

NEW HARMONY: OWEN CONDUCTS AN EXPERIMENT

From HEAVEN ON EARTH by Joshua Murvachik
Preface and Prologue follow this text

MARCH 5, 1825, WAS JOHN QUINCY ADAMS' first full day as President. Nonetheless, he found time to walk over to the Hall of Representatives after dinner to take in a discourse by Robert Owen, the renowned British industrialist and visionary who had come to America to launch an experiment in replacing the existing "individual selfish system" with a "united social" one.

Owen's fame, flowing from the innovative and humane manner in which he governed the employees of his cotton mill in Scotland, had preceded him across the Atlantic. He was received by the panoply of the New World's leading citizens, culminating in an address to Congress on February 25. His audience included not only senators and representatives, but also members of the cabinet, justices of the Supreme Court, and outgoing President Monroe. President-elect Adams had attended part of it. Owen had informed this luminous gathering of "changes at hand greater than all the changes which have hitherto occurred in the affairs of mankind."¹ It was hard to do justice to so momentous a topic even in the several hours that Owen lectured that day, so it was agreed to reconvene on March 5 in order that he might complete the picture.

Something compelled a postponement, but no one bothered to inform the new President, so Adams' walk down to Congress was for naught. Nonetheless, he returned when the postponement date arrived to hear the final three-hour

installment of Owen's disquisition, parts of which, the President noted dryly in his diary, Owen seemed to read from a book.

Owen announced that he had purchased a large, developed tract on the banks of the Wabash in Indiana on which he would organize a model community to prove to the world the benefits of the "social system" and thereby usher in the millennium:

[H]ere it is, in the heart of the United States . . . that that power which directs and governs the universe and every action of man, has arranged circumstances . . . to permit me to commence a new empire of peace and good will to man, founded on other principles, and leading to other practices than those of the past or present, and which principles, in due season, and in the allotted time, will lead to that state of virtue, intelligence, enjoyment, and happiness, in practice, which has been foretold by the sages of past times, would, at some distant period become the lot of the human race!²

Hearing of these plans from his exile in Brussels, Babeuf's surviving co-conspirator, Buonarroti, noted with satisfaction that "what the Democrats of the Year IV were unable to execute in France, a generous man has recently essayed, by other means, to put in practice in . . . America . . . communities founded on the principles of equal distribution of enjoyments and of labours."³

Whereas "Babeuf's doctrine" had no name, Owen and his followers coined the term "socialism." Buonarroti was right that the two had the same end in mind, but the difference in approach was of the utmost consequence. Babeuf had conceived of no way to collectivize property except through the power of the state. Owen recognized that there was no need to seize power. Endowed with some land and capital, socialists could form their own communities. They need not wait for the government to be overthrown before enjoying a life of brotherhood and sharing. And the demonstration they would offer of the happiness and efficacy of collective living would hasten the spread of their philosophy.

This approach was later dismissed by Marx and Engels as "utopian," a label under which they grouped Owen with such other radical thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as Count Saint Simon and Charles Fourier. Nonetheless, Engels acknowledged Owen's unparalleled influence: "Every social movement, every real advance in England on behalf of the workers links itself on to the name of Robert Owen."⁴

Of the “utopians,” Owen was by far the most respected, as was evidenced by the eagerness of the American government’s leaders to give him a thorough hearing. He was also the clearest in his socialism. Saint Simon and Fourier both accepted private property and neither was much interested in democracy, but Owen was a firm advocate of democracy and collective ownership. In addition he was more determined to put his ideas into practice. Within a few months of Owen’s announcement before Congress of his planned settlement, some eight to nine hundred Americans rushed to join him on the Wabash.

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For Robert Owen, pioneering was second nature. After just two years of education, from age five to seven, followed by two years spent assisting with the instruction of younger students, he declared himself ready to strike out on his own. But his parents made him wait until he turned ten, when they took him to Shrewsbury, the stop nearest their home of Newtown in Wales, and put him on board a coach for London with the goodly sum of forty shillings in his pocket.

Owen’s family had not left him entirely to his own devices. A grown brother gave him temporary lodging in London, and his father corresponded with acquaintances to help Robert find his first job, as an assistant to a clothing retailer in Stamford. Compensated at first only by room and board, he proved a bright and diligent employee and climbed rapidly in his position while accumulating knowledge of textiles. Still in his teens he joined with a partner on his first business venture, manufacturing “mules,” a recently invented machine for spinning cotton. After a few months he traded his share in the partnership for a few of the machines and launched his own shop.

Soon his little business was netting six pounds a week, but he gave it up when Peter Drinkwater, the owner of a spinning mill with five hundred employees, agreed to pay him an equivalent amount to become its manager. With a salary of three hundred pounds the first year and substantial increments to follow, Owen boasted that he was “now placed in an independent position for one not yet twenty years of age.”⁵ The accomplishment was all the more remarkable for the fact that, as he later recalled: “I was yet but an ill-educated awkward youth, strongly sensitive to my defects of education, speaking ungrammatically, a kind of Welsh English, in consequence of the imperfect language spoken in Newtown.”

Unschoolled he may have been, but the young Owen had a flair for business. He secured his employer’s permission to stamp his own name on the spools

of yarn, and within a few years Owen's reputation in the field was established. Leaving Drinkwater, he readily found partners to provide the capital for a major new firm under his management, the Chorlton Twist Company.

This business took him to Scotland, where he met Anne Caroline Dale, daughter of the mill owner David Dale. Owen was so shy with women that Anne had to send a friend to let it slip that she would welcome his courtship. He took up the invitation with alacrity, but her father stood as an obstacle. As a stratagem in this courtship, Owen offered to purchase Dale's mills on the Clyde in New Lanark. Owen bought the mills, softened the father, won the girl. His chivalry was doubly rewarded, for the mills at New Lanark brought him fame and fortune.

It was while still managing Drinkwater's establishment that Owen first "noticed the great attention given to the dead machinery, and the neglect and disregard of the living machinery," that is, the employees. Gradually the plan formed in his mind to run New Lanark in a very different way. It was to be, he said, "the most important experiment for the happiness of the human race that had yet been instituted."⁶

When Owen took possession of New Lanark, the mills employed some 1,700 to 1,800 employees. Of these, 400 to 500 were pauper children indentured as wards to industrialists who provided food, clothing and shelter in exchange for the right to work them however they wished. The ages of these charges were recorded as between seven and twelve, but Owen said he discovered that they were in fact between five and ten. Of the workforce as a whole, said Owen, "the great majority were idle, intemperate, dishonest" and "theft was very general, and was carried on to an enormous and ruinous extent."⁷

Owen probably exaggerated the ills to dramatize his own subsequent accomplishment, but there is little dispute that he rendered the place far happier than he found it.⁸ He did not raise wages, but he did marginally reduce the hours of work, and he brought order and cleanliness to the mill.⁹

Since New Lanark was a company village, Owen oversaw not only the workplace but all aspects of his employees' surroundings. He provided a better store at which they could make their purchases, and added a second room to each of their dwellings. Before Owen's arrival many of the villagers allowed dunghills to accumulate in front of their doors. Owen had these carried off to a nearby farm and forbade their renewal. Thereafter, as son Robert Dale Owen recalls, "the streets, daily swept at the expense of the company, were kept

scrupulously clean; and its tidy appearance in every respect was the admiration of strangers.”¹⁰

Owen endeavored to uplift his employees without resorting to the two most familiar methods of his time, religious instruction and harsh punishments. For improving their performance in the workplace, Owen invented a device he called the “silent monitor,” which, he explained,

consisted for a four-sided piece of wood, about two inches long and one broad, each side coloured—one side black, another blue, the third yellow, and the fourth white. . . . One of these was suspended in a conspicuous place near to each of the persons employed, and the colour at the front told the conduct of the individual during the preceding day, to four degrees of comparison. Bad, denoted by black . . . indifferent by blue . . . good by yellow . . . and excellent by white. . . . I could thus see at a glance, as I passed through each room of every factory or mill, how each one had behaved during the preceding day.¹¹

To reinforce the evaluations, Owen had his managers maintain “books of character” in which was entered each employee’s daily score, on a scale of 1 to 4. Owen said he found it “gratifying to observe the new spirit created” by this system. As time passed, the predominant color he observed as he wended his way among the work stations shifted from darkest to lightest. “Never perhaps in the history of the human race,” he ventured, “has so simple a device created in so short a period so much order, virtue, goodness, and happiness.”¹² How his employees felt about this method of daily judgment we do not know.

He also looked to their behavior outside the mill. Although he felt compelled to tolerate the consumption of alcohol, he refused to abide drunkenness. As Robert Dale tells us, “He had village watchmen, who patrolled the streets at night, and who were instructed to take down the name of every man found drunk. The inebriate was fined so much for the first offence, a larger sum for the second, the fines being deducted from his wages, and the third offence resulted in dismissal, sometimes postponed if he showed sincere repentance.”¹³

Nor did Owen’s effort to reform his employees stop at their doors; he undertook as well to police the cleanliness of their abodes. He devised a method for this that might be seen as an early antecedent of the “block committees” that Fidel Castro created to police daily life in Cuba. An anonymous pamphlet written by one of the villagers relates that Owen

advised that they should appoint a committee from amongst themselves, every week, to inspect the houses in the village and to insert in a book . . . a faithful report of the state of each house as they might happen to find it. This recommendation was upon the whole pretty cordially acceded to by the male part of the population, but the rage and opposition it met with from the women, I well remember, was unbounded. They almost unanimously resolved to meet the visitants with locked doors. They bestowed upon them the appellation of "Bug Hunters," and Mr. Owen escaped not without his share of the general odium.¹⁴

In addition to the good order and cleanliness and the general spirit of benevolence that Owen brought to New Lanark, what made the place famous was its educational system. Owen devoted great sums to his schools, often quarreling with his partners over the expenditure. He provided education up to the age of twelve, although book-learning began only in the last of these years since Owen believed that the natural environment was a great source of instruction. The principal subjects were singing, dancing and military drill, for both sexes, which he said were the disciplines most conducive to good character.

Education until age twelve was a lot longer than was commonly available, particularly to a mill worker's child, but the most remarkable aspect of Owen's system was the age at which the schooling began—at one year old or as soon as the children were able to walk.

The cardinal rule of this early childhood education was kindness, although not praise. Owen hit on the theory, still in vogue in some schools of child-rearing, that it was best to avoid all praise or blame. (How he reconciled this with his cherished "silent monitors" which passed judgment on his employees every moment of their working lives was never explained.) The students were not to be struck nor spoken to harshly, and they were constantly exhorted to show kindness to their fellows.

The fame of Owen's schools spread far and wide, and many illustrious guests came to observe them. Grand Duke Nicholas of Russia, who later became tsar, was so impressed that he offered to provide land for two million Englishmen to emigrate to Russia under Owen's governance, in order to alleviate the overpopulation of Britain about which Doctor Malthus was warning. Among the others who made the pilgrimage to New Lanark were Princes John and Maximilian of Austria; Peter, Regent of Oldenburg; and, by Owen's estimate, most of the nobility of England, as well as "Foreign Ambassadors,—many

bishops—and clergy innumerable . . . learned men of all professions from all countries,—and wealthy travellers . . . of every description.”¹⁵ In all, the guest book at New Lanark showed some twenty thousand entries over the ten years before Owen first left for America. Numerous other dignitaries received Owen and embraced his work, including the Duke of Kent, father of queen-to-be Victoria.

For the boy who had left Wales atop a coach with forty shillings in his pocket, the attention he was receiving from the high and mighty was quite heady. He estimated that he had become “the most popular individual in the civilised world,” and his already robust confidence in his ideas grew all the stronger.¹⁶

Owen never departed from graciousness in an argument; but neither did he ever pay the least attention to what anyone who disagreed with him said. Robert Dale Owen recollected that his father “usually glanced over books, without mastering them; often dismissing them with some such curt remark as that ‘the radical errors shared by all men made books of comparatively little value.’”¹⁷ His friend, the writer Harriet Martineau, put it best: “Robert Owen is not the man to think differently of a book for having read it.”¹⁸

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Owen’s socialist philosophy was derived from two fundamental pillars of his thought. The first was that no human “is responsible for his will and his own actions.” This is because “his whole character—physical, mental, and moral—is formed independently of himself.”¹⁹ Each person is entirely the product of his “constitution or organization at birth, and of the effects of external circumstances upon it from birth to death.”²⁰ Therefore, it is futile to call individuals to account for their behavior. Instead, society should recognize its power to shape each of its members into a person of high character.

The second pillar, a natural complement to the first, was a fierce opposition to religion. “There is no sacrifice . . . which I . . . would not have . . . willingly and joyously made to terminate the existence of religion on earth,” he declared.²¹ After reflecting in childhood upon the great diversity of faiths, Owen concluded that all were “based on the same absurd imagination, that each [person] . . . determined his own thoughts, will, and action,—and was responsible for them to God and his fellowmen.”²² This faulty notion, he said, turned man into “a weak, imbecile animal; a furious bigot and fanatic; or a miserable hypocrite.”²³

Owen’s socialist economics crystallized in the course of a national inquiry into the issue of poverty. The revolution in the technology of the textile industry

had displaced many workers, giving rise, from 1811 to 1816, to "Luddite" riots in numerous cities in which labor-saving machinery was smashed. The contraction of demand at the end of the Napoleonic wars drove a growing number of indigents into the public workhouses and prompted a parliamentary inquiry into the Poor Laws. This inspired Owen to develop a plan for "villages of unity and cooperation."

Owen designed the villages down to the last detail, and even had a scale model built. Each village was to accommodate twelve hundred people. The buildings were to be arranged in the shape of a parallelogram, three sides of which would consist of flats, with one room allocated to each married couple and their very young children. The fourth side would comprise dormitories for all children over the age of three, and an infirmary and a guest house. In the middle would be schools and dining halls and kitchens, since all meals would be taken communally. Gardens and playgrounds would surround these central buildings. Owen even prescribed the dress of the villagers, favoring loose garments like Roman togas or Scottish kilts.

These villages would take "men, women, and children, of all ages, capacities, and dispositions; most of them very ignorant; many with bad and vicious habits,"²⁴ and transform them into superior beings. They would live together in the closest harmony—"intimately acquainted with each other's inmost thoughts"—and would produce enough to provide for themselves abundantly.²⁵

The committee of inquiry was unresponsive to Owen's proposal. As G. D. H. Cole put it, they "had asked for a mouse; they received a mountain."²⁶ But while Parliament failed to embrace the idea, Owen became ever more convinced that villages of unity and cooperation held the key not merely to alleviating the plight of the poor, but to the reconstitution of the entire society.

As Owen developed the idea, he envisioned a life of virtually effortless abundance. Villagers would proceed from birth through three five-year stages of education, preparing them to become at age fifteen "men and women of a new race, physically, intellectually and morally; beings far superior to any yet known to have lived upon the earth."²⁷ At this point they would embark upon "a most interesting period of human life," namely the finding of mates. The stress would have been removed from this portentous choice by communal upbringing in which none would have any secrets and all would "naturally make known . . . their undisguised thoughts and feelings."²⁸ Thus it would easily be "ascertained who by nature . . . have the strongest attachment for each other; and these will naturally unite."

Courtship thus dispensed with, the fifteen- to twenty-year-old group would have ample time for their large responsibilities. They would perform virtually all of society's productive work and also would see to the education of those just younger than themselves. Owen estimated that, with the assistance of the younger children, this age cohort would be able to "produce a surplus of all the wealth which a rational and superior race of beings can require."²⁹ However, to guarantee against any possible shortfall, those from age twenty to twenty-five would work as directors and supervisors. Beyond this age, "none need be required to produce or instruct, except for their own pleasure and gratification."³⁰ This would still leave the work of storage and distribution, which would be the task of those from the age of twenty-five to thirty, although it would require no more than two hours a day of their time.

When people were raised in these villages, the human race would change—and not only it. "There will be no cruelty in man's nature," not even toward other creatures, and as a result, "the animal creation will also become different in character." More species would be domesticated, and those that could not be tamed would be "destroyed," so that "a terrestrial paradise be formed, in which harmony will pervade all that will exist upon earth."³¹

These musings about transforming wildlife were fanciful, not to mention ecologically unsound, but they were not unique to Owen. In fact, Charles Fourier went further, predicting the domestication of lions and whales whose strength would free humans from most work. Such fantasies about new beasts did not outlive the utopians, but the idea of a new man, dimly foreseen by Babeuf but sketched sharply by Owen, became the enduring centerpiece of the socialist vision. Socialism promised a surfeit of material goods and brotherly harmony among people, but its ultimate reward would be the transformation of humans, if not into gods, then into supermen able to transcend the pains and limits of life as it had been known.

Owen was confident that the great transition to the "terrestrial paradise" could be achieved by the force of example. Once one or several villages of unity and cooperation would have the chance to demonstrate their success, other people would be eager to emulate them. Even the most privileged of the existing society would come to see that their present enjoyments were nothing in comparison with what this new way of living offered. "Your titles, your rank, shall not be meddled with," he wrote. "You may shut yourselves up in your parks as usual; but when you peep over the walls, you will find us all so happy in our villages of co-operation, that you will of your own accord throw

away privileges that only interfere with your own happiness.”³² Owen stressed that he sought no violent confrontation, and that he was not out to destroy the existing system, merely to render it obsolete. He likened the process to that by which rail travel had supplanted old gravel roads. More and more villages would be “made ready to receive willing passengers from the old road . . . until the new shall gradually . . . become sufficient to accommodate . . . the population of the world.”³³

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The prompt for launching such a village—as opposed to mere theorizing about it—came to Owen quite fortuitously. In the United States, a sect of German Lutheran schismatics, led by the charismatic preacher George Rapp, lived communally since emigrating from Württemberg in 1804. The Harmony Society, as they fashioned themselves, had built a flourishing community in Butler County, Pennsylvania. In 1814, something inspired Rapp to move his flock to Indiana and found a new community, which was christened “Harmonie.”³⁴ Here, in addition to bringing forth verdant fields, orchards and vineyards on the four thousand acres of rich soil they cleared, they built highly remunerative industries which produced an array of textiles, clothing, shoes, lumber, bricks, cooking oil, candles, glue, beer and even whiskey. The latter they did not touch themselves, but marketed, along with about twenty other products, as far away as New Orleans. Then, after ten years, prompted by some new revelation, Rapp determined to move his band once again. He commissioned Richard Flower, a leader of an English settlement across the Wabash in Albion, Illinois, to find a buyer for Harmonie.

Flower traveled to New Lanark and approached Owen, who had already heard of Harmonie and had even corresponded with Rapp about communal living. “The success of the Rappites . . . wonderfully encouraged my father,” wrote Robert Dale Owen. “He felt sure that he could be far more successful than they.”³⁵ Owen could see at once that the site of Harmonie would be an excellent setting for launching a model village of unity and cooperation. And doing it on American soil offered social and political benefits, as well. Robert Dale recalled: “Here was a village ready built, a territory capable of supporting tens of thousands in a country where the expression of thought was free, and where the people were unsophisticated.”³⁶ The time had come for the great experiment.

Thus Owen and his son William, then twenty-two, set sail for the new world. After landing in New York, they traveled upstate to visit a Shaker colony.

William recorded in his diary a conversation the Owens had with some of the Shakers: "When my father talked of establishing communities, they asked: of Quakers? or Jews? or what? and shook their heads when they found it was for all sects."³⁷ But Owen was confident in his plans. William continued: "one asked if we would like to remain with them. We said we would make some communities still better than theirs and that they would come to us."

Owen then lectured his way down the East Coast to Washington, where in addition to the two discourses delivered before Presidents Monroe and Adams and the other assembled leaders of the United States government, he met with a delegation of Choctaw and Chickasaw chiefs whom he found sympathetic to his vision. William recorded in his diary that "At the end of almost every sentence, my Father said they cried out 'say, sa' or 'na, na say sa,' which implied that they agreed and were pleased."³⁸ All in all, Owen's reception in America left him exultant. He wrote home to a friend:

The proceedings exceed the most sanguine anticipations that I had formed. The United States . . . have been prepared in the most remarkable manner for the new system. The principle of union & cooperation . . . is now universally admitted to be far superior to the individual selfish system. . . . In fact the whole of this country is ready to commence a new empire upon the principle of public property & to discard private property. . . . For years past every thing seems to have been preparing in an unaccountable & most remarkable manner for my arrival. This new colony will be filled up to its full number before the end of this [month or year?†] by useful & valuable families & individuals accustomed to the climate & habits of the country without one coming out from Europe. . . . Our operations will soon extend to the blacks, & the Indians who by singular circumstances have been prepared in a peculiar manner for the change which I propose.³⁹

The property transfer was completed. Rapp and his followers boarded a riverboat for their new settlement in Pennsylvania, which they called "Economy." Harmonie was rechristened "New Harmony," and it filled with Americans answering Owen's call. On April 27, 1825, he assembled the new arrivals for a welcoming speech. "I am come to this country, to introduce an entire new state of society," he said. "To change it from the ignorant, selfish system, to an

† Owen omitted a word here.

enlightened social system which shall gradually unite all interests into one, and remove all cause for contest between individuals.”⁴⁰ And he concluded solemnly: “I now live but to see this system fairly established in the world.”

Owen drafted a constitution for the Preliminary Society of New Harmony. He envisioned this as a three-year transitional phase to a fully cooperative and egalitarian community. For the short term, some elements of inequality would be allowed to endure. Despite his hopes for the blacks and Indians, the charter of the Preliminary Society said membership was open to all, “exclusive of persons of color.”

Within two months of greeting his new followers, Owen departed, entrusting command to his son William and a British disciple, Donald MacDonald. He had some business affairs to attend to in Scotland, but mostly he spent his time making speeches in America and England. Owen’s decision to leave his fledgling community at this time defies understanding. Not only were all of his hopes and visions invested in it, but also the preponderance of his fortune. The only conceivable explanation is that he was so certain of the validity of his theories that he had not entertained the possibility that the project might fail.

But if doubt never entered Owen’s mind, the same was by no means true for the son whom he left at the helm. William confided to his diary:

The enjoyment of a reformer, I should say, is much more in contemplation, than in reality. . . . Did I not expect that those who were brought up in a community . . . will enjoy more happiness than I anticipated for myself, and more than they can experience [who have been] brought up and liv[e] under the old mode of society, I should not be disposed to promote the formation of a society, as I at present am inclined to doubt whether the happiness of the present generation will be increased.⁴¹

William was tormented by the knowledge that his own feelings did not correspond with those appropriate for the social system, and he recorded his surprise at how difficult it was to “get over one’s old habits.” He wrote to his father in England about “how delighted I shall be, when we all meet here & again form a family circle. A Society Circle is, as yet a little too large for me.”⁴²

The village purchased from Rapp contained some 160 buildings, ranging from log cabins, which had been erected when the Rappites first settled Harmonie and which they were in the process of phasing out, to large frame and brick structures including dwellings, barns, granaries, factories, workshops,

a tavern and an immense church. However, since the Owenites outnumbered the Rappites by several hundred, William was at his wit's end finding sufficient sleeping quarters for all. Moreover, despite the surfeit of population, there was nonetheless a shortage of labor. This was felt most markedly in the colony's various industries, every one of which experienced a falloff in output and several of which ceased operation altogether.

Historian Arthur Bestor traces this collapse to a dearth of skilled workmen and supervisors, few of whom were attracted to New Harmony where their compensation would have been much less than in the surrounding economy.⁴³ In a letter home to one of his brothers, William bemoaned the lack of any "potter, ager, saddler, or good tinner" among the New Harmonians.⁴⁴ Owen did think to provide some differential material rewards, but only for the more highly educated professionals. Ironically, this was probably superfluous; for unlike the skilled workmen, many intellectuals were drawn to New Harmony by their interest in its philosophy.

Bestor's analysis may account for the atrophy of the colony's workshops, but it does not explain why the Owenites did not manage to plant sufficient crops that spring or summer on the vast fertile lands they had purchased or to adequately protect those they did plant. Of the several surviving accounts from within New Harmony, the letters of William Pelham, an elderly retiree, to his son constitute the only one that retained its hopefulness. He blamed the Rappites for the community's woes. "Vegetables of every kind are very scarce," he wrote, "for the old Harmonites left the garden fences in a wretched condition, and before they could be repaired by the newcomers the hogs and cows had materially injured the gardens." But it is hard to believe that the notoriously punctilious Rappites had in fact left the fences in disrepair, and it is impossible to understand why, if they had, the Owenites could not have made timely repairs.

Other accounts describe similar difficulties but do not join Pelham in pointing fingers outside the group. Paul Brown, who wrote a book about his disillusion with Owen, reports that "the gardens and fields were almost entirely neglected."⁴⁵ And Thomas Pears, another whose correspondence survives, wrote during the late summer: "The hogs have been our Lords and Masters this year in field and garden. We are now, as we have been, without vegetables except what we buy; and I believe that we shall go without potatoes, turnips, or cabbages this winter."⁴⁶

The corollary to the shortage of skilled hands was a surplus of unskilled or unbusy ones. Owen complained, "we have also been much puzzled to know what

to do with those who profess to do any thing or every thing, they are perfect drones."⁴⁷ The same observation was put more bluntly by an outsider, R. L. Baker, a Rappite who returned to New Harmony on business: "the streets are filled with idlers who all have something to do or to say, which one could do for ten."⁴⁸ Even the imperishably hopeful Pelham acknowledged in one letter that "there has been much irregularity of effort." This "irregularity" in turn led to bickering. Pears remarked that "instead of striving who should do most, the most industry was manifested in accusing others of doing little."⁴⁹ He added that this had given rise to what he called "the Reign of Reports."⁵⁰

In September, Pears wrote that "until lately our Committee gave up all idea of farming till Mr. Owen's return, except the sowing of fifty or sixty acres of winter barley, which they wisely concluded would be wanted for our beer the ensuing year."⁵¹ In apparent desperation, he and several other "agriculturalists" met and drafted a resolution calling on the committee "immediately to ascertain the situation of the land which is to receive the crops of winter grain," including "its location" and "whether it be subject at any time to inundation" and also to determine "what number of horses and oxen are in the possession of the Society" and "what number of wagons, tools, ploughs, harrows, axes, spades, etc. [are] now possessed by us." This is information any ordinary farmer would gather on day one, but in New Harmony, all the farmers could do was form a caucus. Pears reported that the resolution languished.⁵²

The prevailing inefficiency at New Harmony extended to its distribution system. Each member of the community had a passbook in which his hours of labor were credited and the supplies taken from the village store were debited. Apparently all consumables were supposed to be disbursed this way. "Even salads were deposited in the store, to be handed out—making ten thousand unnecessary steps, and causing them to come to the tables in a wilted deadened state," complained Brown.⁵³ The scene was vividly described by William Shephard, a neighbor who visited often while serving as an intermediary in some of the continuing financial transactions between Old and New Harmony:

The store is literally constantly thronged by . . . consumers with their little books. The storekeepers and clerks seem abundantly busy in attending them—and altho there is so many persons officiating behind the counters, it is frequently very difficult for country people to obtain attention—It has been remarked by many persons in my hearing that three *Dutch* storekeepers would do more business than them all and with far less confusion—It seems

to me an *expensive system*! plenty of storekeepers, clerks, committee men and rangers—few smiths, artizans [*sic*] & farmers!⁵⁴

Laggard in production, bureaucratic in distribution, New Harmony survived only because Owen subsidized it, pouring in some thirty thousand dollars those first months, in addition to the cost of his purchases from Rapp. Even this subsidy was not enough to raise the living standards above a spartan level. Brown complained that “a great part of the time the people were very much stinted in their allowances of coffee and tea, butter, milk, &c.”⁵⁵ And even the resolutely upbeat Pelham confessed that “our privations are sometimes such as to test the strength of our principles.”⁵⁶ In a letter to friends planning to join him at New Harmony, he urged them to bring items that were in short supply, including ham, despite complaints that the pigs had the run of the place.

Perhaps in consequence of this general feeling of want, or perhaps because of the character of some of the people drawn to New Harmony, “a pilfering disposition very much prevailed,” reported Brown. “Scarce a week passed but shirts, handkerchiefs, or stockings, were filched from . . . out of the laundries or yards of the boarding houses.”⁵⁷

The only things that seemed to be pursued with energy at New Harmony were meetings and entertainment.⁵⁸ One of the few instructions that Owen had given before his departure was that the community should convene three nights a week: once for general discussion, once for a musical recital, once for a ball. These occurred unfailingly, it seems, on Wednesday, Friday and Tuesday nights, and to them were added, according to Pears, parade and drill on Monday nights and “fire engine” and debates on Saturdays.

Despite these diversions, New Harmony was an uneasy place throughout 1825. Pelham remained confident that “the present inconveniences will gradually be supplanted,” but he also had to report that his two friends who had reached New Harmony after a journey of two weeks had decided one week later to return at once to Zanesville.⁵⁹ And Thomas Pears’ wife, Sarah, lamented: “If ever I should be fortunate enough to get into civilized society once more, I think I should never wish to leave it again.”⁶⁰

The young community pined for its founder. After two months in Scotland and England, Owen headed back to America accompanied by his oldest son, Robert Dale, who described himself as having exulted over the journey “as an Israelite may have exulted when Moses spoke to him of the Land of Promise.”⁶¹ Owen’s party also included an architect named Stedman Whitwell. Owen had

retained Whitwell to explain the six-by-six-foot scale model of the ideal cooperative village that he was bringing back with him. It is not easy to understand why Owen attached so much importance to this model when he had nearly a thousand followers living in a flesh-and-blood community patterned according to his social, if not his architectural, ideas. Soon after disembarking, he arranged for Whitwell to convey the thing to Washington, where President Adams allowed them to display it for some weeks in a White House anteroom.

Before returning to New Harmony, Owen traveled to Philadelphia to link up with William Maclure. A Scotsman who had settled in Philadelphia, Maclure was himself a wealthy reformer who had visited Owen's mills at New Lanark and had been powerfully impressed. He had agreed to join Owen in the New Harmony venture and to help finance it. Although Maclure supported Owen's socialist ideas, the goal dearest to his heart was educational reform. It was agreed that he would take charge of education at New Harmony, utilizing it to experiment with new methods. He gathered to himself several educators from Europe and also several scientists of distinction, which he himself was in the field of geology. The coterie included Thomas Say, sometimes called the father of American entomology, and two well-known Europeans, the Dutch geologist Gerard Troost and the French naturalist and illustrator Charles Alexandre Lesueur. So impressive were the group's scholarly credentials that the vessel which carried them to New Harmony was nicknamed the "boatload of knowledge."

Owen's arrival at New Harmony in January 1826 brought great rejoicing. The schoolchildren gathered to greet him and accompanied him to his quarters at the tavern.⁶² In contrast to the widespread sense of distress among the denizens, Owen declared himself mightily pleased with the progress of New Harmony in his absence. Within a week he announced his intention to dissolve the "Preliminary Society," then in only the ninth month of its intended three-year duration, and to replace it at once with a permanent society in which all lingering inequality of rewards would be done away with. It was to be "liberty, equality, and fraternity in downright earnest," wrote Robert Dale Owen.⁶³

For two weeks, New Harmony was alive with meetings and drafting sessions culminating on February 5 with the adoption of the constitution of the New Harmony Community of Equality. Its preamble echoed the Declaration of Independence: "When a number of the human family associate in principles which do not yet influence the rest of the world, a due regard to the opinions of others requires a public declaration of the object of their association, of their principles, and of their intentions."⁶⁴

Apparently, however, the constitution was not pleasing to everyone. Within days, one group, discontent with Owen's antireligious views, broke away and formed an independent community on land that Owen agreed to lease or sell to them. They called their community "Macluria," although Maclure himself was not among them, and he was no less a nonbeliever than Owen. In the main community, after two weeks the populace despaired that the new constitution sufficed to set them on a sound course, so the governing committee unanimously voted to give Owen dictatorial powers for a year. A month later, another split ensued and a third community was formed, taking the name "Feiba Peveli."⁶⁵

This peculiar name derived from an invention of the architect Stedman Whitwell. He found it confusing that so many places in America were named Washington, and troubling that the name of a place told nothing of its whereabouts. To remedy this, he devised a new system of geographic notation in which each degree of longitude or latitude received an alphabetic designation. Whitwell ingeniously assigned consonants and vowels in such a way as to assure that each place would be pronounceable. By his system London became "Lafa Vovutu," Pittsburgh "Otfu Veitoup," and the site of community number three at New Harmony came out as "Feiba Peveli." When challenged about the lack of euphony of his system, Whitwell responded that his place names were a breeze compared with the name of a nearby Indian chief, known as "Occoneocoglecocacachecodungo."

In the main community, Owen undertook a reorganization designed to elicit more work and responsibility from the members. The new constitution contained a provision reminiscent of Owen's "silent monitors" at New Lanark. A record was to be kept of "the Intendants opinion of the daily character of each person attached to their Occupation." Then, at public meetings each Sunday, Owen would read aloud the character ratings and the amount of work performed by each member of the society. By March the community's newspaper, the *Gazette*, was boasting that "by the indefatigable attention of Mr. Owen, a degree of order, of regularity, of system, has been introduced. . . . Our streets no longer present groups of idle talkers."⁶⁶ Spirits were brightened to the point that the weekly balls in April saw the introduction of an original cotillion, called the "New Social System."

Not all of Owen's initiatives succeeded. He banned liquor, but never succeeded in making the ban stick. Decades later one of the community members, using the pseudonym Squire B., recalled to an interviewer his own role in subverting this rule:

[Squire B.] informed us that he came from Illinois to New Harmony, and that a man in Illinois was "owing him," and asked him to take a barrel of whisky for the debt. He could not well get the money; so took the whisky. . . . Not long after, Mr. Owen found that the people still got whisky from some quarter, he could not tell where, though he did his best to find out. At last he suspected Squire B., and . . . accused him of it; on which Squire B. had to own that it was he who retailed the whisky. "It was taken for a debt," said he, "and what was I to do to get rid of it?" Mr. Owen turned round and in his simple manner said, "Ah, I see you do not understand the principles."⁶⁷

The schools, which functioned under Maclure's aegis, were also a source of mixed satisfaction. Some of the parents were unhappy with the forced separation from their children, and undoubtedly many of the children shared this feeling. I am aware of only one surviving memoir recounting childhood experience in the schools of New Harmony, that of Mrs. Sarah Cox Thrall, who recalled many decades later:

We had bread but once a week—on Saturdays. I thought if I ever got out, I would kill myself eating sugar and cake. We marched in military order. . . . We went to bed at sundown in little bunks suspended in rows by cords from the ceiling. Sometimes one of the children at the end of the row would swing back her cradle, and, when it collided on the return bound with the next bunk, it set the whole row bumping together. This was a favorite diversion, and caused the teachers much distress. . . . Children regularly in the boarding-school were not allowed to see their parents, except at rare intervals. I saw my father and mother twice in two years. We had a little song we used to sing:

Number 2 pigs locked up in a pen,
When they get out, it's now and then;
When they get out, they sneak about,
for fear old Neef[†] will find them out.⁶⁸

By May, things were felt to be faltering to the extent that Owen attempted another reorganization of the community, this time, following a suggestion of Maclure's, subdividing it into occupation groups. Each unit—farmers, mechanics, educators—could then see to the productivity of its own and would trade goods and services with the others.

[†] Joseph Neef, an associate of Maclure's, was one of the chief schoolteachers.

In addition to his administrative efforts, Owen aimed to give his followers renewed inspiration. That summer marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and on July 4 Owen delivered an oration that he believed would be at least as important to posterity. He called it the Declaration of Mental Independence, and in it he declared 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. . . . 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.⁶⁹

Thereafter, the masthead of the *Gazette* took to counting time from the moment of the address, as in “First Year of Mental Independence,” and so forth. The effect of the speech, however, was less to energize Owen’s followers than to bring down the obloquy of those scandalized by his attitudes toward religion and marriage.

His critics charged him with advocating free love, and he gave them basis for the charge. Owen argued that the institution of marriage was “unnatural” and “rendered prostitution unavoidable.”⁷⁰ Because “men and women have not been formed with power to create their own feelings . . . it is blasphemy . . . against the laws of their nature, for man or woman to make any promises or engagements relative to their future feelings.”⁷¹ Owen’s design for “villages of unity and cooperation” had been criticized for their proposal that boys and girls share common dormitories in their teen years. These criticisms were dismissed as scandal-mongering by Owen’s defenders, but later Owen asserted that in the new moral world “celibacy, beyond the period plainly indicated for its termination by nature . . . will be known . . . to be a great crime.” In his view “real chastity” consisted not in abstinence from sex but in abstinence from sex without affection.⁷²

No hint of personal scandal can be found in any of Owen’s biographies, but there is an arresting passage in a letter from Maclure to his protégé Madame Fretageot during the days of New Harmony. “I did not conjecture that Mr. O. was quite so amorous as the stories make him,” said Maclure. “The wives of the greatest part of those that have left . . . lately have declared to their husbands that it was in consequence of the freedom that Mr. O. took with them that they could not think of remaining under such dreadful risk of their virtue.”⁷³

By fall, Owen attempted still another reorganization plan, this one designed to root out some of the indolent or otherwise undesirable members of the community. Around the same time, community number two, Macluria, split and a few weeks later dissolved entirely. In the winter, Owen attempted a fifth and last reorganization, breaking the community down into numerous smaller communities. This was accompanied by the expulsion of twenty more undesirable families, an event memorialized by Paul Brown as "Doomsday." A few days later, wrote Brown wryly, came "Dogs' Doomsday." It consisted of a "general dog killing; when all citizens of the canine brood were to be shot. Many were those that fell on that day."⁷⁴

In connection with the final reorganization, Owen agreed to sell parcels of land to small groups wishing to establish their own communities. One of the residents, William Taylor, quickly agreed to this plan. He and Owen signed a contract conveying a certain plot "with all thereon." The night before the effective date, the unscrupulous Taylor moved quantities of the community's valuable assets onto this land, thereby gaining legal title to them. Thus capitalized, Taylor added insult to injury by setting up a distillery on his new property.

The final blow to New Harmony was an angry falling out between Owen and Maclure. One of its chief causes was Owen's sudden plan to institute a program of mass education at New Harmony for adults and children alike, consisting of thrice-weekly lectures. Maclure took this as a direct challenge to his authority over educational matters. In addition, Owen proposed to take back a choice piece of land from Maclure's educational society. The various other subgroups at New Harmony were all Owen's beneficiaries, so their property claims may have been somewhat notional. Maclure, on the other hand, was a full partner in the investment, so his rights were concrete. In the end, the two men sued each other and the courts resolved the dispute, largely in Maclure's favor.

In the winter of 1826-27, with the handwriting on the wall, "a funeral of the social system was projected by some of the New Harmonites," recounts the turn-of-the-century historian George Lockwood. "A coffin was procured and properly labeled, and arrangements were made for an imposing procession; but the night before the day set for the funeral the building in which the coffin was concealed was broken into and all the paraphernalia destroyed, so that the project was abandoned, and the system was allowed to die in its own way."⁷⁵

In May 1827, before departing once again for England, Owen delivered a farewell address to New Harmony, claiming triumph for the project. "The social system is now firmly established. . . . I could not but feel an almost inexpressible

delight . . . from reflecting upon the obstacles which have been overcome," he said.⁷⁶ But with Owen gone, the bickering among his followers intensified, a few drifted away and others turned to private pursuits. By the time the leader returned ten months later, what he found could no longer be sugarcoated. Instead, Owen pointed the finger of blame both at Maclure, for failing to make the schools a force binding the community together, and at the members themselves. "This proves that families trained in the individual system have not acquired those moral characteristics of forbearance and charity necessary for confidence and harmony," he said.⁷⁷ Unsurprisingly, this did not go down well with the assembled listeners, and the old schoolmaster Neef spoke for many when he replied that "People that had sense enough to perceive that a community of co-operation [and] common property would be the best . . . were . . . the very best materials to form such a community."⁷⁸

Despite Neef's telling rejoinder, Owen's attribution of New Harmony's failure to the character of its residents was often repeated, and it has echoed down throughout the historiography of the experiment. As Taylor exemplified, some unsavory types were indeed drawn to New Harmony, but so were a great many unusually accomplished individuals, those for whom the "boatload of knowledge" got its moniker. Moreover, placing the blame on the quality of people attracted to New Harmony ran counter to Owen's own repeated claims that he had formed his ideas in the process of successfully reforming the "idle, intemperate, dishonest" workforce he had inherited at New Lanark. The point was made best by Abram Combe, whom Owen described as one of "the most faithful and honest of my disciples."⁷⁹ In 1826, while Owen's attentions were focused on New Harmony, Combe led a group of Owenites in Scotland in launching a model village at an estate called Orbiston, near Glasgow. Orbiston, too, was short-lived, but Combe rejected the argument that the participants were at fault. "We set out to overcome Ignorance, Poverty and Vice," he said. "It would be a poor excuse for failure to [argue] that the subjects of our experiment were ignorant, poor and vicious."⁸⁰

In short, Owen's argument was circular. Socialism, he said, would produce a "new man." Until then, all people were necessarily products of the old system. If it required people reared under socialism to create socialism, then how could you get there from here?

Robert Dale Owen made a more honest attempt to diagnose New Harmony's collapse. The "most potent factor," he concluded, was that "All cooperative schemes which provide equal remuneration to the skilled and

industrious and the ignorant and idle, must work their own downfall, for by this unjust plan of remuneration they must of necessity eliminate the valuable members—who find their services reaped by the indigent—and retain only the improvident, unskilled, and vicious members.”⁸¹

While the son’s explanation was quite different from the father’s, they both pointed to the same underlying question: was socialism suited to men as they were? Tailoring institutions to human nature was the guiding motif of America’s founders. In the *Federalist Papers*, Madison observed famously that government was necessary because men were not angels and that controls on government were necessary because those who governed were not angels. Had Madison commented on socialism, he might have come up with an analogous paradox: if men were angels then an economy might succeed without selfish incentives, but if men were angels it would not matter whether the economy succeeded since they would have no material needs.

Men, alas, are not angels, and it was socialism’s unique departure to attempt their uplift through an economic rather than a spiritual system. This point was in fact made at the outset of Owen’s experiment by George Rapp in a letter to his son: “It goes with these people as with the Jews at the time of Jesus, they are seeking and want a sensuous kingdom of God, and not a spiritual one.”⁸²

The distinction was evident in the fates of the numerous cooperative villages established in the New World. According to several different scholarly efforts to count them, by the dawn of the twentieth century there had been somewhere between 250 and 300.⁸³ The majority had a religious basis, and many of these endured for long periods. Indeed, the Rappite community survived its founder, lasting one hundred years, and this was despite the fact that from around the time he sold Harmonie to Owen, Rapp required his followers to be celibate. Without procreating, they kept their society alive by recruiting new members.

In contrast, the secular communities, whose primary purpose was to create socialism, all went the way of New Harmony. There were somewhere from ten to twenty inspired by Owen and about another thirty that followed the ideas of Fourier. None of them rivaled New Harmony in scale or promise, and none improved significantly upon its outcome. Their median life span was two years.

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The failure of New Harmony cost Robert Owen much of his fortune, but it did not shake his faith in his ideas. He paid it little more attention than he paid to the arguments of his adversaries. In his autobiography he devoted a total of three

sentences to the entire New Harmony venture, commenting that he “found the population of the States far too undeveloped at that period for the practice of a full true and social life.”⁸⁴

So little was Owen fazed by the denouement of the New Harmony experiment that within months of returning to Britain, he took it in mind to persuade the government of Mexico to grant him Texas as a site to renew his experiment on a grander scale. On his way to Mexico, Owen stopped in Jamaica, which afforded his first opportunity to observe slavery first hand. Perhaps still smarting from the effort to govern an unruly multitude at New Harmony, he came away from the island with a surprisingly positive impression. He wrote:

I request with all the earnestness such a subject demands, that our good religious people in England will not attempt to disturb these slaves in the happiness and independence which they enjoy in their present condition. For while they are under humane masters—and almost all slave proprietors are now humane, for they know it to be to their interest to be so—the West Indian “slave” as he is called, is greatly more comfortable and happy than the British or Irish operative manufacturer or day-labourer.⁸⁵

When Owen reached Mexico, the government turned down his request to rule Texas on the grounds that the territory elected its own governor. But it did discuss the possibility of granting him a swath of land along the border with the United States, some 150 miles in width and stretching from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific. Owen insisted, however, that he could govern the territory only if Mexico would amend its laws so as to allow religious tolerance rather than recognize Roman Catholicism as the established religion. And this proved an insuperable stumbling block.

With his adventures in the New World behind him and his share of New Lanark sold, Owen returned to England, but not to his wife and remaining family in Scotland. Instead, he settled in London. G. D. H. Cole observes that:

Owen had apparently no need of his wife’s companionship. He writes to her reporting his public doings. . . . Her letters . . . dwelling especially on the poor health of their daughter Anne, can only be described as plaintive. Again and again she speaks of her need for him, and urges him to come to her. “Oh, my dear husband, how much I feel the want of you . . . in a time of so much anxiety.”⁸⁶

But he did not come, and Anne died at twenty-two years old. Months later, her mother, perhaps brokenhearted, followed her into the grave. Cole's assessment is that "Owen, from the time when he became a public man, ceased to have any 'private life.' . . . He became a humanitarian, and lost his humanity."⁸⁷

For the next thirty years he continued his activism, serving as the pioneer or inspiration of numerous progressive causes, even some toward which he was ambivalent. For example, the founders of the consumer cooperatives, which began in the 1830s, declared that they had been inspired by Owen, even though he was uninvolved in their efforts and not supportive. Spearheaded by the famous Rochdale movement, the cooperatives grew over generations into a mighty economic force.

No less awkward was Owen's role as leader of the early labor movement. With his ceaseless entreaties to Kent, Nicholas, Castlereagh, Metternich, Santa Anna and the like, Owen was the consummate believer in change from the top. Nonetheless, he was chosen president of the first countrywide labor organization, the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union. Formed in 1834, it brought together a large array of local groups that had emerged over the previous years. Some comprised employees striving for higher wages, others were artisans endeavoring to form producer cooperatives, and still others were organized in pursuit of political reform, or as Mason-like secret fraternal orders. The Grand National pulled off one mass demonstration in behalf of six Dorset workers who had been harshly sentenced for their labor activities, but within a year it disintegrated.

Dearer to Owen's heart than either the consumer cooperatives or the Grand National was the effort to create "labor exchanges." This was Owen's own brainchild. Foreshadowing Marx's more subtle theory, Owen adapted from the early-nineteenth-century economist David Ricardo the idea that the source of value of any item was the labor that went into it. From this, Owen concluded that middlemen were an unnecessary drain on wealth and that money was superfluous. Hence, he went about organizing a center where artisans could exchange goods free from these impediments but with greater flexibility than barter would allow. Members of the exchange could bring their wares and receive credits for the number of man-hours required to produce them. They could spend these credits to purchase other goods from the exchange, priced in man-hours.

Owen opened his exchange in London, and initially it attracted enough participants and apparent success to inspire emulators in other cities.

Gradually, however, Owen and his confreres discovered that it was not so easy to transcend the old methods of commerce. The credits that they issued in exchange for goods took the form of "labor notes," which differed little from currency, except they were not backed by metal. Moreover, the administrators quickly realized that they could not value the goods they accepted according to the number of hours the producer claimed to have invested, since the time varied. Instead, they took to inferring the worth in labor-hours from prices on the general retail market. Finally, they discovered that even though the exchange distinguished itself from traditional merchants by eschewing profits, it could not avoid taking a markup in order to meet overhead and maintain inventory. When the Owen-sympathizer who had initially donated the building that housed the exchange began to charge rent, the managers moved the enterprise to less convenient facilities, and the ensuing decline in business soon led to the project's collapse.

In the middle 1830s, after the failure of the labor exchanges and the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, Owen and his followers—the "socialists," as they by now were coming generally to be known—turned their efforts more toward spiritual and proselytizing activities. In 1835 they founded the Association of All Classes of All Nations. Owen was given the title of Preliminary Father. This was later changed to Rational Social Father, and the group itself became the Universal Community Society of Rational Religionists. Later it changed its name again, to the Rational Society, and then again to the Home Colonization Society.

The group's dual goals were social change along collectivist lines, and moral reform based on Owen's pet theory that the individual was in no sense responsible for his own character. Its chapters erected buildings in which they held Sunday services. They did not call these buildings "churches," but rather "halls of science." The services included readings from Owen's masterwork, the *Book of the New Moral World*; sermons, generally given by Owen himself when he was present; and the singing of hymns. An example of the latter, drawn from the society's own hymnal, *Social Hymns*,⁸⁸ gives a flavor of its gospel:

Outcasts on your native soil,
Doom'd to poverty and toil,
Strangers in your native land;
Come, and join the social band.

Leave, oh leave, your wretched state,
 Scene of discord, scene of hate,
 Take the brother's hand we give,
 Come and in communion live.

Leave your selfish cares behind,
 Turn your loves from self to kind.
 Let the claims of *mine* and *thine*
 In all-blessing *ours* combine.

On each other cast our care,
 All each others' comforts share;
 Hand in hand and heart in heart,
 Bliss enjoy and bliss impart.⁸⁹

In addition to erecting its church-like "halls of science," the society commanded enough resources to appoint six paid missionaries, known as the "socialist bishops."

After a few years, many of the members grew eager for a demonstration of the efficacy of their social theories. In 1839 a large estate called Queenwood was leased and a socialist community was launched. Owen, perhaps inwardly chastened by the collapse of New Harmony a decade before, was uneasy with the venture and declined to be its governor. Nonetheless, the society threw its resources into the experiment, eventually laying off the "socialist bishops." In addition, members made cash subscriptions, and innumerable in-kind contributions were recorded in the society's weekly newspaper, the *New Moral World*: "seventeen pairs of razors, a handbook of mathematics, a complete set of harness, a French grammar, *Horace*, a *Poem*, pocket-knives, a patent corkscrew, and implements innumerable for the stables, the farm, the shambles, the kitchen, and the dining-room."⁹⁰

The few score initial settlers brimmed with enthusiasm. Like the French revolutionists and the New Harmonists, they inaugurated a new calendar, marking off time from the date they took possession of the estate, which was designated "Day 1 of the New Moral World." Before long, however, enthusiasm gave way to discontent over material privations, lack of privacy, and a system of management in which the residents had little voice. In 1841, hoping to rescue the experiment, Owen announced his readiness to assume governorship,

bringing with him an infusion of additional capital raised from a few wealthy backers. He sank it all into the construction of a magnificent three-story building, comprising sleeping, dining and meeting quarters. The structure was christened "Harmony Hall," and Owen had the initials C.M. carved on the front, standing for "Commencement of the Millennium."

Owen's reputation as a businessman of the first order endured, but decades of visionary activism separated him from his days as a prosperous cotton magnate. He spent the colony, and with it the Rational Society, into a deepening hole. Only gradually did it register with some of the disciples that, as one remarked, "Mr. Owen was no financier, and had no idea of money."⁹¹ In the face of discontent with his leadership, Owen resigned as governor of Queenwood in 1842, and then resumed the position a year later, but none of these comings and goings arrested the project's steady decline. In 1844, real dissension against Owen's leadership burst forth, and Owen insisted that he could hold no position with Queenwood or the society unless given absolute authority, which by this time his disciples were no longer willing to grant.

The story of Queenwood and Owen's society-of-ever-changing-names for moral and political regeneration ended in tragic-comic wrangles. The last governor of Queenwood, John Buxton, remained on the property with his family after the other residents departed, until the trustees had him evicted. The Buxtons then camped in a tent on the outskirts, and there convened still one more congress of the society. In the end, after Owen's death, the surviving officers of the society fell to suing one another over what was left of the assets and liabilities.

Even as Owen was getting up in years, he remained energetic. The thrilling revolutionary upheavals of 1848 ignited in him a burst of activity, and he left at once for France, where he saw to the distribution of translations of his various works, supplementing them with two new pamphlets. "Paris was deluged with Owenite literature," says biographer Frank Podmore, and Owen was invited to address the National Assembly.⁹²

Around the time he turned eighty, the still vigorous founder of the Rational Society embraced "spiritualism," that is, the practice of communicating with the dead through the assistance of mediums. This was all the rage in the middle of the nineteenth century, starting in America and carried back from there to England. Owen was initiated into the practice by an American medium named Mrs. Hayden, but when she was exposed as a fraud, he simply found a new medium. Owen knew full well that others doubted the legitimacy of the

process, but he insisted that he had carefully tested it and that the spirits with whom he communicated told him things that only they could know. "To communicate in a material manner with our past and now . . . invisible relatives and friends, is an idea as monstrous to receive by the so-called enlightened of this day, as the monstrous statement of Galileo in his day . . . that the earth was not flat," he said.⁹³

In his séances, Owen communed with many of the famous people he had known, including Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, whom he dubbed "my friend and warm disciple" (although in life Jefferson had written sharp criticisms of Owen's ideas), and his old supporter the duke of Kent. Owen had frequent sessions with the late duke, and he extolled his noble courtesy: "never in one instance . . . has this Spirit not been punctual to the minute he had named."⁹⁴

Despite the turn to spiritualism, Owen never wavered in his opposition to the "superstition" of religion. In 1858, at age eighty-seven, his powers clearly failing, Owen traveled back to his birthplace, Newtown, to die. "I will lay my bones whence I derived them," he told his manservant.⁹⁵ He had been away from Wales for more than seventy years, and he let out a cheer as his coach crossed back into it. He remained himself until the end, writing ahead to one of the town elders with the offer to deliver an important message if a public meeting of the leading citizens would be organized. On his deathbed he staunchly refused the offer of a pastoral visit from the town's rector, and when, a few hours before his death, the rector visited nonetheless, Owen engaged him in a discussion of a plan he was hatching for the regeneration of Newtown.

Owen passed from the world under the loving attention of his son, Robert Dale Owen, who had traveled from Naples, where he was serving as the American chargé d'affaires. "My dear father passed away this morning . . . as gently and as quietly as if he had been falling asleep," he wrote.⁹⁶ Cole, the celebrated socialist historian, pronounced this epitaph:

No man has been forerunner and patron-saint of so many movements as he. New Lanark at once suggests the pioneer of popular education and factory reform; the events of 1830-1834 recall the leading figure in the first broad concerted movement of the working class. Socialism and Cooperation alike found in him their first systematic exponent in Great Britain. Secularism and Rationalism, too, took shape under his guidance.⁹⁷

Robert Owen had created a movement, or at least a large milieu, that called itself “socialist.” There is no record whether it was he, himself, or one of his followers who first used the term, but by the time of his death they had brought it into wide currency. Through the halls of science with their hymns and Sunday meetings, the movement had been shaped into the simulacrum of a religion. The failures of New Harmony and the other Owenite colonies had not proved fatally discouraging; instead, they had pointed socialists back in the direction of political action. The hope that a model socialism could be constructed in isolation from the surrounding community had been dashed. Socialism would have to be achieved by transforming society as a whole.

Across the Atlantic, Owen left a legacy of a different kind, which would help to undermine all that he had worked for. His four sons and one of his daughters remained in America and contributed more than their share to shaping and strengthening the country that would prove to be the insuperable obstacle to socialism. They were among the several hundred survivors of Owen’s experiment who took possession of individual holdings at New Harmony. Relieved of his blueprints, the community thrived. Robert Dale Owen wrote five years later that “the progress back to the state of order and prosperity in which Rapp’s people left it, is, I think, very apparent.”⁹⁸ And in another article around the same time, he explained:

If I expect (as I do expect) to see New Harmony flourish and maintain its rank among the Western Colonies that surround it, it is because we are pursuing there (now that the experiment of United Labor, is, for the present, no longer carried on) a policy the very reverse of this; giving to each respectable citizen every facility and encouragement to become (what every adult ought to be) a landed proprietor.⁹⁹

On this new basis, the Owen progeny and what was left of the “boatload of knowledge”—among them Fretageot, Say, Lesueur and Neef—turned the town into a great intellectual center. It was famed throughout the remainder of the century for its contributions to the natural sciences, education and even the dramatic arts, thanks to a thespian society that William had founded. What did not endure at New Harmony was any remnant of socialism, as the researcher A. J. MacDonald discovered. An admirer of Owen’s who set out in the 1850s to interview veterans of New Harmony, he reported: “I was cautioned not to speak of Socialism, as the subject was unpopular. The advice was good; Socialism

was unpopular, and with good reason. The people had been wearied and disappointed by it; had been filled full with theories, until they were nauseated."¹⁰⁰

The Owen children made notable contributions to their adopted country. David Dale Owen became the state geologist of Indiana and Arkansas and then head of the U.S. Geological Survey. He and Robert Dale were instrumental in the creation of the Smithsonian Institution. Richard Owen succeeded David as Indiana's geologist, later taking up an academic career that culminated in his selection as the first president of Purdue University. He wrote of the link he perceived between the country's natural endowment and its social message: "Here amid nature's wild, human hope expanded, a new regime was founded, and America took up her appointed mission of exemplifying to the world the inalienable rights of man."¹⁰¹ In contrast to his father, Richard became deeply religious and authored some works on the compatibility of natural science with scriptural revelation. William Owen, the son so overburdened with New Harmony's early management, became a bank director.

The greatest distinction was achieved by Robert Dale Owen, who served in the Indiana legislature, then for two terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, and later as secretary of the Freedman's Bureau. In between, he represented the United States as a diplomat, which occasioned his presence in Europe at the time of his father's death. He wrote of the difference between the Old World and the New:

In Europe, where men are trained to bear any and every thing, even steady, respectable heads of families are content to be life-renters or mere tenants at will. . . . But here, fortunately, the state of things is very different. . . . [A]ny man who has the smallest share of honest ambition, and who can wield an axe or plough a corn-row, chooses to have his own homesteading [from which no] haughty landlord [can] dispossess him. So ought it to be every where; so is it, in these United States.¹⁰²

Thus, the son who had written of his rapturous expectations as he first crossed the Atlantic to join his father's colony found the "Land of Promise" not in New Harmony, but in America itself.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In 2002, when *Heaven on Earth* first appeared, an unusual event was held in Washington, D.C. It was a reunion of members of the Young People's Socialist League from the 1960s and 1970s. I had been one, even for a time its leader. Indeed it had been the center of my life for a stretch of years, as it had been for others, so a reunion was a natural thing. And we all recalled that back then we hosted, as fundraisers, reunions of YPSL members from the 1930s—to great success. This reunion of YPSL members of my generation was no fundraiser, just for nostalgic pleasure, but it doubled as a launchpad for my book.

The most remarkable thing about the event was that my 85-year-old father, now of blessed memory, came to protest. He distributed a flyer containing a statement he had written in rebuttal to the book. It described his own circumstance at that time, explaining how he and my mother relied on Social Security and Medicare, suggesting this proved the value of socialism.

His decision to leaflet the event was a little gauche, but I understood that he saw this book as an act of apostasy, a betrayal of the faith he had bequeathed to me. I had hurt him, and I was deeply sorry I had.

I was, nonetheless, not much impressed by his argument. Social Security and Medicare are fine things, but they do not add up to socialism, the dream that had captivated my father and millions of others, including me. Norman Thomas, the six-time Socialist Party nominee for president (whose original party membership card was mounted and presented to my father late in life in token of his decades of service to the party), was asked once whether President Franklin D. Roosevelt had not carried out his program. To this, Thomas replied that FDR had “carried it out on a stretcher.”

Socialism meant so much more than the welfare state, which was at best a kind of consolation prize to socialists and at worst a way of buying off the masses so that they would not pursue deeper change. Indeed, the welfare state had been pioneered by Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck for precisely that purpose. It was not for goals as modest as the welfare state that my father

and others like him had devoted their lives to the pursuit of socialism. Rather, they envisioned, as I too had in my socialist years, an end to exploitation; a new dawn of brotherhood; a different, kinder and more wholesome way of living. The power of this image had made socialism a monumental force driving the history of the twentieth century. And this, I believed, was over.

I still believe it. What I had not predicted, although looking back it seems to have been inevitable, was that any force as powerful as socialism would have an afterlife, and not merely in the form of the welfare state. Now, nearly two decades into a new century, that afterlife is evident in two forms that I find particularly worthy of note.

On the one hand, here and there around the world, as a new generation has grown up without any direct memory of the Cold War or the countless failures and abuses of socialism, that old dream has shown that it retains the capacity to enchant even in the most unlikely places. In the United States, that least socialist of countries, presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, a proclaimed “democratic socialist” and a veteran of the YPSL, nearly won the Democratic nomination in 2016 and inspired other proclaimed socialists to win seats in Congress and statehouses in 2018. Meanwhile, in Great Britain, the Labour Party, once the exemplar of a socialist party that had gone conservative, was taken over by Jeremy Corbyn, who is not merely a radical socialist but a warm supporter of various Communist regimes and movements. I cannot imagine that either the United States or the United Kingdom will be remade as socialist, but the rise of Sanders and Corbyn shows anew the power of this idea.

On the other hand, Russia and even more so China, the two Communist giants of the twentieth century, seem poised to shape and perhaps to dominate international life in the decades ahead. Russia is no longer Communist. And China, though still ruled by the Communist Party, is no longer socialist. Yet these influential countries, one with the world’s largest population, the other with its largest land mass, were largely shaped—or misshaped—by their Communist experience and retain its earmarks in their current guises.

In this new edition, I have not emended any of the chapters of the original book, which cover the history of the previous centuries, other than to correct a few small (though embarrassing) errors and to update my account of the evolution of Israel’s *kibbutzim*. But I have added a long Epilogue, telling the story of this afterlife as it has unfolded thus far in the first decades of the new century.

PROLOGUE: CHANGING FAITHS

SOCIALISM WAS THE FAITH IN WHICH I WAS RAISED. It was my father's faith and his father's before him.

My grandfather, Avraham Chaim Muravchik, grew up in a small *shtetl* outside Kiev in what was then the Russian Empire. Born in 1878, he received the orthodox religious training of every boy of his time and place. But like many others of that generation he turned away from formal Judaism by the time he entered high school, or *gymnasium*, as it was called.

It was in the radical student circle at *gymnasium* that he met my grandmother, Rachel. She was several years his junior since he had not been able to afford the school until he had worked for a time as a lumberman, while her family, which manufactured paper bags and lived in Kiev proper, was better off. Together they joined the most radical of the newly formed Russian leftist parties, the Socialist Revolutionaries. It was distinguished from the more Marxist-oriented Social Democrats by its endorsement of terror tactics and by its theory that the leading role in the revolution would be played by Russia's peasantry rather than its proletariat.

Avraham Chaim and Rachel left for America in 1905, part of a wave of Jewish emigration touched off by an orgy of anti-Semitic violence that followed Russia's defeat by Japan and the abortive attempt to overthrow the tsar. The peasants, it turned out, were more easily mobilized for pogroms than for revolution.

In America, the couple found work with the Yiddish-language *Jewish Daily Forward*, whose masthead was emblazoned with the famous injunction of the *Communist Manifesto*: "Workers of the world unite!" They settled in a Harlem tenement, in which my father, Emanuel, was born in 1916.

Emanuel's boyhood was filled with the comings and goings of the exile branches of the Russian Students Organization and the Left Socialist Revolutionaries. (The party had split in 1917, and my grandparents stuck with the more radical half.) In 1929, Norman Thomas ran for mayor of New York

on the Socialist Party ticket, and the campaign crystallized my father's budding interest in socialism. He chose it as the topic of an eighth-grade paper, and after four intense days in the library, pronounced himself a convert. A few months later, just after his thirteenth birthday, he joined the Socialist Party. It was a coming of age that substituted for a bar mitzvah.

My mother, Miriam, whom he met in college, shared my father's views albeit with softer ideological definition. Being of liberal spirit, however, they decided to refrain from systematically indoctrinating me and my brother as they raised us. Systematic indoctrination was scarcely necessary, at any rate, for the political cause was the center of their lives. It was discussed at the family dinner table and with their friends, who were mostly "comrades." On car excursions, we whiled away the time by singing "We Shall Not Be Moved" and other old labor songs. I first visited our nation's capital in 1958 at the age of eleven when my parents took us on the Youth March for Integrated Schools, one of the earliest civil rights demonstrations. By my teens, I was a seasoned protestor.

By then I, too, had joined the Socialist Party, eventually becoming the leader of its youth wing, the Young People's Socialist League. It was a small organization because socialism never caught on in this country, despite my father's efforts and my own. (His persisted for more than seventy years, while I became an apostate in my thirties and began to grope my way back to Judaism.)

If we were out of step with America, we took heart from knowing that America was out of step with the world. My comrade Michael Harrington—the famous writer who became chairman of the Socialist Party in 1968, at the same moment that I became chairman of the YPSL—boasted: "Most of the people in the world today call the name of their dream 'socialism.'"[†] I could not vouch for his math, but socialism undoubtedly was the most popular political idea ever invented.

Arguably, it was the most popular idea of any kind, surpassing even the great religions. Like them, socialism spread both by evangelization and by the sword, but no religion ever spread so far or so fast. Islam conquered an empire that at its height embraced 20 percent of mankind. It took 300 years before Christianity could speak for 10 percent of the world's people, and after two millennia it can claim the adherence of about one-third of the human race. By comparison, within 150 years after the term "socialism" was coined by the followers of Robert Owen in the late 1820s, roughly 60 percent of the earth's population found itself living under socialist rule of one kind or another.[†] Of

[†] The word "communism" came into use in French and English in the 1840s. The words "socialism" and "communism" have often been used interchangeably, as have the terms "socialism" and "social

course, not all who lived under socialism believed in it, but not all who were counted as Christians or Muslims were believers either.

Once empowered, socialism refused to yield its promised rewards. The more dogged the effort to achieve it, the more the outcome mocked the humane ideals it proclaimed. Yet for a century and a half, no amount of failure dampened socialism's appeal. Then suddenly, like a rocket crashing back to earth, it all collapsed. Within a couple of decades, socialism was officially repealed in half the places where it had triumphed. In the other half, it continued in name only. Today, in but a few flyspecks on the map is there still an earnest effort to practice socialism, defended in the manner of those marooned Japanese soldiers who held out for decades after 1945, never having learned that their emperor had surrendered.

In this book I trace socialism's phenomenal trajectory. It is the story of man's most ambitious attempt to supplant religion with a doctrine about how life ought to be lived that claimed grounding in science rather than revelation. Although its provenance was European, it was taken up with ardor in China and Africa, India and Latin America and even in that most tradition-bound of regions, the Middle East. No other faith ever appealed as widely. It was not confined to salons and libraries but exerted itself as well in statehouses and on picket lines, barricades and battlefields. It did more than anything else to shape the history of the twentieth century.

Ironically, the power of this faith was to some degree obscured by the popularity of Marxist theory, which held that ideas were merely the surface froth thrown up by underlying currents of technological progress and material interests. This, too, was a seductive notion because it answered that most puzzling question: why do people think what they do? But this "materialist" interpretation of ideology has not stood the test of time, least of all in explaining socialism's own history. What material interests or technology caused the triumph of socialism, or its defeat, in Russia? Its transmission to China, Cuba and North Korea? Its appearance in other forms in Sweden, Israel, Tanzania, Syria?

democracy." At other times, these have been treated as differentiable doctrines and various definitions have been formulated, but none of these have won general acceptance, and they have sometimes been mutually contradictory. Since my purpose is history not theory, I stipulate no definitions. In general I will describe movements by the terms they themselves favored. After the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia in 1917, those who followed Lenin's trail assumed a near monopoly on the word "Communist," although they also still often called themselves socialists, too. Those who rejected Lenin's approach generally used the label "socialist" or "social democrat." Except where I am referring to a specific party or movement, I use the term "socialism" broadly to encompass all the various branches that grew out of the socialist acorn.

The idea of socialism did not march through history of its own accord. It was invented, developed, popularized, revised, exploited and in some cases abandoned by a chain of thinkers and activists. It was modified again and again, sometimes for ulterior motives but also because, for all its unmatched allure, it proved maddeningly difficult to implement. I have chosen to tell the story of socialism through sketches of key individuals, each of whom exemplifies a critical stage or form in its evolution. Some of these were seminal figures, responsible more or less single-handedly for a major turning point. Who can imagine communism without Lenin, fascism without Mussolini, or the peaceful self-nullification of the Soviet Union without Gorbachev? Other important episodes, such as the rise of utopianism or social democracy or the embrace of socialism by "Third World" states, cannot be traced to a single individual, so I have selected for portraiture the one whom I believe best represents each of these chapters in the drama.

The manger in which socialism was born was the French Revolution, with its emphasis on equality, its profound anticlericalism and its promise that all things could be made new. Amidst the chiliastic confusion of serial upheavals, one impassioned visionary, "Gracchus" Babeuf, proposed that the way to give substance to the slogan "liberty, equality, fraternity" was to collectivize all property. Thus did his Conspiracy of Equals, as it called itself, serve as midwife to the new idea, which grew and developed over the next 120 years. In the early 1800s, with most of Europe still recoiling from the Napoleonic bloodbath, socialism turned away from revolution to experimentation, in the form of small communities in which people could practice the life of collective ownership. The most important of these—in America and England—were led or inspired by Robert Owen.

These experiments in socialism did not turn out well, and the idea itself might have wasted away in infancy had it not been taken up by a symbiotic team of unique prophetic power: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. They shifted the basis of socialist hopes from individual experiments to broader historic trends, which shielded the idea against empirical failure. Although Owen's movement had adopted the physical trappings of religion, erecting church-like "halls of science" where sermons were delivered at Sunday services, Marx and Engels achieved the far more profound breakthrough of imbuing socialism with something of the intellectual and spiritual force of the great religious texts. Their doctrine provided an account of man's history, an explanation of current sorrows and a vision of a redemptive future.

But half a century after the publication of *The Communist Manifesto*, the socialist idea hit another crisis as Marx and Engels' leading heir, Eduard Bernstein, observed that economic development was confounding the prophecy. The theory was rescued by Lenin, who kept it alive by performing heart transplant surgery, replacing the proletariat by the vanguard. Still, although socialism had stirred millions by the early twentieth century, it remained a dream.

Then, World War I gave Lenin the opportunity to put his idea into practice, and in 1917 socialism achieved its first momentous triumph. Even those socialists who decried Lenin's methods, or who viewed his state as little more than a caricature of their goals, nonetheless felt strengthened in the conviction that history was flowing from capitalism to socialism. Yet the debate over the Russian model, along with the war's demonstration of the power of nationalism, shattered the movement. Of the fragments, the most outré was fascism, which seemed to turn socialism on its head. Still, the leap from Lenin to Mussolini was no bigger than that from Marx to Lenin; each man distilled theory from the exigencies of revolutionary action.

The fascist chapter was explosive and brief, and socialism emerged strengthened from the defeat of this heresy in World War II. Not only did many more communist regimes emerge, but social democracy found a new lease on life, spearheaded by Clement Attlee's stunning electoral triumph over Churchill in Britain at the end of the war. The aftermath also saw the appearance of dozens of new postcolonial states and with them the birth of "Third World socialism." This was a hybrid of communism and social democracy, exemplified by Julius Nyerere's Tanzania, modeled partly after Chinese Maoism, partly after British Fabianism.

At some point in the late 1970s, socialism reached its apogee, with communist, social-democratic or Third World socialist regimes governing most of the world. There were, however, two chinks in the socialist armor. One was its dismal economic performance: much of socialism's appeal sprang from the wish to ameliorate want and deprivation, yet in practice it often made things worse. The other was its utter inability to gain a foothold in America, the world's most influential nation, where—to add insult to injury—the leading antisocialist force seemed to be none other than the working class, personified by labor leaders like Samuel Gompers and George Meany. As America's continued economic success mocked socialism's failures, various Third World nations began to rethink their economic direction. Astoundingly, so did the two communist giants, China and the U.S.S.R., which, under the stewardship of restless

reformers Deng Xiaoping and Mikhail Gorbachev, embarked on uncharted courses away from socialism. It remained only for the social-democratic branch of the socialist family to beat a retreat in order for the reversal to be complete. And in 1997, Tony Blair resuscitated Attlee's moribund party by campaigning with the slogan "Labour is the party of business." Thus, 201 years from the date of Babeuf's failed coup, the story was brought full circle.

I complete my telling with a digression from history to laboratory science, as it were, by training a microscope on an Israeli kibbutz. Like most such settlements, kibbutz Ginosar was secular, built by Jews who, like my father and grandfather, preferred the teachings of Marx to those of Moses. And like most, they succeeded where people in other lands had failed, creating a pure socialism, faithful to the blueprint—only to see their progeny turn its back on this way of life.

After so much hope and struggle, and so many lives sacrificed around the world, socialism's epitaph turned out to be: If you build it, they will leave.