as a whole, such that humanity is seen as having a shared 'interest' rather than competing interests. Second, the exercise removes erroneous ideas such as 'prejudices' towards inhabitants of other countries. Thirdly, it draws the children's attention to the influence of 'circumstances' in the formation of character, and to the contingency of their own character, thus setting them on a path towards being freed from the influence of circumstances and becoming rational. As Thompson put it, "to every child should be guaranteed the free development of its powers, and the free exercise of its judgment on every thing laid before it, without inspiring it with any sentiment either of hatred or respect for any existing opinion or belief"<sup>432</sup>; highlighting the formative role of circumstances is thus intended to remove biases and free up the faculty of Reason to form judgment freely. Finally, drawing one's attention to the role of circumstances in the formation of character also helps cultivate feelings of charity and tolerance in the children. As such, a key function of education was to facilitate "a just, open, sincere, and benevolent conduct."<sup>433</sup>

### **11.3. Natural Rewards and Punishments**

As we have just seen, early education lay down the foundations for the regulation of the self's constitutive elements over the course of one's life. According to Owenites, under the old system the constitutive elements were either incentivised through commendation, status and profit among other things (these are termed 'artificial rewards'), or suppressed using fear, intimidation and punishments, including corporal punishment (these are 'artificial punishments'). John Wesley was a prime example of this approach. Wesley, whose Methodism swept through so many of the lower classes, was unequivocal about what he considered 'useful' education:

Break their wills betimes. Begin this work before they can run alone, before

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<sup>432</sup> Thompson, 'Practical Directions for the Speedy and Economical Establishment of Communities on the Principles of Mutual Cooperation, United Possessions and Equality', 221.

<sup>433</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 123.

they can speak plain, perhaps before they can speak at all. Whatever pains it consists, break the will if you would not damn the child. Let a child from a year old be taught to fear the rod [...]; from that age make him do as he is bid [...]. Break his will now, and his soul shall live, and he will probably bless you to all eternity.<sup>434</sup>

In the Methodist Sunday schools, children were made to sing that they were “By nature and by practice too, A wretched slave to sin.” Much like Wesley, Hannah More believed it a “fundamental error to consider children as innocent beings [rather than of] a corrupt nature and evil dispositions.<sup>435</sup>” Owenites viewed such beliefs and the dour culture that accompanied them as not merely useless, but as actively extinguishing the life-affirming powers of human nature. As William Lovett bemoaned:

My poor mother [...] thought that the great power that has formed the numerous gay, sportive, singing things of earth and air, must above all things be gratified with the solemn faces, prim clothes, and half-sleepy demeanour of human beings; and that true religion consists in listening to the reiterated story of man’s fall [...].<sup>436</sup>

Instead, Owenites proposed using what it claimed were the self’s *natural* mechanisms of reward and punishment. Turning the tables on Christian zealots, Abram Combe branded those who advocated physical punishment ‘infidels’ and accused them of going against God’s law. After all, saying that children’s moral conduct needs ‘human aid’ is to suggest:

that God does *not* govern the world, and that if *human aid* were withdrawn, all would be in confusion [...]; for Divine Revelation teaches us [...] that God’s law is perfect, and that to expect that no punishment will [naturally] follow conduct that is *really bad*, is equal to expecting a change in the system of Nature. It is by the rewards and punishments which God has revealed to us in the natural consequences, that we know what is right from what is wrong. It is only by directing the minds of children to the unerring laws of God, that [...] they will become wise, virtuous, and intelligent.<sup>437</sup>

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<sup>434</sup> John Wesley, Quoted in Robert Southey, *The Life of Wesley ; and the Rise and Progress of Methodism* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022), 561.

<sup>435</sup> Hannah More, *Strictures on Female Education (1799)* (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1995), 44.

<sup>436</sup> William Lovett, *Life and Struggles of William Lovett in His Pursuit of Bread, Knowledge, and Freedom: With Some Short Account of the Different Associations He Belonged to and of the Opinions He Entertained* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1920), 8.

<sup>437</sup> *Orbiston Register*. December 22, 1825. p.51

This is again the principle of a Will to Truth. In the Owenite framework, we are all naturally impelled towards the truth of nature by the operation of nature's own laws. If the will loses its way, it is because of some distortion somewhere along the line, caused partly by the use of artificial punishments. However, "those who pay sufficient attention [...]" will form "habits of cleanliness and order, and above all, [...] the promotion of industry, integrity, and economy, as the sheet-anchor of the system."<sup>438</sup> Habituation, then, is one means of doing away with the need for punishment. Macnab, who wrote extensively of his observations on the New Lanark school, stated that the children's powers were partly developed using "the wonderful power of habit", through which,

by a judicious and constant discipline of the benevolent affections, [Owen] commands the will [...]. He renders habits fixed and strong by repetition, which become [...] a kind of second nature in his pupils. Habits [...], when strong, give not merely a facility in repetition; but also, what is of more consequence, they are accompanied with an inclination or impulse to be repeated [...].<sup>439</sup>

Through 'habits', a kind of auxiliary 'second nature', a deeper level of the self, something more elemental, can be reached and transformed – a new 'impulse' is created, an impulse to behave in a particular way. The satisfaction of this impulse gives rise to a new 'pleasure', a natural reward, which consequently generates a desire, an inclination, to experience that pleasure repeatedly. The removal of bad habits and the inculcation of good habits was a key function of Owen's attempt at large-scale character-formation at New Lanark: "I... withdrew the most prominent incitements to falsehood, theft, drunkenness, and other pernicious habits..., and in their stead I introduced other causes, which were extended to produce better external habits."<sup>440</sup> The Institution for the Formation of Character would go one better. "[I]nstead of longer applying temporary expedients for correcting some of your most prominent external habits", educating the inhabitants in the Institution would allow Owen to "effect a complete and thorough improvement in the internal as well as external

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<sup>438</sup> Combe, *The Life and Dying Testimony of Abram Combe in Favour of Robert Owen's New Views of Man and Society*, 18–19.

<sup>439</sup> Macnab, 'The New Views of Mr. Owen of Lanark Impartially Examined, as Rational Means of Ultimately Promoting the Productive Industry, Comfort, Moral Improvement, and Happiness of the Labouring Classes of Society, and of the Poor; and of Training up Children in the Way in Which They Should Go', 123.

<sup>440</sup> Owen, 'An Address Delivered to the Inhabitants of New Lanark, on the First of January, 1816, at the Opening of the Institution Established for the Formation of Character', 87.

character of the whole village.” Thus, the need for punishment is removed. Yet, habituation and natural rewards only work because they hinge on an essential motive to action – the ‘desire of respect’ (sometimes referred to as the ‘desire of esteem’ or the ‘desire of approbation’). The entire point of Owen’s educational system, as Combe asserted, was,

simply, that Knowledge and Experience, or virtuous and useful actions, constitute the only just claim to Respect; and that the only Rational way to obtain the lasting Approbation of the Community, will be to aid them [...]; and that the Object of Selfishness itself will be easiest obtained, by sinking Individual interest, and making all our Desires centre in the Good of the Community.<sup>441</sup>

As I have already shown, Owenites believed that the desire for private wealth was simply the expression of a confused desire for esteem. Useful education, therefore, is one which re-orientes this innate desire of esteem towards social ends. As individuation stymied the natural ‘sympathy’ that each and every person inherently harboured for their fellow humans, Owenite education was intended to reverse the blockage caused by individuation and help sympathy flow freely and naturally. In 1836, the London Owenite branch set up a party to teach parents and children “the advantages to be derived from extending the family circle beyond the narrow bounds prescribed by legal relationships, and gradually to acquire the due feeling of kindred for the entire human family.”<sup>442</sup> The primary mechanism for the re-orientation of this innate desire of esteem was the use of natural rewards, such as kindness:

for the worst formed disposition, short of incurable insanity, will not long resist a firm, determined, well directed, persevering kindness. Such a proceeding, whenever practiced, will be found the most powerful and effective corrector of crime, and of all injurious and improper habits.<sup>443</sup>

Such a view is surely founded on the assumption that the social instincts are at the heart of all human conduct. “The desire of respect or approbation appears to be the mainspring [of all action. And] this spring, it will be found, may be made to pull in any direction.”<sup>444</sup> Thus, even a social instinct such as the desire of respect can result in irrationality if it is channelled

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<sup>441</sup> Combe, ‘The Definition of Education’, 194.

<sup>442</sup> *New Moral World*. 31 December 1836, 76

<sup>443</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 59–60.

<sup>444</sup> Combe, ‘The Definition of Education’, 189–91.

incorrectly. All irrationality stems from a misfiring or dormant instinct to sociability. If we simply exert pressure on this instinct long and hard enough, using natural means such as kindness, it will inevitably be rationalised. On the other hand, an example of a natural punishment is the adverse reaction of our fellow people to any misconduct:

The publicity of vice [...] would be one of the most powerful causes of reformation – founded on the law in the constitution of man [...] that the contempt and want of confidence of our friends and fellow-subjects, are among the most powerful feelings of the human mind.<sup>445</sup>

In other words, the feelings of shame that might follow being found out and chastised. Rather than coercing people to perform desirable actions, it was important that one develop a genuine understanding of their reasons for doing so, which could only be achieved by working with our “natural rewards and punishments”, by which are meant “the necessary consequences, immediate and remote, which result from any action.”<sup>446</sup> In Owenism, the desired consequence is always ‘happiness’. Therefore, “Whatever, in its ultimate consequences, increases the happiness of the community, is right; and whatever, on the other hand, tends to diminish that happiness, is wrong.” Once again, then, Owenite education consists of understanding the “mechanics” that govern human conduct and then facilitating them in a ‘natural’ way. The community performs a regulatory function by correcting drives whenever they begin to veer off-track. Mechanisms include painful emotions such as guilt and shame, which were merely the “natural punishment of vice”, while the esteem and affection of the wise and good were the “natural reward of virtue.”<sup>447</sup> That is to say, when one’s actions are in accordance with natural law, they inevitably result in the community’s approval and in happiness. Group pressure thus helps keep individual conduct from straying off the natural path: “The Eye of the Community, and the inward feeling produced, will soon either create a change of conduct, or make the individual retire

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<sup>445</sup> Macnab, 88

<sup>446</sup> Dale Owen, ‘An Outline of the System of Education at New Lanark’, 133.

<sup>447</sup> Abram Combe, *The Sphere for Joint-Stock Companies, or, the Way to Increase the Value of Land, Capital, and Labour: With an Account of the Establishment at Orbiston, in Lanarkshire*. (Edinburgh: Bell & Bradfute, 1825), 37–47.

from the Society."<sup>448</sup> In the same vein, George Mudie's Co-operative and economical Society at Spa Fields:

Appears [...] to have agreed upon the propriety of introducing a quasi-Dissenting system of mutual control. Each member had 'his own friendly Monitor', whose task it was 'to notice to his appointer such errors of conduct, temper or language' which endangered the harmony, good will and mutual esteem of the community [...].<sup>449</sup>

Shame was what was produced whenever people's natural 'desire of respect' or 'esteem' – one of human nature's motives to action – was channelled unnaturally and eventually publicly mocked. The regulation of this motive to action was even practiced at New Lanark, where it was regulated through the use of "silent monitors", a wooden cube that was assigned to each worker, with each side painted a different colour indicating the worker's performance that day, "both in terms of productivity and conduct: black (mediocre), blue (pass), yellow (satisfactory) and white (excellent)."<sup>450</sup> Each employee's record was then noted down in a "Book of Character."<sup>451</sup> Presumably, this technique was intended to work with the person's innate "desire of respect and approbation" mentioned earlier, as well as with the propensity to shame. Owen's son, Robert Dale, recalled the same principle being applied at Hofwyl, where, rather than rely on punishment or 'artificial reward', "The nobler elements of our nature had been appealed to, and the response was prompt and ardent."<sup>452</sup> This principle, the idea that the desire of respect can be used in education, appears repeatedly in Owenite writings and forms the focal point of many a pedagogical technique. It was to be regulated by, on the one hand, showing the child unfailing kindness, and, on the other hand, prompting the child to feel shame whenever their conduct was wanting. Maclure confirms this principle in one of his observations on Pestalozzi's school in Yverdon:

[The children's] attention was never fatigued with more than one hour at the same exercise either moral or physical; all was bottomed on free will, by the total exclusion of every species of correction [...]. I do not recollect

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<sup>448</sup> *The Economist*.

<sup>449</sup> Claeys, *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism*, 124.

<sup>450</sup> Simeon, *Robert Owen's Experiment at New Lanark: From Paternalism to Socialism*, 63.

<sup>451</sup> Morton, *The Life and Ideas of Robert Owen*, 81.

<sup>452</sup> Dale Owen, *Threading My Way*, 150–51.



ever to have heard [...] an angry word from either teacher or pupil [...].<sup>453</sup>

While in community experiments, the community takes on a disciplinary function, helping to “gently indicate all transgressions and evoke embarrassment and regret as an appropriate penalty.” Indeed, those fortunate enough to be raised under the ‘new education’ “will know that virtue always conducts to happiness, and that vice leads only to misery; and therefore, they will follow virtue from its own excellence, and avoid vice from its own deformity.”<sup>454</sup>

In some places, the regulatory power of the community is referred to as ‘public opinion’. This refers not to an aggregate of opinions or general will, but to the power of the opinions of others to influence one’s behaviour. For Charles Bray, the power of public opinion to regulate behaviour diminished the larger a society became, paving the way for “deleterious influences, corrupting the moral atmosphere even as fevers are generated by physical impurities.”<sup>455</sup> The language is striking, conjuring up yet again imagery of contamination and degradation by the infiltration of impurities. Impurities must be contained and preferably averted by managing the space through which instincts and drives flow and are expressed:

[It has been] found by experience, that public opinion loses its force, in proportion as its operation is diffused over a larger space and population.” [But,] “on the other hand, when acting in too limited a sphere, its tyranny becomes intolerable.”<sup>456</sup>

What is fascinating about these examples is that they betray a form of thinking about society, morality and conduct in terms of the regulation of currents, or even of the circulation of air. Earlier we saw that ‘rationality’ was often understood as a state of transparency, one in which the will is able to perceive the self’s inner machinations. Yet in the above examples, rationality emerges also as a dynamic force in its own right, one that can become corrupted, and whose circulation requires delicate management, particularly through containment. It is the conditions within which the force circulates that determine its health, and the goal of Owenite Social Science is to ensure its optimal circulation: make

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<sup>453</sup> Maclure, ‘Opinions on Various Subjects’, 247.

<sup>454</sup> Dale Owen, ‘An Outline of the System of Education at New Lanark’, 140.

<sup>455</sup> Bray, *The Philosophy of Necessity; or, the Law of Consequences as Applicable to Mental, Moral and Social Science*, 113.

<sup>456</sup> *The Union*, n.d. 1 August 1842

the channels of circulation too wide and the force will overflow uncontrollably; spread it too thinly and it will degrade. Constrict its flow too stringently and the force will clot and suffocate.

#### **11.4. The Desire of Knowledge**

As shown in sub-section 11.3, the use of natural rewards and punishments centred around the innate 'desire of esteem'. Another motive to action that Owenite education tries to regulate in the formation of character is the innate desire for knowledge. Or more specifically, knowledge of God's plan. That the new education can rely on natural rewards and punishments is due to the fact that we already contain, as part of a Nature's code, mechanisms designed to perceive and decipher said code intuitively. Macnab supports this assertion by quoting from Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

There is a part of our knowledge which we call intuitive: in this, the mind is at no pains in examining or proving, but perceives the truth, as the eye does light, only by being directed to it; and this kind of knowledge is irresistible; and as bright sunshine forces itself to be immediately perceived as soon as every the mind turns its views that way.<sup>457</sup>

To which Macnab himself adds:

To present such truths in [education], carefully and scrupulously taking as a practical rule or indication, the pleasure enjoyed by children in exercising their powers and faculties, education becomes a delightful task [...]. The improvement and happiness of the human race are, by the laws of nature and of God, inseparable in universal education.

Moreover, recourse to artificial rewards and punishments could produce other, more damaging, side effects "in its ultimate effects upon the human character." Artificial rewards may generate "pride, vanity, inordinate ambition, and all their concomitant irrational and injurious feelings and passions", while artificial punishments risked "debasing the character, and destroying the energies of the individual." Preventing the development of 'malevolent passions' and conveying to the child the direct consequences of their actions would

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<sup>457</sup> Locke, quoted in Macnab, 'The New Views of Mr. Owen of Lanark Impartially Examined, as Rational Means of Ultimately Promoting the Productive Industry, Comfort, Moral Improvement, and Happiness of the Labouring Classes of Society, and of the Poor; and of Training up Children in the Way in Which They Should Go', 210.

guarantee the child will always choose to act virtuously and rationally. Their ‘character’ “would inevitably become an amiable and a virtuous character.”<sup>458</sup> Therefore, instead of making recourse to artificial means, Owenite education sought to utilise human nature’s inherent tools to guide the formation along a natural path. Owenites believed that all individuals were providentially imbued with in-built tools – mainly the senses and the faculties – through which they could acquire an understanding of the natural world. “The language of nature is the language of God”, said Macnab. And children,

have a *natural desire to know* it in the forms of the different objects in nature. In presenting to them simply the objects in the vegetable, mineral, and animal kingdoms, and pointing out their different qualities, properties, uses, and ends, they will naturally conceive the existence of design, fitness, and contrivance. Here the teacher, without abstract or continued acts of reasoning, will, at one and the same time, instruct them in the relations of the works of creation; and thus furnish the great basis on which must be built the sciences of botany, of mineralogy, of chemistry, of astronomy, & c....<sup>459</sup>

We find this principle of an intuitive desire for knowledge not only in Owenite educational theory and in the classroom, but also built into the recreational activities that took place within Owenite community experiments. The Orbiston community, for example, had a theatre, the educational function of which is beyond doubt: an article describing the theatre’s activities is entitled “The Orbiston theatre, with general remarks on the performance, and the effects such representations are calculated to have on the population of the place.”<sup>460</sup> “The stage”, writes the reviewer, “has always been considered as one principal mean of forming the national character; let us in our little Community avail ourselves of its instrumentality.”<sup>461</sup> As well as forming the character, “theatrical pursuits [...] fix the attention, occupy the mind.” When accustomed through habit to “occupation and exercise”, the mind will tend to “seek something on which it can fix itself.” This is because “the desire of knowledge is natural to man”; therefore, “it is the business [...] of education to give this natural desire the most beneficial direction [...]. As [the members] become easy

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<sup>458</sup> Jane Dale Owen, ‘The Principles of Natural Education’, in *Utopianism and Education: Robert Owen and the Owenites*, ed. J.F.C. Harrison (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), 181–82.

<sup>459</sup> Macnab, 117–18.

<sup>460</sup> *Orbiston Register*. May 9, 1827, 42 (my italics).

<sup>461</sup> *Orbiston Register*. May 9, 1827, 43

and independent in their circumstances, they will, by their expanded minds [...], be enabled to enjoy it as rational beings.” So, the role of the theatre (or education in general) is to put forth the kinds of ‘representations’ that would direct the mind in a desired manner. And the mechanism underlying this process is as follows: the mind is already implanted with a natural desire for knowledge. That is to say, the desire for knowledge is a permanent function of human nature and is always “switched on”, as it were, always seeking out knowledge like some sort of insect feeler. However, without proper guidance, this natural mechanism can be led down a harmful path. Education, then, can help redirect the mind by occupying it in a useful, healthy way. When employed correctly, activities like the theatre can steer the mind in such a way that it become ‘independent’, and therefore ‘rational’. We see, then, that one of the principles of Owenite education is to make learning “pleasurable” by cultivating the various pleasures associated with learning. Being exposed to this new education for the first time produces a cascading effect of new pleasures being cultivated. First comes the ‘Pleasure of Curiosity’, where the pupil develops a desire “for more and more of such pleasures. Instead of repressing this inclination [...], nothing in the whole domain of things that a child feels an interest in enquiring about, shall be withheld from its scrutinizing glance.”<sup>462</sup> Later come the ‘Pleasures of Discovery’ – The development of the desire to go forth and discover new things in search of the previously mentioned pleasures, rather than wait for new facts to come to them – and the ‘Pleasures of Invention and Planning’ – allowing the child to conduct experiments, plan for the utilization and expansion of technologies, and so on. Some of the pleasures include “the pleasures of the senses..., those of the eye, the touch, the ear, the taste, etc.; the pleasures of muscular exertion grateful and conducive to the health of adults [and] the young”, and “the pleasures of the exercise of the mental powers”, which permit one “to compare and judge freely of all things, and not forced into premature judgement of any thing.”<sup>463</sup> There are many types of pleasures to be cultivated according to Thompson; while we will not list these fully here, the important thing to note is that each pleasure is designed to facilitate the development of abilities, skills or tendencies that together help form an independent learner – someone

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<sup>462</sup> Thompson, ‘Practical Directions for the Speedy and Economical Establishment of Communities on the Principles of Mutual Cooperation, United Possessions and Equality’, 210.

<sup>463</sup> Thompson, 209.

who willingly goes out into the world, empowered to learn from it independently and without instruction. Indeed, the cultivation of 'independence' is one of the cornerstones of Owenite child education. The aim is to develop the child's 'reflective faculties' by encouraging them to pursue learning of their own accord, by stimulating 'pleasurable feelings' rather than using artificial rewards or punishments. The idea appears to be that, just as the old system numbs the reflective faculties by engendering a dependent character, so did the dominant form of education blunt children's power of 'attention' by using artificial rewards and punishments to force the child to learn things that were of no interest to them:

Attention is the only medium through which instruction passes into the mind; without it, nothing makes a lasting impression [...]. Can undivided attention be secured by fear or coercion? This is a query necessary to be solved, as a principle upon which education must be bottomed.<sup>464</sup>

Instead, Owenite education "[rejects] every thing uninteresting to children,"<sup>465</sup> and cultivates different pleasures (such as the pleasure of discovery, the pleasure of curiosity, the pleasure of novelty, and more) to stimulate independent learning in the child, in which the child becomes their own teacher. Any knowledge acquired through independent learning, Owenites claimed, is far more effective and lasting than knowledge acquired through coercion. By learning of their own accord and intuition, "an agreeable impression [is] made for the first time" which, "not only from its difference in kind, but from our consciousness of its not having been felt before, operates more vividly, and generally more pleasantly on the mind."<sup>466</sup> The cultivation of these pleasures helps lay the foundations for a person with a high degree of inquisitiveness, invention and independence. By inculcating "enduring principles of action" and "early habits", the child would supposedly experience, throughout their life, "pleasurable feelings resulting to him from his particular mode of conduct", which will ensure that "he would never swerve from the right path." 'Pleasurable feelings', then, are a natural mechanism that, when correctly calibrated, can regulate one's conduct rationally, in much the same way as shame or the desire for respect are natural

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<sup>464</sup> Maclure, 'Opinions on Various Subjects', 254.

<sup>465</sup> Thompson, 'Practical Directions for the Speedy and Economical Establishment of Communities on the Principles of Mutual Cooperation, United Possessions and Equality', 203.

<sup>466</sup> Thompson, 209–10.

mechanisms that must be used in the regulation of conduct. These different pleasures form the “useful principles of influence or motives to exertion or learning [...]. They are simply the desire to experience [these pleasures] again (after having once experienced them) [...]”<sup>467</sup> These ‘motives to exertion or learning’ are in opposition to what Thompson terms “the pernicious motives” dominant in most forms of education: “factitious rewards and punishments, particularly the latter, physical pain and terror”, as well as “the principle of Emulation”, which founds “the gratification of one individual on the relative inferiority of others.” This principle is “utterly hostile [...] to benevolence, which would rejoice in every species of good to another.”<sup>468</sup> Once again, we find the idea that individuals consist of different faculties and moral qualities that need to be regulated expertly to ensure that they develop in a useful, natural and healthy way, avoiding an imbalanced development. The notion of ‘factitious’ or ‘artificial’ rewards and punishments is a recurring trope in Owenism. Robert Dale Owen stated that “All rewards and punishments whatever, except such as Nature herself has provided [...], are sedulously excluded, as being equally unjust in themselves, and prejudicial in their effects.”<sup>469</sup> Instead, children are to be excited “by creating in them a wish to learn what they are to be taught”, rather than commending them through distinction. What Owenites tended to care about, then, was creating the right ‘motives’ in people.

## Conclusion

As we can begin to see, the purpose of Owenite infant education was to provide the child with the building blocks of rational and independent learning, cultivating their innate capacities in a harmonious manner until the individual was ready to reason and make rational judgments for themselves. This was done by first developing the powers of observation and attention, as well as the child’s natural curiosity (or ‘spirit of enquiry’). These fundamental building blocks would instil in the individual a lifelong inclination and confidence to pursue learning of their own accord. Crucially, it would allow the individual to assess information without becoming deceived by false claims. The way to regulate the

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<sup>467</sup> Thompson, 205.

<sup>468</sup> Thompson, 206.

<sup>469</sup> Dale Owen, ‘An Outline of the System of Education at New Lanark’, 132.

development of these capacities was to work with the human constitution's inherent desires, drives and inclinations to cultivate an instinctive pleasure at using these capacities, rather than trying to force them. Owenites considered human beings to be made up of certain fundamental desires and powers, of which we have so far examined the 'desire of esteem', the 'desire of knowledge', and the power of curiosity. There is at least one more desire that I have been able to deduce from Co-operative writings – the desire of independence, – which I will outline and unpack in part III of this thesis. For now, however, I would like to note a number of things about what has been covered in this chapter. First, this is a part of what Owenites meant when they spoke of their system of education as working with natural principles: they considered the desire of esteem and knowledge to be fundamental motives to action in the human mind. This was in stark contrast with the 'Old System of Education' which, Owenites claimed, relied on fear, punishment, praise and imitation. This is because, as we saw from the examples of John Wesley and Hannah More at the start of the chapter, other systems of education assumed that the human constitution was fundamentally corrupt and unruly, naturally tending towards malice and disobedience, and humans thereby needed to be repressed into good conduct. As such, Owenite education was not merely seeking to create rational individuals, but to give people tools with which to flourish. This is thus an early articulation of the notion of human flourishing, which is linked to their theory of alienation. Individuals are alienated when their natural desires of esteem and knowledge, and their natural curiosity, are suppressed. Second, I would like to draw attention back to the role of the Will to Truth in the Owenite framework. To Owenites, our innate desire for knowledge is guaranteed by our being part of a wider natural order – a divine order. It is founded on the ontological assumption that nature contains all of the knowledge required to live a happy life. All that is needed in order to discover and acquire this knowledge is to use the correct tools. This is what I will cover in chapter 12, where I will explore the role of the senses and the faculty of reason in the Owenite framework.

## Chapter 12 – Reason and the Senses

### Introduction

In the previous chapter I traced some of the foundations instilled by Owenite pedagogy in order to form an individual capable of independent learning. In this chapter, I will demonstrate the epistemological basis of Owenite pedagogy. That is to say, the Owenite theories regarding the manner in which the individual absorbs information and sifts through it for knowledge. I will explain the particular empiricist model at the centre of Owenism, which sought to make of everyone an empirical scientist, in a sense. As I have already argued, Owenism was a response to what it experienced as a crisis of meaning. While Owenites did not believe in a divine authority, they nevertheless believed that everything in the universe obeyed natural laws which, when adhered to, unfailingly lead to happiness and harmony. As such, the crisis of meaning was an epistemological one – all that was required to resolve it was to uncover the laws of nature. To this end, Owenites developed epistemological frameworks with which to acquire sound first principles on which to establish the Social System. I will demonstrate this epistemological framework in this chapter.

### 12.1. The Role of Reason in the Creation of Independent Learners

As stated, the end-goal of the various stages of Owenite education described so far was the cultivation of an independent, rational learner – someone who could be presented with claims regarding reality and evaluate them critically rather than simply absorbing received ideas. However, all of the different building blocks of learning require one primary faculty to bring them all together and regulate their powers – the faculty of reason. It is this faculty that would ultimately allow the independent learner to critically assess information:

[...] man has no other means of discovering what is false, except by his faculty of reason, or power of acquiring and comparing the ideas which he receives. [...] when this faculty is properly cultivated or trained from infancy, [...] then the individual will acquire real knowledge, or those ideas only which will leave an impression of their consistency, or truth [...].<sup>470</sup>

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<sup>470</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 113.



The above definition of ‘reason’ is a reminder that Owenism views itself partly as an empiricist project. To Owenites, reason allows the individual to ‘compare’ received ideas and to assess them against sound first principles: those ideas which “leave an impression of their consistency.” “[Plain] unsophisticated reason [...] traces to its source the cause of every evil which exists [and] adopts the proper measures to remove the *cause* [...]”<sup>471</sup> It is an apparatus for distinguishing between options. In this respect, they speak from the same Enlightenment tradition as d’Holbach, for whom “Reason [...] is nothing but the act of choosing those passions which we must follow for the sake of our happiness.”<sup>472</sup> This, then, is the Owenite conception of rationality: a rational agent – or someone with rational character – is one who is able to perceive reality and their true interests correctly. This allows them to choose, in any given situation, the option that would truly make them happy. While an irrational agent, on the other hand – or someone with an irrational character – is one who is confused about their interests and whose choices therefore lead to unhappiness, as happens when an individual works from false first principles: “[...] the reasoning faculty may be injured [...] during its growth, by reiterated impressions being made upon it of notions not derived from realities, and which it therefore cannot compare with the ideas previously received from the objects around it.”<sup>473</sup> This explains why Owenite education takes such painstaking measures to protect the child from ‘artificial’ external circumstances from infancy – receiving erroneous ideas, ‘notions not derived from realities’, at such a young age, would leave the child with false first principles on which to build their knowledge of the world. This, Owen says, results in “partial insanity or defective powers of judging [...]”<sup>474</sup> As such, we can frame the purpose of Owenite education in a new light: to make every child, every individual, into an independent *empirical scientist* – or even, an empirical scientist of the self. All of the pedagogical practices and principles described so far can be viewed in this light, as cultivating tools in the individual that would allow them to empirically study both the world and themselves. That is what is meant by an ‘independent’ or ‘rational’ learner. Once the faculty of reason has been fully developed, the individual is considered to be ready to go out into the world, independently of any instructors, and study

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<sup>471</sup> Owen, 135–36.

<sup>472</sup> Paul Henri Thiry Holbach, *System of Nature. Volume 2 (1770)* (London: Routledge, 2019), 31.

<sup>473</sup> Owen, *New View of Society*, 113–114

<sup>474</sup> Owen, *New View of Society*, 114

both the world around them and themselves, as Frances Wright<sup>475</sup> exhorted Co-operators to do: “Turn your churches into halls of science, and devote your leisure day to the study of your own bodies, the analysis of your own minds, and the examination of the fair material world which extends around you.”<sup>476</sup>

But there is another layer to the notion of an education “founded in nature.” The creation of an independent learner could not be achieved by “the present defective and tiresome system of book learning”,<sup>477</sup> claimed Owen. “In many schools [...] the children of the poor and labouring classes are never taught to understand what they read; [...] [They] are taught to believe without reasoning, and thus never to think or to reason correctly.” Rote learning is insufficient and injurious when relied upon exclusively. Therefore, while it is important that the children learn ‘facts’, these should be used to help the child “form a rational judgment on any subject” once they are in possession of “the full vigour of his faculties.”<sup>478</sup> The best education, according to Maclure, would:

free the pupil [...] from dependence on the ipse dixit of the master, by teaching him to derive his knowledge directly from the things themselves [...] Instruct children to teach themselves by their own observations, which make lasting impressions, and enlist self-love to enhance the value of the knowledge acquired.<sup>479</sup>

Book-learning and rote-learning were inadequate, then. Instead, knowledge should be derived ‘directly from the things themselves’, by the children’s ‘own observations’. Yet what are the psychological and physiological mechanisms that underpin and make possible this sort of learning? It is the senses, which play a crucial role in Owenite theories of education. I will outline and explain this claim in the remaining sub-sections of this chapter.

## 12.2. The Senses

The Owenite conception of rationality, as we have seen, requires knowledge of the truth, an accurate perception of reality. At the same time, however, knowledge of reality could not

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<sup>475</sup> A close friend of Robert Dale Owen’s and a member of the New Harmony community

<sup>476</sup> *The Co-Operative Magazine*, n.d. October 1829, p.227

<sup>477</sup> Owen, ‘The Book of the New Moral World’, 126–27.

<sup>478</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 98–99.

<sup>479</sup> Maclure, ‘Opinions on Various Subjects’, 249.

be implanted from without. Rather, the purpose of education was to empower individuals to be independent empirical investigators, as it were, because the power to obtain this knowledge was already inscribed into the human constitution. Thus, Rational education would teach one to use “the rational powers and faculties of man [in order] to discover the laws of nature, and direct and apply this precious knowledge to the due direction and cultivation of the constituent parts of man, which form an epitome of the universe [...]”<sup>480</sup> Because there are “laws by which Providence directs the machinery of the universe”, and human nature is an epitome of these laws,

to discover and employ the [...] means of knowing the relations in the works of creation, and of their due applications, constitutes the limits of the human understanding, and furnishes the grand basis [...] on which must be reared the improvement and happiness of the human race.

The tools that allow one to carry out this task are the senses. These were viewed by Owenites as a naturally in-built tool which function it was to gather information about the world that could then be presented to reason; a tool given to us by creation, with which to read and decipher the Divine Code that is everywhere around us. Indeed, bemoaned the *New Harmony Gazette*, “judging without accurately making use of the senses to investigate and examine, has often deceived us on the causes of our diseases.”<sup>481</sup> For example, by correctly using observation and experience, the author insists, one could ‘observe’ that fever was caused by the sharp changes in temperature common around New Harmony and swampland in general, and that from such sensible observations we could conclude that fever can be prevented by wearing warmer clothes at night. Furthermore, they assert, people could generally maintain their health by making sure to “put into our mouths only what *experience* has taught us will conduce to our health and consequent happiness.” They continue, trusting in the power of the ‘senses’ and ‘experience’ to reveal to us the natural inclinations of our bodies:

Try every experiment on things within your control— register the results of all proportions and varieties of food and raiment, and if it is found, that

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<sup>480</sup> Macnab, ‘The New Views of Mr. Owen of Lanark Impartially Examined, as Rational Means of Ultimately Promoting the Productive Industry, Comfort, Moral Improvement, and Happiness of the Labouring Classes of Society, and of the Poor; and of Training up Children in the Way in Which They Should Go’, 48.

<sup>481</sup> *New Harmony Gazette*, Wednesday, May 31, 1826.

practising the simplicity of our instinctive tastes, is the shortest road to both moral and physical gratifications and comforts [...], follow the regimen as nearly as the depraved appetites and spoiled palates of the old [system] will permit; and educate the children so as to avoid the acquiring of any artificial tastes [...] by never offering to a child a second time what it makes wry faces at the first [...].

Every individual, then, has in-built capacities that enable them to distinguish the healthful from the harmful. The problem is simply that the 'artificial' tastes we have acquired confuse and disorient us. 'Experience', 'observation' and 'the senses' are the keywords of Owenite empiricism, the mantra by which each individual holds the key to true knowledge of both the moral and physical world: "[E]ach one may confirm or invalidate [the aforementioned] by his own observations; as what we gain by our own experience is what regulates our conduct." It is for this reason, then, that book-learning is an inadequate method for the acquisition of 'truth' – it does not make use of the senses. Note, also, the analogy between physical and moral corruption, which creeps up time and again in Owenite thought: 'practising... our instinctive tastes, is the shortest road to both moral and physical' improvement. In other words, the senses, when correctly calibrated, reveal to us not only the natural way to conduct the body, but also our moral conduct. It follows from this that the moral and physical rationality of the individual are concomitant with one another.

This model is grounded in the assumption that the universe – including the human constitution – is governed by a Will to Truth. The senses are continually trying to communicate some truth to us about the external world, and if we just learn to listen to it correctly, we can regulate our conduct along natural and healthy conduits. The path to knowledge and rationality, then, lies in distinguishing the 'natural' from the 'artificial', and undertaking a process of purification of sorts, removing all traces of artificiality from one's body and mind. We find this formulation everywhere in Owenism, both in its overtly Christian followers and in its Deist ones. William Ludlow, a member of New Harmony who self-defined as a 'rationalist Christian', described himself as someone "who understands the essential word of God [...] in the laws of nature [...]. Jesus Christ is nothing more [...] than true knowledge and goodness, which forms us God-like in our dispositions, causing us to

love God and man.”<sup>482</sup> Similarly, to Abram Combe Co-operation was simply True Christianity, and the laws of nature are to be disclosed to us as part of the unfolding of Divine Revelation through history. “Divine Revelation” reveals “all the Facts and Truths” of human nature to the “Senses and to the Understanding. The Human Character is ennobled, and happiness promoted, by an acquaintance with this revelation.”<sup>483</sup> “Knowledge” of the Plan can be confirmed via “The agreeable sensations which are attached to [it]”, as they “constitute the Stamp of Approbation which the Great Author of Nature has set upon what is Good.” The infidel, on the other hand, does not believe in Providence, and instead “attempts to force circumstances from the channel in which God ordained them to move.” So, a Will to Truth runs through everything, and if we just learn how to use the natural gift of the senses then they, like a dowsing stick, will show us the true way of things. As such, Rationality implied not only transparency and unity between the self and the outside world, but between one and one’s self.

The infrastructure of this form of thinking, let us remember, was already present in the political economists and moral philosophers described in Part I, some of whom were regularly invoked by Owenites, such as in this quote from Dugald Stewart used in the following statement, issued by Robert Owen's Committee on August 23, 1819: “[...] In the moral world, as well as in the material, the farther our observations extend, and the longer they are continued, the more we shall perceive of order and of benevolent design in the universe.” The Owenite science of human nature understood people as containing natural mechanisms that allow them to ascertain the truth and design behind the natural world, God’s code, and it was this alleged inbuilt mechanism that made empirical self-examination possible. Thus, one task of education was to teach the person how to make correct use of the senses in order to properly gather information about the world around them. We may also conclude from this that a misuse or malfunctioning of the senses is a key determinant in alienation. An individual who has not been properly trained to use their senses will

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<sup>482</sup> Ludlow, *Belief of the Rational Brethren of the West* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1819), cited in Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: The Quest for the New Moral World*, 107.

<sup>483</sup> *Orbiston Register*, 49.

present the faculty of reason with false information, thereby developing incorrect ideas regarding the world and themselves.

But then, what are the factors that might impede or facilitate the senses' function of acquiring knowledge? The senses operate "upon a due exercise of instinct and intuitive power, by sensible signs. These signs must either consist in the original types in nature, or representations of these types, which bear the relation of likeness to their originals." The senses' capacity to transmit accurate knowledge to the mind, then, depends on the 'sensible signs' on which they rely.

### **12.3. Representation and Artificial Signs**

One of the 'artificial' factors that stood in the way of the senses' capacity to gather accurate information was language – or rather, language in its incomplete or artificial state. Because language, as the Owenites conceived of it, consisted of nothing more than signs that stood in for things in the world, it ran the risk of impressing an inaccurate idea of reality.

Artificial signs [...] throw the mind at a distance from nature, render complicated the operations of the mind, and are discordant with curiosity, one of the strongest dispositions in the nature of youth and of men. Artificial languages consist in signs *which have no natural relation with the thing signified* [...]. [my italics]

Language is not merely a distortion of reality, but a complete fiction. Therefore,

unless the mind be previously cultivated and strengthened by knowledge, acquired by the use of sensible signs, its powers and faculties, particularly judgment, must evidently be weakened.

In such a state, where one's faculty of judgment is weakened, one is vulnerable to irrationality. Therefore, in order to ensure one's rationality, their mind must be prepared in advance, implanted with natural ideas, and their faculties trained so as to be able to withstand the assault of language. For example, 'curiosity' – an inborn disposition of human nature – could become stunted or numbed under the wrong circumstances. We regularly find in Owenite writings the notion that existing languages contained "impurities", so to speak, which corrupt the mind. Indeed, some Owenites predicted that when the social system finally triumphed it would cut across all national borders,

[leading] to an open and unrestrained correspondence amongst all people [...]. Every country would be the home of all [...]. This would cause such a thoroughfare of human beings [...]. as to destroy all national distinctions amongst men [...] [and] [...] destroying all old languages; and giving birth to a new and universal medium of communicating thought, a language more perfect, more copious, more beautiful, and better adapted to the new condition and the new ideas of mankind. [...] [Errors] must all be dispersed when the intercourse is perfect, and the language of the world is one. This idea also corresponds with a promise in the Bible respecting this happy state of things, in which the Lord says to the prophet Zephaniah, "I will turn to the people a pure language."<sup>484</sup>

At times it was not language in its imperfect state that was the problem, but language *altogether*. Owenites often contrasted 'language' with 'representation'. 'Representation' (which mostly referred to drawing) captured the essence of a thing in the world by relying on *sensible signs*. By utilising the senses, representation avoided any mediation between the mind and external reality, and thus transmitted an accurate idea of the thing to the mind. Language, meanwhile, merely stood in for a thing but had no relation to the thing itself. It therefore acted as a mediator between the mind and reality, risking the transmission of inaccurate, distorted ideas. Representation is natural as it passes through the senses, while language is artificial. And this has implications for education:

When a child first sees a Horse, it gets a correct idea of a Horse. If you attempt to give the child an idea of any object by words, the task is [...] disagreeable and unprofitable [...]—It is upon this account that the Founder of the New System proposes to introduce sensible signs as the best means of educating children; and when the object itself cannot be introduced, it is supposed that a correct representation of it will best supply the deficiency.<sup>485</sup>

For this reason, book-learning was deemed insufficient, and while co-operators produced numerous publications and co-operative societies were renowned for their ample reading rooms, their formal pedagogical techniques usually avoided relying on books, especially at New Lanark. For, through language,

we may acquire either correct ideas, or [...] incorrect. —All ideas which do not correspond with the realities, are incorrect; and all the ideas that we

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<sup>484</sup> Smith, 'Lecture on a Christian Community', 203–4.

<sup>485</sup> Combe, 'The Definition of Education', 190.

get solely by means of words, are, without exception, more or less of this description.

Consequently, in order to cultivate sound judgment, education must make use of natural signs. We ought to bear this in mind as we examine Owenite educational activities, asking ourselves how each activity was designed to bring about these ends. For example, at New Lanark, there were classes in,

natural history, geography, ancient and modern history, chemistry, astronomy, etc. on the principle, that it is following the plan prescribed by nature to give a child such particulars as he can easily be made to understand, concerning the nature and properties of the different objects around him, before we proceed to teach him the artificial signs which have been adopted to represent these objects.<sup>486</sup>

As much as possible, then, the thing itself must be used to learn about it, rather than a description of it or an artificial sign. William Maclure takes the distinction between useful and useless knowledge, and between nature and artifice, to a degree of austerity unmatched by other Owenites, but his thoughts are nonetheless revealing of a broader trend:

Representation is the only defined language, and is perhaps equal in value and utility to all the languages together; [...]. When the objects themselves are absent, descriptions, from the undefined nature of words, must be equally vague and uncertain. An idea is a representation in the mind of a thing thought of; [...]. What does not come by the senses, cannot be figured in the mind, of course cannot be called a correct idea, but must remain vague and imperfect.<sup>487</sup>

Therefore, only those modes of teaching that can convey accurate ideas of things must be utilised. Chief among these is the,

art of drawing or delineation, which has been placed (because its utility was not well understood) amongst the fine arts, must be ranked amongst those which are useful, as it is probably the most expeditious, correct, easy and pleasant mode, of giving ideas both to children and adults.<sup>488</sup>

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<sup>486</sup> Dale Owen, 'An Outline of the System of Education at New Lanark', 147.

<sup>487</sup> Maclure, 'Opinions on Various Subjects', 231.

<sup>488</sup> Maclure, 232.



Literature, on the other hand,

is at best an ornament, that all language [...] can easily dispense with. The flowers of rhetoric and declamation, only serve to disguise the truth and puzzle all who attempt to convert them into common sense. [...] the thing most to be guarded against, is the exaggerated delusion of the imagination [...]. When we cannot explain our meaning to another, it is not generally for want of language, but because the idea is vague and undefined [...]. Our species is perhaps the only one that dreams when awake; that allow their imagination to run riot with their thoughts and build castles in the air, resembling nothing in existence.<sup>489</sup>

‘Imagination’, then, emerges as a dirty word in the Owenite lexicon, something to be “guarded against.” Any ideas acquired via language or any other artificial signs lead to an ‘imaginary’ understanding of reality. Imagination distorts our understanding, leads us to “dream when awake”, and muddies communication. This theme of distortion and the failure of clear communication persisted in Abram Combe, who believed that the reason there is so much disagreement in the world is that, as people live under an irrational system,

they have no fixed intelligible standard by which to regulate their opinions [...] [Those] who are trained from infancy to resign the understanding [...] to the dictates of the Human Imagination, cannot meet together even for an hour, without quarrelling upon some point or other [...].<sup>490</sup>

‘Useful Knowledge’, therefore, was any knowledge that helped one perceive reality clearly, accurately and without distortion, and provided them with a “fixed standard.”

#### **12.4. Uses of ‘Representation’ in Owenite Pedagogy**

There are numerous examples of the use of ‘representation’ in Owenite pedagogical practice. In *An Outline of the System of Education at New Lanark*, Owen’s son, Robert Dale Owen, describes a course in Natural History in which nature is divided into “the Animal, Vegetable, and Mineral Kingdoms.”<sup>491</sup> Here, the teacher would teach details of “the most interesting” specimens in each division; these details,

are illustrated by representations of the objects, drawn on a large scale, and as correctly as possible. It is desirable, that these representations should be

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<sup>489</sup> Maclure, 242.

<sup>490</sup> *Orbiston Register*, 50.

<sup>491</sup> Dale Owen, ‘An Outline of the System of Education at New Lanark’, 153.

all on the same scale; otherwise the child's idea of their relative size becomes incorrect.<sup>492</sup>

So essential was accurate representation deemed that in his plans for the establishment of Co-operative communities, William Thompson stated that if a community's resources were limited at first, it ought to “even [...] do without teachers than without draftsmen and modellers. Drawing should be [...] one of the permanent, most pleasing and therefore most useful, of the modes and aids to instruction in all departments.”<sup>493</sup> Perhaps the most innovative Owenite in terms of her use of ‘representation’ was Catherine Vale Whitwell, who spent more than two years teaching and lecturing at the Institute for the Formation of Character in New Lanark, working with both children and adults. Whitwell produced a variety of learning aids to be used in lessons, most notably the ‘Stream of Time’ (see Fig. 5). “This device... showed the divisions of historical time, linked to major events and personalities of the various colour-coded periods, hence aiding cross-correlations and memory.”<sup>494</sup> Robert Dale Owen described “botanical representations” produced by Whitwell, which were displayed “on glazed canvas”, as well as musical notes, signs and music itself, “represented on a large scale.”<sup>495</sup> She was also responsible for producing maps and the large-scale tableau of exotic animals displayed at the Institute (See Figs. 4 and Figs. 6-8), replicas of which are today installed in the museum at the New Lanark World Heritage Site.

A description of the classroom in *An Outline* reads:

The walls are hung round with representations of the most striking [specimens from the natural world as well as] very large representations of the two hemispheres; each separate country, as well as the various seas, islands, &c. being differently coloured, but without any names attached to them [*presumably in order to encourage the children to use colour as a mnemonic aid*].<sup>496</sup>

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<sup>492</sup> Dale Owen, 153–54. See Figs. 4-8.

<sup>493</sup> Thompson, ‘Practical Directions for the Speedy and Economical Establishment of Communities on the Principles of Mutual Cooperation, United Possessions and Equality’, 224–25.

<sup>494</sup> Donnachie, “‘We Must Give Them an Education, Large, Liberal and Comprehensive.’ Catherine Vale Whitwell: Teacher, Artist, Author, Feminist and Owenite Communitarian’.

<sup>495</sup> Dale Owen, ‘An Outline of the System of Education at New Lanark’, 198.

<sup>496</sup> Dale Owen, 143–44.

Extensive use of visual aids was also made in the teaching of Ancient and Modern History, using Miss Whitwell's 'Stream of Time and "seven large maps or tables." Each country, event and century are represented by different colours, and,

the children are taught the outlines of [...] History, with ease [...]. On hearing of any two events, for instance, the child has but to recollect the situation, on the tables, of the paintings, by which these are represented, in order to be furnished at once with their chronological relation to each other.<sup>497</sup>

Furthermore, the teacher tries to convey an "intimate connexion between Natural History, Geography, and History [...], so that in lecturing on one of these [...], the teacher finds many opportunities of recalling [...] various portions of the others." It is worth noting that the use of colours as a mnemonic aid was an innovation that went beyond mere 'representation'. It's clear that Whitwell sought to make use of the full range of senses and faculties in ways that far exceeded anything Owen or any Owenites imagined possible.

## **Conclusion**

I began this chapter by outlining the role of the faculty of reason in the Owenite framework and its function in the production of an independent and rational learner. The function of this faculty was, primarily, to aid the individual in acquiring consistent first principles upon which to construct their understanding of the world. As such, Owenite education sought to make of everyone an empirical scientist of sorts. That is to say, life under the Owenite framework is a kind of project of empirical investigation. Yet again, it is important to reiterate that this approach is grounded in the Owenite ontological commitment to the idea of nature as a unified field governed by the Will to Truth. Because nature is a unified field characterised by consistency, the route to knowledge lies in removing inconsistencies, arriving at consistent first principles, and gradually building cumulative knowledge from there, thereby continually progressing towards greater knowledge.

Here, then, we have an epistemological assumption that informs much of the Owenite project. While Owenites believe in innate instincts, drives and desires, they reject the notion of innate ideas, holding instead that knowledge can only be acquired through the senses.

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<sup>497</sup> Dale Owen, 156–57.

The senses constitute the only tools through which human beings – who part of the universal and providential natural order – can gather information about nature, which is then interpreted by the faculty of reason. The danger is that the senses may inadvertently transmit distorted information to the mind when relying on unnatural source material such as language or inaccurate representations of things. Relying on such artificial sources leads to the formation of erroneous impressions in the mind, causing the faculty of reason to form an erroneous understanding of reality, which subsequently guides the Will down an unhealthy path.

Everything centres around the contrast between clarity and distortion, unity and division, consistency and contingency. Nature is posited as this fixed standard – a source of unambiguous truth and certainty from which to extrapolate the parameters of all conduct, moral and physiological alike. Using artificial signs leads to the formation of unnatural ideas, to the alienation of the individual from nature, and consequently also from themselves. Rationality, therefore, is guaranteed by the Will to Truth that courses through everything. The paths through which it flows must be cleared, however, removing any distorting filters such as language or inaccurate representations. By clearing the path, the Will to Truth is regulated, and harmony is established. Using clear, natural signs, the faculty of reason is helped to make sound judgments and distinguish between artificial and natural ideas.

A further point emerging from this chapter is that, owing to their assumption that the natural world and society are governed by the same laws, Owenites conclude that the senses and reason can be used to infer *moral* knowledge and ascertain an unambiguous moral code. Thus, Owenite theories regarding language, representation and the senses appear to be an extension of the anxious urge to replace God with a new universal source of truth. The individual is expected to learn how to correctly read the signals being sent out by their own natural mechanisms and regulate their own conduct accordingly. Simultaneously, the mind is constantly in the process of receiving impressions and ideas from the external environment or ‘circumstances’; and if these ideas are out of alignment with the principles of nature, they end up disrupting one’s ability to read the signal being sent by our innate drives, leading the individual to behave irrationally. The moral, physiological and pedagogical discourses contained in Owenism are thus built on the assumption that both

external reality and the inner machinations of the self can be made fully transparent to the individual, and that this would allow the individual to make 'rational' choices. Therefore, a scientific education will help

man to attain a rational state of existence, to know himself and humanity, to acquire useful and valuable knowledge, to be advanced from being the slave of inferior and vicious circumstances [...]. In fact, this is the education that will elevate man to a permanently rational and superior state of existence.<sup>498</sup>

However, if the flow of the Will to Truth is forever in danger of being disrupted, thereby misleading the individual, then they require correct guidance, at least until they are sufficiently well-trained to be their own guides. Thus, there emerges a seemingly irresolvable tension between the claim to creating independent learners on the one hand, and a refusal to relinquish control on the other. I will explore this tension in the part III.

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<sup>498</sup> Owen, 'The Book of the New Moral World', 126–27.

## **PART III – Self-Help Co-operation**

## Chapter 13 – Setting out the Context for Self-Help Co-operation

### Introduction

Over the preceding chapters, I showed that the purpose of Owenite education was to create an independent character, and highlighted a contradiction between this aim and the Owenite insistence that top-down instruction was a pre-requisite to mental independence. This contradiction is emblematic of a broader tension across not only Owenism, but the Co-operative Movement as a whole – a tension between top-down paternalistic approaches to character-formation on the one hand and, on the other hand, a bottom-up approach that viewed *a priori* freedom as the only means of attaining independence and rationality. In Owenism, one was considered to have a rational character once their faculties had been fully developed. Crucially, however, the only way to develop the pupil's faculties was by completely controlling their circumstances and providing top-down instruction. Most Owenites were thus unwilling to relinquish any control and viewed a scientifically precise education as a prerequisite for independence. The fact is that, no matter how noble Owen's conscious intentions may have been, his insistence that a person had no capacity for transforming their own character placed the educator in a relationship of absolute hierarchical superiority to the educated, one in which the educator "helps to create and shape [the educated], or [...], in Owen's term, 'governs' them as their 'architect'."<sup>499</sup> As Seigel puts it, to Owen,

people are born with different sets of 'propensities and qualities' that gave them 'individuality and distinctiveness', but the notion that such differences would persist through the highly directed kind of educational process he envisioned assumed that everyone's innate tendencies were compatible with the impress this education was intended to give them. And there was the rub: his schema left no space for the possibility that people might arrive at their mature characters through a process that included resistance to some of what would be provided for them.<sup>500</sup>

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<sup>499</sup> Claeys, *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism*, 67. Quote from Robert Owen, *A Discourse on a New System of Society* ('First Discourse', 1825), p.27

<sup>500</sup> Jerrold Seigel, 'Necessity, Freedom, and Character Formation from the Eighteenth Century to the Nineteenth', in *Character, Self, and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Thomas Ahnert and Susan Manning (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 258.

Thompson says precisely this of Owen: “However admirable Owen was as a man, he was a preposterous thinker [...]. There comes through his writings not the least sense of the dialectical processes of social change. [...]”<sup>501</sup> Most famously, Marx took issue with this aspect of Owenism:

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that circumstances are changed precisely by men and that the educator must himself be educated. Hence this doctrine necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, of which one towers above society.<sup>502</sup>

Indeed, Marx believed that the only way to achieve the new moral world was through revolution, which was required

not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.<sup>503</sup>

That is to say, only by directly participating in the revolution could the working classes shape their own character and be prepared for the new world. As Claeys summarises:

The new character of the future would have to be at least partially remade during the revolutionary process itself, [Marx and Engels] concluded, to avoid importing too much irrationality from the old world into the new, and forever threatening a resurgence of the old order.<sup>504</sup>

In this chapter, I will begin to unpack the tension between the top-down approach to character-formation and the argument that people can only be remade through bottom-up participation in the formation of their own character. I will trace this tension as it was played out within Owenite circles, before moving on to examine the ‘Self-Help’ strands of the Co-operative Movement and how this tension was played out within Self-Help circles over the remaining chapters.

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<sup>501</sup> Thompson, 865

<sup>502</sup> Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, 1845, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/index.htm>.

<sup>503</sup> Marx and Engels, *Karl Marx Frederick Engels: Collected Works. Vol. 29, Karl Marx: 1857-61*, 461–62.

<sup>504</sup> Claeys, *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism*, 304.



### 13.1. The Desire of Independence

Marx himself was speaking as part of a long-standing liberal tradition that views 'freedom' or liberty as character-forming in and of itself, and as a pre-requisite for rationality rather than its end-product. Humboldt wrote that the "true end of Man... is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole", and that "[Man] only attains the most matured and graceful consummation of his activity, when his way of life is harmoniously in keeping with his character [...]"<sup>505</sup>, a point all Owenites would agree on. Yet most Owenites certainly would not agree with Humboldt's assertion that "[Freedom] is the first and indispensable condition which the possibility of such a development presupposes", and that "nothing promotes this ripeness for freedom so much as freedom itself."<sup>506</sup> The belief in one's inalienable liberty could be found among Owen's own workforce, with certain workers taking issue with being dictated to "from above" by a benign saviour. In a letter to the company's partners, members of New Lanark's workforce complained that Owen had been trying to force on them a kind of community life that they did not want to take part in:

We wish to know [...] whether a friendly invitation or a determined compulsion shall thereafter constitute the society [...] We view it as a grievance of considerable magnitude to be compelled by Mr. Owen to adopt what measures soever he may please to suggest on matters that entirely belong to us. Such a course of procedure is most repugnant to our minds as men, and degrading to our characters as free-born sons of highly-favoured Britain.<sup>507</sup>

Here, then, the workers at New Lanark appear to already have had a strong sense of their own independent character, culture and self-worth, and resented the idea that someone should impose a new way of life on them. These workers would undoubtedly have concurred with Humboldt's statement that the notion that freedom is a pre-requisite for rationality "may not be acknowledged by those who have so often used this unripeness as an excuse for continuing repression."<sup>508</sup> Owen may not have quite repressed anyone, but he

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<sup>505</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 41.

<sup>506</sup> Humboldt, 5.

<sup>507</sup> Anon. 1823. Letter to the London Proprietors. *Edinburgh Christian Monitor* 22, 836.

<sup>508</sup> Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, 136.

appears to have been driven by a total lack of trust in the lower classes. Yet, while Owen and his immediate circles were deeply and rigidly paternalistic, allowing no room for bottom-up character-formation, we can find among wider Owenite circles much evidence of a position that views liberty – or at least being given responsibility – not as the end product of education, but as a *means* of education. A position that, much like Humboldt, Cobbett and Marx, views freedom as character-forming in and of itself. One example of this position comes from Abram Combe: “[We] find that there is nothing like *experience* for giving us correct ideas.”<sup>509</sup>

Our greatest difficulty has been in overcoming the aversion which the working people have acquired for managing their own affairs. They actually know so little of what they can do for themselves, that, while their minds are in this state, they feel a continual desire to be dependant and degraded servants to others (in which condition they must remain in perpetual poverty) rather than exert the reflecting faculties which have been given them to obtain wealth and independence.<sup>510</sup>

Combe became an adherent of this belief following an experiment conducted at an iron foundry he owned together with two other business partners, Campbell and Shedden. Combe proposed to let his workers buy stock in the company for 50% discount as a way to improve their productivity and commitment to the company. We may look at this as an early example of a worker co-operative or worker ownership model. The results exceeded expectations:

The work that has been done at the iron foundry here, has convinced me that no individual can ‘do for them’ nearly so well as they can do for themselves. [...] Not an old nail is lost, nor a deal end wasted; and every piece of old wood that is capable of answering a useful purpose has been preserved. The refuse of the lime has been sifted a second time [...]. They have no overseer to keep them at work, and yet go when we may, we find them always busy [...].<sup>511</sup>

As well as an increase in productivity and motivation, Combe was adamant the scheme also improved the workers’ moral character:

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<sup>509</sup> Combe, *The Life and Dying Testimony of Abram Combe in Favour of Robert Owen’s New Views of Man and Society*, 13.

<sup>510</sup> *London Co-operative Magazine*, letter from Abram Combe, cited in Combe, 13.

<sup>511</sup> Combe, 13.

[...] all of our iron founders have been creating wealth in a ten-fold ration; and, at the same time, acting upon a principle which tends to improve the best feelings of our nature. There is already a symptom of improvement in the habits of the people [...].<sup>512</sup>

There are a few underlying assumptions or principles in the above passages that set this approach apart from the more orthodox Owenite approach, and it is necessary to unpack before carrying further. Firstly, as Combe states, one of the characteristics of an irrational character is a 'desire to be dependent', making people complicit in their own servitude. This suggests, if we follow the common formula of this discourse, that this desire of dependence is unnatural, and that, as such, people contain a natural desire to be independent. Co-operators never quite use the term 'natural desire of independence'. Yet, as I will demonstrate over the remaining chapters, the movement (and particularly its 'self-help' currents) is wholly motivated by the assumption that a natural desire of independence is every bit as integral to human nature as the natural desires for knowledge and esteem traced in Part II of this thesis. Within this discourse, attaining independence entails becoming *conscious* of one's capacity for managing one's own affairs, one's own capacity for independence, and consequently *ceasing to desire* dependence on masters. More importantly, this consciousness cannot be taught or instilled by an instructor. Rather, it can only be acquired by exercising their supposedly unripened faculties in the management of their own affairs. As Humboldt puts it, "The cultivation of the understanding, as of any of man's other faculties, is generally achieved by his own activity, his own ingenuity, or his own methods of using the discoveries of others [...]." Or, as we quoted Humboldt as saying earlier: "nothing promotes this ripeness for freedom *so much as freedom itself*."<sup>513</sup> Indeed, many Owenites such as Combe were able to reconcile a belief in the role of *a priori* freedom with the doctrine of circumstances. For if character was completely moulded by circumstances, then the exercise of freedom *under the right circumstances* would naturally result in rational conduct. It was for this reason, after all, that the social system was to be created, in order that every interaction and activity would form the character along social and rational lines. We can in fact trace in almost all co-operative writings – Owenite or

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<sup>512</sup> Combe, 14.

<sup>513</sup> Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, 58. My italics

otherwise – the idea that one becomes a co-operator by *living co-operation*, by performing it, passing through certain activities and practices, and being transformed in the process. Co-operative communities, for example, were intended to provide precisely this kind of comprehensive framework, allowing people to become co-operators simply by living and working in the community. Hence, the definition of ‘education’ at George Mudie’s short-lived Economical & Co-operative Society extended beyond formal teaching – life as part of the community was to be in itself transformative and educational.<sup>514</sup> It was the experience of *living* co-operatively that would form the character of the members. Likewise, for William Thompson, character was to be formed “by the mere operation of the arrangements of a co-operative community, constituting a great practical school, ever efficient in enlarging the mind and harmonizing the disposition, working unseen, without the formal announcement of any specific purpose.”<sup>515</sup> What was supposed to make co-operative communities educational was the fact that they set co-operation as a regulatory principle for all activities – one that guided an individual’s desires, thoughts and inclinations down a natural, rational path. Through some cascading effect, co-operative arrangements would,

[give] birth to mutual good will and to every moral habit. When interest [...] is not promoted by mutual annoyance, mutual annoyance will cease to be practised: where interest [...] requires mutual aid, and where such interest is promoted [...] by the utmost perfection of knowledge [...] and of conduct [...], there will be mutual aid, and mutual instruction and benevolence will flourish.<sup>516</sup>

Reconfigure the relations by which the system is arranged, and change will course through its channels and transform each and every constitutive element and individual unit within that system. To link this sub-section back to the theme of alienation and rationality, we might say that, under the strict Owenite conception of education, one remained alienated (irrational) and incapable of freedom until their character had been fully formed by the teacher. While on the other hand, among those who did not subscribe to Owen’s

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<sup>514</sup> See Silver, *The Concept of Popular Education*, 162.

<sup>515</sup> Thompson, ‘Practical Directions for the Speedy and Economical Establishment of Communities on the Principles of Mutual Cooperation, United Possessions and Equality’, 226.

<sup>516</sup> Thompson, ‘Practical Directions for the Speedy and Economical Establishment of Communities on the Principles of Mutual Cooperation, United Possessions and Equality’, 226–27.

dogmatism, we find the idea that the absence of freedom is alienating, and that the only way to become rational is through exercising one's freedom. That is because the latter belongs to a tradition that considers the desire of independence to be a motive to action essential to human nature and argues that withholding freedom results in the atrophying of this innate inclination, such that the individual becomes alienated from this essential part of their nature. Here, then, the freedom to be responsible for one's own affairs is character-forming in and of itself.

### **13.2. The 'Improving' Self-Help Drive**

The tension in the movement between top-down and bottom-up approaches needs to be understood in a broader historical context. For, in late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain, these ideas were being articulated and shaped as part of an already established wave of self-help institutions and practices driven as much by the lower classes, “from below”, as self-help “from above” by the middle and upper classes. These self-help drives were a response to the crisis that Owenism was responding to, but experienced differently (at least where members of the lower classes were concerned) and using different approaches to Owenism. Whereas Owenism saw the crisis as one of character and rationality, many among the lower classes had their own, more direct experience of the crisis, to which they responded through their own bottom-up initiatives. The working classes' plight gave birth to an explosion of self-help and mutual-aid institutions.<sup>517</sup> By the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, about 8.5% of the population were members of Friendly Societies, with Hopkins positing the Industrial Revolution as the primary driver behind rising membership. He supports this with figures from several sources: F.M. Eden, in his *Observations on Friendly Societies* (1801), estimated the number of societies at 7,200 and the total number of members at 648,000,<sup>518</sup> which numbers increase over the following 3 decades. Gosden, using Census figures, parish overseers' returns and figures produced by the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Poor Laws (1831), demonstrated a direct link between industrialised urban areas and membership of friendly societies. In Lancashire, which experienced relatively early industrial

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<sup>517</sup> For details see P.H.J.H. Gosden, *Self-Help: Voluntary Associations in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Batsford, 1973), 4.

<sup>518</sup> Gosden, 12.

development, 17% of the population belonged to a friendly society, compared with 5% or lower in less industrialised counties such as Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Hampshire. He further cites Marshall's analysis of the Nottinghamshire area as proof that "the friendly society movement spread outwards from the towns and industrial districts"<sup>519</sup>, which Gosden hypothesises is down to working men being "able to afford the cost of friendly society membership" and feeling a "greater need to make this provision against sickness than those who worked on the land."<sup>520</sup> However, there is plenty of evidence to support the claim that this bottom-up drive was concomitant with a middle- and upper-class drive to establish their own self-help institutions on behalf of, and for, the lower classes. This was, predominantly, an 'improving' kind of self-help drive propelled by the anxiety regarding the moral character of the lower classes covered in Part I. Increases in urban populations, the precarity of employment, the rising Poor Rates, the dissolution of old livelihoods and communities, and the ever-growing demands for the franchise, all correlated with a proliferation of organisations designed to draw the lower classes' attention to more 'improving' matter – organisations like the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.<sup>521</sup> Burns traces the proliferation of 'improving' societies to as far back as the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century, which saw a "mushrooming of 'Literary and Scientific' or 'Philosophical and Archaeological' societies – or whatever variant title appealed to those who came together to talk, to publish more or less learned papers, to set up museums and libraries."<sup>522</sup> Within the Spalding Gentlemen's Society, for example, "members were encouraged, even required to submit communications of their own; and a library was gradually built up, to which each new member was expected on his admission to present at least one volume." However, according to the society's Rules and Orders, it was to be:

'a Society of Gentlemen, for the supporting of mutual benevolence, and their improvement in the liberal sciences and in polite learning [...]' No one, the Rules and Orders over the years repeatedly insisted, was 'to talk politicks' – or, it was carefully added in 1745, 'to dispute about religion'. [...]

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<sup>519</sup> See J.D. Marshall, 'Nottinghamshire Labourers in the Early Nineteenth Century', *Transactions of the Thornton Society*, LXIV, 1960, p.64

<sup>520</sup> Gosden, *Self-Help: Voluntary Associations in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 13.

<sup>521</sup> See Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 790.

<sup>522</sup> Burns, 'From "Polite Learning" to "Useful Knowledge"'.

members were urged 'to communicate whatever is useful, new, uncommon, or curious' (the 1745 revision has 'useful or entertaining') 'in any art or science'.<sup>523</sup>

Thus, political debate was often excluded from many mutual improvement societies.

'Political knowledge' was irrelevant to these middle-class reformers. Their definitions of 'practical' or 'useful' knowledge extended to business-training, to the kind of 'civilising' scientific and technical knowledge provided at the Mechanics Institutes, and to the principles of human nature. In other words, the purpose of 'improving' education was the cultivation of a polite character, diverted away from revolutionary ideas. 'Political knowledge' was a dangerous distraction from life's practical concerns. As J.F.C. Harrison observed, faced with poverty, "[the] middle classes had only one answer, to make over the whole of society in their own image. The ideas and standards and methods which had brought them such conspicuous success could do the same for all the people."<sup>524</sup>

Here we have, then, an already existing model and an infrastructure by which the middle and upper classes attempted to regulate lower-class character through educational provision. Later, from the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, a similar model is used by the country gentry and clergy to establish friendly societies for the lower classes as an answer to the problem of security against sickness and unemployment, with a significant portion of them holding that an even better solution "might be provided through societies controlled by [the lower classes] themselves."<sup>525</sup> Thus, the self-help tradition was encroached upon by the middle and upper classes, both as a way of improving the lower classes' character and providing as a security against poverty. And this drive is not limited to philanthropists and social reformers, but extends to parliamentary acts as well. The Savings Bank Act of 1819 declares in its preamble that, as well as relieving the burden on the poor rates, "the purpose of the measure was to [...] [improve] the moral habits of the poorer classes by persuading them to rely on 'the fruits of their own industry'."

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<sup>523</sup> Burns.

<sup>524</sup> J.F.C. Harrison, *Learning and Living 1790-1960: A Study in the History of the English Adult Education Movement* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 39–40.

<sup>525</sup> Gosden, *Self-Help: Voluntary Associations in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 33.

### 13.3. Self-Help “from Below”

At the same time, we ought to bear in mind also the broader socio-political context within which these this ‘improving’ kind of self-help was emerging. Middle- and upper-class anxiety was not only in response to poverty, unemployment and crime; it was equally a response to the growing working-class zeal for ‘knowledge’ and, amongst the politically minded, the increasingly loud clamour for the franchise. This presented, in the minds of many of the higher classes, a grave danger to the established social order. As Thomas Arnold suggested:

It is in vain now to say that questions of religion and politics are above the understanding of the poorer classes—so they may be, but they are not above their *misunderstanding*, and they will think and talk about them, so that they had best be taught to think and talk rightly.<sup>526</sup>

The forms of self-help provided from above, then, were always an attempt to encroach upon lower-class self-help initiatives and to make sure they did self-help “correctly.” But what did lower-class self-help “from below” look like? This bottom-up response occurred within what Thompson argues was an already emerging working-class consciousness and played an integral part in further shaping this consciousness. As Thompson states, the “working class made itself as much as it was made... By 1832 there were strongly based and self-conscious working-class institutions - trade unions, friendly societies, educational and religious movements, political organizations, periodicals - working-class intellectual traditions, working-class community-patters, [etc.]”<sup>527</sup>, the roots of which far preceded Owenism. As such, by the time of Owenism’s arrival there already existed a rich tradition of working-class self-help stretching back to at least the 18<sup>th</sup> Century with the proliferation of Constitutional Societies, Corresponding Societies, Friendly Societies, reading groups and as well as the ‘improving’ kinds of institutions just covered. Much like the co-operative stores that would emerge in the 1820s, these self-help organisations tended to be formed by skilled labourers out of shared economic hardship. The Sheffield Corresponding Society, for example, originated from a gathering of “five or six mechanics [...] conversing about the

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<sup>526</sup> Quoted in Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold, D.D., Late Head-Master of Rugby School, and Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Oxford* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1846), 263.

<sup>527</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 212–13.



enormous high price of provisions.” One of the purposes of the Corresponding Societies, for example, was to help gain a better understanding of the causes of hardship within particular industries. Many mechanics also understood that these specific problems were linked to wider issues, and sought to cultivate a richer political understanding: as the societies proliferated, 1,400 subscriptions were made from among the members to a pamphlet edition of Paine’s *Rights of Man*, which was “read with avidity in many of the workshops in Sheffield.” Thus, the societies provided political education through the dissemination of printed ideas. As one member put it, the *raison d’être* of the society was,

To enlighten the people, to show the people the reason, the ground of all their sufferings; when a man works hard for thirteen or fourteen hours of the day, the week through, and is not able to maintain his family; that is what I understood of it; to show the people the ground of this; why they were not able.<sup>528</sup>

Participation in societies and unions also provided an education of a different kind. As well as producing a vocabulary and conceptual arsenal with which to analyse socio-political issues, it gave them organisational experience and a sense of being able to manage their own affairs. As they grew in size, the societies had to devise ever more sophisticated structures of governance. One method adopted in May 1792, for example, involved,

dividing [the Society] into small bodies or meetings of ten persons each, and these ten to appoint a delegate: Ten of these delegates form another meeting, and so on [...] till at last are reduced to a proper number for constituting the Committee or Grand Council.

Indeed, later co-operators did not just become co-operators in a vacuum. Rather, the majority of them will have brought into the movement a plethora of skills developed and honed as part of their past or ongoing membership of various communities and organisations. As Trustram and Mansfield remind us, many of these early Co-operators belonged to nonconformist churches, from which they learned to challenge scriptural authority and received wisdom. In these churches’ chapels “workers developed their own culture of self-education, running their own administrative affairs, and honing skills in oratory.” It is in these chapels that the working classes had sharpened their arguments and

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<sup>528</sup> Quoted in Thompson, 165.

developed an organisational know-how that was “readily transferable to other working organisations like friendly societies, co-operatives, political groups and trade unions [...]”.<sup>529</sup> This was typical of a newly emerging concept of education, in which almost every activity was assessed according to its character-forming value. As Richard Johnson points out, what typified popular forms of education in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century was that:

educational pursuits were not separated out and labelled ‘school’ or ‘institute’ [...]. They did not typically occur in purpose-built premises or places appropriated for one purpose [...]. Educational forms were closely related to other activities or inserted within them, temporally and spatially [...]. As [Holyoake] put it, ‘knowledge lies everywhere to hand for those who observe and think’.<sup>530</sup>

Thus, the working-classes received their education largely through a mixture of informal and formal networks, which included:

the educational resources of family, neighbourhood and even place of work, whether within the household or outside it, the acquisition of literacy from mothers or fathers, the use of the knowledgeable friend or neighbour, or the ‘scholar’ in neighbouring town or village, the work-place discussion and formal and informal apprenticeships, the extensive networks of private schools and, in many cases, the local Sunday schools, most un-school-like of the new devices, excellently adapted to working-class needs.<sup>531</sup>

On top of this rich yet ever-vulnerable legacy, Radicals created other means of education – eventually adopted by Owenites and Chartists – such as,

communal reading and discussion groups, the facilities for newspapers in pub, coffee house or reading room, the broader cultural politics of Chartist or Owenite branch-life, the institution of the travelling lecturer [...] [or] ‘missionary’, [who] toured the radical centres, and, above all, the radical press, the most successful radical invention and an extremely flexible (and therefore ubiquitous) educational form.

By the time Owenism had arrived, working people had already been deep in the process of forming a nuanced political picture of the world. Owenism merely slotted into and

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<sup>529</sup> Myna Trustram and Nick Mansfield, ‘Remembering the Buildings of the British Labour Movement: An Act of Mourning?’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 19, no. 5: Labour and Landscape (2013): 34.

<sup>530</sup> Johnson, “‘Really Useful Knowledge’: Radical Education and Working-Class Culture, 1790–1848’, 755.

<sup>531</sup> Johnson, 755.

augmented this. Whether alone or in groups, members of the lower classes would educate themselves by reading works of political economy, French Enlightenment philosophy, *Age of Reason*, Radical pamphlets and Cobbett's periodicals:

Thus working men formed a picture of the organization of society, out of their own experience and with the help of their [...] erratic [self-education], which was above all a political picture. They learned to see their own lives as part of a general history of conflict between the loosely defined 'industrious classes' on the one hand, and the unreformed House of Commons on the other.<sup>532</sup>

Even the illiterate workers, of whom there were many, would get their education by attending Houses of Call where the news were read out loud, going to public lectures and sermons, or receive the news from ballad-singers and 'patterers'.

#### **13.4. Self-Help as Character-Forming**

Therefore, by the 1820s and '30s, the lower classes largely consisted of masses of people whose worldview and sense of self had already been formed by the material crises they faced, as well as by the measures imposed (or "charitably" offered) from above (e.g. the Poor Laws and the Corn Laws) by the gentry, the middle and upper classes, and the myriad social reformers and philanthropists who, like Owen, each had their own idea regarding how best to rescue them from their plight (and from themselves). Perhaps more importantly, however, they were shaped by *their own self-help* responses to these crises, as well as by their reactions to middle- and upper-class attempts at solutions "from above." These reactions may have taken the form of resistance, resentment and suspicion, or it may have been one of internalisation, as with the notion of 'respectability' that many of the lower classes felt a pressure to acquire and display.<sup>533</sup>

More often than not, the response would have been an uneasy mixture, always in a state of tension. Regardless, Owen failed to understand that the people who made up the object of his plans were not "some nondescript undifferentiated raw material of humanity, ...[that could simply be turned] out at the other end as a 'fresh race of beings'." Rather, the crisis

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<sup>532</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 781–82.

<sup>533</sup> More on this later.

was imposed “upon the free-born Englishman... as Paine had left him or as the Methodists had moulded him.” These people were inheritors “of remembered village rights, of notions of equality before the law, of craft traditions.”<sup>534</sup> And, we may add, they were shaped by a bottom-up tradition of self-help that they themselves had wrought. As such, many of the lower classes will have had an acute sense of their lost independence. Or, indeed, a sense that they *were* independent and equal to any reformers and philanthropists. In this sense, the practical organisational experience provided by the societies amounted to a kind of character-forming education in and of itself – a transformative education attained by direct participation rather than by top-down teaching. Contemporaries would have considered this experience ‘character-forming’ (while a modern observer might describe it as ‘consciousness-raising’). Francis Place, for example, attributed what he perceived as the new, self-disciplined and restrained character of the working-classes, to the political consciousness:

spreading over the face of the country every since the Constitutional and Corresponding Societies became active in 1792 [...] Now 100,000 people may be collected together and no riot ensue, and why? [...] The people have an object, the pursuit of which gives them importance in their own eyes, elevated them in their own opinion, and thus it is that the very individuals who would have been the leaders of the riot are the keepers of the peace.<sup>535</sup>

Place had himself been moulded by his time in a London Corresponding Society, of which he commented: “I met with many inquisitive, clever, upright men [...]. We had book subscriptions [...]. We had Sunday evening parties [...] readings, conversations, and discussions.”<sup>536</sup> Furthermore, he believed industrialisation had also played a role in this improvement in character, bringing with it a positive discipline and ‘improving’ habits:

Within a few years a stranger walking through their towns was [...] hooted, and an ‘outcomling’ was sometimes pelted with stones. ‘Lancashire brute’ was the common and appropriate appellation. Until very lately it would have been dangerous to have assembled 500 of them on any occasion. Bakers and butchers would at the least have been plundered.<sup>537</sup>

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<sup>534</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 213.

<sup>535</sup> Quoted in Thompson, 463–64.

<sup>536</sup> Minutes of London Corresponding Society, Add. MSS 27808.

<sup>537</sup> Graham Wallas, *The Life of Francis Place, 1771-1854*. (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1951), 13.

We cannot know whether the alteration in working-class character was as extensive as Place suggested, nor, assuming there was such a sweeping change, whether it could really be reduced to these societies alone. In a sense, the answer is less significant than the question Place was grappling with: What are the types of experience that determine the growth of a given kind of consciousness? This has been a key question throughout the history of socialist thought. Why is it that some people have an articulate conception of their own condition, while others develop little to no interest in the matter? In his survey of London's working-classes years later, the social reformer Henry Mayhew observed that:

In passing from the skilled operative of the west-end to the unskilled workman of the eastern quarter of London [...] the moral and intellectual change is so great, that it seems as if we were in a new land [...]. The artisans are almost to a man red-hot politicians. They are sufficiently educated and thoughtful to have a sense of their importance in the State. [...] The unskilled labourers are a different class of people. As yet they are as unpolitical as footmen, and instead of entertaining violent democratic opinions, they appear to have no political opinions whatever; or, if they do [...] they rather lead towards the maintenance of 'things as they are', than towards the ascendancy of the working people.<sup>538</sup>

Here Mayhew sees a division amongst the labouring classes between those who have political consciousness and those who do not, which he correlates with their respective socio-economic status. The question of class consciousness is of course of particular importance in the Marxist tradition. E.P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* effectively asks a twofold question: Who has class consciousness? And what is it that makes class consciousness possible? Thompson hints at a partial answer to this question: "[It] was among the artisans that the membership of friendly societies was largest and trade union organization was most continuous and stable, that educational and religious movements flourished, and that Owenism struck deepest root."<sup>539</sup> Thompson seems to suggest that their prior involvement in self-help organisations played a significant part in the formation of a working-class consciousness among the English artisans. Indeed, the character-forming role of self-help and of direct democratic participation has repeatedly been held up as a key

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<sup>538</sup> Henry Mayhew, *Labour and the London Poor: Selections (1862)* (Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2020), 243.

<sup>539</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 266–67.

feature of co-operation. Here, a stonemason recounts his encounter with co-operators while being contracted to build their co-operative store in a mining district sometime during the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century:

I have never heard politics discussed with more force and directness than among these men [...] Their debates, couched in the very plainest English, were interesting to follow [...]. All this struck me because, in our own trade, politics, as a rule, were left to so-called ‘cranks’ [...] [Those] miners [...] seemed to me to have reached the high water mark of industrial prosperity; the most striking thing about them was the fact that they had gained their advantages by organisation.<sup>540</sup>

Tom Woodin notes in this quote the “sense of entitlement, control and engagement with political forces” (or an ‘independent character’) that formed part of “a learnt associational identity which had developed from a shared cultural and class background”, forged in “aggregated ownership, personal sacrifice and a determination to improve economic security.”<sup>541</sup> These miners organised for and by themselves, meaning that they did not rely on a master to make arrangements for them. They were independent. And whether political awareness preceded the ability to organise, or whether their experience of organisation was in itself politicising, the two nevertheless appear inextricably linked. There is no doubt that organising together in self-help institutions, from the bottom up, at least gave members the *opportunity* to develop a more nuanced and shared understanding of the political and economic structures that governed their existence, and gaining a sense of self-respect and intellectual independence in the process – though participation by no means guarantees the formation of a desired kind of consciousness or conduct. Thompson even reminds us that there are just as many credible accounts of other L.C.S. divisions meeting in alehouses, chewing tobacco, and singing profane songs.<sup>542</sup> Nevertheless, what matters is that a whole discourse forms around the nascent tide of self-help practices, in which people sought two things: First, they ask: “What kind of consciousness, character, conduct, do we want self-help practices to produce?” That is to say, they sought to predefine and determine the kind

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<sup>540</sup> ‘A Working Man’, *Reminiscences of a Stonemason* (London: John Murray, 1908), p.223-225. Cited in Tom Woodin, ‘Co-Operative Education in Britain during the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries: Context, Identity and Learning’, in *The Hidden Alternative: Co-Operative Values, Past, Present and Future*, ed. Anthony Webster et al. (Manchester University Press, 2011), 81.

<sup>541</sup> Woodin, 81.

<sup>542</sup> See Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 462–64.

of character/consciousness to be produced by self-help. Second, they ask: “what kinds of self-help practices would create this desired consciousness?” In the remaining chapters, I will trace the different approaches to these questions across the co-operative movement.

### **13.5. Co-operative Societies as a Means of Security**

In the previous chapter, I described the emergence of self-help institutions and practices in response to the crisis. It is in this context that we need to understand the wave of trading co-operative societies that began to sweep through large parts of the country from the 1820s, and which continued to expand for several decades. The co-operative trading societies of the 1820s partly evolved from this long-standing self-help culture, and they remained rooted in this culture long after the embers of Owenism had ebbed. As Walton shows, the Rochdale Pioneers, who formed in 1844 and who still epitomise the ethos of self-help co-operation for many in the movement to this very day, emerged within an already firmly established culture of “Independence and self-help.” These “were so embedded in [Rochdale’s] local culture that the advice or demands of an external body rarely went unchallenged and often encountered strong resistance.”<sup>543</sup> Similarly, the new co-operative trading societies of the 1820s, while inspired and galvanised by Owen, emerged off the back of existing cultures of self-help in different places. They were certainly no “orthodox” Owenites, and were even dismissed by Owen himself as too narrow in scope, confined to “mere buying and selling”<sup>544</sup> and as missing the greater picture of his co-operative vision. Owen’s view of co-operation, after all, had nothing to do with trading – he wanted the wholesale transformation of society through education. But these new societies had more immediate material needs to resolve, and therefore took from Owenism whatever they could use to their immediate ends. As Thompson points out,

Owenism from the late Twenties onwards, was a very different thing from the writings and proclamations of Robert Owen. It was the very imprecision of his theories, which offered, none the less, an image of an alternative system of society, and which made them adaptable to different groups of working people. [Artisans, weavers and skilled workers selected from Owenite writings] those parts which most closely related to their own predicament and modified them through discussion and practice. [...]

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<sup>543</sup> Walton, ‘Revisiting the Rochdale Pioneers’, 220.

<sup>544</sup> Owen, quoted in Silver, *The Concept of Popular Education*, 158.

[Owen's writings] can be seen as ideological raw material diffused among working people, and worked up by them into different products.<sup>545</sup>

We see an example of this in a letter to George Mudie's *The Economist*, in which a correspondent asserts that "the working classes, if they will but exert themselves *manfully*, have no need to solicit the smallest assistance from any *other class*, but have within themselves [...] superabundant resources."<sup>546</sup> As Thompson points out, such statements carry the tone of the "political Radicalism of the artisans" who, as well as inheriting a tradition of individualism, "were also inheritors of long traditions of mutuality – the benefit society, the trades club, and chapel, the reading or social club, the Corresponding Society or Political Union."<sup>547</sup> Aspects of Owen's thought chimed with these already-existing traditions and aspects of artisan consciousness. Owen's view that the capitalist was parasitic and that labour was the source of all wealth was in tune with the artisan's grievances against contractors and middlemen. His labour theory of value chimed with those artisans who already lived in close proximity and would occasionally exchange services rather than use money; and so on and so forth. As such, these self-help co-operatives (as we might call them) borrowed much from Owenism. For example, it is clear from the Laws of the First Armagh Co-operative Society that it is, first and foremost, a self-help body. Like many Friendly and Providential societies, one of its key functions was to provide security to its members. The 'Laws' section details the rules & regulations of the society, conditions of membership, governance structures, as well as special provisions made for members should they fall ill – a 'relief fund' is set up, into which each member has to deposit a weekly sum of '1 penny', unless "the sickness or distress has arisen from improper conduct."<sup>548</sup> However, it prefaces its 'Laws' with a socio-political tract that is concerned with an analysis of human nature and of the kind of character produced by capitalism:

[We] want no change in the nature of man, but we want a change in the mode of educating him. The false notions that are abroad, and the unsocial system that prevails, have made men cruel and proud, wicked and avaricious. Under wise arrangements – that is, when their interests shall cease to be opposed to each other – they can be rendered humane,

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<sup>545</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 868.

<sup>546</sup> *The Economist*, 9 March, 1822

<sup>547</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 869.

<sup>548</sup> First Armagh Co-operative Society, 'Words of Wisdom Addressed to the Working Classes, 1830', 335.



generous, full of every good quality, and capable of almost infinite improvement. And these glorious results, which are so consoling to all good minds, will arise, when men, viewing life as a thing short and transitory, and feeling within themselves noble and never ending yearnings for mental enjoyments, have discovered that all is sacrificed to the grovelling desire of individual wealth: that to the same unhallowed cause is owing destruction of private friendship [...].<sup>549</sup>

They even directly acknowledge Owen on several occasions. Thus, then, the methods of 'self-help co-operation' and Owenite aspirations did go hand in hand for a while, even before the Rochdale Pioneers.

The London Co-operative Society is another example of this marriage of self-help co-operation and Owenism. In 1826, it drafted a set of articles for the formation of a community on "principles of mutual co-operation", which was published in the *Co-operative Magazine*. The principles include self-governance and equality of property, means of enjoyment, and gender. There would be systems of "mutual instruction." All work would be performed "on scientific principles on a large economical scale." Health and short working days were a priority. Towards the end, there is an emphasis on Owenite principles regarding "charitable conduct, knowledge of human nature, methods of production and distribution, infant education and government."<sup>550</sup> We even find echoes of the Owenite emphasis on the community's role in correcting conduct through 'Public Opinion'. In an earlier London community, established in December 1821, members were instructed to "each... appoint, from amongst the congregated members, his own friendly monitor...", the role of whom was to "give notice of errors of conduct, temper and language, and to admonish where necessary."<sup>551</sup> But the overwhelming emphasis in these trading co-operatives was on attaining economic security (or 'independence') through self-help. Thus, we can begin to discern a different notion of 'useful knowledge' and 'practicality' to the kind promulgated in Owenism, and a tension between the paternalistic, utopian vision of co-operation on the one hand, and a more bottom-up – one might say pragmatic – approach to co-operation that was focused on members' immediate material needs more than on the wholesale

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<sup>549</sup> First Armagh Co-operative Society, 329. Section 36

<sup>550</sup> Garnett, *Co-Operation and the Owenite Socialist Communities in Britain 1825-45*, 47.

<sup>551</sup> *The Economist*, No 50, 19 January 1822, p.379.

spiritual transformation of society. As Thornes points out, Owen's ideal of fully co-operative, self-sufficient rural communities operating as a uniform model, "seems to have been regarded by a significant section of the movement as neither practicable nor desirable."<sup>552</sup> Often these workers did not wish to move into newly-established bespoke communities, but for their existing communities to start co-operative societies within existing society rather than withdrawing from it – to have "a manufacturing community arising up amongst us", as the Cumberworth Co-operative Society put it. Like many, the Cumberworth Society rejected the need for complete self-sufficiency and to engage in agriculture, preferring instead to "command the produce of land in any market by their manufacturing goods."<sup>553</sup> Not even all of Owen's followers who were committed to the communitarian ideal necessarily accepted Owen's blueprint. George Mudie's London Co-operative Society clearly differed from Owen's plans on several key points. First, it was not to be set up in the countryside, but in the city, with members "occupying contiguous dwellings."<sup>554</sup> Furthermore, the society was to be established gradually, from the bottom-up, through the steady accumulation of funds and the acquisition of property for the community. *The Economist* explained that each male member would pay one guinea a week to the general fund, in return for which they would receive "board and accommodation for himself and family, sickness benefit and a share in communal property and capital."<sup>555</sup> Furthermore, by August 1821, it was clarified that the proposed community, rather than being a community of goods, "distinctly recognises, and carefully preserves the right of private property, and of individual accumulation and possession."<sup>556</sup> And so we see again that these co-operative societies resembled existing self-help organisations such as friendly societies in that their primary function was to promote "the interest and comfort of the society, individually and collectively."<sup>557</sup> The objective of the Kirkheaton (1835) and Colne Bridge (1842) societies was

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<sup>552</sup> Thornes, 'Change and Continuity in the Development of Co-Operation, 1827-1844', 32.

<sup>553</sup> Proceedings of the third Co-operative Congress... 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 1832, London, 1832, p.121

<sup>554</sup> 'Report of Committee of Journeymen Chiefly Printers to Take into Consideration Propositions by George Mudie for a System of Social Arrangements to Effect Improvement in Condition of Working Classes and of Society at Large.', 13 January 1821, 26, Howell collection, Bishopsgate Institute, London. Henry Hetherington was one of the signatories.

<sup>555</sup> Garnett, *Co-Operation and the Owenite Socialist Communities in Britain 1825-45*, 42.

<sup>556</sup> *The Economist*, No. 29 11 August 1821, p.45

<sup>557</sup> PRO, F.S.1/817/336, Rules of the Carr Green Co-operative Trading Friendly Society. Cited in Thornes, 'Change and Continuity in the Development of Co-Operation, 1827-1844', 42.

To raise a capital sufficient for the purpose of food and raiment at the wholesale market and retail them out to the members and other customers at the lowest possible price in order to give to industry [meaning the labouring classes] as large a share of its products as the present exigencies of the country will admit.<sup>558</sup>

These self-help co-operatives sought independence by organising collectively in order to resist exploitation and ensure their fair share of the wealth they produced. Thus, their endeavours were grounded in a critical analysis of exploitation and unequal wealth distribution that sought to challenge the established order. The Ripponden Co-operative Society, established in 1832, stated in its enrolled rules that

labour is the source of all wealth [and that] consequently the working-classes have created all wealth. [And yet], instead of being the richest, [the working-classes] are the poorest in the community; hence, they cannot be receiving a just recompense for their labour.

The way to remedy this, they concluded, was through “the attainment of independence by means of a common capital’.”<sup>559</sup> Thus, their objectives tended to be humbler than Owenism’s, as stated in a small co-operative journal entitled *Common Sense*:

The object of a Trading Association is briefly this: to furnish more of the articles of food in ordinary consumption to its members, and to accumulate a fund for the purpose of renting land for cultivation, and the formation thereon of a cooperative community.<sup>560</sup>

This fitted in with existing needs, such as to escape from profiteering and from the adulteration of staple foods so widespread at the time.<sup>561</sup> Furthermore, this approach to co-operation appealed to those workers who felt patronised by Owenism. *The Trades Newspaper*, commenting on Orbiston in 1825, dismissed Owenism as “impracticable form the dislike that free-born, independent men, must have to be told what they must eat... and what they must do.”<sup>562</sup>

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<sup>558</sup> PRO, F.S.1/818/349, Rules of the Colne Bridge Friendly Society. Cited in Thornes, 42.

<sup>559</sup> Cited in John H. Priestley, *The History of the Ripponden Co-Operative Society Limited: Founded November 10th, 1832*. (Halifax: F. King & Sons Limited., 1932), 31–32.

<sup>560</sup> *Common Sense*, 11 December 1830

<sup>561</sup> See Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 874.

<sup>562</sup> *Trades Newspaper*, 14 August 1825

Perhaps the tension stems partly from the class differences between Owen's close circles and the trading societies. After all, for all his inarguable radicalism, Owen was a philanthropist, and it was philanthropy that drew many of his early followers into his orbit. As Harrison points out, his followers during the 1820s included Scottish and Irish landowners (some of whom established their own community experiments, most notably in Orbiston and Ralahine), "a group of wealthy followers in London and the southern counties", and American philanthropists such as Williams Maclure "and the richer members of [...] New Harmony [...]."<sup>563</sup> If those from a working-class background were less concerned with 'human nature' and more with economic independence, perhaps this reflected the fact that their analysis was rooted in their own experience of struggle. Engels, in his *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844), said of the Chartists (many of whom had passed through Owenism and set up their own co-operative stores) that they were "theoretically the more backward [...], but they are genuine proletarians all over [...]", while the Owenites were described as "more far-seeing, propose practical remedies against distress, but, proceeding originally from the bourgeoisie [...]."<sup>564</sup> As Thompson put it:

[...] Owenite Socialism always contained two elements which never wholly fused: the philanthropy of the Enlightenment, devising 'span-new systems' according to principles of utility and benevolence: and the experience of those sections of workers who selected notions from the Owenite stock, and adapted them to meet their particular context.<sup>565</sup>

This particular co-operator may well have had Owen in mind:

No proud, conceited scholar knows the way – the rugged path that we are forced to travel; they sit them down and sigh, and make a puny wail of human nature; they fill their writings full of quaint allusions, which we can fix no meaning to; they are by far too classical for our poor knowledge-box; they preach up temperance, and build no places for our sober meetings [...] but we will make them bend to suit our circumstances.<sup>566</sup>

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<sup>563</sup> Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: The Quest for the New Moral World*, 26.

<sup>564</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: With the Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844, Socialism: Utopian and Scientific by Friedrich Engels* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2008), 40.

<sup>565</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 857–58.

<sup>566</sup> *The Pioneer*. 25 January, 1834.

### 13.5. Contested Meanings of 'Self-Help'

A schism emerges in the early days of the movement, therefore, between Owenism and the more self-help approach to co-operation, even if the two were also deeply entangled. On top of this schism, I aim to show in the remaining chapters that there was another schism within the movement's self-help strand of thought, between what I term 'improving' self-help co-operation and 'politically Radical' co-operation. Like many other self-help institutions, the co-operative trading societies were pounced upon by members of both the lower and middle classes, becoming battlegrounds on which the meaning of values and terms such as 'useful knowledge' and 'independence' were contested. Each strand had its own analysis of the "crisis", and its own understanding of the purposes and uses of self-help. On the one hand, the 'improving' current viewed co-operation and trading co-operatives as a way of instilling sound business knowledge in the lower classes, making them into responsible capitalists, and cultivating in them a middle-class sense of "respectability." The Politically Radical current, meanwhile, tended to view the crisis in terms of exploitation and oppression, propped up by the lower classes' ignorance of their own oppression, as well as by deliberate obfuscation by the ruling classes. To these co-operators, the way out of the crisis is to acquire 'political knowledge' – which is to say, knowledge of the means by which they are oppressed. As such, they viewed co-operation and trading co-operatives as a means of attaining economic independence from their oppressors and furthering their political ends. Crucially, however, I intend to show that while one's position may correlate with their specific class and material conditions (such that middle-class co-operators tended to occupy an 'improving' position while lower class co-operators tended to occupy a more politically Radical position), the positions in fact become largely intermingled, such that we find most inhabitants of this discourse to hold unique mixtures of these positions.

Over the remaining chapters I will explore the two strands of Self-Help Co-operation in line with the same parameters I applied to Owenism. That is to say, I will outline their respective responses to the crisis, and deduce their ontological and epistemological commitments from their various practices and writings. This will reveal new approaches to thinking about alienation and flourishing quite different from orthodox Owenism, centred as they are

around the idea that the desire of independence is the most important factor for the production of rational character and conduct.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explored the tension between top-down and bottom-up approaches to character-formation and traced out another ontological commitment present in Co-operative thought: the natural desire of independence. This 'desire' is particularly interesting because its articulation adds further nuance to the notion of alienation: if the desire of independence is as essential a part of human nature as the desires of esteem and of knowledge, then it follows that one becomes alienated when this desire is stifled. Furthermore, it would suggest that the way to become unalienated (or acquire a 'rational' or fully-formed character) is by exercising this natural inclination, just as Owenite education encouraged children to exercise their desire of knowledge, their innate sociability and the power of curiosity. This, however, would contradict some of Owenism's core tenets. Owenism aims to create independent people, but insists that they have to be formed by an instructor before they can be entrusted with independence. At the same time, the example of Combe's worker-owned co-operative suggests that he, Combe, believed, at least to some extent, that independence – or responsibility – is an *a priori* condition of character-formation. That is to say, this position broadly views dependence as alienating, and being entrusted with responsibility as a key to flourishing.

This tension does not only exist between Owenites and the 'Self-Help' wing of the movement, but also between different strands of 'Self-Help' Co-operation, and I will explore this 'desire of independence' and the tension around it in more depth over chapters 14-16.

## Chapter 14 – ‘Improving’ Self-Help Co-operation

### Introduction

I will start with the ‘improving’ Self-Help strand of the movement. In this chapter, I will extrapolate the ‘Improving’ strand’s framing of the self and of its mechanics. In contrast with Owenism, these self-help Co-operators contended that people contained the means to lift themselves out of poverty, but that these have become stymied by ‘dependence’. I will explain the ontological assumptions behind this view of the self and this strand’s conception of the mechanics of agency by which the poor can be regulated to become independent. I will demonstrate that while ‘Improving’ Co-operators operated along the same epistemic horizon as Owenites and within a similar model of developmental psychology, they nevertheless developed a different articulation of alienation and of flourishing in which the desire of independence stands at the core of rational character-formation.

### 14.1. Recasting Business Acumen as Practical

We can see evidence of an ‘Improving’ drive even in Owenism (although here it is largely drowned out by Owenism’s more radically innovative aspects, which somewhat make up for its paternalism). Owen proposed to deliver evening adult lectures at the Institute three times a week, alternately with dancing. These lectures would, among other things, teach the adults,

how to expend the earnings of their own labour to advantage and how to appropriate the surplus gains which will be left to them [as part of Owen’s worker-ownership scheme], in order to create a fund which will relieve them from the anxious fear of future want, and thus give them [...] that rational confidence in their own exertions and good conduct [...].<sup>567</sup>

In a lecture by an anonymous Owenite we find the familiar ‘improving’ tropes regarding co-operation’s tendency to civilise the lower classes and to introduce rationalising recreational activities:

where the evening would bring with it social intercourse; whilst even music, public lectures, and reading rooms, must possess the greatest efficacy in removing that dull rudeness and gross and offensive selfishness which are

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<sup>567</sup> Owen, *New View of Society*, 102-103

so prevalent amongst mere agricultural labourers [...]. The expense of these rational recreations is trifling, compared with the beneficial tendency they have been found to create [...] helping to impart cheerfulness, content and intelligence to a working population [...].<sup>568</sup>

Historically, however, the ‘improving’ strand of self-help co-operation is more strongly associated with the likes of Dr William King of Brighton and Samuel Smiles, as well as with Christian Socialism. Much like Owen, King believed crime and poverty to be matters of character – people are made vicious and criminal through neglect and lack of proper education. Thus, in order to eradicate poverty and crime, people’s character must first be changed through proper education. Before becoming a co-operator, King was secretary of the Brighton District Society, a paternalistic organisation established in response to Brighton’s heavy unemployment. The Society’s objects were: “The encouragement of industry and frugality among the poor by visits at their own habitations - the relief of real distress, whether arising from sickness or other causes, and the prevention of mendacity and imposture.”<sup>569</sup> His take on co-operation was characterised by a self-help ethos that prioritised the virtues of thrift and saving, and the belief that workers could lift themselves out of poverty through self-cultivation and through the patient accumulation of capital. Thus, while Owen was suspicious of the co-operative trading societies, King viewed them as the necessary starting point for the working classes. Reflecting on the movement several years after Owenism’s decline, he reaffirmed that co-operation had in fact “never been political, but [was] always founded on self-exertion, Social Co-operation and saving.”<sup>570</sup> To King, then, co-operatives were the perfect vehicle for cultivating an ethos of self-help in the lower classes. His highly influential publication, *The Co-operator* - part theoretical journal, part practical manual for setting up co-operative stores - was instrumental in translating the self-help ethos into co-operative terms in the late 1820s, and the Rochdale Pioneers are believed to have adopted its organisational principles when setting up their society 1844.

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<sup>568</sup> Anonymous, ‘A Vindication of Mr. Owen’s Plan for the Relief of the Distressed Working Classes, in Reply to the Misconceptions of a Writer in No.64 of the Edinburgh Review’, 140.

<sup>569</sup> Quoted in Mercer, *Co-Operation’s Prophet: The Life and Letters of Dr. William King of Brighton with a Reprint of The Co-Operator, 1828-1830*, 3–4.

<sup>570</sup> *The Christian Socialist*, n.d. No.50 (11 October 1851), 226-7



Samuel Smiles, too, was an avid supporter of co-operation, which he saw as the perfect vehicle for the 'improving' kind of self-help:

The great power [...] which seems yet destined to effect the social improvement of the working classes is the power of co-operation. In this power they now generally recognise the means of their permanent social elevation, and the foundation of all true progress.<sup>571</sup>

He considered producer and consumer co-operatives

the highest practical embodiment of the principle that has yet been attempted in this country. [...] It aims at co-operation of men in the production and distribution of wealth. And why should not men co-operate for this purpose? Why should not working men [...] reap the entire benefits of their own industry?<sup>572</sup>

Yet Smiles is no revolutionary. If he demanded a greater share of wealth for the workers, it was only as a means of securing a capitalist status quo by "converting" workers from revolutionaries to capitalists. Having a greater share of wealth would allow the working classes to save capital, thus enabling them to eventually see factory masters "as they really are [...]. It weans them from revolutionary notions and makes them conservative." Such men "cease to regard others' well-being as a wrong inflicted on themselves, and it will no longer be possible to make political capital out of their imaginary woes."<sup>573</sup> King saw the same potential in co-operation to create a capitalist character together with moral improvement. To him, co-operation's primary aims were the cultivation of a self-help ethos among the lower classes and their conversion into property-respecting capitalists: "Co-operation aims to give property and character to the working classes [...]. The possession of property tends [...] to produce respect for the property of others [...]."<sup>574</sup> The aim, therefore, is very much not the redistribution of existing wealth, but the production of new wealth as a means of "levelling up."

But a familiar paradox emerges. Smiles and King both believe that being entrusted with responsibility is integral to the formation of a healthy character, yet, like Owen, King also

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<sup>571</sup> Smiles, *Thrift*, 132.

<sup>572</sup> Smiles, 107.

<sup>573</sup> Smiles, 107.

<sup>574</sup> *The Co-operator*, March 1830

seems to believe that the lower classes need the correct kind of prior training – or ‘knowledge’ – before they can be entrusted with managing their own affairs. For workmen could never co-operate “with minds such as they possess at present - without knowledge, without information, without the power of thinking.” He further emphasised the “absolute necessity of knowledge, before success can be expected.”<sup>575</sup> As J.S. Mill put it, “[education] is *help towards doing* WITHOUT HELP.”<sup>576</sup> It was to this end that King set about publishing *The Co-operator* and giving classes in ‘practical knowledge’ to the lower classes in Brighton. As with Owenism, knowledge is the key to salvation, and ignorance is an obstacle in the way of progress. If the workers fail to understand that their wages do not represent the full value of their labour, it is only because of their ignorance. They are taught from an early age to do nothing but toil, and not to think at all, and to spend their wages “in what they call self-enjoyment.”<sup>577</sup> But while a call for workers to claim the full value of their labour may sound like the beginnings of a Radical position, its conclusion is very much conservative. Instead of taking issue with capitalism, King’s solution is simply to make every worker into a self-employed capitalist. The problem is not that capitalism may be inherently exploitative, but that the workers allow themselves to be exploited through ignorance and bad habits. As is often the case in this ‘improving’ self-help strand, the blame for poverty is laid at the feet of the poor. And while ‘knowledge’ is lauded, it is only so if it is the correct kind of knowledge, sympathetic to the principles of capitalism.

#### 14.2. 'Improving' Account of Character-Formation

Just like Owenism, the self-help strand was underpinned by theories that presented human nature as the foundation of character-formation and agency. However, while Owenism can be viewed as a *relatively* unified body of thought in which the underlying principles are clearly laid out in canonical works, usually with reference to a leading figure, the same cannot be said for the self-help tradition. There is no unified ‘self-help’ school of thought with canonical works containing agreed-upon overarching principles. The tradition of self-

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<sup>575</sup> Quoted in Mercer, *Co-Operation’s Prophet: The Life and Letters of Dr. William King of Brighton with a Reprint of The Co-Operator, 1828-1830*, 29–30.

<sup>576</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy: In Two Volumes*, 5th ed., vol. 1, 2 vols (London: John W. Parker and Son., 1862). Book V, chapter XI

<sup>577</sup> Kind, quoted in Mercer, *Co-Operation’s Prophet: The Life and Letters of Dr. William King of Brighton with a Reprint of The Co-Operator, 1828-1830*, 59.

help was made up of a myriad of thinkers, each with somewhat differing ideas on the question of agency. As such, more work is required to trace and pull together some of the shared principles behind the language of self-help. As Travers points out, Smiles' self-help ideal was made up of three elements: First, the belief that "there existed a beneficent natural order, a Providential harmony."<sup>578</sup> Second, a considerable degree of environmental determinism in the early experience of the individual. And third, a faculty psychology perspective on child development, in which the "separate and sequential development of the... faculties [had] favourable implications for the use of the intellectual faculties in adult self-culture and self-education."<sup>579</sup> These three principles are incredibly close to Owenism's framework, with the exception, perhaps, that Owenism viewed environmental determinism as absolute and not merely central in early experience. Smiles also held a strong interest in phrenology, even if he never fully subscribed to it. He was particularly attracted to its links with physiology and its commitment to the natural laws of health and hygiene. Such was his regard for phrenology that prior to its publication he sent a manuscript of *Physical Education* to George Combe (the preeminent phrenologist of his age and brother of Abram Combe), asking him for his opinions on "man's" rationality, to which Combe replied that "as man is in his nature rational, he will come to act in harmony with the dictates of reason after he knows them. At present he does not know them."<sup>580</sup> Another familiar aspect of Smiles' conception of human nature is the presence of theories regarding the development of the senses, the association of ideas, and the effects of early childhood experiences on the formation of 'primary habits' to the kind found in Owenism and across the 'science of man' charted in Part I. As with Owenism, the training of the senses preceded the intellectual faculties: "[It] is only after the senses have been . . . cultivated, that the mind can at any time be said to exist, as it is through this avenue all its first ideas are acquired." The mind "learns to arrange and associate ideas regarding them [objects of sense]; to understand the general laws they obey; and trace causes and consequences in all their relations." While we also find the familiar belief that children's minds possess a higher degree of plasticity compared with adults. It is in childhood, he wrote, that:

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<sup>578</sup> Travers, 'Samuel Smiles and the Origins of "Self-Help": Reform and the New Enlightenment', 164–65.

<sup>579</sup> Travers, 'Samuel Smiles and the Origins of "Self-Help": Reform and the New Enlightenment', 164–65.

<sup>580</sup> Charles Gibbon, *The Life of George Combe* (Republ, 1970), 255.

the habits of mind are then chiefly formed, and indelible impressions made for good or evil through life [...]. It is indeed scarcely possible to over-estimate the importance of training the young to virtuous habits. In them they are the easiest formed, and when formed they last for life [...].

Furthermore, as the infant brain was unripe for the cultivation of the intellectual faculties, Smiles asserted that the “main object of early education should be to direct the sentiments and emotions, and implant in the mind the germ of virtuous principles.” As such, there is a pronounced empiricist element to Smiles’ conception of learning:

Wisdom and understanding can only become the possession of individual men by travelling the old road of observation [...]. Useful and instructive though good reading may be, it is yet only one mode of cultivating the mind; and is much less influential than practical experience and good example in the formation of character.<sup>581</sup>

Like the Owenite framework, Smiles views observation as an important tool in the formation of ‘understanding’, and stresses the role of ‘practical experience’ and ‘example’. But whereas for Owen the individual was to be inculcated with empiricist skills by an all-knowing ‘architect’ from above, for Smiles the best learning occurred through a bottom-up process, in which individuals could only attain independence by experiencing something firsthand and drawing their own conclusions. The reference to ‘wisdom’ suggests something more organic, flexible and open-ended than the rigid Owenite definition of ‘rationality’, which is uniform and unbending, denoting the possession of very specific opinions.

### **14.3. ‘Difficulty’ and the Mechanics of Dependence**

The emphasis in the language of self-help, then, is on self-culture. And much as in Owenism, the role of education is to inculcate in the individual the skills and habits required for independent learning. However, the ‘improving’ self-help tradition’s analysis of the obstacles that stand in the way of intellectual independence is different from Owenism. It views one particular condition or state as pivotal in the degradation of character: ‘dependence’. For example, it was the purpose of the Wiltshire County Society, founded in 1828, to correct the state of ‘dependence’ that (as the society’s middle-class founders saw it) kept the lower classes in poverty: “...it is only reasonable to expect Pauperism will

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<sup>581</sup> Smiles, *Self-Help: The Art of Achievement Illustrated by Accounts of the Lives of Great Men*, 311–12.

eventually be lessened and the labouring classes be raised to that state of comparative independence, which is so essential to their moral character and necessary to the well-being of... society.”<sup>582</sup> The Society viewed charity as counterproductive as it merely reinforced the poor’s dependence upon it. Instead, it aimed to help the poor into a state of ‘comparative independence’. In other words, pauperism is both a cause of, and caused by, dependence. In the ‘improving’ conception of the mechanics of the self, dependence develops as a result of misguided attempts to assist the poor through charity. The ensuing dependence consequently degrades character and robs one of the very desire to provide for themselves. Charity, in other words, erodes people’s natural desire for independence, causing it to atrophy and degrade into a desire for dependence, thus ultimately entrenching poverty. Poverty and character are thus tightly bound together. Furthermore, dependence is a symptom that has an underlying pathophysiological mechanism. In this framework, humans are imbued with a natural desire for independence, as well as an in-built signalling system that becomes activated when this natural desire fails – shame. The healthy individual is one who tends to feel shame at the loss of independence and at the receipt of charity. The dependent individual, however, is one in whom this natural trigger has malfunctioned, eroded by the receipt of charity. The cure, therefore, is to re-activate the mechanism of shame and facilitating its natural flow by making the poor “ashamed to receive the miserable boon of Pauperism [...]” and giving “weight and respectability to honest independence [...]”.<sup>583</sup> The physiological conceptualisation of shame is not entirely my own creation, but is rather ever-palpable in Smiles’ work. Both Smiles and King were trained physicians. Smiles’ *Physical Education* propounded “a politicised view of medicine and child management”<sup>584</sup> where education is viewed as a form of “preventive medicine” and in which the physician’s role is merely to aid and facilitate the prescribed course of nature in the child by removing “obstructions to [nature’s] peaceful and healthy action.”<sup>585</sup>

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<sup>582</sup> Quoted in Gosden, *Self-Help: Voluntary Associations in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 33.

<sup>583</sup> *Brighton Gazette*, 1825, quoted in Mercer, *Co-Operation’s Prophet: The Life and Letters of Dr. William King of Brighton with a Reprint of The Co-Operator, 1828-1830*, 10.

<sup>584</sup> Travers, ‘Samuel Smiles and the Origins of “Self-Help”: Reform and the New Enlightenment’, 165.

<sup>585</sup> Samuel Smiles, *Physical Education ; or, the Nurture and Management of Children, Founded on the Study of Their Nature and Constitution* (Oliver & Boyd, Tweeddale Court, 1838), 10.

One might notice a familiar theme here: these self-help improvers view the crisis of character as the result of a misalignment between circumstances and human nature. However, whereas Owenism sought to re-calibrate people's character in line with human nature by stringently controlling the pupils' circumstances and providing top-down instruction, this particular strain of self-help held that character could only become aligned with nature by developing through struggle and 'difficulty'. It is only by actively grappling with one's circumstances that a robust independent character can emerge. To Smiles, struggle and difficulty were essential to the cultivation of a robust, independent character. The most commendable individuals were those "whose faculties in necessary conflict with the environment had been developed into a well-balanced, harmonious, and steady character by the persevering and self-helping individual."<sup>586</sup> This is a marked difference from the Owenite position, which held that individuals were entirely formed by circumstances and therefore had to be removed from 'irrational' circumstances altogether, so that the educator could control the formation of ideas in the subject's mind. In this 'improving' strand, one was to become an independent subject not by being removed or protected from supposedly pernicious circumstances, but by contending with said circumstances, coming into 'necessary conflict with the environment', and growing in strength and character as a result of friction and resistance in the face of 'difficulty'. This struggle would allow the individual "to cultivate his higher faculties and affections, [and] raise [him] [...] to the very summit of his nature."<sup>587</sup>

#### **14.4. Self-help as a roadmap to fulfilment**

The 'improving' kind of self-help, then, is articulated in opposition to the doctrine of circumstances, offering the poor a different path out of poverty and towards self-realisation. In 1830, the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (S.D.U.K.) published G.L. Craik's *The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties*, an assortment of biographies of "self-made" men, from across historical eras and countries, who overcame adverse conditions to excel in their field. Craik stated:

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<sup>586</sup> Travers, 'Samuel Smiles and the Origins of "Self-Help": Reform and the New Enlightenment', 171.

<sup>587</sup> Smiles, *Physical Education ; or, the Nurture and Management of Children, Founded on the Study of Their Nature and Constitution*, 200.

If some individuals we have mentioned have risen to great wealth or high civil dignities, it is not for this that we have mentioned them. We bring them forward to show that neither knowledge, nor any of the advantages which naturally flow from it, are the exclusive inheritance of those who have been enabled to devote themselves entirely to its acquisition from their youth upwards.<sup>588</sup>

Anyone, then, can acquire knowledge and use it to improve their condition, regardless of circumstances. “[The] most unpropitious circumstances have been unable to conquer an ardent desire for the acquisition of knowledge.” In fact, not only can all circumstances be overcome, but the need to overcoming adverse circumstances is itself an advantage, a character-shaping experience not available to those born to luxury. “He who is left to educate himself in every thing, may have many difficulties to struggle with; but he who is saved every struggle is perhaps still more unfortunate.”<sup>589</sup> Difficulty teaches one “to learn and practice, to an extraordinary extent, the duties of steadiness, diligence, husbanding of time, concentration of attention... In learning these virtues he learns what is more precious than any knowledge [...].”<sup>590</sup> Smiles echoes this nearly 30 years later in *Self-Help*: “An easy and luxurious existence does not train men to effort or encounter with difficulty [...] Indeed, so far from poverty being a misfortune, it may, by vigorous self-help, be converted even into a blessing [...].”<sup>591</sup> Silver takes such passages to be an indication that the purpose of this ideology “was to persuade the workman to be contented with his poverty, his liability to imprisonment, his lack of teachers, leisure and health.”<sup>592</sup> However, I would like to interrogate Silver’s argument somewhat. First, the emphasis on self-culture and the role of ‘difficulty’ is one of the key differences between the ‘improving’ conception of the self and the one found in Owenism. Despite many self-help thinkers accepting a high degree of environmental determinism, the *blame* for poverty is ultimately laid at the feet of the individual for failing to rise up to the challenge and improve their condition. The individual alone has the power to change their condition, and if their condition remains the same, it is because they have essentially refused to confront it. In one fell swoop, the improvers’

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<sup>588</sup> George Craik, *The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties* (1830) (Norderstedt: Hansebooks GmbH, 2017), 53.

<sup>589</sup> Craik, 16–17.

<sup>590</sup> Craik, 419.

<sup>591</sup> Smiles, *Self-Help: The Art of Achievement Illustrated by Accounts of the Lives of Great Men*, 22.

<sup>592</sup> Silver, *The Concept of Popular Education*, 204.

argument rules out any possibility of deeper sociological and historical explanations for inequality. And yet, there is a powerful aspect to the idea of self-help that must not be underestimated: while the logic of self-help arguments can be reductive and moralistic, one function of such arguments is to provide individuals with a roadmap to self-realisation, much like the doctrine of circumstances gave individuals an explanation for their own suffering and a roadmap to social transformation. Both the doctrine of self-help and the doctrine of circumstances provide the individual with pathways to self-acceptance (and, in the case of the doctrine of circumstances, self-compassion) as well as offering a path to self-fulfilment. Both allow the individual to regain a sense of agency and control over their lives (not to mention hopefulness). For example, in *The Lives of Engineers*, Smiles gives an account of the qualities and attributes that had supposedly helped certain historical figures to achieve greatness. In other words, it gives an account of the kind of character required in order to succeed. As such, Smiles provided a roadmap that could be applied to every individual life, regardless of the circumstances into which one was born. Of Thomas Telford he wrote:

Every step in his upward career, from the poor peasant's hut in Eskdale to Westminster Abbey was nobly and valorously won. The man was diligent and conscientious whether as a working-man hewing blocks [...] as a foreman of builders [...] or as an engineer of bridges, canals, docks and harbours. The success which followed his efforts was thoroughly well deserved. He was laborious, pains-taking and skilful, but, what was better, he was honest and upright. He was a most reliable man; hence he came to be extensively trusted. Whatever he undertook he endeavoured to excel in. He would be a first-rate hewer, and he became so.<sup>593</sup>

Valour, diligence, conscientiousness, hard work, perseverance, pride in one's work no matter what it is, honesty, reliability, trustworthiness. These are the virtues that everyone could supposedly cultivate in themselves, if they were so willing. The roles of genius and stock were played down. In fact, difficulty and toil are character-forming, and therefore a blessing:

[Telford] was even of the opinion that the course of manual training he had undergone, and the drudgery, as some would call it, of daily labour [...] had

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<sup>593</sup> Samuel Smiles, *Selections from Lives of the Engineers: With an Account of Their Principal Works*. (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1966), 44.



been of greater service to him than if he had passed through the curriculum of a University.<sup>594</sup>

Much like Owen, then, the power of Smiles' works was in their ability to provide a model through which one could make sense of their suffering, as well as a clear path to self-transformation. In Smiles's words, he wanted to show people that what really matters in life is not great genius but the "use of simple means and ordinary qualities, with which nearly all human individuals have been [...] endowed [...]" and which can be learnt through "examples of conduct and character drawn from reading, observation and experience."<sup>595</sup> This is what Smiles meant by 'individualism'. Not so much "every man for himself" but "every man can through his own exertions." After all, there is a reason why self-help books remain, to this day, such regular bestsellers, and it cannot be reduced to an explanation of 'placation' or control over the lower classes. Therefore, when we survey the 'improving' ideology, its intentions should be examined from several angles. First, from the point of view of the author of such statements, we could ask: What worldview is the author trying to convince their audience to adopt, and why (e.g. it might be motivated by anxiety regarding the social order and a consequent wish to shape the conduct of others along particular channels)? There is also, however, the reader's angle, regarding which we might ask: How does a given statement help the reader make sense of the world and of their own suffering? In what way does the author's statement offer the reader a roadmap for moving forward, for achieving happiness and a sense of self-fulfilment?

#### **14.5. Co-operatives as a vehicle for 'improving' character-formation**

Indeed, it is for these very reasons that the likes of Smiles and King so enthusiastically implored the poor to set up trading co-operatives. Rather than wanting the lower classes to accept their servile role in the social order, he wanted for them to participate in the game of capitalism and acquire wealth through self-help. Based on his conception of human nature and the mechanics of agency, Smiles believed that running their own co-operative societies and being allowed to take responsibility for their own affairs would produce the virtues of

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<sup>594</sup> Smiles, 223.

<sup>595</sup> Samuel Smiles, *The Autobiography of Samuel Smiles, LL. D.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905), 165.

self-help in people. Chief among these was the virtue of ‘thrift’: “It is an acquired principle of conduct. It involves self-denial [...] the subordination of animal appetites to reason, forethought, and prudence.”<sup>596</sup> In Smiles we may recognise an extreme articulation of a familiar conservative argument that has burrowed its way into British consciousness and made itself a self-evident truth for many – that all accumulated capital is fundamentally the result of prudent saving:

Wealth is obtained by labour, it is preserved by savings and accumulations [...]. Thrift produces capital; and capital is the conserved result of labour. The capitalist is merely a man who does not spend all that is earned by work [...]. Society consists mainly of two classes - the savers and the workers, the provident and the improvident, the thrifty and the thriftless, the Haves and the Have-nots. The men who economise by means of labour become the owners of capital which sets other labour in motion.<sup>597</sup>

Here, then, co-operation is positively character-forming both in its stimulation of sociability and through its business operations. By giving the lower classes the opportunity to manage their own business and livelihood, it allows for the formation of a capitalist kind of character (or consciousness) from below, without the need for top-down instruction. Dr King favoured helping the lower classes establish co-operatives for the same reason, believing that the cultivation of independence precipitated by co-operatives would be a far better answer to poverty than charity. By setting up their own co-operative stores and being forced to raise themselves out of precarity,

[working men] are obliged to exercise their judgement, to weigh and balance probabilities – to count the profit and loss – and to acquire a knowledge of human character [...]. If the mind continues to be occupied in this manner, for a series of years, it will receive a practical education much more improving than the dry lessons of schools, which exercise the memory by rote, without opening and strengthening the understanding. All co-operators will become, to a certain extent, men of business. But they cannot become men of business without becoming men of knowledge.<sup>598</sup>

There are many similarities with Owenism here. The aim is to develop the ‘judgment’ and the ‘understanding’, to acquire ‘knowledge of human character’, and to learn through a

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<sup>596</sup> Smiles, *Thrift*, 181.

<sup>597</sup> Smiles, 54.

<sup>598</sup> *The Co-operator*, 1 January 1830.

‘practical education’ rather than ‘by rote’. But, unlike Owenism, these faculties are to be exercised and strengthened through practice, by being entrusted with responsibility. ‘Difficulty’ becomes a catalyst for the reawakening of one’s inherent desire for learning and for independence. It’s interesting to note that this is also the essence of Marx’s critique of Owenism. Marx observed of Owen’s approach that it “gave society the universal power to form individuals” while at the same time exempting some individuals (particularly himself) from being so formed. This constituted an impasse for Marx, one which he concluded “could be overcome only by revolutionary action, through which workers would be moved by circumstances to remake themselves in the same act by which they altered the conditions that formed them.”<sup>599</sup> Both ‘improving’ co-operators and Marx, then, conceive of self-formation as something that occurs through struggle. The key difference, however, is in the intended *telos* of the process of struggle: to co-operative ‘improvers’, education is aimed at the formation of ‘men of business’ – a very different character-type from either Owen’s or Marx’s ideal. In this ‘improving’ strand of self-help co-operation, then, the term ‘practical’ is appropriated by a capitalist sense, in which to make someone practical is to make them acquire the character of a businessperson – saving capital, bookkeeping, buying and selling. Being made responsible for one’s own affairs is here seen as a form of ‘practical’ education that works in alignment with the principles of human nature and rationalises the mind, the idea being that a spirit of independence (and therefore rational and moral character) is cultivated by being entrusted with responsibility for one’s own security and wellbeing. In that sense, both the Owenite and ‘self-help’ approaches are prescriptive in so far as they expect a particular kind of subjectivity to emerge from their proposed practices – one that, while supposedly independent, is nevertheless guided by a particular (capitalist) ethos, particular values, and particular forms of conduct.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined a different take on the question of alienation. Much like the Owenite approach, the ‘Improving’ Self-Help strain of the movement considered alienation

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<sup>599</sup> Jerrold Seigel, ‘Necessity, Freedom, and Character Formation from the Eighteenth Century to the Nineteenth’, in *Character, Self, and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Thomas Ahnert and Susan Manning (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 258–59.

to result from a misalignment between conduct and the principles of human nature. However, while the emphasis in the Owenite conception of alienation was on people's separation from their innate sociability, these self-help improvers held that alienation was driven by one's separation from an innate desire of independence, which separation resulted in an unnatural and stultifying desire to be dependent. The key to rationalising people, therefore, was to re-activate this natural desire for independence. However, whereas Owenism sought to reconnect people with the natural drives through tightly controlled top-down instruction, the self-help approach held that one can only connect with their natural desire of independence by embracing 'difficulty'. In other words, by directly and actively struggling with – and resisting – the circumstances that continually shaped them. Thus, while Owenism insists on people being trained prior to being entrusted with any responsibility, we find in the self-help tradition the belief that being entrusted with responsibility and freedom is a *pre-condition* to rationality, rather than a product of rational education. It is only by being entrusted with responsibility – accepting freedom as an *a priori* condition of rational character-formation – that one's faculties and judgment are healthily cultivated. And yet, we find that these self-help improvers were rarely radical democrats. For, despite paying lip service to notions of liberty and independence, they nevertheless sought to cultivate a particular kind of character – the character of a businessperson concerned primarily with the prudent accumulation of wealth. This was their idea of the rational individual. And so, we find these improvers trying to exclude any line of thinking that does not conform with their desired character-type. To them, co-operatives are a means of diverting the lower classes away from revolutionary or even broadly political ideas and producing in them a capitalist character.

I further argued that while the language of 'improving' self-help is often interpreted as a means of suppressing working-class ambitions, its power resided in the fact that it actually provided people with a framework through which to make sense of their suffering, as well as a roadmap out of alienation and towards self-fulfilment, just as Owenism and the Doctrine of Circumstances provided the lower classes with frameworks through which to make sense of the world and to articulate a way forward. In this sense, we can view the 'Improving' strain as attempting to respond to the same crisis of meaning as Owenism.

Whereas Owenism attempted to systematically reconstruct an entire foundation for meaning, 'improving' co-operators such as Smiles and King opted for a more immediately practical approach, articulating a path out of poverty and a simple definition of "success" to which individuals could easily attach themselves.

In summary, we find in the 'improving' strain a set of pressures that were continually being exerted on the lower classes, both positively and negatively. The "negative" or disciplinary pressures to display 'respectability' or polite refinement, and the "positive" or incentivising function of a framework that provides an explanation for one's pain. In the following chapter, I will explore the manifestation of these pressures across the movement in greater detail, before examining the Politically Radical wing of the Movement and its rejection of the anti-political stances of Owenism and 'Improving' Co-operation in Chapter 16.

## **Chapter 15 – Counter-Revolution and the Pressures of Respectability**

### **Introduction**

As I have stated, I will shortly explore the more politically radical – often even revolutionary – strains of the co-operative movement. First, however, I would like to elaborate on the counter-revolutionary drive within the movement. While there existed a schism between top-down and bottom-up approaches to character-formation, there existed another schism between those who pursued a ‘political’ analysis of the crisis (which is to say, an analysis in terms of class conflict) and those who sought to neutralise such political ferment and put forward a sort of “levelling-up” agenda in which co-operation was seen as a means of peaceably eliminating inequality without the need to expropriate any of the ruling classes’ existing wealth or property. Finally, and in keeping with my line of argument throughout this thesis, I do not make the claim that any given positions (for example, revolutionary or counter-revolutionary) could be demarcated along clear factional lines. There was no revolutionary or counter-revolutionary faction. Rather, I argue that we can trace certain drives, such as a counter-revolutionary drive, across the movement, but each individual in the movement may embody a different configuration of said drive, or even a particular amalgamation of drives and positions. Thus, rather than try to assign each individual to a particular faction or position, I have found it more useful to trace the ways in which the different drives exerted pressures on the lower classes and various members of the co-operative movement, as well as the ways in which these pressures were resisted or subverted.

### **15.1. The Counter-Revolutionary Uses of the Will to Truth**

Counter-revolutionary positions were not all identical. The ‘Improving’ kind of self-help co-operation, as we’ve seen, sought to dissuade the lower classes from revolutionary notions by offering them a roadmap to both mental and economic improvement through self-help. There was another aspect to the counter-revolutionary drive, however, which we have already touched on previously: the rationalist belief in the world as Will to Truth. If we cast our minds back to Owenism, we will recall that it viewed socialism as already built into human nature. Based on this principle, Owenism viewed humanity as naturally propelled

towards socialism, rationality and harmony. As such, socialism would not require violence in order to be realised. For socialism

holds all existing institutions sacred—all rights undisputed—all forms unchanged. [...] [It] takes its station among men, without forcibly displacing a single circumstance or arrangement of life. [...] Whatever shall go to decay before it, will not have been destroyed by violence, but will have fallen to pieces from being no longer useful [...] and from there being none to think it worth the trouble of preservation.<sup>600</sup>

Oppressive institutions, then, would be eradicated by the sheer force of rationality. So unshakeable was the fact of nature's unity and of our mutual interests that, once socialism was fully established, all capitalists' behaviour would be transformed without the need for coercion:

Under the New System, the Capitalists or Employers will not act in direct opposition to the fundamental Law of Christianity; [...] They will see that the *liberty* of others is of no value to them [...] and they themselves will then know, experimentally, [...] that security can arise only from integrity; they will act uprightly [...].<sup>601</sup>

While John Wade believed that "[the] other classes [i.e. the non-working classes] have mostly originated in our vices and ignorance [...]." Therefore, once humanity attained "greater perfectibility [...]. Having no employment, their name and office will cease in the social state."<sup>602</sup> As Thompson points out:

[...] [Owen's magazine] the *Crisis* sailed blandly through the waters of 1831 and 1832, carrying cargoes of reports on cooperative congresses and on trading stores at Slaithwaite, without noticing that the country was in fact in a state of revolutionary crisis.<sup>603</sup>

This counter-revolutionary drive in Owenism is partly grounded in the Owenite conception of rationality and the doctrine of circumstances. One of the Owenite laws of character-formation, after all, is that it must progress slowly and gradually. Prejudices are removed one by one, the removal of one paving the way for the removal of the next. Thus, "time will

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<sup>600</sup> *Orbiston Register*.

<sup>601</sup> *Orbiston Register*, February 16, 1826. p.90.

<sup>602</sup> *Gorgon*, 8 August, 1818.

<sup>603</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*.

be given for reason to weaken the force of long-established injurious prejudices.”<sup>604</sup> And because all misery and exploitation are merely the result of irrational character, bred by irrational circumstances, there is no use in blaming the ruling classes for the lower classes’ plight. Thus, the doctrine of circumstances often had a “neutralising”, counter-revolutionary effect that precluded any notions of class-struggle on the grounds that everyone, regardless of class, was formed by circumstances and therefore did not merit anger. Speaking at the London Congress in April 1832, Reverend Marriott stated that:

Whatever views a Radical Reformer might entertain relative to the benefiting of society, it was morally impossible he could ameliorate the condition of mankind so far as the [Owenite] Co-operator, who acted upon a system that [...] acknowledged all men to be the creatures of circumstance, and forgave the failings of every one, from the king to the poorest person.<sup>605</sup>

Put simply by *The Pioneer*: “Ye are as circumstances made you; nor praise nor blame from us.”<sup>606</sup> While Owen himself adds:

You must be made to know yourselves, by which means alone you can discover what other men are. You will then distinctly perceive that no rational ground for anger exists, even against those who by the errors of the present system have been made your greatest oppressors and your most bitter enemies [...]. They are no more to be blamed [...] than you are; nor you than they.<sup>607</sup>

Class antagonism was explained away by the doctrine of circumstances which, says Claeys, functioned “as a pacifying element among Owen’s followers”, acting as a way of preventing conflict between the classes and neutralising revolutionary ferment.<sup>608</sup> To the Owenite, the doctrine of circumstances does away with the need for the kinds of analysis of power and class conflict found in other quarters of the radical press (and which we will shortly examine), providing instead a simple model through which Owenites could make sense of complex phenomena and navigate the pain and disbelief that can arise from trying to make

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<sup>604</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 62–63.

<sup>605</sup> Proceedings of the Third Co-operative Conference held in London ... on the 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 1832..., London, 1832, p.121.

<sup>606</sup> *The Pioneer*, 16 November 1833.

<sup>607</sup> Owen, *The Life of Robert Owen Written by Himself with Selections from His Writings & Correspondence* (1857), 226.

<sup>608</sup> Claeys, *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism*, 116.



sense of injustice and suffering, reducing all antagonism, injustice and poverty to a question of 'rationality'. All injustice and inequality were simply the result of 'errors' that could be scientifically corrected, and the correction of which would not be resisted by the ruling classes, because truth is irresistible.

## 15.2. Reassuring the Ruling Classes

There are some other motives behind the language of counter-revolution, including the need to assuage the ruling classes and keep the potential wrath of vested interests at bay. A letter from J.D. Styles, printed in *The Crisis* in 1832, invites members of both houses of parliament to the third Co-operative Congress. Co-operators, he reassures the members, are "the peaceably disposed of this Class" and, while the condition of the working class is akin to slavery,

we blame no parties for this change in our condition; but believe it to be the necessary result of the onward progress of society, and that we, as well as all other classes, shall be ultimately benefitted by the very means which have produced the severe distress which we now experience.<sup>609</sup>

Owenites regularly sought to reassure the ruling classes that they had no intentions to expropriate any existing wealth but rather to create new wealth among the lower classes. "Cooperation has no *levelling* tendency", reassured the *Economist*. Its purpose it to "elevate all."<sup>610</sup> While a Warrington clergyman assured his readers: "We do not come here to deprive any human being of any of his or her property."<sup>611</sup> Two things are noteworthy in the above examples. First, the apparent need to assure potential readers that co-operators constitute the peaceful faction of the working classes. It is worth noting that this was a time in which fear of revolutionary ferment was still high among the ruling classes, and the cultivation of an image of peacefulness and rationality may have been equal parts strategic and sincere, looking to avoid alarm among the ruling classes.<sup>612</sup> As Combe stated: "Some short-sighted

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<sup>609</sup> *The Crisis*, Saturday, April 21, 1832, p.7.

<sup>610</sup> *Economist*, 11 August 1821.

<sup>611</sup> A.E. Musson, *The Ideology of Early Co-Operation in Lancashire and Cheshire* (Manchester: Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society, 1958), 126.

<sup>612</sup> The panic that gripped England regarding revolutionary sentiment from the time of the French Revolution, which would regularly rear its head over the course of at least four decades, scarcely needs demonstrating. cf. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*. Especially chapter 5.

politicians may *imagine* that the condition of the higher classes will be injured by the *general* introduction of such manners [i.e. habits of independence]. All *past* experience contradicts this notion.”<sup>613</sup> Nevertheless, such claims were probably mostly sincere. For, from its inception, Owenism contained a dominant strain that viewed ‘political knowledge’ and the lens of class struggle as “impractical.” Styles assures MPs that the congress will be attended by “plain practical men, which have the peace, order, and improvement of society solely in view.” In that sense, the anti-political strands of the movement were themselves shaped by a broader counter-revolutionary drive that dominated English politics over several decades. Thus, the term ‘practical’ (which regularly overlaps with ‘useful’) had a multifaceted and adaptable meaning, being both defensive and offensive, depending on the context. On the one hand, Owenites regularly found themselves rebuffing accusations of being impractical visionaries, “and went to some lengths to protest their *bona fides* as successful men of the world who had little time for [mere theory].”<sup>614</sup> While at the same time, they themselves dismissed political agitators for being ‘impractical’ in the sense that their analysis of the causes of ‘distress’ was wrong. After all, co-operators ‘blame no parties’ for their condition, and even view this condition as a ‘*necessary*’ step along the road towards eventual wellbeing. Thus, it becomes clear that while pacifying revolutionary ire is strategic, it is also the result of strict rationalist utopianism – the belief that society will inevitably march towards ultimate progress and suffering be eradicated through rational, peaceful means. After all,

truth alone can disentangle [bad habits and sentiments], and expose their fallacy. It becomes then necessary, to prevent the evils of a too sudden change, that those who have been thus nursed in ignorance may be progressively removed from the abodes of mental darkness, to the intellectual light which this principle cannot fail to produce. The light of true knowledge therefore must be first made to dawn on those dwellings of darkness, and afterwards gradually to increase, as it can be borne by the opening faculties of their inhabitants.<sup>615</sup>

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<sup>613</sup> Combe, *The Life and Dying Testimony of Abram Combe in Favour of Robert Owen’s New Views of Man and Society*, 14.

<sup>614</sup> Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: The Quest for the New Moral World*, 46.

<sup>615</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, 132.

Owenism is thus a kind of conservative socialism that views political agitation and class antagonism as not merely incorrect, but counterproductive. Improvement can only be brought about gradually and slowly, through a progress from irrationality to rationality. This progress is guaranteed by the very nature of 'truth' and has no place for rupture:

From the earliest periods of society, history abounds with facts confirmed by the daily experience of every thinking man, which prove that all genuine improvement [...] is of a progressive nature. [...] [S]cepticism, with regard to all creeds of such high promise, as that of a sudden and violent change in all the departments and ranks in society, becomes a duty. From what I know of Mr. Owen [...] he is among those incapable of being practically advocated for disorder.<sup>616</sup>

Macnab will have had his upper-class readership in mind when he defended Owen against possible accusations of revolutionary sympathies. Perhaps he was appealing to the upper-classes' fear of a collapse of the social order and the prospect of losing the power or wealth they held:

The great and important law in nature, that servitude, when founded on *opinion* and *esteem*, is true liberty, is verified among the inhabitants of [New Lanark] in the most striking and interesting manner, producing a delightful order and harmony [...].<sup>617</sup>

Here, then, is a reassurance that Owenism will merely teach the lower classes to love and accept their place in the hierarchical order of society. Remarks such as the above will surely have done much to justify many a working-class Co-operator's conviction of the need to pursue 'political knowledge'. Owen himself regularly asserted that his ideas would alleviate distress "without any public disorder."<sup>618</sup> And if this gradual progress towards rationality is possible, it is because Owen's plans are rooted in the Laws of Nature. After all, nature equals truth, and truth is unified, consistent and harmonious. Therefore, any rupture or 'violent change' would indicate a deviation from nature. The same line was towed by Owen's disciples. In the *Orbiston Register*, Combe declared that Co-operation seeks to overthrow nothing, nor to appropriate any wealth to be distributed among the poor. It

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<sup>616</sup> Macnab, 'The New Views of Mr. Owen of Lanark Impartially Examined, as Rational Means of Ultimately Promoting the Productive Industry, Comfort, Moral Improvement, and Happiness of the Labouring Classes of Society, and of the Poor; and of Training up Children in the Way in Which They Should Go', 40.

<sup>617</sup> Macnab, 48.

<sup>618</sup> Owen, *A New View of Society*, v.

seeks simply to eradicate poverty, by allowing everyone to create more wealth, for themselves and for society at large.<sup>619</sup>

### 15.3. The Pressures of Respectability

Linked to the pressure to reassure the upper classes of one's peaceableness is a broader pressure to display a respectable character, partly stemming from a drive to discipline the lower classes and the poor in particular. Before the emergence of the welfare state, the poor would often have to demonstrate good character just to receive charity:

[All] applicants [to the Charity Organization Society] were to have their cases thoroughly investigated; if found 'deserving' (showing signs of thrift and temperance), they were to be directed to the appropriate specialized charity; if found 'undeserving' (drunken, improvident), they were instructed to apply to the workhouse.<sup>620</sup>

Furthermore, the projection of a respectable character was essential to one's material wellbeing. As Max Weber noted, membership of a prestigious congregation (and presumably also of a responsible Friendly or Providential society), "was a public sign of an individual's respectability and of his credit-worthiness". And the use of the discourse of respectability as a disciplinary tool also extended to the fight against political radicalism and revolutionary ferment. In order to be allowed to organise at all, the lower classes needed to convince the authorities of their respectable and peaceful (that is, non-revolutionary) intentions. News of gatherings by "persons of the lowest order" stirred anxiety among the local gentry, particularly at a time when fear of revolution was at its peak. Sympathetic members of the upper classes would try to quell this anxiety by emphasising "the members' sober and orderly behaviour." One correspondent tried to reassure Christopher Wyvill that the gatherings consisted of

persons of good characters [...] men of sound understanding, with their minds open to information [...]. One of the Meetings [...] was conducted with order and regularity [...] several Members in succession read selected passages [...] for the instruction of the Meeting, all in favour of Liberty and peaceable Reforms [...].

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<sup>619</sup> *Orbiston Register*, Opening Statement

<sup>620</sup> Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982*, 192.

And like political Radicals, co-operators regularly had to fend off accusations of moral deviance. Thus, Thompson argues, the exhortation of respectability by some leading Radicals such as Cobbett, Carlile and Lovett, was motivated by the need to defend themselves against the assorted loyalists and conservatives who denounced them as “disreputable exemplars of every vice.”<sup>621</sup> Regarding the anti-Owenite propaganda of the 1830s, Frost’s *Forty Years’ Recollections* reveals that:

It was a very common device for complainants and witnesses to say of a person charged with larceny, wife desertion, or almost any other offence, ‘He is a Socialist’; and reports of all such cases had the side-head, ‘Effect of Owenism’ [...].<sup>622</sup>

Therefore, Radicals “sought to exhibit themselves as bearing [...] an irreproachable character.”<sup>623</sup> Thompson is right, but I argue that there is another facet to the analysis of ‘respectability’, one missing from Thompson’s: while it is certainly true that there was a necessity for Radicals to display their respectable credentials, there is little reason to doubt that they also genuinely *believed* in the importance of the respectable virtues they extolled. Carlile did not publish *The Moralist*, nor Cobbett his *Advice to Young Men*, for reputation alone. These works on the virtues of diligence, application, tenacity, independence, and so on, were types of self-help books, albeit written by those who emerged from the working classes rather than promoted by middle-class improvers such as Smiles, Craik and King, or organisations such as the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. If they wrote these books, it is because they truly believed in the principles laid out in them, and because these principles had provided them with a sense of control over their own lives, and a path to self-improvement, in the same vein as what middle-class improvers tried to provide the lower classes with. After all, the immense popularity of the various improving societies and self-help books indicates that there was a gap in the market, a significant demand for blueprints and roadmaps to the good life. Thus, there were legitimate reasons for adopting an ‘improving’ kind of self-help. It was not just the pressure to be ‘respectable’ – it was also about escaping conditions of servitude. Just as one finds the urge to resist upper-class

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<sup>621</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 814.

<sup>622</sup> Thomas Frost, *Forty Years’ Recollections: Literary and Political (1880)* (New York: Garland, 1986), 20.

<sup>623</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 815.

meddling and chastisement, we should equally note the manner in which some working-class people felt a need to remove themselves from those habits widespread in their fellow class members that they perceived to hold them back. “I hate taverns and tavern company”, wrote Francis Place, one of the greatest and earliest chroniclers of the working-class movement. “I cannot drink, I cannot for any considerable time consent to converse with fools.”<sup>624</sup> We therefore cannot simply view the idea of ‘improvement’ in terms of “reform from above.” It is something that the poor may well desire for themselves as a legitimate means of escaping the squalor and chaos by which they feel suffocated. The co-operative movement, after all, was largely of this sort, being made up of people who sought a better life for themselves, and for other members of their class, even if this drive often morphed into an elitism and puritanism that either resembled that of the upper classes, or perhaps internalised it. Thus, the language of ‘character’, ‘improvement’ and ‘respectability’ cannot be seen as straightforwardly “controlling.” Yes, the concept did serve as a tool for control and discipline, but it also served contradictory functions within the working classes: on the one hand, it gave someone an aspirational language with which to articulate and illuminate an avenue for personal betterment, giving one hope that their own condition – both material and intellectual – could indeed be improved. It gave them something with which to distinguish themselves from the misery that surrounded them. On the other hand, it was used by some sections of the working classes to set themselves apart from those parts of the working classes with which they did not wish to be associated. In the following declaration released by a builders’ union in 1833, we may detect the language of respectability being internalised by workers and turned against other members of their class. These builders promised to embrace

quarriers, brickmakers, and labourers as soon as they can be prepared with better habits and more knowledge to enable them to act for themselves, assisted by the other branches who will have an overwhelming interest to improve the mind, morals and general conditions of their families in the shortest time.<sup>625</sup>

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<sup>624</sup> Wallas, *The Life of Francis Place, 1771-1854.*, 195.

<sup>625</sup> *The Pioneer*, September 1833.

The self-help framework gave workers a clear roadmap to improving their condition and becoming masters of their own destiny. But it also gave some a tool with which to distinguish themselves from other sections of the lower classes, designating them as possessing a lower character<sup>626</sup>, and thereby elevating themselves above these other sections. In other words, the improving discourse can be converted into elitist sentiments and a desire for status. 'Respectability' is therefore a concept that is always being contested, both within the working-class movement and between the working-classes and ruling classes. Quite which meaning is being expressed at any one iteration is difficult to pin down, and instead it ought to be acknowledged as a complex term whose precise meaning and affect is constantly being stretched in different directions simultaneously, including contradictory ones. Thus we find that while the majority of activities carried out in the mutual-improvement societies of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries were centred around the pursuit of "gentlemanly character" (placing great emphasis on manners, good conduct and enunciation), they nevertheless attracted also the more politically radical members of the lower classes, such as Thomas Cooper, who would go on to become a prominent Chartist leader. It becomes clear, then, that even the more critical minds among the lower classes found themselves struggling with the pressures of improvement and respectability.

We see, then, that the pressure to project a respectable character was incessant and came from multiple directions. This takes us back to a point made in Part I: that the discourse of character is largely concerned with calculability. That is, an individual's character was of interest because it allowed one to calculate the likely conduct of the individual in question: to assess someone's character is to predict how they might respond in a given situation (e.g. can they be trusted in a business transaction? Are they likely to default on a loan? Are they rational enough to be entrusted with the franchise? Or are they likely to riot and require violent suppression?). Someone whose character or 'primary motive' cannot be clearly perceived is considered dangerous and untrustworthy. Demonstrating respectability,

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<sup>626</sup> If Toryism manages to repeatedly appeal to so many of the working-classes it is precisely because it allows individuals to believe that they can better their own condition by sheer willing (if they just work hard enough, for example). It also, by the same token, makes it easy to blame others for their failure to clamber out of their abject condition, for their responsibility is seen to lie within their own free-will.

therefore, was a means of assuring the upper classes that one was rational and predictable. It is both politically and economically expedient, therefore, to take on an improving kind of education in order to be able to display a desired character. Thus, the drive for improvement was pulled in a number directions. A pressure to prove to the upper classes that one is rational and not a danger to them could simultaneously exist in a single individual side-by-side with revolutionary beliefs. Yet so overpowering can be the pressure be that respectability's discursive tropes become internalised and distilled in the individual. As such, both respectability and criticality form nodes within a discourse of 'rationality' that continually mingle, merge and overlap, forming an evanescent mesh of desires, refracted anew in every individual and in each utterance made within said discourse. Here, the subject may be understood as a product of the play between the internalised pressures of respectability and the simultaneous urge to resist and reject aspects of that pressure. While each individual internalises and is shaped by a discourse to some extent, they also rework the discourse anew through their form of resistance to this internalisation.

## **Conclusion**

I have just outlined the counter-revolutionary drive which pervaded the movement and which formed a constant restraint upon the more revolutionary and anti-capitalist forces within it. In part, this drive realised itself through appeal to the unity of nature and the Will to Truth. With 'nature' being characterised by consistency and harmony, any discord – such as the suggestions of class antagonism – could be dismissed as erroneous and counter-productive, while the principle of the Will to Truth could have convinced many that violent revolution was unnecessary. It is difficult to know how effective such ontological – even theological – arguments may have been in quelling lower-class ire. What is clearer, however, is that the doctrine of circumstances allowed many individuals' potential resentment to be diverted by providing people with a simple model through which to make sense of their suffering and of the poverty and inequality that surrounded them. By reducing injustice to a matter of 'rationality', Owenism could function as a balm for the soul. It provided people with a sense of meaning, purpose and hope, just like the framework of self-help. Furthermore, as part of the battle over the definition of 'useful knowledge', it provided them with a clear idea of what knowledge to pursue. There was, however, a politically



radical strain of the Co-operative Movement, particularly between the mid-1820s and late 1830s, which resisted and rejected the paternalistic and authoritarian elements of Owenism and the 'improving' definitions of useful knowledge. They had a thoroughly different analysis of the crisis, one that was grounded in their own experience of immiseration and in their own needs. I will explore this strand of Politically Radical Co-operation in the chapter 17.

## Chapter 16 – Politically Radical Co-operation

### Introduction

In this final chapter, I will explore the Politically Radical strand of the movement, comparing its analysis of the crisis and its conception of alienation with those of Owenism and the ‘Improving’ strand. I will show that these Politically Radical Co-operators had an analysis that was grounded in their own experience of immiseration and exploitation, which consequently led them to pursue a very different kind of knowledge to the kinds pushed by the other strands of the movement. I will show how, despite being greatly indebted to the Owenite framework, these Radical Co-operators developed an analysis which resisted the neutralising pressures of Owenism and the language of respectability, and which could only have been developed “from below.”

### 16.1. Politically Radical Analysis of the Crisis

While the Owenites considered knowledge of human nature to be essential to the formation of an independent character, and while ‘improving’ co-operators considered business knowledge to be the most useful, there were many co-operators who arrived at the movement from the tradition of Radicalism and who insisted on the priority of ‘political knowledge’ and political rights. These co-operators tended to argue that political knowledge and rights would provide the lower classes with the independence and freedom required to assume responsibility for their own affairs. And while many of these Radical co-operators were also sympathetic to Owenism and desired the moral transformation of society, they argued that political rights and liberty were a pre-requisite to any moral transformation. The Poor Man’s Guardian declared: “our opinions of Co-operation are well known. We admire the principle, but we despise the shallow conceit which would carry it into practice, without pre-existing materials. [...] [Co-operation] was utterly impracticable under the existing laws, or any form of government other than a government of the people.”<sup>627</sup> While to James Hole, political rights and the exercise of freedom went hand in hand in ushering in socialism:

[As] each individual unit of the mass called society, attains a clearer notion of his rights and duties, and a consequent greater power of self-assertion,

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<sup>627</sup> *The Poor Man’s Guardian*, 28 June 1834.

so does society become diviner, and government a more perfect exponent of its wishes [...].<sup>628</sup>

Political knowledge (the notion of one's political rights and duties) begets a 'greater power of self-assertion', which begets a more perfect society:

He who would elevate government, let him elevate the people. Let schools, books, newspapers, and every agency for good, continue their work on the masses of our country [...]. Then shall the state become the embodiment of Liberty, Fraternity, Equality.<sup>629</sup>

On the other hand, Owenites argued that 'liberty' "consists not in the right but in the power given to each individual in the community to develop his faculties", and that every member of society should have "a sound education" and the means of "labouring profitably for themselves and for the community at large."<sup>630</sup> Thus, Owenites thought it more important to make "culture and the means of self-cultivation [...] accessible to all."<sup>631</sup> Indeed, Owenism is characterised by a fear of what might happen should the 'unripe' be prematurely entrusted with political freedom: "[In] the present state of moral culture", asked Robert Dale Owen, "would [increased leisure time] [...] be a benefit? [...] Think of the temptations of intemperance! Some of the reports even from the eight-hour experiment are discouraging."<sup>632</sup> Despite its undeniable radicalness, then, Owenism simultaneously belongs in the 'improving' tradition that views education as a means of "civilising" the lower classes and maintaining a stable social order. In the end, it seems that no matter how radical Owenism was – and it truly was radical, to the point where many of the ruling classes found it terrifying<sup>633</sup> – it never escaped its fundamentally moralistic paternalism. Owenism's rejection of 'political knowledge' and revolutionary aspirations was both a source of strength and its undoing. On the one hand, it allowed the movement to appeal (for a time)

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<sup>628</sup> Hole, *Lectures on Social Science and the Organization of Labor*, 141–42.

<sup>629</sup> Hole, 141–42.

<sup>630</sup> *The Labour League*, 16 September 1848, 49.

<sup>631</sup> Claey's, *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism*, 2.

<sup>632</sup> Dale Owen, *Threading My Way*, 271–72.

<sup>633</sup> In 1833 the *Quarterly Review* estimated that Owenism had about 500,000 followers, that 350 towns were being visited regularly by Owenite missionaries, and that it was a sect "professing atheism, the irresponsibility of man..., community of goods and the abolition of marriage." The doctrines, claimed the *Quarterly Review*, were "incompatible with our political constitution, moral obligations and religious duties", as well as with "any system whatsoever of human society." Cited in Garnett, 172.

to elements from across the social spectrum. On the other hand, it ultimately caused many working-class Radicals to reject as limited and incapable of addressing the root causes of their distress. As Harrison points out, “Marx and Engels commended Owen and the other utopian socialists for their attack upon ‘every principle of existing society’, but condemned them for failure to realize the significance of class antagonisms.”<sup>634</sup> It was the “‘utopian’ element [...] which prevented [Owenite socialism] from supporting revolutionary class action.” And, at least until the late 1820s, most political Radicals were dismissive of Owenism. The Jamaican-British radical, Robert Wedderburn, chastised Owen for being unwilling to examine the problems of class-power and ownership: “Mr Owen [...] will find that the lower classes are pretty well convinced that he is a tool to the land-holders and Ministers [...]”.<sup>635</sup> Hazlitt famously made clear his disdain for Owen’s naivety in a scathing passage, from which I quote only a short segment:

[New Lanark] is insignificant. Our statesmen are not afraid of the perfect system of reform [Owen] talks of, and, in the meantime, his cant against reform in parliament [...] serves as a practical diversion in their favour. But let [...] his ‘New View of Society’ but make as many disciples as the ‘Enquiry concerning Political Justice’, and we shall see how the tide will turn about. [...] He will be marked as [...] an incendiary, [...] and he will find out that it is not so easy [...] to make mankind understand their own interests, or those who govern them care for any interest but their own.<sup>636</sup>

## 16.2. The Radical Analysis of the Crisis and the Pursuit of ‘Political Knowledge’

Nevertheless, despite these frictions between Owenism and Radicalism, by 1829 Owen’s influence on the conceptual and analytical framework of the working classes had become immense, with many viewing Radical political reform and Owenism as having a shared objective:

Let the Radical take the Owenite by the hand, and the Owenite do the same by the Radical, for both parties are the real, and only friends of the working people [...]. The disciples of Mr Owen may differ from us as to the means, or “modus operandi”, but they have precisely the same eventual object in view,

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<sup>634</sup> Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: The Quest for the New Moral World*, 46.

<sup>635</sup> *The ‘Forlorn Hope’, or a Call to the Supine*, 11 October 1817.

<sup>636</sup> *Examiner*, 4 August 1816

namely, to establish for the workman dominion over the fruits of his own industry [...].<sup>637</sup>

Indeed, many of those who would later become leading Chartists first passed through Owenism and were indelibly shaped by it. The People's Charter, for example, was originally drawn up by William Lovett, who had been a follower of Owen for years, and the Owenite influence shines through the universalist tone of the charter, in which, in true Owenite fashion, Lovett "forcefully rejected any claim based on historical precedent [...]."<sup>638</sup> Many fused political radicalism with cooperative socialism. Henry Hetherington's *Poor Man's Guardian*, which was edited by James Bronterre O'Brien from 1832 onwards, was one of the most prominent expressions of this fusion. Both Hetherington and O'Brien were co-operators who also agitated for political reform and who would become prominent figures in the Chartist movement. As Stedman Jones points out:

Whatever the limits of Owen's law that 'man's character is made for him, not by him', it was of enormous importance for those who came into contact with it, in clearing the ground for a belief in natural and universal equality, human perfectibility, the malleability of social and political institutions and a movement which looked unambiguously to the future rather than the past.

And even though many of his more Radical followers had begun to distance themselves from him, they nevertheless still acknowledged an indisputable debt to him:

Owenism was for them always a great and constructive influence. They had learned from it to see capitalism, not as a collection of discrete events, but as a system. They had learned to project an alternative, utopian system of mutuality. They had passed beyond Cobbett's nostalgia for an older world and had acquired the confidence to plan the new. They had gained an understanding of the importance of education, and of the force of environmental conditioning.<sup>639</sup>

This tension between Owenism and the drive for political reform typified the co-operative movement during the period between 1829-1834: Owenism provided a conceptual framework and reserve of ideas from which the working classes could pick and choose, and

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<sup>637</sup> *Poor Man's Guardian*, No. 67, September 22, 1832, p.538

<sup>638</sup> Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982*, 126.

<sup>639</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 887.

to which they could add a democratic political philosophy to serve their needs. Thus, just as the wave of co-operative societies in the 1820s was shaped by both Owenism and by a long line of self-help institutions and practices, it also needs to be understood, as Harrison shows, as shaped by the Great Reform Bill struggle and the formation of the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union.<sup>640</sup> Nevertheless, Owenism was limited in its experience of the crisis as something taking place “down there”, among the lower classes. Furthermore, Owenites dismissed any calls for political reform on the grounds that the real problem was the ideological irrationality of the Individual System, which could only be corrected through the education of all classes of society. This Owenite rationalism prevented Owenites from being able to recognise the importance of political reform. After all, what use would the extension of the franchise be “in the present state of ignorance in which the mass of the British population has been hitherto allowed to be trained?”<sup>641</sup> Political reform would be meaningless unless the population was rationalised first. And as Harrison points out, “one would never suspect [from reading the Owenite journals] that from 1830 to 1832 the whole country was seething with excitement over the question of the Reform Bill.”<sup>642</sup> This exasperated many political Radicals: “He has been so long elevated above the atmosphere of human passions, that he hardly knows what is going on in this nether world [...].”<sup>643</sup> They had no such luxury. To them, the problem of immiseration was not an abstract phenomenon to be resolved through rational arrangements and education – they experienced the crisis directly, and suffered daily as a result. As such, their analysis of the causes of the crisis were different. Whereas Owenite analysis traced the source of society’s ills to a crisis of rationality and character, the Radical’s analysis framed society’s ills in terms of oppression, to which the working classes’ were vulnerable through ignorance of the nature of said oppression. Writing in Holyoake’s *The Reasoner*, the Chartist William Addiscott speaks up against the clergy’s denunciation of Chartist efforts and praises the Chartists who,

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<sup>640</sup> See Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: The Quest for the New Moral World*, 215.

<sup>641</sup> Dale Owen, *Threading My Way*, 209.

<sup>642</sup> Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: The Quest for the New Moral World*, 215.

<sup>643</sup> *Poor Man’s Guardian*, Vol. I, No. 68, September 29, 1832

seek to point out the natural remedies for the evils that overwhelm us—and they plead the cause of the suffering and oppressed against the tyrant oppressor, whether he be lord or priest.<sup>644</sup>

Notice that Addiscott's position differs from Owenism in its analysis. Both Owenism and radicalism identified the church as pivotal in the diffusion of ignorance, but the Radical analysis juxtaposes 'oppressed' and 'tyrant oppressor', and identifies both 'lord' and 'priest' as being on the oppressing side. Owenite analysis, on the other hand, would point to some fundamental erroneous belief that afflicts all classes equally, such as the belief in the primacy of self-interest. Thus, Radicals were sympathetic to large elements of Owenism, but perceived it as incomplete and impracticable without the prior attainment of political reform and suffrage. "[We] believe [Owen's] PRINCIPLES are, in the main, true", said the *Poor Man's Guardian* in September 1832. Yet the editorial was nevertheless suspicious of

the various schemes of the leading co-operators, who are avowedly indisposed to confer upon the industrious classes their POLITICAL RIGHTS, and who, indeed seek every opportunity to speak sneeringly and contemptuously of their possession [...]. We, on the contrary, contend that till the industrious classes become possessed of political power [...] no permanent improvement will or can take place in their condition [...].<sup>645</sup>

As Johnson explains, "[this] was the core of what [Henry Hetherington's *Poor Man's Guardian*] called 'knowledge calculated to make you free'."<sup>646</sup> And only once this knowledge was attained could "Owenism, St. Simonism or any other -ism [be instated to help] ensure the well-being of the whole."<sup>647</sup> Indeed, not only were political rights as important as the Owenite 'social system', but were in fact a prerequisite. Hetherington commented of Owen's ideas that they were

essentially practicable and beneficial, if the people had a free stage and no favour. When the people have EQUAL RIGHTS, and their consequent EQUAL LAWS, the superiority of Mr Owen's principles will admit of demonstration, but not till then. To attempt to establish even partially, upon independent grounds, any of Mr Owen's philanthropic views in the present state of the

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<sup>644</sup> *The Reasoner: And 'Herald of Progress'*, 246–47.

<sup>645</sup> *The Poor Man's Guardian*, Vol I, No. 64, September 1, 1832, p.513

<sup>646</sup> *Poor Man's Guardian*, 14 April 1832.

<sup>647</sup> *Poor Man's Guardian*, 30 November 1833.

country, and before the working classes are politically emancipated, is only putting the cart before the horse, and will end in an abortion [...].<sup>648</sup>

For whereas the likes of Smiles and King believed that ‘dependence’ was the source of the crisis, their analysis did not take account of the *political causes of dependence*. If some people were indeed ‘dependent’ it was not due to a malfunctioning of some natural psychological mechanism such as ‘shame’, but because ‘property’ – whose interests were represented by government – was unevenly pitted against the ‘working classes’. And while the ‘improving’ co-operators’ proposed solution was to make all workers into property-owning capitalists, Radicals rejected this as a fantasy. The solution, therefore, was to demand just representation through universal manhood suffrage – a “government of the whole people to protect the whole people.”<sup>649</sup> This, then, constituted a different kind of ‘useful knowledge’ to the kind found in Owenism and in ‘improving’ co-operation – here, ‘useful knowledge’ refers to an understanding of the nature of oppression and class struggle. This was ‘political knowledge’. And, faced with pressures from both Owenites and improvers who sought to rationalise and discipline them, working-class Radicals believed that truly useful knowledge could only be attained by the workers’ own endeavours rather than gifted by some benevolent philanthropist. Here is an example of one such “investigation from below”: an account of the plight of cotton-spinners in *Black Dwarf* from 1818. Previously, the author recounts, industrial conditions were such that spinners had a great degree of freedom and could afford to negotiate their wages:

If a man [back then] could not agree with his master, he left him, and could get employed elsewhere. A few years, however, changed the face of things. Steam engines came into use, to purchase which, and to erect buildings sufficient to contain them and six or seven hundred hands, required a great capital. The engine power produced a more marketable (though not a better) article than the little master could at the same price. The consequence was their ruin in a short time; and the overgrown capitalists triumphed in their fall; for they were the only obstacle that stood between them and the complete control of the workmen.<sup>650</sup>

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<sup>648</sup> Poor Man's Guardian, 24 December 1831.

<sup>649</sup> *Poor Man's Guardian*, 30 November, 1833

<sup>650</sup> *Black Dwarf*, 30 September 1818.



With big capitalists being in complete control of the job-market, the spinners had lost all ability to negotiate, and all independence. Therefore,

It is in vain to insult our common understandings with the observation that such men are free; that the law protects the rich and poor alike, and that a spinner can leave his master if he does not like the wages.<sup>651</sup>

In the face of at least two wings of the movement who insisted on telling workers that they were not being oppressed, Radicals set out to find political knowledge. That is, knowledge that helped illuminate the workings of oppression. This much is unanimous in Radical working-class journals, including those of Owenite affiliation. “All useful knowledge”, insisted the *Pioneer*, an Owenite and trade union journal, “consists in the acquirement of ideas concerning our conditions in life.”<sup>652</sup> The *Guardian* echoed, “What we want to be informed about is – how to get out of our present troubles.”<sup>653</sup> And there was a suspicion, too, of the kind of knowledge that was being pushed by the various ‘improving’ societies, the Mechanics’ Institutes, the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, and so on: “A man may be amused and instructed by scientific literature but the language which describes his wrongs clings to his mind with an unparalleled pertinacity.”<sup>654</sup>

### 16.3. Owenite Contributions to the Radical Analysis

This is not to say, however, that these politically-minded co-operators had no use for Owen’s permutations on human nature and character-formation – quite the opposite. Henry Hetherington was one Radical who, while having disavowed orthodox Owenism, still acknowledged the great intellectual benefits Owen had gifted him:

His lectures on the Organisation of Industry, and the Formation of Character, have done a world of good [...]. Every working man who reads Mr Owen's essays becomes a new being in his own estimation. He no longer feels himself a mere lump of living mechanism, predestined for the use and abuse of others. He sees that, however degraded he has been made to be, it is possible for him, under new arrangements, to become the equal of those that look down upon him. He sees that Nature has stamped no inferiority upon him - that Providence has been equally bountiful to him, as to others,

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<sup>651</sup> *Black Dwarf*, 30 September 1818.

<sup>652</sup> *Poor Man's Guardian*, 31 May 1834.

<sup>653</sup> *Poor Man's Guardian*, 25 October 1834

<sup>654</sup> *Poor Man's Guardian*, 14 April 1834

in all the essentials of human happiness; and that, in short, whatever inferiority belongs to him is SOLELY THE WORK OF MAN, and by man therefore remediable.<sup>655</sup>

As we have already seen, Owen's doctrine of circumstances had a hugely galvanising and liberating effect on many of the working classes. And upon deeper inspection, it also becomes clear that the kind of knowledge of human nature pursued by Owen cannot easily be disentangled from political knowledge. Hetherington, for example, espoused Owen's analysis of competition as corrosive to character, speaking of

the plagues and pleasures of a competitive, scrambling, selfish system by which the moral and social aspirations of the noblest human beings are nullified by incessant toil and physical deprivations; by which, indeed, all men are trained to be either slaves, hypocrites, or criminals. Hence my ardent attachment to the principles of that great and good man – Robert Owen.<sup>656</sup>

This quote is concerned with the effect of competition on the moral character of individuals, but it is undeniably political in its analysis of competition as the source of privation and servitude – in other words, an analysis of class struggle. We find, then, that Owenite conceptions of nature and character-formation are central to the Radical and Chartist missions.

The doctrine of circumstances was likewise enlisted in the drive for political analysis, albeit using a very different approach from the Owenite one. While Owenites invoked the doctrine of circumstances as a call to forgiveness and proof of the shared interests of all classes, Radicals invoked it as proof of their rulers' inadequacy and an argument in favour of political independence from these rulers:

The circumstances of an hereditary Earl, of one trained in the profession of law, and especially of English law, and now a Lord, and of a successful soldier of fortune, now a Duke, are the most unlikely to form human beings competent to understand the real cause of the errors and evils of society [...].<sup>657</sup>

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<sup>655</sup> *The Poor Man's Guardian*, 4 April 1835.

<sup>656</sup> *Democratic Review*, September 1849, 159.

<sup>657</sup> *The Crisis*, 19 May 1832.

The possibility of combining co-operation and ‘political knowledge’ was a giddy prospect for some:

The new ‘movement’ is almost invisible, but yet a little while and it will burst on an astonished world like another moon rising at mid-noon [...]. Co-operation and political knowledge are about to give a glorious emancipation to the producers of wealth, and really conduct us into a new age.<sup>658</sup>

#### 16.4. ‘Ignorance’ as an Instrument of Oppression

But what stood in the way of this “knowledge calculated to make you free”? Recall that for the Owenites, people lacked self-knowledge because they had been raised in artificial circumstances, resulting in the promulgation of ‘erroneous’ ideas in the mind; while for ‘improving’ co-operators, irrationality was caused by ‘dependence’. In both cases, then, ‘ignorance’ was merely caused by a misalignment between human nature and circumstances, which precipitated a malfunctioning of one’s natural mechanisms. Similarly, political co-operators also viewed ‘ignorance’ as the key obstacle to happiness. To Radical co-operators, however, ignorance was not merely a systemic issue, but the product of a deliberate and active obfuscation of reality by the upper classes, who disseminated and reinforced ‘useful ignorance’. “Why [...] did not the lass [Queen] Victoria learn really useful knowledge by being apprenticed to a milliner?”, asked the *Guardian*. “What [...] is useful ignorance? – ignorance useful to constitutional tyrants.”<sup>659</sup> As far as the Radical was concerned, ‘useful ignorance’ was pivotal in maintaining an oppressive social order, and the sort of ‘useful’ education provided by the middle and upper classes was often no more than a means of controlling the lower classes and prescribing a form of ‘independence’ that suited the ‘improvers’. As Richard Johnson points out:

On the one hand, [nineteenth-century radicals] valued the acquisition of knowledge very highly indeed [...]. Knowledge or ‘enlightenment’ was generally sought: it was a good in itself, a use value. This passion can be traced in many working-class autobiographies in which the fervent ‘pursuit of knowledge’ always looms large [...].

At the same time, however, radicals were aware of the poverty of educational resources to hand [...] certainly from the 1830s there was a

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<sup>658</sup> *Voice of the West Riding*, 12 October 1833.

<sup>659</sup> *The Poor Man’s Guardian*, 22 June 1833.

growth, in real terms, of educational facilities of the provided kind, if not of opportunities for their use. Yet as 'facilities' grew, the dilemma actually deepened. The quality of what was on offer never matched the aspirations. Far indeed from promising liberation, provided education threatened subjection. It seemed [...], at worst, a species of tyranny, an outward extension of the power of factory master, or priest, or corrupt state apparatus.<sup>660</sup>

And this tussle between the lower- and middle-classes over the meaning of 'useful knowledge' also reached into the heart of the co-operative movement. In a letter to *The Crisis*, artisan Benjamin Warden criticised the form of 'knowledge' provided in Mechanics' Institutes:

Knowledge was very differently understood in its application to the people generally. Brougham and others summed [knowledge] up as little more than honour and obey the King, and all who are in authority under him. 'You may get practical science', say they, 'but it is only to make you better servants'. Their views expressed a limited range, while our own were founded on all known facts. Mechanics Institutes were not intended to teach the most useful knowledge but to teach only as might be profitable to the unproductive [...] we should now get working men to inquire how the produce of their labour was so cunningly and avariciously abstracted from them, and thence go on to the attainment of truth, in order to obtain, before long [...] happiness and community.<sup>661</sup>

Indeed, argued the *Times*, workers were denied knowledge "because instruction was supposed to unfit the workman for this task, and might make the poor ambitious, rebellious, and discontented with their wretched lot."<sup>662</sup> As such, truly useful education must entail not only the acquisition of new knowledge, but the un-learning of 'useful ignorance'. Here, learning and unlearning form part a process of enlightenment that folds in on itself – enlightenment as a simultaneous process of discovery and destruction; a dismantling of one's acquired character as part of a process of self-creation. Much of the energy of radicalism was therefore trained on dismantling the institutions that disseminate 'useful ignorance':

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<sup>660</sup> Johnson, "'Really Useful Knowledge': Radical Education and Working-Class Culture, 1790–1848", 753.

<sup>661</sup> *The Crisis*, 1 June 1833.

<sup>662</sup> Cited in *The Reasoner: And 'Herald of Progress'*, 238.

[...] [The] struggle for human freedom must be carried on against the oppressive authority of the priesthood with as vigorous energy as is ever needed to overcome political tyranny. The nation that worships the evangelical idea of Deity is but ill prepared for a government based on justice, benevolence, and reason.<sup>663</sup>

Against the drive to define ‘useful knowledge’ from above, such statements indicate a desire to capture knowledge from below. These definitions were still concerned with a sense of ‘improvement’, but not necessarily in line with middle-class standards. Rather than seeking social mobility within the channels provided by the established social order, ‘knowledge’ here becomes an instrument for self-liberation:

The juggle of the political economists [...] is now seen through; when translated into plain English, political economy means nothing more nor less than this – Give up the whole produce of your labour – fill everybody's cupboard but your own – and then starve quietly!!! Oh, no, no; the wealth-producers must obtain useful knowledge of a very different description, if they desire to better their condition.

It was not only ‘useful ignorance’ that was intentionally spread by the ruling classes as a means of subjugation. ‘Competition’, too, was but an oppressive tool in the hands of the masters according to some Radical analyses. Many politically radical co-operators, however, believed that competition was “actively encouraged by the idle to benefit themselves, [and that the] means by which the idle were able to promote the competitive battle was through their control of money.”<sup>664</sup> The *Pioneer* argued that “Money alone is the thing which gives the unproductive classes their power over the producer and which enables the idle to abstract from the industrious the fruits of their toil.”<sup>665</sup>

## 16.5. Attempts at Political Knowledge

Similarly, we find plenty of evidence from the many trading co-operatives of a conceptual framework that shared much with Owenism, but which, unlike Owen, was used to try and develop an analysis of the origins of class oppression. The ‘Rules’ of the First Armagh Co-operative Society, for example, stated read: “Knowledge is the parent of virtue and

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<sup>663</sup> *The Reasoner: And ‘Herald of Progress’*, 246–47.

<sup>664</sup> Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982*, 132.

<sup>665</sup> *Pioneer*, November 30, 1833

happiness. Ignorance is the parent of vice and misery."<sup>666</sup> But they also, contain a political tract:

It is WORKPEOPLE who make everything which is called wealth [...]. It is workpeople who dig the coals and the iron ore out of the bowels of the earth; and it is other workpeople who make the ore into iron and steel. It is workpeople who make the iron and steel into implements and utensils of all kinds, and into working tools; without which tools, almost nothing could be made by man.<sup>667</sup>

Why, then, do the wealth-makers not own the wealth? Because they are 'ignorant':

How, then, has it happened that the workpeople are not the wealthiest class in the world. [...] The wealth of the world is in the hands of those who make none of it; whilst those who make it ALL are so poor, that, with the most unceasing and laborious toil, they can hardly keep themselves and children from dying for want of food. [...] [It] is founded on the ignorance of the wealth-makers, that is, the WORKING PEOPLE. If the working people [...] were not blinded by ignorance, they would work for each other, and then they would enjoy amongst them all the wealth which they make.<sup>668</sup>

So far, there is not much in the text that Owenites would disagree with. But while the tract starts off in line with orthodox Owenism, the text soon begins to veer towards an historico-political analysis that extends beyond the remit pursued by most Owenites. Developing a political analysis of the present distribution of power, they argue that the uneven distribution of power and wealth is the result of an imbalance of advantages held by certain individuals through no merit of their own, but rather through inheritance or luck:

Surely it would not be just to allow [men who have acquired more than their due share] to do this, merely because they were stronger, or more active, or more skilful than their brethren [...]. The only just way would be, to let every one take up his own share, and no more.<sup>669</sup>

They also attempt to ascertain the meaning and origins of the concept of money through conjectural history. At first, they speculate, money was invented as a convenient way of exchanging goods and services. However, "the money was soon collected into the hands of

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<sup>666</sup> First Armagh Co-operative Society, 'Words of Wisdom Addressed to the Working Classes, 1830', 319.

<sup>667</sup> First Armagh Co-operative Society, 320.

<sup>668</sup> First Armagh Co-operative Society, 321.

<sup>669</sup> First Armagh Co-operative Society, 322.

a few, who by that means became the masters of all the rest [...].” Money only acquires this degree of power, however, because people

look upon money as real wealth; [...] If all the workers were to refuse to take money for the goods which they make [...], the money would then have no value whatever [...] it is the consent of the workpeople which gives to money all the seeming value which it has. The moment this consent ceases, the money becomes useless.<sup>670</sup>

To these politically-motivated Co-operators, gaining political knowledge – which is to say, an understanding of the structures, concepts and ideas that constitute and reinforce power in society – would allow the subjugated workers to resist the workings of power and create new and fairer systems. Thus, we see here a merging of Owenite ideas and political Radicalism which, at least for a period of about 5 years between 1829 and 1834, was a dominant force among the organised working-classes.

#### **16.6. Will to Truth in the Radical Strain**

Despite the differences between Owenites and political Radicals, they were nevertheless both undergirded by an axiomatic Will to Truth. This particular relationship to truth and rationality could still be found in the pages of Holyoake’s *The Reasoner* deep into 1840s and 50s, where he published and reproduced articles by a variety of Radicals, Chartists, freethinkers and Nonconformists. In a short article, the Chartist William Addiscott speaks up against the clergy for decrying Chartist efforts, and praises the Chartists who,

Perceiving also a mighty spirit of progress in humanity, and a desire for happiness [...], point to better times to come for this very earth on which we stand; [...].<sup>671</sup>

Both Owenism and Chartism share a belief in a ‘spirit of progress’ and a ‘desire for happiness’, and their ultimate aim is to establish a government founded on ‘reason’. Truth is, as usual, seen as an all-powerful force: if the sources of ignorance could only be removed, then truth would be allowed to seep through and reason will be able to govern as intended. To these political co-operators, however, it was political knowledge that would ultimately

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<sup>670</sup> First Armagh Co-operative Society, 338.

<sup>671</sup> *The Reasoner: And ‘Herald of Progress’*, 246–47.

lead to happiness and community. If one could only uncover the nefarious machinations that kept the oppressors in power, they would soon be overthrown. Thus, 'ignorance' was the obstacle standing between people and happiness:

Is it [...] strange that [man] has pursued the wrong in place of the right – that he has grasped at the shadow, while the substance has been overlooked? No! the wonder is, that he has been able to rise from under such loads of error [...]: that through the medium of so many prejudices he has seen so much clearly.<sup>672</sup>

In this case, society progresses through the gradual accumulation of knowledge and dispelling of 'ignorance':

[...] it has always been ignorance which prevented men from enjoying all that can be enjoyed on this earth. Our forefathers, the early savages, had they not been ignorant, would have left off hunting sooner, and become shepherds. The shepherds, had they not been ignorant, would have sooner become farmers and tradesmen; and the farmers and tradesmen, which we now are, were it not for our ignorance, would banish the use of money from amongst us, and would work for one another on terms of perfect equality [...]. There cannot be a doubt that men will all adopt this plan sooner or later; for though the progress of knowledge is slow, still it is quite sure.<sup>673</sup>

We find this Will to Truth at work among the more revolutionary of radicals. James O'Brien, for example, viewed the present system of partial suffrage as responsible for reinforcing a division of interests through the creation of a petty middle class whose sole interest lies in exploiting the lower classes, just as it itself had been previously exploited by the classes above it. The only solution, he believed, was a fusion of political Radicalism with Owenism, creating a revolutionary Socialism:

We must have [...] 'a revolution of revolutions'; [...] that is to say, a complete subversion of the institutions by which wealth is distributed. [...] Property – property – this is the thing we must be at. Without a change in the institution of property, no improvement can take place.<sup>674</sup>

His analysis was unapologetically one of class struggle. Unlike the improvers, he was not interested in the accumulation of capital or property, but in its 'subversion'. And yet, even

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<sup>672</sup> First Armagh Co-operative Society, 'Words of Wisdom Addressed to the Working Classes, 1830', 328.

<sup>673</sup> First Armagh Co-operative Society, 338–39. My italics.

<sup>674</sup> *Destructive*, 24 August 1833



this perspicuous analyst stopped just short of baying for blood. The revolution would be attained, not through violence, but through manhood suffrage: “From the *laws of the few* have the existing inequalities spring; by the laws of the many shall they be destroyed.”<sup>675</sup> Indeed, Radical co-operation shared Owenism’s enlightenment conception of the world as Will to Truth and used very similar imagery to Owenism with regards the unassailability of truth and progress. Hetherington pressed “people to purge themselves of those errors that result from bad habits, previously contracted, and which tarnish the lustre of their benign and glorious principles.” Radical co-operation was as rationalist and as grounded in the Will to Truth as Owenism and ‘improving’ co-operation were – people had to be ‘reformed’ and taught to perceive their true interests in order to achieve progress and happiness:

Self-reformation is the only reform that will establish the happiness of mankind. Man must be taught to know what are, as well as what are not his rights; he must learn the dependence of his happiness on the happiness of his fellow-creatures; his mind must be cleansed of all the many and pernicious prejudices, which, when it was too weak to resist their influence, even at the time of its birth, took root around it, and have hitherto choked up its real nature and hidden from it the lights of truth; he must be made to love, instead of fearing – to pity, instead of blaming – to reason, instead of listening – to be convinced, instead of believing – and, above all, he must know his weakness as an individual, and his strength in proportion only as he UNITES and co-operates with others.<sup>676</sup>

The above quote is a pithy summary of the diverse positions occupied by political Radicals at the time, containing distinctive elements from both Paine-ite political Radicalism (the allusion to ‘rights’) and Owenism (the dependence of happiness upon mutual interest, the prioritising of pity over blame), as well as a formulation of ‘doubt’ that owes as much to enlightenment rationalism and religious dissent (“to reason, instead of listening – to be convinced, instead of believing”). Crucially, of particular interest to us is an epistemic axiom that underpins these assorted positions and which can be discerned by reading between the lines: the idea of a Will to Truth. The perception implied in the quote is that the individual needs to be recalibrated in such a way as to allow truth to work through them. Their “mind must be cleansed of all the many and pernicious prejudices, which [...] have hitherto choked

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<sup>675</sup> *People’s Conservative; and Trade’s Union Gazette*, 14 December 1833

<sup>676</sup> *The Poor Man’s Guardian*, 26 February 1833. My italics.

up its real nature and hidden from it the lights of truth.” In other words, the influences received by the individual under a corrupt system imbues their mind with ‘prejudices’, untruths, that hinder the flow of truth through the individual (“choke up” – the language of blockage and circulation). And this opens up an important nuance in the Radical notion of rationalisation: it is as much about ‘de-education’ as ‘education’, ‘unlearning’ as well as ‘learning’. One must unlearn, because the ideas that have been imparted to them as self-evident truths in fact serve to keep them in a state of ignorance and subjugation. For an individual to become rational, their mind has to be strengthened sufficiently to be able to question, resist, and ultimately do away with the pernicious and artificial ideas that have been forced upon them. For it had previously been “too weak to resist their influence.” Under this formulation, then, the Will to Truth is the guarantor of rationality, the great regulating force. The assumption is that there is something in all of us that desires truth, desires knowledge, and that once the mind’s gaze is successfully fixed upon the truth, it will not fail to choose accordingly. The role of education is thus to prepare the body (individual, social, and politic) to perceive and to receive truth. In this sense, it operates on the same principle as Owenism.<sup>677</sup> Nevertheless, the key difference from Owenism is in Radicalism’s insistence that the path to rationality lies with ‘*self-formation*’, as stated at the top of the quote. Political rights and the *a priori* exercise of freedom and choice are more important to the attainment of rationality than education from above.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have traced the Politically Radical conception of alienation. Like the Owenite and ‘improving’ conceptions, this one was also grounded in a relationship to truth and in the idea that one is alienated when one is cut off from a universal truth. However, unlike the other two conceptions, here it is the truth of political knowledge that one needed to connect with in order to attain happiness and rationality. Furthermore, while both the Owenite and the ‘improving’ formulations held that alienation and ignorance resulted from a misalignment between conduct and nature, and that exploitation and misery were merely the result of error, here we find the formulation that misery was the result of oppression

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<sup>677</sup> Note, however, that the emphasis is on ‘self-reformation’, self-education rather than character-formation from above, doled out by a paternalistic and all-knowing architect. This is a different kind of independence.

and that ignorance is deliberately imposed and reinforced by the ruling classes in order to retain their power and wealth. Here, the key to transformation is not through top-down teaching, nor through the positing of business-knowledge as a guide for conduct. Instead, it is through bottom-up organisation and the pursuit of political knowledge. While Owenites believed that individuals needed to be fully-trained before being entrusted with the responsibility of self-governance, Radicals demanded the franchise because they believed that people are intrinsically ready to decide for themselves, and that the only way to flourish, to develop the faculties and their judgment, was by exercising their *a priori* freedom without constraint. This was guaranteed by two principles: one, that people have an innate desire for independence which is always seeking freedom from oppression. Second, that people have an innate desire for knowledge, which is always seeking the truth and which is guided by a universal Will to Truth. Both desires would find their goals – truth and liberty – once the deliberate obfuscation by the ruling classes has been removed. Here, then, we find a similar fantasy of clarity, unity, and transparency (as well as the self-transparency of the subject) to the one found in Owenism and in the ‘improving’ strain of co-operation.

## Conclusion

### Review of the Research Questions

In the introduction to this thesis I argued that while most historians of the Co-operative Movement have framed it as a response to the economic and social crises of the Industrial Revolution, the Movement's significance and essence cannot be understood without interrogating the Movement's stated aim of forming a 'Co-operative character'. I subsequently set out the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** What exactly is meant by 'Co-operative character'?
- **RQ2:** How has the Movement gone about forming this character?
- **RQ3:** Has the Movement's understanding of 'character' and of its own mission changed over time? If so, how?
- **RQ4:** What are some of the possible reasons behind the Movement's declining emphasis on social transformation and its transition to a consumer movement?

I showed that the early Movement's preoccupation with the character of the lower classes in fact belied a deeper anxiety around a crisis of truth. In doing so I provided a new and original framework through which to research the Movement. Thus framed, I was able to demonstrate that the Movement – and especially its Owenite strands – in fact constituted a project to re-establish the ontological and epistemological foundations of morality. That is to say, Owenite theory consisted of various attempts to tether moral conduct to a fixed source of truth. This development gives rise to a specific way of theorising alienation as separation from truth. This theory of alienation was largely refracted through the language of character: broadly speaking, Co-operators considered the Individual System to produce irrational character in people as it ran counter to the principles of nature. Conversely, they viewed Co-operation as a means of producing a rational character (variably defined across the Movement's different strands).

I argue that this conception of alienation can be found throughout the Movement, albeit with each strand producing its own analysis of the precise nature and causes of the crisis of truth and of alienation. I further argued that as I was inquiring into the Movement's relationship to truth, this required a different methodological approach to the ones

employed in previous studies of the Movement. I therefore employed a more archaeological approach in order to delineate the ontological and epistemological assumptions that structure the Movement's thinking. Thus, in chapters 1-4, I delineated the contours of the onto-epistemic horizon within which the movement emerged by exploring a variety of articulations of character, rationality and agency expressed across a mixture of fields in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, not in order to find Owenism's direct antecedents, but rather to identify some of the shared axiomatic assumptions that delimited the broad 'science of character-formation' to which Owenism belonged. I showed that this 'science of character-formation' was expressing a new conception of the self, one in which the individual is made up of drives, instincts, desires and inclinations that behave in accordance with natural laws. In this new conceptualisation of agency, moral conduct was being refashioned as a question of rationality and approached as a scientific problem, rather than merely a moral one. This lay the groundwork for analysing the practices and statements of the Co-operative Movement in a similar manner in order to extrapolate the onto-epistemic assumptions that structured its thought.

The research approach I have just described helped me to answer RQ1 and RQ2. Regarding RQ1 ("What exactly is meant by 'Co-operative Character'?"), I was able to show that the ontology of self contained in the 'science of character-formation' gave the Movement a framework through which to articulate the notion of a Co-operative Character. This character could be defined in the following manner:

- A Co-operative character's constitutive elements were arranged around the social instincts rather than around self-interest.
- A Co-operative character understood its own happiness as bound up with that of humanity as a whole.
- Its faculties were developed to such an extent that it was capable of independent learning.
- Its understanding was such that the Will always chose rationally, thus consistently leading to happiness.

With regards RQ2 ("How has the Movement gone about forming this character?"), I demonstrated, through an examination of the theories and practices of the Co-operative

Movement, how the Social System and Co-operative pedagogy were intended to regulate the self's constitutive elements in such a way as to produce a Co-operative, rational character, as per the definition given above. Most fundamentally, however, character denoted a particular relationship to truth in which one's character was more or less rational depending on its given orientation towards truth. In the Owenite sense, this was primarily a question of clarity and unity: one's character was rational when they had a clear and accurate view of reality, while alienation was caused by holding erroneous ideas that regulated one's conduct counter to the laws of nature. As such, creating a Co-operative character required one to regulate the self's constitutive elements in accordance with the laws of nature.

In chapters 5, 6, 8 and 12 I demonstrated that Owenites approached the crisis of truth as a primarily epistemological problem. I argue that they were driven by a deep anxiety regarding the historical contingency laid bare before them by the "Death of God". Without an authoritative God – without a fixed moral foundation – it was clearly feared that virtuous conduct could not be justified. Owenites thus turned to empirical science to resolve the problem of moral inconsistency. They viewed morality as an aspect of human nature, and human nature as obeying the same laws as the rest of the natural world. Consequently, they viewed morality as a matter of 'knowing' – of *factual knowledge*. Their empiricism postulated an epistemological framework grounded in a dichotomy between 'imagination' and 'representation', which sought to establish clarity and transparency between the subject and objective reality in order to allow the subject to sort through true and false information. One simply needed to ascertain the *correct* way to behave by inferring the laws of nature empirically. The crux of Owenite pedagogy, therefore, was to develop the individual's faculties and train them to use their senses correctly in order to be able to carry out their empirical inquiries independently.

I showed that the Movement also consisted of other strands besides Owenism, and that these had their own analyses of the crisis of truth and of alienation, as well as a different approach to character-formation. I largely grouped these together under the label Self-Help Co-operation, which I argued could be roughly divided into 'Improving' and 'Politically Radical' Self-Help. Although these strands developed different analyses of the causes of

alienation, they all shared similar ontological and epistemological assumptions. Primarily, much like Owenism, they conceived of alienation as rooted in a separation from truth. Precisely what constituted truth or 'useful knowledge', however, differed from strand to strand. For example, all Co-operators broadly held the desires of esteem and of knowledge to be the primary motives to action. However, Owenites contended that these desires needed to be regulated through a tightly controlled top-down pedagogy. On the other hand, I showed that most within the Self-Help strands of the movement held that the desire of independence was as important as the other innate desires, and that alienation stemmed from this desire becoming atrophied through dependence. To them, the only way to help people flourish and become rational was by helping them to cultivate habits of self-help and encouraging them to exercise their innate desire of independence. As such, this strand's formulation of alienation and rationality posited 'nature' – and specifically human nature – as a source of truth, much like Owenism, but it had a different formulation of the precise configuration of the self, placing the desire of independence at the centre of the self's constitutive elements. Thus, under this formulation, dependence – and indeed top-down instruction – is alienating, while being entrusted with responsibility is key to the flourishing of the faculties and the formation of a rational, harmonious character. As I've shown, however, there was a further schism within the Self-Help strand between the Improving and Politically Radical Co-operators. While Improvers ostensibly viewed independence as an *a priori* condition of healthy character-development, they nevertheless sought to delimit the contours of this independence, insisting that business acumen constituted the most 'practical' type of knowledge, while 'political knowledge' bred factionalism and resentment. Politically Radical Co-operators, on the other hand, insisted that the only way to improve their condition was by attaining political rights, which required 'political knowledge'. These Co-operators, as I have shown, were not uninterested in questions of human nature. Indeed, many of them were admirers of Owen and openly declared their intellectual debt to him. But they nevertheless believed that Owen's nature-based pedagogy required a foundation of political rights and knowledge for it to be effective.

## **The Movement and Meaning-Formation**

I argue that the crisis of truth implies, in fact, a crisis of meaning and of purpose (the two being inextricably bound). Although the term ‘meaning’ is not explicitly referenced in early Co-operative writing, the power of each strand resided in the fact that it provided people with a framework through which to make sense of their suffering and of events around them, as well as a roadmap out of their sense of alienation and towards happiness.

Owenism provided people with a systemic explanation for society’s ills, which helped one make sense of the callousness surrounding them as well as giving them faith in society’s inevitable transformation into a New Moral World. Similarly, the Improving Self-Help account of human nature, and the examples of so-called self-made individuals provided by the likes of Smiles and Craik in their books, provided people with the belief that they could improve their lot by their own exertions, and outlined the character traits and habits required for self-improvement, such as thrift, perseverance, attention, time-management, and so on. Finally, the Politically Radical strand likewise provided a framework, one that explained one’s suffering in terms of oppression by the upper classes. It also provided a solution: the pursuit of political knowledge and political rights. Furthermore, its rootedness in the ontological principle of the Will to Truth further supplied individuals with the belief in the eventual triumph of truth and justice.

## **The Movement Present and Future**

Regarding RQ3 (“Has the Movement’s understanding of ‘character’ and of its own mission changed over time? If so, how?”) and RQ4 (“What are some of the possible reasons behind the Movement’s declining emphasis on social transformation and its transition to a consumer movement?”), I found that there was a prominent critical element at the core of the early Movement, especially within Owenite and Politically Radical Co-operative circles. This critical bent was facilitated by Owenism’s analysis of immiseration, exploitation and inequality as systemic issues rather than standalone phenomena. This was undoubtedly decisive in emboldening Owenites to reject some of the core tenets of organised religion, the institution of marriage, and the sanctity of the nuclear family. Most noticeably of all, Owenites rejected capitalism and competition out of hand. And yet, today’s Movement generally does not display a similar criticality concerning the tenets of capitalism, with many



Co-operators accepting capitalism as inevitable and even natural, and viewing co-operatives as mere moralising agents whose function is to countervail some of capitalism's more rapacious tendencies. Why might this be the case? I would like to propose a number of possible explanations emerging from this thesis, as well as outline a number of potential research avenues to pursue in future.

One possible reason might be the neutralising elements contained in the Movement from its very inception. First, there is the fact that the Movement's more dominant voices tended to hail from the middle and upper classes. These individuals tended to see co-operative societies as a means of civilising the lower classes and converting them from resentful would-be revolutionaries to level-headed capitalists. Furthermore, every strand of the Movement was grounded in an ontological commitment to the world as governed by a Will to Truth. Among Owenites, this rationalist principle, while inspiring, also functioned as a neutralising force, promising an inevitable transition to a moral world and discouraging any political or violent agitation. I further showed that the Will to Truth was operant even among the more politically Radical elements of the Movement, meaning that very few political Radicals actually sought to change the entire system, but rather merely believed that the extension of the franchise would eventually result in the expression of a general will and the attainment of justice.

The fixation on rights often features in analysis of working-class movements as a sign of "appropriation" by the logic of liberalism. While there is much to say about this kind of analysis, I would like to propose a new analysis of the Movement, arguing that the loss of its critical edge may stem from its being fundamentally nihilistic, in a Nietzschean sense. Nietzsche's criticism of socialism notwithstanding, Nietzsche's and Owen's critiques of modern European society actually had some things in common. Both, for example, challenged dominant definitions of 'usefulness' and sought to put forward a vision of humanity that did not reduce 'happiness' and 'usefulness' to mere moneymaking<sup>678</sup>. Nietzsche, however, would have viewed Owenism's proposed remedies as deleterious at best. To begin with, he opposed extending education to the wider population, a principle he regarded as going against nature, "thoroughly artificial, and [responsible for] the most fatal

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<sup>678</sup> See in particular Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* and *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*.

weaknesses of the present day..."<sup>679</sup> More fundamentally still, as I have already demonstrated in Part II, Nietzsche would have regarded the utilitarian and mechanistic Owenite conception of agency as nihilistic. It reduced human agency to mere choice-making, with choices – including ones of a moral nature – being either right or wrong, natural or artificial. Furthermore, this model of rational agency depends on a commitment to the idea of the world as Will to Truth and posits that rationality requires complete transparency – both between the subject and the external world, and between the subject and its own machinations. This assumes that such transparency is possible at all, and that the subject will always choose rationally and virtuously given an undistorted perception of reality. Thus, Owenite character-formation sought to produce independent empirical investigators who could extrapolate the laws of nature and amend their conduct accordingly. One problem with such a formulation is that it reduces human agency to the mere discovery of what already *is*, and leaves no space for an account of how the new might be formed, nor of whether it is possible for anything truly new to be formed at all. After all, the Owenite conception of rationality is entirely ahistorical – nothing is either new or old, because human nature is fixed and universal. A Nietzschean critique, on the other hand, would posit that the essence of human agency entails meaning-creation rather than rational choice. In the rationalist conception of agency, alienation is cast as mere irrationality, the making of poor choices resulting from a misguided choice-making mechanism. A Nietzschean conception of alienation, however, might define alienation as stemming from the loss of one's ability to form meaning. Although I did not have the time to develop this point in depth in this thesis, I wonder whether this nihilism – the loss of our meaning-forming capacity – provides at least a partial explanation for the Movement's defaulting to the logic of capitalism: Without the ability to articulate a grand vision for humanity, perhaps every social movement is bound to end up accepting moneymaking as the only practical and non-ideological human activity. I would like to propose this hypothesis as a potential direction for future Co-operative research. Can Co-operation learn from, and further develop, a Nietzschean philosophy of truth that posits our meaning-forming capacities at the heart of human nature? What would a Co-operative theory of meaning-formation look

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<sup>679</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Anti-Education: On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*. Translated by Damion Searls. New York: New York Review Books, 2016, 34.

like? Could it develop a theory of meaning-formation as a collective and *co-operative* activity?

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## Appendix I: Figures

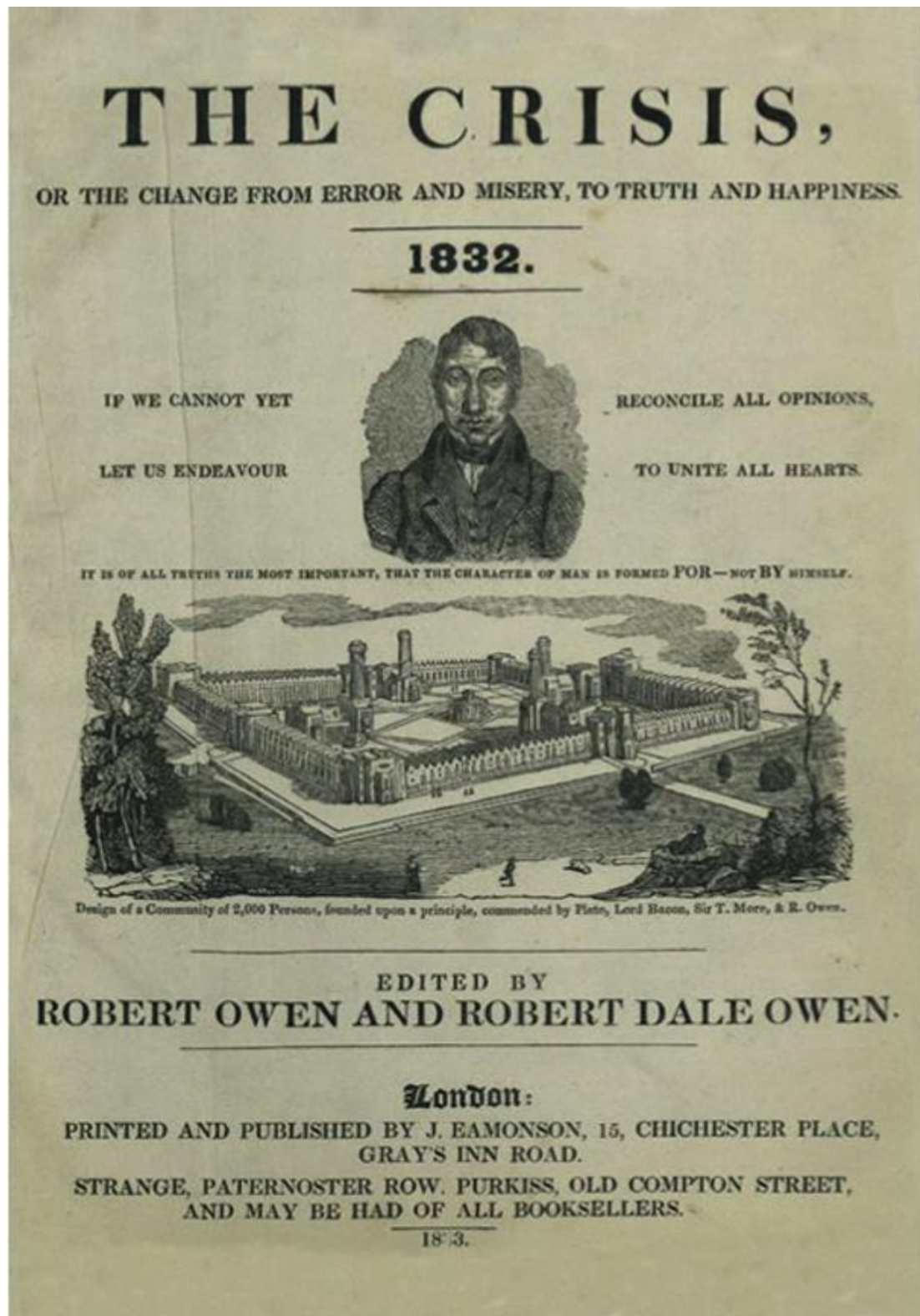


Figure 1

MAY, 1896



ELECTROZONE is a wonderful liquid disinfectant invaluable in cases of SMALLPOX, DIPHTHERIA, and INFLUENZA. It is a patent process, consisting of the electrolysis—or special treatment by electric current—of sea-water.

NO HOME SHOULD BE WITHOUT IT.

Figure 2



Carrying the Fragrance of the Plantation . . .

# SWEET CAPORAL CIGARETTES

BERRY FELLOW TOBACCO PLANT

The Tobacco used in the Manu-  
facture of this cigarette is  
of Imported American Cigar-  
ettes is grown in the world's  
finest plantations. The Cigar-  
ettes are covered with the finest  
and purest tissue, and unite  
the greatest fragrance with  
ABSOLUTE PURITY. Sold in  
Packets only.

Now Reduced to  
**A POPULAR PRICE.**

SMALLPOX, DIPHTHERIA, SCARLET FEVER.

Keep the health and avoid all these diseases by using

**Horlick's Malted Milk**  
FOR YOUNG AND OLD.

A glass taken just before going to bed in the morning and before retiring  
to sleep is the best safeguard possible when suffering from these  
diseases.

**Horlick's Malted Milk**

is Nature's own nutriment, containing all the vital food principles in  
their proper proportion, and is a powerful and most palatable tonic.

**Horlick's Malted Milk**

THE GREAT HEALING NUTRIENT.

It is recommended for Infants, Children, Invalids, Men, and all whose  
daily existence is a struggle with weakness and morbid states.

FEVER, RHEUMATISM, with neural and nervous debility, will be cured  
by its application.

HORLICK AND CO., 34, FARRINGTON-ROAD, LONDON, E.C.

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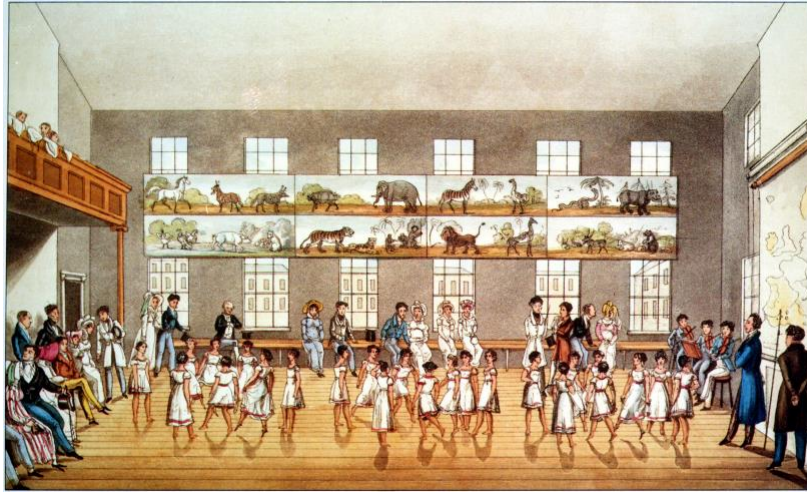
BILIOUS & NERVOUS DISORDERS,  
Sick Headache, Constipation, Wind,  
Weak Stomach, Impaired Digestion,  
Disordered Liver & Female Affections.

Prepared only by the Proprietor, Thomas Beecham, Esq., London, in  
2000, in 100, 50, 25, and 10, each with 25, 50, 100, and 200 Pills.

## BORD'S PIANOS

ON HIRE, with 50 per cent. discount for cash, or 25 per month (interest  
paid, 10s. 6d. per month) on the Three Year Term. — Little Free of C.  
BORD and Co., 41, and 43, Southampton-row, London, W.C. Terms on exchange.

Figure 3



*Figure 4: Illustration of the original classroom at New Lanark*



Figure 5: Replica of Chatherine Vale Whitwell's 'Stream of Time'



*Figure 6: Replica of Whitwell's animal paintings*





*Figure 7: Replica of Whitwell's world map*





Figure 8: Replica of Whitwell's animal illustrations