

Abstract

Introduction

Robert Owen's relevant role in the history of Socialism has often been underrated. Without any doubt, his reputation as a social reformer was damaged by Karl Marx's strong criticism against his theories as shown in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in 1848, where Owen was regarded as a utopian and therefore as an unreliable thinker. Since then, his role in the subsequent development of Socialism has been virtually ignored.

The aim of this work is therefore to cast a light on Owen's doctrines in order to restore his place in the evolution of socialism. The present paper consists of three chapters, the first dealing with Owen's life and the situation of Great Britain at that time, the second with Owen's ideology and the third with his book or pamphlet *Report to the County of Lanark* (a plan for relieving public distress).

Chapter 1

Robert Owen was born in Newtown, Wales, on 14th May 1771. At that time, after the end of the Seven Years' War, Britain was about to become one of the greatest empires in the world thanks to its geographical extension as well as to its economic growth with the Industrial Revolution.

In 1781 Robert Owen joined his brother, William, in London and was employed by James McGuffog until their religious contrasts forced him to leave that job. Afterwards, he worked for Mr Flint and Mr Palmer in London before moving on to Mr Satterfield's company in Manchester, where in 1789 he successfully started up his own business in the growing cotton industry. In 1791,

he was bestowed by Mr Peter Drinkwater the management of one of his factories. In 1793, Owen joined the *Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society*, and met Thomas Percival, who would play an important role in the development of his doctrine. In 1795, Owen left Drinkwater's company and with other partners set up his own business in the cotton industry. In 1799, he purchased David Dale's - his father-in-law- cotton mills in New Lanark.

While the Industrial Revolution was dramatically changing British society, Owen tried to run his cotton mills taking into account the needs of his workers, who were indeed granted better working conditions than in other factories. Following his principles, he broke down the unfair system of poor apprentices, raised the minimum working age, reduced working hours, promoted children's education and granted social benefits to his employees. The social experiment he carried out in New Lanark was a success.

In the first three decades of the 19th century, while Great Britain was characterised by social unrest, in 1815 Robert Owen endeavoured the reform of the factory system, but unfortunately his projects did not succeed. In 1817, he submitted his proposal to the Committee of the House of Commons on the Poor Law. In the same year, he wrote a leaflet against religion which made him unpopular amongst many of his previous supporters. In 1820, he authored the *Report to the County of Lanark*, but unfortunately his proposals were not accepted.

In the 1830s and 1840s, several *Friendly Societies* as well as a Labour Movement – Chartism - were born. Robert Owen played an important role in Britain at the time, in spite of the failure of his social experiment in New Harmony, Indiana, in 1828. In 1832, he founded a cooperative association named *National Equitable Labour Exchange*. In 1834, he became the leader of the *Grand National Consolidated Trades Union*. Yet both experiences were over in 1834. In 1839, he aimed at carrying out a new community experiment in

Queenwood, which failed in 1845. In 1857, he wrote his autobiography and in 1858 he died in Newtown.

Chapter 2

Owen's ideas were clearly influenced by the Enlightenment, Utilitarianism and Paternalism. The Enlightenment appears in the way Owen conveyed his theories, which are presented as truth eventually unveiled through his research. Utilitarianism can be detected in the central role played by the concept of happiness in the bulk of Owen's theories. Last, but not least, Paternalism represented the action method Owen employed while carrying out his community experiments.

Based on a rather original concept of human beings, Owen's theory is developed in his *Five Fundamental Facts of the Rational System of Society* contained in *The Book of the New Moral World*. According to the five facts, the feelings and the beliefs of each individual are dependent from an "original organization" dating back to life before birth. This original organization is then affected and even modified by "external circumstances" (mainly constituted by the ideas and by the habits of our social environment). Therefore, man is not endowed with free will and even his feelings and beliefs simply depend on the interaction of the original organization with external circumstances.

According to the Owen's theory, if all external and negative circumstances responsible for the vicious characters of human beings could be removed, it would be possible to reduce poverty in British society. Moreover, he thought that the Industrial Revolution had imbued the British with that peculiar feature hindering both collective and personal happiness. The laws of the capitalistic system were indeed destroying the pattern of the traditional British society and the conditions of the British working class.

Robert Owen struggled against the new logic of the individualistic ideology in Britain, by proposing policies against the increasing social inequality caused by the Industrial Revolution. For this reason, he committed himself first to communitarianism, then to cooperativism and trade unions, and finally he worked on developing his theories.

Therefore, after analysing his thought, we can say that he was one of the most significant representatives of Socialism and this explains why his doctrine was object of critical interpretation. Basically, there were three trends in the criticism of his theory. The first was provided by his followers, the so-called owenists, the second by some representatives of the Fabian Society, the third by Marx and Engels.

Chapter 3

Thanks to his pragmatic approach, Robert Owen was able to confer a special, constructive quality to his Socialism. This led him to build up communes, set up cooperatives and develop projects to reduce poverty, such as the *Report to the County of Lanark* in 1820.

In the first part of this Report, Owen wrote that the Industrial Revolution caused the rise of unemployment and the reduction of wages. Consequently, the purchasing power of the majority of the population decreased and this affected the market capacity to absorb production. In the same part of the report, Owen also developed his theory of value. In his view, as in David Ricardo's, the value of each good derives from the amount of work embedded in it. So, Owen inferred that the solution would be to enlarge the markets as to create new jobs, to rise wages and to build up a new system to measure economic value based on the real source of value itself, i.e. work.

In the second part of his Report, Robert Owen presented his bizarre plan to create new jobs: working in the fields using spades rather than ploughs. He thought this would surely relieve unemployment and at the same time would increase food production to meet the needs of a population of 100 million people. Also in this part of the Report, Owen emphasised the importance of work as the criterion to measure value and as the basis of an economic system where the results of workers labour would not be taken away from them.

In the third part of the Report, Owen explained that society could be changed forward to could only take place after the re-organization of that same society. This reorganization could be carried out dividing the population into self-sustaining communities, mainly devoted to farming. The communities had to be shaped as parallelograms, with buildings to mark the perimeter and some more in the middle. The adult population would occupy the buildings along the perimeter. All houses would contain bedrooms and living rooms, whereas kitchens should be built in common areas. Moreover, each room had to be adequately aired, cooled or heated by the most up-to-date technological equipments.

Owen also developed projects on kitchens and common areas (where the community would be able to live together developing a strong sense of belonging), on clothing, on children's education (an important element in a process of social re-generation), and on the way communities had to be run. He also wrote a plan on communities relationship with the national government and the old society, until the complete disappearance of the latter.

Conclusions

This work has attempted to present Robert Owen's theory in order to restore his place in the history of Socialism. Karl Marx rightly defined Owen as a utopian thinker, but he did not acknowledge Owen's merits and basically underestimated his ideas. Robert Owen was the first to become aware of the

disrupting power of economic pressure on society and he lucidly thought of reshaping society after the Industrial Revolution to prevent economic laws from overruling human life.

By conferring new dignity to Owen and his theories, we might as well be able to find new solutions to the most relevant issues of the 21st century. For instance, the environmental problem could be solved only if we are able to shape our society in a different way, therefore challenging the basis of modern capitalism.

In conclusion, Owen's theory can be useful both to understand the development of the Socialism and to find an answer to the questions distressing of our times.