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A Welcome Attack on American Values : How the Doctrines of Robert Owen Attracted American Society

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Abstract

In November 1824, Robert Owen came to the United States with the intention of putting his beliefs about society into practice. He had done so once before in the “new system of society” that he had created at New Lanark (the site of a textile factory he owned), in which he singled out individualism, competition and selfishness as the sources of social evil. The prescribed cure was an improvement of their environment and circumstances, which Owen believed to be the true determiners of a person’s character. The experiment was considered a great success, and served as an international model. This perception of man’s character as being determined by his cultural surroundings was shared by many Americans of the time, as evidenced by the popularity of various reform movements. With the intention of recreating a society like the one he had engineered at New Lanark, Owen purchased the Indiana village of Harmonie from the religious sect (the Rappites) that inhabited it, rechristened it New Harmony, and issued an open invitation to all people to join his communitarian experiment. The excitement that ensued around the country was almost palpable as Owen embarked on a massive promotional tour for his venture: he met privately with former presidents, he recruited new members in Philadelphia, and he lectured in front of numerous statesmen, proclaiming the glories of his “new system of society.”

A Welcome Attack on American Values:

How the Doctrines of Robert Owen Attracted American Society

ELIZABETH JOHNSON

*Ah, soon will come the glorious day,
Inscribed on Mercy's brow,
When truth shall rend the veil away
That blinds the nations now.*

*When earth no more in anxious fear
And misery shall sigh;
And pain shall cease, and every tear
Be wiped from every eye.*

*The race of man shall wisdom learn,
And error cease to reign:
The charms of innocence return,
And all be new again.*

*The fount of life shall then be quaffed
In peace by all that come:
And every wind that blows shall waft
Some wandering mortal home.*

~Owenite poem, 1826

In 1705, a Dutch preacher named Johannes Aalstius made a dire prediction about the future of the human race: if the views of enlightenment philosophers were to gain popular acceptance, he averred, “mankind would in the future concern itself only with individual happiness in this life.”¹ A little more than one hundred years later, American society was arguably illustrating the veracity of Aalstius’s argument as an increasingly greater emphasis was placed on improving the quality of life of the general citizenry through the efforts of various reform movements. No longer was man born into a life of inevitable, and indeed, necessary

¹ Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.

misery and pain; on the contrary, the American of the early 19th century was aglow with the promise of his inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness. Surely Aalstius was turning in his grave.

This was the setting in which the social philosophy of British manufacturer Robert Owen first appeared. Owen, who had experienced great success in the textile business in his native Scotland, advanced a doctrine of social responsibility in manufacturing that attempted to cure the ills of society created by an impoverished working class. Americans, who desperately feared recreating the same problems in their own society that had driven them to leave Europe and fight for independence, initially received his ideas with enthusiasm. What Americans would come to find, however, was that many of the ideas Owen espoused were ones they could not bring themselves to support.

A speech delivered at New Harmony, Indiana by Owen on July 4th, 1826, entitled “A Declaration of Mental Independence,” provides an excellent example of how some of Owen’s beliefs were out of step with fundamental American values. He attacked concepts so ingrained into the American way of life that even in the modern era, an attack on them would be seen as nothing less than an attack on our entire system of society:

I now DECLARE, to you and to the world, that Man, up to this hour, has been, in all parts of the earth, a slave to a TRINITY of the most monstrous evils that could be combined to inflict mental and physical evil upon his whole race.

I refer to PRIVATE, OR INDIVIDUAL PROPERTY — ABSURD AND IRRATIONAL SYSTEMS OF RELIGION — and MARRIAGE, FOUNDED ON INDIVIDUAL PROPERTY COMBINED WITH SOME ONE OF THESE IRRATIONAL SYSTEMS OF RELIGION.²

The “monstrous evils” of private property, religion and marriage as a combination of the previous two were certainly not among the things the vast majority of reformers wished to change in their quest to make the United States a shining example of the perfectibility of man,

² Robert Owen, “A Declaration of Mental Independence,” reproduced in *The New Harmony Gazette*, 12 July 1826, Vol. 1 Issue 42.

society and the world. And yet, at least initially, Owen's doctrines inspired excitement rather than outrage. In spite of his radicalism, Americans accepted or at least were willing to listen to Owen's ideas because of his own charisma, their search for a way to avoid the perceived failures of their European counterparts, and the pervasiveness of reform ideals in that period in American history. Ultimately, Owen was met with general approval because of the ways his beliefs were in sync with larger movements taking place in the United States in that era.

In November 1824, Robert Owen came to the United States with the intention of putting his beliefs about society into practice. He had done so once before in the "new system of society" that he had created at New Lanark (the site of a textile factory he owned), in which he singled out individualism, competition and selfishness as the sources of social evil. The prescribed cure was an improvement of their environment and circumstances, which Owen believed to be the true determiners of a person's character. The experiment was considered a great success, and served as an international model.³ This perception of man's character as being determined by his cultural surroundings was shared by many Americans of the time, as evidenced by the popularity of various reform movements. With the intention of recreating a society like the one he had engineered at New Lanark, Owen purchased the Indiana village of Harmonie from the religious sect (the Rappites) that inhabited it, rechristened it New Harmony, and issued an open invitation to all people to join his communitarian experiment. The excitement that ensued around the country was almost palpable as Owen embarked on a massive promotional tour for his venture: he met privately with former presidents, he recruited new

³ Daniel Feller, *The Jacksonian Promise: America, 1815-1840* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 10, 77-78.

members in Philadelphia, and he lectured in front of numerous statesmen, proclaiming the glories of his “new system of society.”⁴

Although he would not arrive until years later, it was as early as 1817 when Robert Owen’s ideas began circulating in the United States with the publication of some of his writings in the Philadelphia *Aurora*. In 1822, the New York Society for Promoting Communities published excerpts from Owen’s *New View of Society* and William Maclure formed an Owenite club in Philadelphia one year later.⁵ Owen, therefore, was by no means unknown in intellectual circles in American society. Although British critiques of his doctrines had managed to cross the Atlantic, they succeeded only in making Owen a “vaguely familiar, but not a controversial, figure.”⁶ Owen himself did not take much personal interest in America until 1824. It was in this year that he was visited at New Lanark by William Maclure, who was “wild with excitement” over his educational reforms, and Richard Flower, an agent of the Rappite community of Harmonie, Indiana who had come to offer him the opportunity to purchase the village. The proposed cost of \$135,000 would equal only one fourth of the sum that would have been necessary to purchase a comparable village in England.⁷ The offer proved too tempting to resist, and so that same year, Owen departed for the United States “to sow the seeds of [the rational system] in that new fertile soil...the cradle of the future liberty of the human race.”⁸ Upon his arrival, he undertook the aforementioned publicity tour and was met with great enthusiasm along the way.

⁴ Ibid., 78.

⁵ Robert P. Sutton, *Communal Utopias and the American Experience: Secular Communities, 1824-2000* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 4.

⁶ Arthur Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias: The Sectarian Origins and the Owenite Phase of Communitarian Socialism in America, 1663-1829* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), 96. Although this is an excellent secondary source, it was most beneficial to me for its inclusion of excerpts from newspaper articles about Owen.

⁷ Sutton, *Communal Utopias*, 5.

⁸ Robert Owen, *Life of Robert Owen*, vol. 1 (London: Effingham Wilson, 1857), 154.

An article printed in the *New York American* newspaper summarized Owen's plans for his communitarian experiment and arrived at the balanced conclusion that "whatever may be thought of their practicability...the praise of disinterested and persevering philanthropy [sic] will certainly not be denied Mr. Owen."⁹ The *National Intelligencer* was less cautious with its praise:

It is fortunate for the United States, that this gentleman has come among us with the express purpose of establishing an institution, in which all that has been here noticed, and more than what is here possible to be described, are meant to be carried into execution.¹⁰

One of the greatest testaments to Owen's influence and acceptance in the United States was the fact that he was granted the use of the House of Representatives in Washington D.C. to deliver two speeches, the first on February 25, 1825, and the second on March 7 of the same year. Both speeches lasted three hours, and the audience listened with great attention and respect.¹¹ In these addresses, Owen summarized his career and his experiences at New Lanark, where he insisted that the citizens had been hopeless and demoralized until his system transformed them. Now, he proclaimed, he was prepared to likewise transform the village of New Harmony, and issued an open invitation to all Americans to join him in Indiana.¹² Owen also met with three former presidents: Adams, Jefferson, and Madison, all of whom, according to Owen, acknowledged that his principles were correct. Notably, though, neither they nor anyone else at the time bothered to ask him exactly how he planned to put his principles into action¹³; this was fortunate for Owen (but perhaps unfortunate for the future of New Harmony), for even he himself did not have a clear and detailed plan laid out.

⁹ Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*, 107.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹¹ Sataty, Nechama, "Utopian Visions and their Critics: Press Reactions to American Utopias in the Antebellum Era" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1986).

¹² Robert Owen, *Two Discourses on a New System of Society: As Delivered in the Hall of Representatives at Washington* (London: Whiting & Branston, 1825)

¹³ Margaret Cole, *Robert Owen of New Lanark* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1969), 148.

In spite of Owen's unsettling religious convictions and his inability to provide a specific plan for putting his philosophy into action at New Harmony, many of his principles resonated with some of the major concerns of American society. His previously stated opinions on the manufacturing system and how to best remedy the many problems it had created were of particular interest to many Americans, who were seeking a way to avoid the creation of an impoverished, destitute working class. The Lowell mill community was a perfect example of this. Francis Cabot Lowell, on a factory tour in Britain from 1810-1812, had seen the squalor of the labor force there, and his goal became to "create an American textile industry without creating an American working class."¹⁴ The Lowell firms mainly employed young single women who were helping support their families before they married, but not all textile firms operated this way. A report on child labor in Massachusetts in 1825 listed the child labor statistics in several towns in the state; in fully seventeen of the thirty-four towns in the report, children worked twelve hour days, and many of the towns reported that children had either no access to schools or were able to attend for less than three months out of the year.¹⁵ Even twenty years later, manufacturers still presented a problem for society, which was addressed by Theodore Parker in his sermon on "The Bad Merchant." What influence on society, queried Parker, did these merchants have? His answer: "To taint and corrupt it all round. He contaminates trade; corrupt [sic] politics, making abusive laws, not asking for justice but only dividends."¹⁶ Clearly, the negative effects of the burgeoning capitalist economy were far from unnoticed.

¹⁴ Feller, *Jacksonian Promise*, 120.

¹⁵ "Child Labor in Massachusetts, 1825," reproduced in Louis L. Snyder, ed., *The Era of Reform* (Malabar, FL: Robert E. Krieger Publishing, 1982), 103-104.

¹⁶ Theodore Parker: "The Bad Merchant," 1846, reproduced in Snyder, ed., *Era of Reform*, 101.

To Americans, who were willing to try almost anything to avert the predicted social chaos that would result from an abusive manufacturing industry, the doctrines of Robert Owen seemed particularly appealing. In 1813, in his native Britain, Owen published the first in a series of essays that would eventually be compiled into one of his most renowned works, entitled *A New View of Society: Essays on the Formation of Character*. In it he laid forth his plan, designed as an answer to the vast social and economic questions raised by the Industrial Revolution. By putting his philosophy into practice at the textile factory of New Lanark, of which he was part owner, he gave a thoroughly convincing demonstration of what is today known as the economy of high wages. Essentially, he demonstrated that manufacturers need not abuse employees through over-work and under-payment in order to turn a profit, which was truly indispensable knowledge for the future of worldwide labor movements.¹⁷ Owen himself recognized the role of the burgeoning manufacturing system in creating some of the problems that his society faced. In his “Observations on the Effect of the Manufacturing System,” he acknowledged that “The general diffusion of manufacturers throughout a country...will produce the most lamentable and permanent evils, unless its tendency is counteracted by legislative interference and direction,”¹⁸ and in “An Address to the Working Classes,” decried the fact that most wealthy manufacturers “take pride...[in depriving] the great mass of mankind of the most essential benefits that belong to human nature.”¹⁹ Owen and American society were in general agreement that these problems needed to be remedied.

Another area in which Owen appealed to the American reform mentality was education. The United States were seemingly in overall agreement regarding the need for a change in the

¹⁷ G.D.H. Cole, foreword to *A New View of Society, etc.*, by Robert Owen (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1927), viii-x.

¹⁸ Owen, *Life*, 121.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 152.

public education system. The main goal was to create a public school system that all children, or at least all white male children, would have access to. Education was particularly seen as a guarantor of equality. In 1830, the Workingmen's Party of New York asserted in a report that "pupils must learn to consider themselves as fellow-citizens, as equals. Respect ought to be paid...to virtue, and to talent; but it ought not to be paid to riches, or withheld from poverty."²⁰ Horace Mann, a true innovator in the American educational system, wrote in 1848 that "Education...is a great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery."²¹ Although maintaining social equality was of great importance to early nineteenth century Americans, the main dilemma that held up the process of developing a widely accessible public education system was a question of whose financial responsibility it would be, the states' or the federal government's. Few people were in favor of raising taxes in order to fund such programs. However, despite the unsettled question of funding, Americans remained interested in new educational techniques. Prior to Owen's arrival in America, Englishman John Lancaster came to the country to garner support for his new instructional methods. In the Lancastrian system, older students helped drill younger pupils, thereby allowing many more students to be instructed by a single teacher. The method was widely praised and adopted by many schools.²²

While Owen, like Lancaster, did not provide a solution to the question of funding, his ideas were also met with great interest. He believed strongly in the importance of education in the proper formation of a child. In his *New View of Society*, Owen presented his interpretation of the individual character of children and their relationship to society, asserting that "children are, without exception, passive and wonderfully contrived compounds; which...may be formed

²⁰ "A system of Republican Education," reproduced in Walter Edward Hugins, *The Reform Impulse 1825-1850* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), 136.

²¹ "Horace Mann on Education and National Welfare," reproduced in Snyder, ed., *Era of Reform*, 134.

²² Feller, *Jacksonian Promise*, 150.

collectively to have any human character.”²³ He also allowed revolutionary educational theories to be implemented at New Harmony, based on the expertise of Swiss reformer Johann Pestalozzi. The curriculum of New Harmony schools was driven by the concept of “useful knowledge.” Children learned through experimentation and at their own pace; “memorization, instruction in dead languages, and punishment were forsworn.”²⁴

William Maclure, one of the two men who helped convince Owen to come to America, was also a strong advocate of the Pestalozzian system and played an integral role in its implementation in New Harmony. Maclure revealed his own frustration with his “sterile” classical education in a letter to his friend, Pestalozzian teacher Madame Fretageot. He decried the fact that he had been “launched into the world as ignorant as a pig of anything useful, not having occasion to practice anything I had learned, except reading[,] writing and counting.”²⁵ Fretageot herself would move to New Harmony, and had nothing but praise for the engineer of it all, gushing that they “had the delightful pleasure of hearing the best man explaining a plan which is the best calculated for human happiness.” “The children’s education,” Fretageot explained, “is what will occupy the most, because from them depends the future prosperity not only of the community but of all.”²⁶ This optimistic and modern approach toward education, shared by Maclure, Fretageot, and Owen himself, was very much in keeping with the American vision of education as the great guarantor of democracy.

Perhaps even more than his commitment to manufacturing and educational reform, Owen’s commitment to the belief that man was capable of change and that society played a critical role in determining his character was what led Americans to embrace his philosophy in

²³ Robert Owen, *A New View of Society, etc.* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1927), 23.

²⁴ Feller, *Jacksonian Promise*, 150-151.

²⁵ Cole, *Robert Owen*, 145.

²⁶ Arthur E. Bestor, *Education and Reform at New Harmony: Correspondence of William Maclure and Marie Duclos Fretageot, 1820-1833* (New York: Sentry Press, 1973), 317.

spite of his somewhat radical beliefs. He argued in *A New View of Society* that in the cases of those who commit crimes,

the fault is obviously not in the individual, but the defects proceed from the system in which the individual was trained. Withdraw from those circumstances...and crime will not be created.²⁷

This theme was also repeated in Owen's February 1825 address to Congress, when he asserted that "external circumstances may be so formed as to have an overwhelming and irresistible over every infant...either for good or for evil."²⁸

The conception of human character as dependent upon one's environment was also a key element in many of the reform movements taking place in America at the time. A particularly relevant example of such a movement can be seen in the new commitment to prison reform following the Revolutionary War. In stark contrast to the filthy, overcrowded prisons of the eighteenth century, the new prisons of the nineteenth century featured separate cells for each convict in the hope that solitary confinement would prevent the spread of vice. Unfortunately, it more often led to insanity, but the new system was truly designed to "remedy the evils of society," focusing on the rehabilitation of inmates for society instead of their isolation from it. An English visitor to an American prison noted that convicts were learning "'habits of industry,' temperance, obedience, 'order, cleanliness, and punctuality, all new and agreeable to him.'"²⁹ The optimism about the changeability of humanity behind the reform of the American prison system paralleled Owen's "new view of society." In this context, his philosophy does not seem so out of place in American society.

In fact, to some extent, Owenite philosophy even paralleled millennial expectations and the wave of "religious virtuosos" whose beliefs were sweeping the nation at the same time. This

²⁷ Owen, *A New View*, 34.

²⁸ Owen, *Discourses*, 18.

²⁹ Feller, *Jacksonian Promise*, 141.

is somewhat paradoxical when one considers the fact that Owen was quite strongly opposed to organized religion, one of what he referred to as the three monstrous evils that plagued society and kept man in a state of misery. However, upon closer examination of the beliefs and tactics of the religious virtuosos in comparison with Owen, it is easy to draw a connection between the two despite the obvious fact that Owen would have wanted no part of such a religious movement. In *Cosmos Crumbling*, Robert Abzug describes the new Protestant virtuosos of early nineteenth century America as being bent on clarifying the ways in which earthly order was connected to the cosmos and God's will.³⁰ By achieving a near perfect representation on earth of God's heavenly order, such virtuosos as Lyman Beecher and Charles Finney hoped to set a shining example for the rest of the world, but more importantly, to prepare all of society for the second coming of Christ.

Although at first glance this does not seem to have much in common with Owen's philosophy, a careful analysis of Owenite works reveals that to some extent, these millennial ideas were common to both groups. An Owenite poem printed in the *New Harmony Gazette* in 1826 looked forward to the day when

*Truth shall rend the veil away that blinds the nations now...the race of man shall wisdom learn,
and error cease to reign: the charms of innocence return, And all be new again.*³¹

Such rhetoric reveals millennial expectations similar to those of the religious virtuosos. Of course, this Owenite poem lacks direct references to God, but the same sentiment that inspired men like Beecher and Finney can be found here. The language of the poem demonstrates that its

³⁰ Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1994), 4.

³¹ "Owenite Poem, 1826," reproduced in Thomas Clinton Pears, Jr., ed., *New Harmony: An Adventure in Happiness (Papers of Thomas and Sarah Pears)* (New York: Sentry Press, 1973), 94. A full text of the poem is available on the title page of this essay.

author fully expected the problems of the world to be solved if only everyone would follow the guidelines of Owen's philosophy.

Another example of this mentality comes from Owen himself: in his first address to Congress in 1825, Owen stressed to both houses of Congress and President John Quincy Adams that the time had come for the world to decide whether the masses should remain in ignorance, poverty, and disunion, and offered his new system of society as the way to avert these evils.³² The perception that simply following a prescribed set of rules could correct many of the world's problems was one shared by many religious virtuosos, and especially by reformers such as Benjamin Rush, Sylvester Graham, and other body reformers. To a great extent, the only true difference between the Owenite expectations and those of the religious virtuosos was the overriding reason for bringing about such a change: Owen and his followers wanted simply to ensure the happiness of all people, whereas the religious virtuosos were more concerned with saving their souls.

It is also important to note, in examining why Owen was accepted into American society, that the communitarian ideal was not new to the country. As early as 1680, religious sects "retreated to the wilderness" to form their own utopian communities.³³ Religious communitarian movements in America prior to Owen's communitarian experiment at New Harmony included sects such as the Shakers and the Harmony Society, or the Rappites. Owen himself mentioned the Shakers in his autobiography, a community he looked to as an example of how communitarian life could work. In an 1817 paper he composed on the Shakers, Owen clearly supported the social and economic aspects of their existence, but ultimately condemned them for

³² Owen, *Discourses*, 3.

³³ Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 3.

their religious prejudices and avoidance of secular education.³⁴ But “even by a very inferior community life,” he later acknowledged optimistically, “wealth could so easily be created for all, that...all the members obtained abundance without money and without price, and were removed from the fear of want.”³⁵

The village of New Harmony itself had been constructed around religious communitarian ideals even before Owen thought of purchasing it. The Rappites, the founders of the village, were a group whose actions were dictated entirely by their religion. To prepare for the second coming of Christ, which they expected to happen any day, the Rappites placed their own self-interest and ambition second to the good of the community and making preparations for the Millennium.³⁶ In her sociological interpretation of the communitarian movement, Rosabeth Kanter explains that the basic underlying belief at the root of utopian communities is an idealization of social life, which holds that it is possible for people to live together in harmony, brotherhood, and peace. In the utopian ideology, it is societies, not individual people, that are the cause of human problems. People are inherently good, but have been corrupted by society.³⁷ Kanter argues that this principle applies even to religious utopian communes; by that assessment, the belief in the perfectibility of humanity had been planted in American soil over a century before Robert Owen was even born. His vision was unique, to be sure, but not unprecedented in the United States.

It is undoubtedly true that much of the initial excitement over and acceptance of Robert Owen and his ideas was due to the way in which his philosophy paralleled key elements of the reform movements sweeping the nation in the 1820s. However, the charisma of Owen himself

³⁴ Owen, *Life*, 147-154.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 242.

³⁶ Don Blair, *The New Harmony Story* (New Harmony, IN: New Harmony Publications Committee, 1959),

7.

³⁷ Kanter, *Commitment and Community*, 32-33.

also played an important role in the way the public perceived him. Thousands flocked to join the New Harmony settlement after Owen, perhaps unwisely, issued an invitation to all people to join the community; he naively believed that it was the wish of all people to follow his ideals, so he was not at all discriminating in selecting members. This resulted in an influx of followers who came to New Harmony in search of an easy and secure life, with no effort required.³⁸ The success of the community was handicapped by this undesirable group, but Owen's presence in New Harmony always seemed to have a buoying effect. Unfortunately, he spent little time at the site of his envisioned utopia, instead spending the majority of his time promoting the community in America and abroad.³⁹ It is remarkable that Owen was able to convince so many to uproot their lives to join his village, especially without ever having provided a clear outline of a plan for how his principles would be implemented, but it is a true testament to his persuasive abilities. Even those who were cognizant of the shaky foundation upon which New Harmony would be built were drawn in by the man himself:

‘Always,’ said Harriet Martineau, ‘always a gentle bore in regard to his dogmas and his expectations; always palpably right in his descriptions of human misery; always thinking he had proved a thing when he had only asserted it in the force of his own conviction; and always really meaning something more rational than he had actually expressed.’⁴⁰

Martineau obviously had her doubts about Owen, but was still willing to assume that he really meant something more rational than what he had actually said! Madame Fretageot, a New Harmony resident, told her friend William Maclure that even when questioned on the controversial topic of religion, Owen “was quite candid in his answer and yet did not hurt the feeling of the most bigoted.”⁴¹ Clearly, Owen was gifted with the ability to convince his listeners of his good intentions, even if they were left in doubt of his rationale.

³⁸ Blair, *New Harmony*, 11.

³⁹ Feller, *Jacksonian Promise*, 80.

⁴⁰ Cole, *Robert Owen*, 152.

⁴¹ Bestor, *Education and Reform*, 317.

Although Owen apparently managed to present his religious beliefs to a New Harmony resident without giving offence, he would not have such luck in the rest of the world. In his Independence Day address in 1826, he asserted that “all religions have proved themselves to be Superstitions—by destroying the judgement [sic]...of man,”⁴² and years prior, had identified religion as one of the most important “obstacles” to overcome in the pursuit of improving the lives of working class citizens.⁴³

Unsurprisingly, Owen’s opinions on religion were met with passionate criticism in his homeland of Britain. However, he was not simply criticized for arguing that religion was a source of evil in society rather than improvement. One of the main arguments against Owen made by British preachers and religious pamphleteers was that his very belief that man was entitled to happiness in his earthly life was sacrilegious in itself. In his sermon refuting the doctrines of Robert Owen, the Reverend G. Redford of Worcester reminded his congregation that the Bible said “the ground is cursed for the sake of man.” If man was not inherently sinful, he asked his listeners, “why make him toil and eat in sorrow?”⁴⁴ In this view, unhappiness was a punishment from God, and to question it or actively seek happiness was utterly audacious. A similar manner of thinking was demonstrated by an unnamed London pamphleteer who set out to expose the “atrocious and horrible doctrines” of Owen and claimed to reveal him for what he truly was: not exactly an atheist, perhaps, but “he regarded man as being formed for happiness in this life, which is almost as bad.” Although Owen did not deny the existence of an incomprehensible being known as God, according to the writer, he imagined that

⁴² Owen, “Mental Independence,” *New Harmony Gazette*.

⁴³ Owen, *Life*, 66-67.

⁴⁴ Reverend G. Redford, “A Sermon in Refutation of the Doctrines of Robert Owen” (sermon preached at the Angel Street Church in Worcester on 15 December 1833), University of Illinois library, Champaign.

the cultivation of perfect charity, and unbounded kindness towards all their fellow-men, is of more real utility, and of more intrinsic worth, than all the speculative creeds of the religious world.⁴⁵

Despite the controversy over the question of man's entitlement to happiness on earth that was taking place on British soil, this question had apparently already been settled in the United States, where founding father Thomas Jefferson had identified "the pursuit of happiness" as one of three inalienable rights given to humanity by God. This is not to say that Owen would not become a controversial religious figure in America as well; he was of course controversial, but the criticism that he was upsetting cosmic order because man was not destined to be happy figured less significantly in anti-Owen arguments.

The concepts of freedom of religion and the separation of church and state were very appealing to Americans, again due in large part to their horror at the religious wars of the past centuries that took place in Europe. However, what freedom of religion meant to Owen was very different from what it meant to most Americans at that time. Public opinion began to turn against Owen in November 1825, almost exactly one year after he had arrived in the United States to a glorious fanfare. Newspapers began to publish his controversial views on religion, especially focusing on an "Open Letter" that Owen had composed on his trans-Atlantic journey to Philadelphia in the fall of 1825, in which he claimed that all religions indoctrinated bigotry, hypocrisy, and hatred, and were therefore wrong. The revelations that he did not believe in original sin, or even the Bible as the word of God, were strong blows to his reputation.⁴⁶ In reality, Owen had never been particularly careful to conceal his convictions about religion. When Owen addressed Congress in February 1825, he made many references to religion and his opinions on the topic and concluded that the traditional "old system" of religion was "in all

⁴⁵ "A Full and Complete Exposure of the Atrocious and Horrible Doctrines of the Owenites," reproduced in Kenneth E. Carpenter, ed., *The Rational System: Seven Pamphlets, 1837-1841* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 3-4.

⁴⁶ Sutton, *Communal Utopias*, 7.

countries, universally opposed to facts, and thereby rendered more or less irrational.” Moreover, he asserted that genuine religion never did and never would consist in “unmeaning phrases, forms, and ceremonies.”⁴⁷ In his native Britain, as previously discussed, his “heathenish” beliefs were well known, but they had not received much attention before in the United States. When Owen’s more polarizing statements about religion finally did begin receiving publicity in America, it did nothing to improve public perception of the floundering community.

Even worse for the future of New Harmony, though, was its citizens’ own discontent with the religious diversity there and with its founder’s open criticism of revealed doctrine. Relatives of a prominent New Harmony citizen, Sarah Pears (the daughter of a minister), wrote to her in late 1825 and early 1826 expressing their disappointment with Owen’s religious beliefs. Despite reports that Owen was “the most amiable and benevolent of men, as far as these qualities can exist without Christianity,” Pears’ aunt could not help but exclaim: “alas! for him and all who think as he does!”⁴⁸ Her uncle also confided to her that “I wish most devoutly...that he [Owen] had not discarded the sanctions of revelation.” “What any member of the Society could lose by adopting a rational system of religion such as I conceive the Christian...to be,” he admitted, “I am at a loss to determine.”⁴⁹ By January of 1826, eastern newspapers were denouncing Owen as an “infidel charlatan”; the New York Advertiser mocked him, commenting that any man “who can invent anything more absurd...more irreligious in its principles...must be possessed of no ordinary capacity.”⁵⁰ Even Owen’s charisma could do little to overcome the prejudice that was mounting against him.

⁴⁷ Owen, *Discourses*, 18.

⁴⁸ Pears, Jr., ed., *Papers of Thomas and Sarah Pears*, 48.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

⁵⁰ Sutton, *Communal Utopias*, 7.

Although widespread criticism of Owen's religious beliefs, or, perhaps, the lack thereof, did not begin in earnest until late 1825, when New Harmony had been in existence for one year, denunciations began in denominational journals almost immediately after his arrival in 1824. One of the first was that of Dr. Ashbel Green, a former president of Princeton, who attended one of Owen's lectures in Philadelphia on November 22, and printed a critical assessment of him in the *Christian Advocate*. Green decided that Owen's plans "appeared not only exceedingly visionary, but in some particulars dangerous" because he "denied the doctrine of original sin, and seemed to us to build his system on the old and baseless foundation of the Perfectionists."⁵¹ Even in the face of criticism from both the religious and secular presses, however, Owen was still treated with overall respect by the American public: the 1829 series of debates between Owen and Alexander Campbell serve as interesting evidence of this. Owen set out to convince his audience of more than one thousand people that all religions had been founded on nothing more than the ignorance of mankind, but failed utterly. At the end of the debates, when Campbell asked all present "who believe in the Christian religion or who feel so much interest in it, as to wish to see it pervade the world" to stand up, all but three did so.⁵² However, it is important to note that although the audience did not agree with Owen, they still were willing to listen to his argument. This tolerance of new religious ideas, even ones that were unpopular, is one of the reasons why the New Harmony experiment was able to take place at all.

Over time, it became increasingly evident that the combination of the lack of planning that went into New Harmony, the presence of people who were not interested in the effort required for the success of a communitarian movement, and the controversy surrounding its founder rendered the future success of the village as envisioned by Owen impossible. Sarah

⁵¹ Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*, 125.

⁵² Feller, *Jacksonian Promise*, 104-105.

Pears confided to her aunt in 1826 that “most people seem pretty well persuaded that they will never come to any good, and I have no doubt that two thirds of the Society would go if they had the means.”⁵³ The community hung on for nearly a year more, but in March of 1827, Owen’s sons, Robert Dale and William, officially announced the end of New Harmony in the *New Harmony Gazette*.⁵⁴ Owen, disillusioned, returned to Britain, but his sons stayed in the United States and eventually became leaders in various other reform movements, especially education reform.

Thirty-one years after the New Harmony experiment was abandoned, Robert Owen passed away at the age of eighty-eight. His obituary printed in the *New York Times* remembered him as a man who “proposed to reconstruct society, projected a variety of measures for the elevation of mankind, and labored diligently in his vocation of philanthropist,” working hard to familiarize the world with his “peculiar doctrines.” In reference to his time in America and his New Harmony project, the *Times* had this to say:

While here he received marked attention from the social reformers, and omitted no opportunity to bring his theories prominently before the public. Mr. Owen was very enthusiastic in his devotion to schemes of social reorganization; was an avowed free-thinker; had a faculty of fixing the attention of his hearers when he spoke; wrote with facility; was a man of impressive presence, and had many warm admirers.⁵⁵

It was a summary of his life that quite accurately reflected the time he spent in the United States.

In spite of the fact that some of Owen’s beliefs, particularly regarding religion, flew directly in the face of traditional American values, he was nonetheless welcomed into American society. In their search for ways to avoid making the same mistakes that has been made by many European countries and their commitment to reform ideology, Americans were willing to be receptive to almost any system that offered a solution. The fact that Robert Owen’s “new view

⁵³ Pears, Jr., *Papers*, 81.

⁵⁴ Blair, *New Harmony*, 51.

⁵⁵ “Obituary.” *New York Times*, 30 November 1858

of society” promised to prevent the creation of an impoverished and destitute working class and focused on education for all people was a major draw for many reform-minded people, and Owen’s own charisma only contributed to the popularity of his ideas. Moreover, the precedent set by other communitarian societies that had existed in North America made his idea appear to be less of a radical venture than it might have been perceived as in other places. Ultimately his religious views were what received the most criticism from religious and secular presses in the United States, but even so, people were still willing to listen to what Owen had to say, even if they strongly disagreed. Although ultimately Owen’s plans did not succeed, the very fact that they were accepted by many Americans as an exciting prospect and a viable option is a true testament to the spirit of the times.