

'EDUCATION FOR CITIZENSHIP' AND THE NEW MORAL WORLD OF ROBERT OWEN

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SYNOPSIS

This article considers the current resurgence of education for citizenship in a historical context. In particular, it examines the relationship between education and citizenship in the two Owenite communities of New Lanark, Scotland and New Harmony, Indiana. There is an overview of Owen's world view and the role of education in producing citizens for the new world of Owen's millenarian vision. The education systems of New Lanark and New Harmony are considered and the article concludes by arguing that, despite the obvious differences between the new moral world of Owenism and the modern understanding of good citizenship, there are many shared issues and contradictions.

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INTRODUCTION

The notion that education, socialisation and citizenship are inextricably linked is hardly confined to the twentieth century. The Greeks and Romans may be said to have systematised the process upon which succeeding generations built, but, with the possible exception of the Dark Ages, (and even here, the role of the church is significant), every generation has sought to educate its young people into the ways of the world. What constantly changes throughout history, of course, is the definition of education, the curriculum and methodologies in operation and the concept of citizenship as society evolves.

At the commencement of the new millennium, 'education for citizenship' has once again become a major issue for government and for educators. In England, it has become a school subject, largely in response to the Advisory Group's report of 1998.¹ In that report, there was lengthy discussion and debate about social and moral responsibility, community involvement and political literacy and the need for active citizens to involve themselves in public life. The crucial role of the education system was also recognised. In Scotland, the issue of citizenship in schools has been given high priority by Learning & Teaching Scotland and early consultation papers suggest that, while 'Citizenship' is unlikely to become a defined curricular subject in schools, 'education for citizenship' will be a key overarching purpose of the curriculum and will be embedded in many subjects across the curriculum.

Historical precedents for most things educational are never hard to find. The dawn of a new age (real or imagined); a need for 'good citizens' to people the new age and a recognition of the crucial role played by education in forming those citizens? Robert Owen would have recognized the territory.

THE APPEAL OF OWENISM

The highly respected Owenite scholar, J.F.C. Harrison, begins one of his seminal works on Robert Owen by arguing that Owen's world view (the terms 'philosophy' or 'system' suggest something too coherent, structured and consistent) found favour with many and various disparate groups in the nineteenth century.² Factory reformers were clearly influenced by his attempts to restructure factory hours and

conditions. Communitarians, both religious and secular, were drawn to his idea of experimental communities. Even Engels, while ultimately rejecting Owenism as too conservative, was attracted to Owen's intention (often stated but never practised) of communal ownership of land and property.³ Co-operators of various hues, some early Chartists, utopian socialists and Garden City proponents all found something in Owen's new millennium – the 'new moral world' to which they could all, at least in part, subscribe.

This, of course is partly because Owen's 'new view' was itself a hybrid view, owing much to the earlier work of John Bellers (1654-1725), Rousseau (1712-1778), Bentham (1748-1832) and in particular to Godwin (1756-1836), whom he visited some 50 times between 1813-18 and partly because Owen frequently modified his ideas as time went on.⁴ Also, it has to be said that there was often a contradiction between his rhetoric and his actions, a point made frequently and forcibly by one of his fiercest critics, Paul Brown, in *New Harmony*.⁵

Nevertheless, at least two elements of Owenism remained constant throughout: firstly, the urgent necessity for a new, secular millennium, i.e. a second coming of a new age without vice, poverty, crime and other evils and, secondly, the crucial role of education in bringing that about. The new world order was founded on what he believed to be a new concept of citizenship and only education could produce the correct kind of citizen. As Owen himself put it in his address to the villagers at the opening of the New Institution in New Lanark on 1st January, 1816:

What ideas individuals may attach to the term Millennium, I know not, but I know that society may be formed so as to exist without crime, without poverty, with health greatly improved, with little, if any, money, and with intelligence and happiness increased a hundredfold, and no obstacle whatsoever intervenes at this moment, except ignorance, to prevent such a state of society becoming universal. ⁶

This extract from his lengthy speech is important because it contains three ideas pertinent to this paper – three ideas which remained constant throughout his life. Firstly, there is a vision of a society within which 'citizenship' will be clearly framed. Secondly, the sole obstacle is considered to be ignorance, which could be removed by appropriate education. Thirdly, this vision contains nothing less than the seeds of a new moral world: not a new village or town, not a new community for the poor, (although he continued to debate that issue for the next three or four years), but, ultimately, a new world order. It is impossible, therefore, to underestimate the importance of education in this process. Education was to train new citizens for this new moral world. For Owen, there could be no higher purpose. Modern educators are unlikely to go fully down this road but Owenism, in the same way that it appealed to those disparate groups in the nineteenth century, raises questions about the relationship between citizenship and education which are highly relevant and topical today.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

The opening of the New Institution was an obvious occasion for Owen to state publicly his views on the importance of education. Always prone to florid and millenarian language, his speech was peppered with talk of being 'born again'.⁷ The human intellect was to be released from its 'state of darkness' and 'all nations of the world' were to be trained on the New Lanark model.⁸

From the period following 1813-14, there are very few of Owen's writings which do not contain substantial reference to the importance of education in forming citizens. In *A New View of Society*, he talks of 'rational education'⁹ to promote the happiness of the individual. Children can and should be 'moulded'¹⁰ to eliminate anger, to respect the views of others and to be charitable. Fairness, equity and

justice¹¹ were to be the guiding principles, not only of the education system but of the community which nurtured the children and which would benefit when these children grew up to be 'industrious, temperate, healthy and faithful to employers'.¹² It was, of course, axiomatic for Owen that the character of man was formed for him and not by him and from 1817 this became the root of his world view. In his first plans for the 'Villages', based on co-operation and united labour,¹³ and again in *A Sketch of some of the Errors...* in 1817, he talks at length of unity, mutual co-operation and what we would call the 'common good'.¹⁴

A year later, he visited schools in Switzerland which were under the directorship of Pestalozzi (1746-1827). Owen had been aware of Pestalozzi's attempt to combine the naturalism & religion of Rousseau with manual work and physical exercise. This was intended for both rich and poor but particularly for the working-class children who would eventually reform society peacefully. Owen knew of Pestalozzi's 'object' lessons and the principle of moving from the known world to the unknown – from the concrete to the abstract etc. Similarly, he was aware of Pestalozzi's view that children should not be subjected to 'unnatural rewards and punishments' – a phrase much used by Owen himself.

Owen visited Pestalozzi in Yverdon but was rather more impressed by the schools at Hofwyl, run by Pestalozzi's assistant, Emmanuel von Fellenberg. One of these schools, for those under 15, was conducted ostensibly on Pestalozzian lines, but was altogether more authoritarian and included 'productive labour' in lieu of fees for poor children. As has been noted:

In essence, this was really a school of two extremes – a School of Industry for the poor and a school [The Literary Institution] for gentlemen.¹⁵

As a result of his visit, Owen's sons, Robert Dale and William Owen spent three years (1819-22) as pupils of the Literary Institution, at a cost of \$1500 per annum.¹⁶ As has already been observed, there were often contradictions between Owens deeds and words. His dedication to equality, or at least equity, seems to have stopped rather short of his own door.

It is not difficult, therefore, to see where some of Owen's ideas on education came from. It has been suggested that he may have approached the Liverpool government as early as 1810 with a draft 'Bill for the Formation of Character Among the Poor and Working Classes'.¹⁷ He was certainly aware of Bell and Lancaster's 'monitorial method' in 1812 and was clearly influenced by Pestalozzi and Fellenberg, particularly in relation to productive labour for the poor. He had also read John Bellers' much earlier work on Colleges of Industry.¹⁸ In fact, Bellers was the main inspiration for much of Owen's thinking on Villages of Co-operation

By 1820, despite the fact that he was still proposing small-scale villages, there are clear hints of what was to come later, i.e. that villages should contain representatives of all the social classes and that the educational system had the potential to create not just model villages but a new social system throughout the world. Education, 'the most important part of the economy of human life'¹⁹ would 'unite the mental faculties...for the attainment of pacific and civil objects'.²⁰ It is important to emphasise at an early stage that Owen was, above all else, a social reformer, not an educator. It is not true to argue, as some have done, that "...his propagandist views earned him the right to the title 'educator'."²¹ While education was crucial, it was for one purpose only, viz., the creation of citizens for the new society.

The formation of character, while it was most recognisable in the process of educating and training children, was not confined to them. Good citizens for the new moral world would clearly take some time to produce. During the transition, the adults too would be part of the process, learning about the new system and about respect, kindness, tolerance, sobriety and the common good by living it in the experimental

communities. Owen was, however, concerned that the process of ‘unlearning’ their adult vices would be a difficult process, something which proved to be the case in New Lanark and New Harmony. Nevertheless, in both the communities considered here and, indeed, in all the Owenite communities, education, while it was primarily aimed at character formation in children through the schools, was very much a community activity for those adults who wished to pursue it. In New Lanark, the new Institution was open in the evenings for community groups to meet and for lectures and discussions (although these were not always well attended after a long day at the mills).²² In New Harmony there were also classes for adults and there were lectures and public meetings about the ‘New Social System’, as it became known. This was aided and abetted by the community newspaper which was very much a voice of Owenism in the early days of New Harmony. Like the New Institution at New Lanark, the *New Harmony Gazette* functioned as an agent of both socialisation and education.

News is a secondary object, the first being to disseminate a correct knowledge of the principles, practice and local affairs of this society.²³

How, then, did this system work in practice? In as much as it is possible to do so briefly, this article will focus on New Lanark and New Harmony. That is not to deny the importance of education in communities such as Orbiston, Ralahine, Queenwood or the many ‘Owenite’ communities which sprang up in this country and in the eastern United States – to do so would be to deny Owenism itself. However, New Lanark was fundamentally important because it was the model which inspired Owen’s world view. Similarly, New Harmony, Indiana is particularly significant here because it was the first attempt to create a new community from the outset; one in which Owen was directly involved and one which was free from the limitations of the British socio-economic and political system.

NEW LANARK

If the new society was to be governed by kindness, respect, fairness etc., then Owen believed that the education system at New Lanark should reflect these principles and much has been written to that effect. However, much of this type of writing neglects to emphasise the earlier point that Owen was a social reformer, not an educator. It is certainly true that some of the education at New Lanark was ahead of its time and was influenced by Pestalozzianism, that it was theoretically child-centred and that it laid the foundations for infant education in Britain. However, it is essential to remember that the New Lanark system only embraced some elements of Pestalozzianism. There was no role for the mother and none for religion and there was no vocational training. Conversely, there were elements of Lancaster’s monitorial teaching methods for the older children, despite the fact had Owen had become critical of such methods. New Lanark was a factory community, founded and focused on cotton. It was also one which owed a great deal in terms of its reputation and financial success to David Dale who had established a day school in the village long before Owen came along.²⁴ During Owen’s time there, despite the ‘progressive’ methods for the younger pupils, ‘factory’ methods of rote learning and mass instruction were clearly evident in the New Institution throughout the period. In New Harmony, of course, there was no focus on cotton and no history of manufacturing. There was, however, the opportunity to mould the citizens of the new world, in a land whose very Constitution seemed to afford endless possibilities to ‘social entrepreneurs’ like Owen.

Robert Dale Owen in his *Outline of the System of Education at New Lanark*²⁵ makes it clear that the general aims and principles behind the system at New Lanark were influenced in part by Pestalozzi and by the overarching principles of Owenite education, i.e. ‘rationality’ and ‘happiness’. The pupils were governed

by kindness and there were no unnatural rewards and punishments – only natural consequences.

By natural rewards and punishments, we mean the necessary consequences, immediate and remote, which result from any action.²⁶

Happiness was their ‘being’s end and aim’.²⁷

Whatever, in its ultimate consequences, increases the happiness of the community, is right; and whatever, on the other hand tends to diminish that happiness is wrong.²⁸

Fundamental here is the notion that personal happiness was ultimately and necessarily connected with that of the community – a connection which Robert Dale Owen was later to acknowledge as hopelessly misguided.²⁹

Subjects and knowledge were conveyed to pupils in as pleasant and agreeable a manner as possible and were designed to interest them as much as possible. There were 300 day-pupils and the younger ones (2-5 years) were taught in three rooms on the lower storey of the New Institution. The classes were mixed-sex and, although class sizes are somewhat vague, they were ‘of larger size’ than the 20-40 pupils in the older classes upstairs.³⁰ The young ones were taught reading, natural history and geography, and it seems clear that, despite the frequent assertion that there was no formal teaching,³¹ some kind of child-centred approach was being used. James Buchanan and the 17-year old Molly Young were chosen for the job of school master and assistant respectively because of their kindly personalities and their abilities with young children. Neither were qualified teachers but there is evidence of instruction taking place through structured play, object lessons, choral verse, drama, singing and dancing, even at this early stage.³² Similarly, the fairly novel idea of a playground was an important part of this. Molly Young supervised up to 100 infants, ‘without harshness or punishment’, apparently rendering them ‘contented and happy’.³³

As ever, the purpose was clear, i.e. the happiness of the individual which would lead, in turn, to increased co-operation and to the happiness of the community.

... these infants acquire the healthful and hardy habits and are at the same time trained to associate in a kind and friendly manner with their little companions, thus practically learning the pleasure to be derived from such conduct, in opposition to curious bickering or ill-natured disputes.³⁴

This relatively liberal, Pestalozzi-inspired model was only partly extended to the older pupils (6-10 or 12 years if their parents allowed it) upstairs. There was certainly some use of the object lesson, matched to the level of individual understanding and such objects were frequently drawn from the world of nature – pictures and specimens of reptiles, birds, minerals and when these were not available, there were large painted canvasses depicting topics from natural history and important historical events in the form of a time line. The canvasses were hung on rollers in one of the principal school rooms (also used for concerts, dances and recitals). Children were taken out to gather specimens in the local woods and were also taken on educational excursions.³⁵ The object lesson also involved, then as now, targeted questioning to elicit existing knowledge and related ideas and to introduce new knowledge and take the lesson forward at an appropriate pace. Each separate-sex class had a ‘master’. There was also a teacher who taught dancing and singing, one who taught drill and there was also a sewing mistress.³⁶

However, also much in evidence was the ‘factory’ method of instruction. One of the main school rooms was ‘fitted up with desks and forms on the Lancasterian plan.’³⁷ Despite assertions to the contrary, reading seems to have been a fairly mechanical process for the older pupils. There was a shortage of books and passages

were read out by one pupil, followed by questions to ensure the others were following the chain of events. In writing, there appeared to be an emphasis on dictation and copying. Only in Arithmetic was there any mention of more progressive methods and even here this was limited. One class was to begin a new course in mental arithmetic where the teacher attempted to explain why the answers were correct and how these arithmetical problems related to real life. However, Natural History, Geography, Ancient & Modern History were all taught 'in familiar lectures, delivered extempore by the teachers.' The audience (40-50 pupils) were then questioned to test their understanding.³⁸

Robert Dale Owen's *Outline* was written in 1824 and, in a youthful attempt to defend his father's principles, he claimed that these lectures were striking and interesting to the children and that they were entirely suitable for future citizens of the new social system because they avoided anything which might be 'irrational and injurious to the happiness of the community.'³⁹

Young as he was, Robert Dale Owen could recognise some of the drawbacks of the New Lanark system, or at least of the framework in which the system operated, in the grand scale of his father's mission. The children only spent a few hours each day in school and still lived with their parents who had been brought up in the old ways. Any good work done by the schools was likely to be countered by parents who frequently failed to attend the evening classes and who did not, would not or could not understand the long-term aims of the system. It was also difficult to staff the school with appropriate teachers. Overall, the situation was 'imperfect and consequently incapable of uniformly producing all the results which would otherwise be obtained.'⁴⁰

It is hardly surprising, then, that his father's desire for a 'vast theatre on which to try his plans'⁴¹ could hardly be fulfilled at New Lanark. The opportunity to buy the Rappite community's land in Harmony, Indiana came at exactly the right time – 'here was liberty, equality and fraternity in downright earnest'.⁴²

Here was a village ready-built, a territory capable of supporting tens of thousands in a country where the expansion of thought was free, and where the people were unsophisticated.⁴³

NEW HARMONY

Theoretically, Harmony (re-named 'New Harmony' by Owen) offered the ideal opportunity for education to fulfil its prime function of moulding new citizens. If schools truly were 'the machinery for social and moral regeneration'⁴⁴ inherent in Owenism, then New Harmony should have been its promised land.

Space here does not permit a full discussion of events at New Harmony⁴⁵ but a brief overview is necessary to illustrate why it was that education was not apparently able to produce the required citizenry, despite the potentially ideal setting.

By January 1826, Owen senior had managed (eventually) to persuade a group of distinguished teachers, scientists and others to join him in New Harmony. Chief among these were William Maclure, Marie Fretageot, Joseph Neef and William Phiquepal – all experienced practitioners of Pestalozzianism in their own right and chosen for that very reason by Owen.

However, the seeds of dissent were sown early. Maclure, whom Owen considered as one of his partners in the venture (a view not shared by Maclure), was committed to Pestalozzian education. Owen was committed to social reform more than to the advancement of one particular educational theory. Maclure was a scientist, more cautious than Owen, and less prone to hyperbole. Above all, Maclure was well aware that if meaningful social reform were to be achieved, it would take a very long time – 'a century' or even longer.⁴⁶

The community on the banks of the Wabash river had been purchased by Owen

in 1825 and he had established a Preliminary Society which operated for some months. When he reappeared with the others in January 1826 on the keelboat forever afterwards nicknamed as 'The Boatload of Knowledge', he declared a 'Community of Equality' and embarked on a series of wide-ranging and premature reforms in a community which had only just drawn its first breath. Within a few short months, dissent and fragmentation had taken hold to such an extent that nothing could hope to retrieve it.

For this rather elite group of educators, at least, there was a spirit of optimism for the first few months of the Community of Equality. Fifty tons of books and musical and scientific instruments were delivered.⁴⁷ Workshops were established as an addition to the school curriculum and by March, 400 pupils were in school. In May of that year, an Education Society was established, largely in response to the open dissent in the larger community over money, land, credit, open admission and many other issues. It was felt that a separate, focused Education Society (separate from the Agricultural and Mechanics' Societies) would be able to settle and begin the process of educating the new citizenry. The existing citizenry, however, were distinctly unimpressed by what they saw (correctly) as elitist behaviour on the part of the educators - referred to pejoratively by the others as 'The Literati'.⁴⁸ Also, many were outraged at Owen's 4th July speech on Mental Independence. The larger community was fraught with dissent and would certainly have fractured in any event but his speech denounced both marriage and religion in the strongest terms, which alienated him further from many of the inhabitants.

Three schools did operate for a time. The Infants School for those aged 2-5 was run by Fretageot. The 180 children were 'nurtured in the ideals of communal living and the rudiments of play and learning'⁴⁹ and the teacher was to 'direct the amusements of the children'.⁵⁰ The Higher School was run by Neef with an offshoot, the Industrial School (although these titles were often interchanged), run by Phiquepal. There were 200 pupils aged 5-12 and 'object' lessons were the basis of much of the teaching. New machines were used for arithmetic, scientific instruments were used for experiments and there were new musical instruments available.⁵¹ Music, gym, drill, Natural History and Science were all part of the curriculum. Unlike New Lanark, the pupils spent some time in manual training, shoemaking, drawing, engraving, carpentry, hatmaking and agricultural labour for boys. The adult school was similar in concept to the New Institution in New Lanark but adult numbers were smaller. Maths, Chemistry and Natural History were all on offer, in addition to lectures by Owen himself or one of his acolytes. However, the community continued to disintegrate and 'these cumulative difficulties eventually affected the philosophy, methodology and structure of the Education Society'.⁵²

Owen preferred to see it differently. In his view, New Harmony was disintegrating because of the failure of the education system to deliver the message of Owenism quickly enough. Having left the operation of the Education Society to the 'experts' who had apparently failed him, he decided to take a hand in events. He hatched a short-lived and ill-conceived attempt at what he called 'Superior Education', to be run by himself. This was basically a system of rote-learning and lectures delivered by anyone who had a trade or occupation. When publicly challenged to provide more information on how this would work, he was unable to provide practical details.⁵³ Nevertheless, he attempted just such a system for some six weeks before quietly dropping the idea. This split in the Education Society, however, only fuelled discontent between Neef, Fretageot and Phiquepal and for some time afterwards, they too succumbed to the spirit of factionalism and ran their schools separately until Owen left in June 1827, followed shortly thereafter by Neef. Ironically, Owen's departure heralded the beginning of a relatively calm and successful period for the New Harmony schools until Fretageot died in 1833.

There were many reasons why New Harmony failed as an Owenite community. Owen laid the blame at the door of the Education Society, in fact at everyone's door but his own. It is clearly impossible for any system to educate or train 'new citizens, in months or even years – something which Owen claimed to understand. He simply lost patience as all around him began to collapse. He claimed to believe in Pestalozzi's methods but was much too hasty in reaching for 'factory' methods of mass education which simply could not provide the moral re-education which was required, either in New Lanark or New Harmony. Interestingly, one historian has noted that even in the Queenwood/Harmony community in the 1840's, Owen was still mentally 'rebuilding New Lanark'.⁵⁴

REBUILDING HISTORY?

Is 'education for citizenship' rebuilding history? At first sight, it would appear not, in as much as it is clearly not rebuilding Owenism. Most of the current debate on citizenship education centres on the notion of a democratic society and active, participative citizens within it. Owen was many a thing but a democrat he was not. The idea of citizens governing themselves within the proposed communities could only work up to a certain point, beyond which they required leadership from someone like himself until they were finally capable of providing a model for the rest of the world to copy. The communities formed by these citizens were set (in his earlier thinking) within a wider society run by traditional elites. Eventually, the communities would provide the model for a new way of thinking, a new world order. For Owen, democracy in the traditional form of elections, 'implied disagreement, competition, irrationality, disharmony.'⁵⁵ In fact, the new morality of Owenism – the new way of thinking and behaving was built on vague principles of unity and mutual co-operation sometimes based on age, sometimes class and sometimes occupation, rather than elections. Similarly, the notion of happiness which Owen often referred to has often been likened to 'docility'.

Nevertheless, there are echoes of Owen in the modern citizenship debate. Underlying much of that debate is the desire for a better world. Owen too had a vision of a better world. He would certainly have recognised the modern emphasis on the crucial role of education in the formation of character and behaviour. There is still a very moral message in citizenship – personal responsibility combined with a civic spirit and respect for the law, all of which have historical precedents, not least in Owen's view of the new millennium. Similarly, Owen talked (at length) of equality, justice and tolerance, all of which are to be found in the current debate.

There are other less obvious but equally interesting parallels which might be suggested. Owen was and remained a paternalist. Many have argued that he was guilty of benevolent self-interest. He was also impatient and made mistakes and was over-fond of rhetoric. We convince ourselves that we are unlikely to repeat any of these mistakes today or display any of the weaknesses of Owenism in our quest for citizenship for our young people – citizenship fostered by the education system. And we may well be justified in thinking so. However, just as Owen expounded the virtues of fairness, justice and equality at New Lanark while remaining a firmly paternalistic employer, perhaps we too may be presiding over something similar. Perhaps we have a vision which contains moral and noble ideas for our children while we as adults and educators remain firmly in control of what is to be learned and ultimately valued. Finally, and perhaps inevitably, Owen's new moral world was never achieved and there were many reasons for this. One of the most obvious was that he was long on rhetoric and short on practical detail. There may indeed be a lesson to be learned for all concerned in the modern debate on education for citizenship.

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- 55 Claeys, G., 1991. op.cit. p.xxix

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