

Industrial utopianism—version 1.0

Poverty, inequality, conspicuous consumption, the struggle to get ahead, explosive pressures on the environment—where should we look to explain, and to judge the necessity or otherwise, of these byproducts of industrialization? Since there's little that's completely new in the story playing out in Asia's largest countries on a grander scale these many years after the industrial revolution began in Britain, it's interesting to go back to an earlier, simpler time to view the discontent brewed by the process. What alternatives seemed possible at the time that industrialization was stirring up its first major batch of naysayers?

When a young Welshman named Robert Owen began his climb up the ranks of management in the cotton mills of late eighteenth-century Manchester, that city's population had yet to reach one hundred thousand, less than one percent the size of today's Delhi or Beijing. Less than a quarter of a century had passed since the first factories running coal-powered steam engines began producing what for the times were massive quantities of yarn and cloth. Waterpower was still a common industrial energy source.

Resented for rendering untenable the previously common lifestyle of cottage-based production, the factories of Manchester were decried as under-ventilated

dungeons in which an industrial workforce was employed in fourteen-hour shifts with only brief, regimented breaks. Wages were so low that few workmen were willing to take up factory jobs, which were accordingly considered suitable only for children and young women. The factory working conditions of the time would be excoriated in the damning descriptions of Friedrich Engels, who for years supported himself and his friend Karl Marx on his earnings as a Manchester factory manager. The duo's writings describe the same conditions that moved Charles Dickens to evoke pitying emotions in his own readers. The 1809 poem by William Blake that introduced the phrase "dark Satanic Mills" became for a time a socialist anthem, though these days "Jerusalem" is sung without overtones of class warfare at English cricket and rugby matches.

To Engels and Marx, the mills were the inevitable expression of the "laws of motion" of capitalism. The pair discounted attempts to undo the mills' excesses through legislation or social reforms, arguing that the only solution to capitalism's "internal contradictions" lay in a working class revolt that would be hastened by factory misery.

But our Welshman Owen was of a different mindset. Perhaps he was just too well established on the businessman's side of the social divide to be drawn to thoughts of class warfare. He had, in any case, his own social theory, one that emphasized that humans are creatures of their environment and education. After becoming a partner in the industrial enterprise founded by his father-in-law David Dale in New Lanark, Scotland, he helped to convert it into what was in its day an astonishing example of humane factory labor, one that attained fame throughout Britain and beyond.

Dale had already seen to the construction of housing of comparatively good quality in the small industrial village near the picturesque Falls of Clyde. Owen took matters further by ending the use of child labor and corporal punishment. He afforded the factory's workers a higher living standard by selling them their basic necessities at reasonable prices (foregoing the customary monopoly mark-ups of company stores), took effective measures to improve the cleanliness of the workers' housing and of the village as a whole, promoted their physical exercise and education, and established schools for their children. As his theory of human nature evolved, he applied it towards productivity improvement, encouraging the workers to excel at their jobs by hanging colored cubes above each workstation with colors denoting the worker's quality, thus allowing pride in good work to serve as a motivator. Defying Marx's inevitabilities, Owen's New Lanark mills

were highly profitable. A steady flow of visitors, including social reformers and intellectuals, politicians, and even royalty, made pilgrimages to the site and pronounced it impressive.

Owen's personal fame as the man behind the New Lanark model was such that when he came to the United States in 1824–25 and lectured on his ideas about social reform, he was received—remarkably!—by both the outgoing president, James Monroe, and the incoming president, John Quincy Adams. In February 1825, he addressed a packed house of Congress with both presidents and many of their cabinet members in attendance. If they expected to hear more about the humane and profitable factory he'd created at New Lanark, however, they may have been disappointed. For by this time, Owen had set his sights on change of a more radical character. He was intent on founding communities that would combine manufacturing and agriculture with child-rearing, life-long education, and cultural activity, all in a setting free of class distinctions—no owners, no employers, no employees. An initial prototype was to be established almost immediately, and once it had been proven a success, the world would awaken to its virtues and follow suit—no class war and no violence required.

New Harmony

A site had already been identified. A property in southern Indiana that had housed a religious community, called Harmony, had been put up for sale by its owners, and on January 3, 1825, Owen inspected it and signed a contract to purchase its twenty thousand acres and 180 buildings. In a land of dreams, what would probably become the most famous utopian experiment of nineteenth-century America was about to begin. It would be known as New Harmony.

Not only the real estate, but also those prepared to populate the new society, were ready for Owen's bold experiment. For years, Robert Owen had been writing and publishing essays about his emerging ideas. Although his full-blown social radicalism was less known to the general public than his successful reforms, his ideas had already captured the imaginations of some well-read Americans, and this following was awaiting his arrival in the United States, ready to join the adventure. They included respected intellectuals, such as Thomas Say, called by some "the father of American entomology." There was also the French naturalist, Charles Lesueur, and enough others for the band to be dubbed the "Boatload of Knowledge" as they made their way to Indiana.

Foremost among Owen's scientific enthusiasts was the geologist, William Maclure, then president of the prestigious Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. Not only did he serve as the group's leading recruiter and booster, but he also helped Owen to finance New Harmony and for a time shared in its leadership. Even some business people, such as Thomas Pears, a Pittsburgh-based industrial manager with experience in glass manufacturing and other industries, were won over by Owen's ideas and joined the pilgrimage to New Harmony.

By the summer of 1825, the community had about eight hundred members from almost every state of the then extant (mostly eastern) United States. Soap, glue, candle, and shoe factories were in operation, as was a hotel for visitors coming "to see with their own eyes Robert Owen's famous social experiment."³ The community boasted a rich cultural life, including its own newspaper, frequent lectures on science and social theory, a weekly dance, and a weekly performance by an orchestra of resident musicians. A school registering two hundred students was established along similar lines to the one at New Lanark, with education, board, and clothing costs covered by the community.

Owen was away much of the time on a lecture tour, through which he hoped to drum up enthusiasm for his communal ideas, and the community was in actuality limping along under the temporary leadership of his son. Yet a spirit of optimism prevailed in its initial months.

Well into its first year, the commune was attracting fresh expressions of interest and having to turn some applicants away due to limited housing space. In a letter dated June 2, 1825, Pears wrote to his friend and former employer: "New Harmony now presents to the world a novel and, I think, a sublime spectacle—an assemblage of people meeting together to try to do the utmost good for each other; and my hope is that we shall act as though the eyes of the world were upon us."

But running an economically complex society, even on the small scale of New Harmony, was impossible without some sort of leadership or organizational structure and without laying down principles of job assignment and compensation. Initially, the community adopted a vague and expressly transitional system based on the declaration by Owen, in April 1825, that it would be "forced to admit for a time, a certain degree of financial inequality." Then, returning from his lengthy lecture tour in early 1826 and without sufficient study of New Harmony's actual situation, he spearheaded the drafting of a new communitarian constitution, under which all members would be equal in consumption, with no system of accounting for work performed or for its quality.

Dream and reality

How did the scheme of perfect equality work out at New Harmony? We can't say for sure because the new constitution had barely been unveiled when the balance sheet from the community's first year of operation was completed and published. Like a bucket of cold water poured over the heads of sleepers, it woke even the most fervent Harmonists from their reveries. Suddenly, it was clear that New Harmony had been operating at a large deficit.

Without enough skilled farmers to feed itself, and with most of those having skill in one craft or another being occupied in community services that generated no income, New Harmony was far from covering operating costs. Indeed, keeping it afloat was rapidly soaking up Owen's personal savings and the limited financial support he'd managed to attract from outside backers.

A true believer could argue that the full egalitarianism of the 1826 constitution was never really tried out, so concluding that it was egalitarianism that posed a threat to the experiment may be unfair. But the actions of the Harmonists suggest that they at least saw the lack of material rewards and the accounting system required by them as a core problem. It was, apparently, the leading members of the community who advised Owen that pushing the new ideas too quickly would be taking a further step in the wrong direction. Judging the state of the project to be a dire one, members who had left ostensibly successful and comfortable lives behind to stake all on it begged Owen to stop touring and to take personal command of New Harmony's affairs. They also urged him to eliminate, as impracticable, the utopian elements of the short-lived constitution.

Owen accepted their request. But the magic touch that he had brought to the management of New Lanark (his earlier venture) seemed to have evaporated, or at least to have become incapable of turning around the Indiana commune. Indeed, as much as anything, the experiment's impending collapse might be attributed to the increasingly self-deluding outlook with which Owen approached it. It was he, for example, who ignored the advice of the son who had managed New Harmony in his absence that he should go slow in changing to a more radically egalitarian structure. He also wrongly imagined great enthusiasm, where there had been relatively little, on the parts of the press and of the audiences that he had addressed during his tour. Sensing that it was rudderless, New Harmony began to splinter into competing factions. In the end, it was only the educational and scientific work of those attracted to the venture by Maclure that would survive. Thanks to their efforts, New Harmony, Indiana, was to be a significant scientific center for the next

century and a half. The communal experiment itself had essentially reached its end when Owen returned to England in 1827.

Apart from problems of leadership, what else had gone wrong with the experiment at New Harmony? Almost everything, it would seem. Of the 800 original settlers at New Harmony, only 140 had skills useful to its industrial and craft needs, and only 36 had farming experience. Despite the cadre of intellectuals attracted from the urban centers of the east by the appeal of Owen's ideas, most of those who came were young, local, unskilled, and without financial resources. No effort had been made to set standards for membership. Goodwill reigned at the outset, and a sense of peace and physical security generally prevailed—in the faint praise of New Harmonist Josiah Warren, “We had enacted the French Revolution over again with despairing hearts instead of corpses as a result.” Yet even the rhetoric of classlessness failed to match the reality. In one of her letters, Thomas Pears's wife, Sara, wrote:

Oh, if you could see some of the rough, uncouth creatures here, I think you would find it rather hard to look upon them exactly in the light of brothers and sisters, I am sure! I cannot in sincerity look upon these as my equals, and if I must appear to do it, I cannot either act or speak the Truth.⁴

A visitor from Germany, Duke Karl Bernhard, noted that he attended social functions in New Harmony and always “noticed members sticking to their own former social classes” including “upper-class girls refusing to dance with lower-class men.” Bernhard concluded that “in spite of all the talk about equality, these people would never mix with their ‘inferiors.’”⁵

Getting along with others seemed difficult even for the affable Mr. Owen. In New Harmony, he had festering public disputes with Maclure and another break-away leader, Paul Brown. Business frictions with his erstwhile partners in New Lanark, in which he maintained an interest, were also rife. When finally ending his connection with the New Lanark mills in 1828, he is reported to have uttered to long-time business partner, William Allen, the famous words: “All the world is queer save thee and me, and even thou art a little queer.” Strange words from a famous philanthropist, humanist, and utopian!

The good and the bad of it

A generous interpretation of the New Harmony saga would point out that it illustrates how ideals can stir intelligent and practical men and women into action. In the end, Maclure, Say, and Lesueur went on to establish the Indiana town as the home of an important educational and scientific center. Influenced by Maclure, Owen's son David Dale Owen became the official geological surveyor of Indiana and two neighboring states, while son Richard Dale Owen became a natural scientist and university professor, and Robert Dale Owen became a state and US legislator who played a role in promoting public schooling and equality for women. It was this Owen who introduced the bill that created the Smithsonian Institution.

Robert Owen Sr. has his admirers, too. The documents nominating New Lanark, Scotland, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2001 stated that here "Robert Owen created a model for industrial communities that was to spread across the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" and that "the name of New Lanark is synonymous with that of Robert Owen and his social philosophy in matters such as progressive education, factory reform, humane working practices, international cooperation, and garden cities, which was to have a profound influence on social developments throughout the nineteenth century and beyond."

But less generous interpreters of the New Harmony experiment might argue that Owen "went off the rails" when he jettisoned the practical humanism of his innovations at New Lanark for the more radical communitarianism of New Harmony. By this interpretation, Owen's mistake was the same as that of all utopians: underestimating human selfishness. Harmonist Warren wrote of the community's demise: "Our 'united interests' were directly at war with the individualities of persons and circumstances and the instinct of self-preservation . . ." The fact that Owen owned the lion's share of the Indiana colony's assets as his personal property was one glaring contradiction of the spirit of New Harmony that seems to illustrate Warren's point. While Owen was affable and inspiring to some, he was prone to blindness about how his ideas were received and to the consequences of their implementation. Nor is it clear how well suited he himself was for community living: for all of his professed belief in the perfectibility of humankind, his "thee and me" remark fits perfectly with Warren's suggestion of a "war with the individualities of persons."

During the nineteenth century, dozens of New Harmony-like schemes inspired by Owen's ideas, most on a smaller scale, were launched. In the end, each fared as badly or worse. So did similar utopian efforts spawned by the French

philosopher Charles Fourier. Unlike those shorter-lived experiments, Israel's pioneering kibbutz settlements survived for decades in the twentieth century under rules of strict egalitarianism, scoring successes also in transitioning from mainly agricultural to substantially industrial production in the 1960s and '70s, before most abandoned their strict communal character in the face of a changed financial environment. Small, voluntary egalitarian societies have continued to be formed since Owen's time, including a spate of commune formation in the United States that began in the 1960s and saw the founding of some communities that persist to the present.

What happened when radical egalitarian creeds were embraced by all-powerful states is a very different story. Recall that Karl Marx, who fancied himself an objective scientific observer and rejected Owen and Fourier as utopians, judged the suffering of his generation's working class to be a necessary precursor of revolution. While he never wielded a weapon besides his pen, and while he might well have lacked the steel of the despots who gave homage to his ideas, Marx's spirit of readiness to accept that some would be sacrificed on the way to the millennium translated after his lifetime into an ideology used to justify some of the worst horrors of the twentieth century, including Stalin's bloody purges of his own political associates, his starvation of more than four million Ukrainian peasants, and his gulag prison labor system. China's Mao Zedong fell into megalomaniacal self-delusion after his success as a revolutionary strategist in the mountains gave way to the problems of managing economic modernization on a national scale. Whipping sycophantic followers and frightened bureaucrats into a frenzied campaign of rural commune building, he caused at least twenty million famine deaths in 1960 and 1961, after which he rebounded from the political sidelines to terrorize China's educated urban population from 1966 until his death a decade later. And before the facts of China's famine would be fully known to the world, Cambodia's Pol Pot would try to out-Mao Mao, succeeding in that perverse effort by causing the deaths of one in five Cambodians through politically induced famine, overwork, and punishment for the slightest suspicion of bad class leanings. In the late 1970s, you risked being executed in Cambodia if you wore glasses, since it raised the suspicion that you were an intellectual.

To be sure, neither the failures of the voluntary utopias nor the horrors wrought by those bent on building their preferred worlds on involuntary labor and blood-letting prove that our own world of fabulous economic growth mixed with fabulous poverty, insecurity, environmental destruction, and lack of social

purpose is the best we can hope for. But both warn us that we'd best be prepared to think long and carefully as we consider what futures are and what are not both desirable and actually within reach.