Scientific Socialism: The Case of Robert Owen

David Leopold

(i)

Robert Owen is rightly acknowledged as '[t]he central figure of British Socialism in the first half of the nineteenth century', a writer and reformer who was well-known and respected in both establishment and radical circles.[1] Few contemporaries would have predicted the comparative obscurity and neglect which is his current fate. In what follows, I briefly introduce Owen's life and work, before turning to consider the place of science and government in his communitarian socialism. (By 'communitarian socialism' I mean a socialism which views the creation of intentional communities – small voluntary settlements of individuals living and working together for some common purpose – as both the means of transition to, and the final institutional form of, a socialist society.)

Born in Newtown, in Wales, in 1771, Owen left home at the age of ten. He worked first as a draper's assistant, and then – with considerable entrepreneurial success – in the expanding cotton industry. His move, as manager and part-owner, to the New Lanark Mill in Scotland, provided him with a large and self-contained (therefore controllable) environment to implement improvements based on his evolving views about the formation of human character (see below). In *A New View of Society* (1813-14), Owen emphasised the transformation in the character of the workforce that resulted from his policies of improving working (and living) conditions, moderating child labour, and providing infant education. At this time, he wrote as a 'manufacturer for pecuniary profit' distinctive mainly in advising his peers to take as much care of their 'vital machines' as they did of their 'inanimate machines', ensuring that both were kept clean, kindly-treated, and well-supplied.[2] Owen's views subsequently evolved in a more radical direction, but he would always portray New Lanark as confirming both the veracity of his views about human character, and the accuracy of his self-image as a successful practical reformer (and emphatically not a speculative armchair theorist).

Owen always retained his views about the formation of character, and a certain innocence about the nature of power, but began to develop a more critical understanding of the contemporary social world, and a more ambitious account of the remedies that might be required to avoid its failings. After his much-heralded success at New Lanark – much-heralded, not least, by himself (he was a skilled self-publicist) – Owen sought a larger public role, initially as an authoritative voice on factory legislation and the alleviation of poverty, but increasingly as a radical critic of contemporary society.

After 1817, Owen came to identify existing forms of religion, marriage, and property, as preventing the emergence of a more rational and humane society. He attacked existing religions for their sectarian and superstitious attitudes, and for being based on ideas about character formation destructive of human well-being and happiness. Owen also rejected existing marriage arrangements for compelling men and women who did not love each other to live together, for their social results (crime and prostitution), and again for their impact on character (generating selfishness, cunning, and deceitfulness). Finally, he criticised the existing economic system – based on competition and the idea of buying cheap and selling dear – primarily for its impact on character (competition encouraged the 'most inferior feelings, the meanest faculties, the worse passions, and the most

injurious vices'), but also variously, for being inefficient and wasteful, for creating unhealthy and unpleasant employment, for overproducing commodities with little or no intrinsic worth, and for encouraging injurious inequalities.[3]

Alongside this critique of existing society – which alienated some of the establishment figures who had supported his earlier philanthropic endeavours – Owen began to advocate small intentional communities as a way of meeting the current economic crisis and alleviating the condition of the poor. However, the more that Owen considered the advantages of communitarian life, the more he became convinced that *everyone* would be better off living inside intentional communities of the right kind. In a 'Further Development of the Plan' (1817), he envisaged communal settlements as providing the basis of a new kind of society based on cooperation.

The benefits of communitarian life would be many. Domestic duplication would be avoided, for instance, with better food being prepared at a fraction of the effort and cost of individual family arrangements. However, the main advantage of these rational social arrangements would be their transforming effect on the physical, intellectual, and moral character of humankind. The ignorant, irrational, and miserable, population of the old world, would be replaced by 'intelligent, rational, and happy' persons.[4] Indeed, Owen seems to have found it hard to imagine any disadvantages of communal living, except perhaps the danger of too many of those living under the old order rushing precipitately into the new arrangements.[5] Communal settlements would usher us into, and form the social framework of, what Owen would come to call the 'new moral world'. That millenarian language was not a slip. Whereas Christian prophecy predicted that a 'period of universal virtue and happiness' would emerge at some unspecified and distant point in the future (and last for a thousand years), Owen now identified a 'Millennium state of existence' (which would last forever) as near at hand, awaiting only the social changes that he recommended.[6]

Communitarian preoccupations would occupy much of Owen's remaining life. After the false start of the British and Foreign Philanthropic Society (which failed to fund a trial settlement), he took matters into his own hands, purchasing a township in 20,000 acres, in Indiana, as the basis for the New Harmony settlement (1825-1827). Owen would spend five years (1824-1829) in America, promoting his ideas to distinguished audiences (including Congressmen and President), and losing four-fifths of the fortune he had acquired from New Lanark. The New Harmony settlement fell apart before it was really established, yet Owen's confidence in his communitarian views remained undiminished. Returning to Britain, he turned his attentions to a settlement called Harmony, in Hampshire (1839-1845). Like its American counterpart, Harmony had a complicated and short-lived existence. In both cases, the proximate causes of communal collapse include inadequate preparation, undercapitalisation, inappropriate skills of membership, poor internal accounting, and disputes about property arrangements and governance.

Between these transatlantic communal experiments came the brief period when (parts of) the growing Owenite movement coalesced with two mass working class movements. Owenites took part in the first wave of the cooperative movement; most famously in the period (1832-33) when Owenite 'labour exchanges' issued labour notes as an alternative to currency. Owen portrayed rational economic arrangements as balancing production and consumption (thereby avoiding crises of overproduction), and replacing money with labour notes (thereby avoiding the circulation problems of an 'artificial' standard of value such as gold). In addition, Owenites were involved in the period of dramatic trades union

growth, especially in the building trades, culminating in the short-lived Grand National Consolidated Trades Union (which collapsed in 1834).

Owen was never entirely comfortable with this close proximity to working class struggles. He maintained that rich and poor have but one interest, and encouraged the latter to view the former as potential friends and active collaborators. After 1835, Owen guided the movement into its so-called 'sectarian' phase. 'The Rational Society' built halls of science, providing a base for 'social missionaries', and cultural and leisure activities for members (typically drawn from the best paid strata of the working class). By 1840 there were over sixty branches, with weekly events – including dances, concerts, lectures, and debates (all with a whiff of teetotalism) – 'instituted to improve the habits and manners of the working classes, and more generally to cultivate kindly feeling and social fellowship among all classes'.[7] Owenite events sometimes shadowed the Christian calendar, with branches providing Owenite sermons and hymns on Sundays, and even Owenite rites for baptisms, marriages, and funerals.[8] The society's best-known newspaper, the weekly *New Moral World*, ran for nearly eleven years (1834-45), and had a peak circulation of some 40,000. The relationship between the Rational Society and Owenite communitarian ambitions was complex, but the organisation was eventually bankrupted by its, sometimes reluctant, financial involvement in Owen's communal experiment at Harmony.

Even after the effective collapse of the Owenite movement, Owen (now in his late seventies) remained an indefatigable reformer. He made several proselytising visits to America, and in 1846 mediated in a border dispute in Oregon.[9] In 1848, he spent five months in revolutionary Paris, promoting Owenite ideas – as best as an English-speaking monoglot might – and offering his services to the provisional government of the February Revolution.[10]

Owen's final years were dominated by his (1853) conversion to Spiritualism, and the publication of *The Life of Robert Owen Written by Himself* (1857-8). That conversion embarrassed some of Owen's subsequent admirers, but he would always insist on the links between socialism and spiritualism; for instance, a spiritual communication to Owen from the former Duke of Kent confirmed that there were no titles in the afterlife; and an American follower provided him with architectural plans (for a new settlement) sent from the spirit world. Owen himself passed beyond the veil in 1858.

(ii)

There is something approaching a broad consensus amongst traditional commentators, about the political dimension of Owen's life and work. His political views, we are variously told, are 'undemocratic', 'aristocratic', 'conservative', 'paternalistic', and so on. It seems that Owen is to be placed squarely in the tradition of what has been called 'socialism from above', combining some collectivist ideas with a commitment to elite rule.[11] W.L. Sargent, his (Owenite) first biographer concedes that Owen's 'notions of government generally were anything but democratic, and had rather a paternal leaning'.[12] Max Beer, the distinguished historian of socialism, insists that Owen 'was no democrat'; he could be the 'self-sacrificing father and teacher' of the masses 'their authoritative adviser and leader, but never the *primus inter pares*'.[13] Frank Podmore, the Fabian biographer of Owen, describes him as 'aristocratic in his methods and the whole cast of his mind. He appears always to have conceived of reform as something imposed upon

the mass of the people from above'.[14] Arthur Bestor, the great historian of American communitarianism, suggests that 'a certain distrust of popular control marked all his proposals for reform'.[15] And the Marxist writer Ralph Miliband characterises Owen's approach to politics as 'cautious and conservative'.[16]

These labels – 'undemocratic', 'aristocratic', and so on – are not identical, nor is their precise meaning always clear. Moreover, the relation between these adjacent but distinct characterisations is uncertain, and individually they seem ill-equipped to capture the complexities of Owen's views about politics and government (see below). Nonetheless, this traditional consensus is seemingly supported by a wide range of evidence from Owen's life and writings.[17]

Examples of a lack of democratic sensibility on Owen's part are easily found. In 1817, for instance, he expressed surprise that ordinary members of the public attending a recent meeting had raised objections to his reform plans; surely the 'gentlemen' in question could not have imagined that he 'wished to have the opinions of the ill-trained and uninformed on any of the measures intended for their relief and amelioration'.[18] Yet more than a sensibility is at issue here. Both the structure of the wider Owenite movement and Owen's behaviour within it are pertinent. Early incarnations of the Rational Society, for instance, had a 'patriarchal' rather than 'democratic' structure, with Owen, of course, as 'Father'. And within Owenite institutions, Owen typically resisted any restrictions on his authority. When the annual congress of the Rational Society proposed some modest constraints on his powers, Owen resigned as the governor of Harmony – a key stage in its evolving collapse – explaining that 'he could not accept of office in connection with the society, unless he could have full authority to act as circumstances rendered it necessary, without reference to previous resolutions'.[19]

Owen's attitude towards political change might also support these traditional characterisations. Owen's socialism of 'all classes of all nations' pitched him against, both those reformers who sought purely political changes, and those who had a social programme but sought to advance it through conflict. Addressing the first group, which included some Chartists, he insisted that '[i]t is not Universal Suffrage, Vote by Ballot, and Annual Parliaments that can effect that which is now required for the people of all countries'.[20] Disputes over 'despotism, aristocracy, and democracy' were either, irrelevant (insofar as the real cause of social problems was neither the number of rulers, nor the process by which they were selected, but rather their ignorance), or, part of the problem (insofar as they reflected a kind of 'desolating conflict between parties whose real interests are the same').[21] Addressing the second group, which included certain 'red republicans, communists, and socialists of Europe', he criticised their anger and ill-will towards their opponents as, either, 'irrational' (because it presupposes what is – on the Owenite account – false, namely that the 'higher classes' are responsible for the misery of the 'lower classes'), or, 'useless' (because it encourages, misplaced but nonetheless real, resistance to change on the part of the 'higher classes'). In addition, Owen rejected class struggle for broadly prefigurative reasons; he insisted that a rational and humane society could never 'be effected by violence, or through feelings of anger and ill-will to any portion of mankind', but only though means which embodied 'the spirit of peace, kindness, and charity' which characterised its goals.[22] A crucial advantage of the communitarian strategy, for Owen, was that it accommodated his distinctive ambition of a 'peaceful revolution', combining dramatic social transformation with the absence of injury to any part of existing society.[23] Settlements would spread gradually by the power

of example, peacefully expanding from community to community, country to continent, until the whole world was organized according to cooperative principles.

The traditional consensus about Owen's political views perhaps also draws support from his concessive attitude towards the existing establishment. Owen was not merely convinced that his proposed social arrangements were in the interests of all, but was also persuaded of the good will, and openness to reason, of contemporary political elites. That confidence extended well beyond the circle of wealthy philanthropists and politicians who had, for example, joined him in lobbying for the 1819 Factory Act. Writing as 'Your Majesty's Faithful Friend', Owen happily appealed to William IV to use his authority to help 'reconstitute society upon a new and solid basis';[24] and subsequently petitioned Queen Victoria to use the power of the British Empire for good, by adopting his policy recommendations.[25]

Owen's governmental preferences within transitional communities might also lend support to this traditional consensus. By *transitional* communities, I mean those in which at least some settlement members have characters partly formed under the irrational social arrangements of the old world. Owen accepted that private property, class divisions, and inequality of condition, might all continue for a time in transitional communities; for instance, settlements might house individuals of independent wealth who availed themselves of the superior domestic and social arrangements but were not required to contribute to production.[26] More importantly, in the present context, the governing minority in transitional communities would be selected only from full members – rather than the (numerically superior) groups of candidate members and wage labourers that also made up the community – and those chosen would be those already 'in the practice of directing extensive operations in old society'.[27] The social origins of this group are clear; for the time being, at least, Owen insists that 'the middle class is the only efficient directing class in society'.[28]

Owen maintains that governing a transitional settlement is '*the most difficult task* that man will ever have to perform'.[29] It is analogous to superintending 'a great lunatic asylum', except that in the communitarian (unlike the asylum) case the 'patients' (that is, the members of the settlements) are 'armed' – they have the 'power of life and death' in a thousand different ways – and the 'physicians' (that is, the communal governors) have no weapon aside from reason, truth, and kindness.[30] This remarkable and revealing image confirms both Owen's view of government as a paternalistic activity requiring specialist expertise, and the personal impact of his own difficulties in exercising authority within the movements that he helped to found.

This survey confirms the variety of evidence supporting the traditional characterisations of Owen's politics as 'undemocratic', 'aristocratic', 'conservative', and so on. Indeed, whatever their limitations (see above), it is hard to deny that these labels have some purchase on their target. However, this evidence concerns, either Owen's own character and behaviour (rather than his theoretical views), or it refers only to his theoretical views about transitional communities. In what follows, I discuss the somewhat neglected topic of governmental arrangements in *non*-transitional, communities (in which all members have been born and educated within rational circumstances). Owen's non-transitional preferences complicate, or so I will argue, this consensus about his political views.

I introduce these issues somewhat obliquely, by first considering the importance of science, and scientific governance, in Owen's political thought. Agrarian threads in Owenism can obscure its forward-looking character, and its embrace of science and technology. Crucially, Owen insists that the new moral world is only accessible – that is, reachable from where humankind is currently situated – because of three recent scientific breakthroughs.

First, the new moral world is accessible because of recent historical developments in technology and natural science. Owenite socialism is only feasible because of material abundance, which in turn depends on the increased productivity resulting from the utilization of recent scientific breakthroughs within a new and more rational social environment. Owen welcomed the 'new inventions and discoveries' of the last hundred or so years, especially developments in 'mechanics, chemistry, and other sciences' which had increased the ability of humankind to satisfy their material wants.[31] In present society, Owen allows that scientific and technological progress has generated unwelcome results, including 'poverty, destitution, crime, and consequent extreme suffering'.[32] However, in suitably altered social conditions, this 'new scientific power' would create abundance beyond 'the imagination of ordinary minds' without harmful effects.[33] Owenite enthusiasm for science and technology is also apparent in the lectures and entertainments of the Rational Society. One breathless branch report merits quotation: 'On Friday last … the philosophical experiments … were of a superior description. Amongst some of the experiments were the oxy-hydrogen and Bude lights, the last new invention of Mr. Gurney for light-houses; decomposition of various chemical compounds, as sugar, potassa, &c.; and with a good electrical machine we were enabled to electrify nearly all present at one time. Besides other experiments, a model of a Montgolfier balloon ascended in the hall twice during the evening, and at the close was committed *ad nubes*. The nitrous oxide, or laughing gas, exerted its full powers on this occasion, delighting all by its singular effects. Between the leading experiments, the lively dance was indulged in, thus at once blending the acme of mental and physical enjoyments'.[34]

Second, the new moral world is accessible because Owen had discovered and refined 'the science of human nature'. Its two central claims are: that individuals do not form their own character (their character is rather *wholly* formed for them by natural and social circumstances); and, seemingly as a consequence, that individuals are not accountable for their own sentiments and habits (the practice of punishment and reward purportedly embodies a fundamental and pernicious error). There are material constraints here; human nature is not a blank sheet of paper, on which 'educators' can write anything they want. However, human nature is sufficiently malleable that, with the appropriate means, any 'general character' from the 'best' to the 'worst' can be created in a community. In *A New View of Society*, Owen contrasts a 'good' character that is intelligent, rational and happy, with a 'bad' character that is ignorant, irrational, and miserable.[35] In his communitarian writings, the environmental transformation of character is even more dramatic, effectively resulting in 'a new race', physically, intellectually, and morally, far superior to any who have previously lived upon the earth.[36]

Third, the new moral world is only accessible because of breakthroughs in 'the science of society'.[37] (The Owenite William Thompson has been credited with the earliest English use of the term 'social science' which retained Owenite associations into the 1840s.)[38] This science is concerned with 'the architectural materials with which to build up a new

state of human existence'; designing the institutional and other arrangements embodying the principle of union governing the new moral world (replacing the principle of individualism which governed the old immoral one), and forming the best of human character.[39] The detail of these social arrangements varies from text to text, but the broad outlines of a representative *non*-transitional Owenite community – that is, a settlement in which all have been 'trained from birth to become rational men and women' – are easily sketched.[40]

The non-transitional community would be small, accommodating perhaps two thousand five hundred persons, living and working together, on an estate some three thousand acres in extent. The main communal buildings would form a closed 'parallelogram' – on the model, commentators often say, of an oversized Oxford or Cambridge college – with living quarters on its sides, and public rooms (such as lecture rooms, libraries, concert halls, and infirmaries) at the corners. A great communal dining hall would be located alongside botanic gardens inside the huge quadrangle. And many of the working parts of the building – brewery, kitchens, and so on – would be found on the extensive basement level. The result would be nothing less than 'a magnificent palace, containing within itself the advantages of a metropolis, an university, and a country residence, without any of their disadvantages, and situated within a beautiful park'.[41] There would be hot and cold running water, gas lighting throughout, and the latest labour saving devices where appropriate. Many familiar occupations would have disappeared (lawyers, bankers, and priests, are predictably early casualties), but idleness would be unknown. Mechanism and science would have got rid of 'all severe, unhealthy, or, even unpleasant human labour', and only labour consisting in the healthy and pleasurable exercise of our physical and mental powers would remain.[42] To facilitate this, agricultural work would predominate over manufacturing. Communities would be largely autarchic, with only limited external 'trade'. Owen's conviction that labour was the source of all wealth, and that competition bred an undesirable character, led him to endorse common property and equality of condition in non-transitional circumstances. The community would have a shared ethos, emphasising 'a family affection', and individuals would possess 'a lively interest' in the well being and happiness of others.[43] Childcare would be partly collectivised, and education in the narrow sense (that is, schooling) would play a crucial formative role. Owen was sensitive to the charge that he was an enemy of family feeling, and maintained that his modest collectivisation would result in less separation of parents from their children than occurred at present (he had in mind the contemporary separations resulting from the privations of the poor, the work demands of the middle classes, and the use of boarding schools by the wealthy).

All three of these sciences are necessary in order to bring about the new moral world, but the relationship between the two Owenite sciences is especially close. The science of human nature is concerned with the abstract principles of character formation; embracing, for instance, the claim that the individual 'will' is just another part of character formed by circumstances.[44] The science of society is a practical science of social design which presupposes, and makes use of, those abstract principles, in generating concrete institutional and other recommendations. These two sciences have to be 'united and formed into a practical system' if they are to benefit the human race fully.[45] Previous thinkers, 'from the time of Plato to the present', had typically fallen into one of two camps: either 'men of words' who knew little of practical measures; or men engaged in the 'practical operations of society' who 'seldom, knew or troubled themselves' about the principles regulating the formation of human character.[46] In contrast, Owen presents himself as understanding both 'practical measures', and the 'principles which should

direct them'.[47] Given recent innovation in natural science and technology, the unification of the sciences of human nature and society promises dramatic historical consequences. Simply put, these three scientific breakthroughs would enable the world to be transformed into 'a terrestrial paradise', and its inhabitants to become 'rational and superior beings'.[48]

(iv)

The science of society, drawing on the science of human nature, includes a knowledge of 'the principles and practice by which to *govern* man'.[49] Owenite government is educative in the broad sense, concerned with the social environment in which all individuals are circumstanced. Its purpose is to 'devise and execute the arrangements by which the conditions essential to human happiness shall be fully and permanently obtained for all the governed'.[50]

Even in non-transitional circumstances, government is still required. It constitutes one of the four 'general departments of life' in settlements (alongside production, distribution, and education in the narrow sense). Communal flourishing still requires government because there remains some opacity or disagreement about the best arrangements, and, Owen insists, the 'final decision upon every doubtful point of practice must rest somewhere'.[51] As well as a clear distinction between government and governed, minority rule will also remain (see below). Yet, in comparison with transitional circumstances: there will be less governing; it will no longer be coercive; and it will be easy.

First, Owen suggests that in non-transitional circumstances, there might be rather little for government to do. Laws are still needed but, given rational people in rationally arranged circumstances, 'these laws are few', they are universal (applying across the rationally organised world), and they have already been discovered (requiring execution not legislation).[52] Owen explains that once we are beyond transitional circumstances 'there will be no necessity for any other laws than the twenty-five now enumerated and explained' in the *Book of the New Moral World* (1842-44).[53]

Second, government in non-transitional communities is not backed by coercive force. Government proceeds 'without force or fraud, and solely by reason and kindness'; the power of reason replaces Lenin's bodies of armed men, and ideology (in the pejorative Marxian sense) and individual punishment (or rewards) are redundant.[54] Owen assumes that reason and experience will produce clear and determinate decisions, and that those decision will typically be accepted happily by the governed.

Third, given the rational social arrangements and the resulting character of community members, 'there will be no difficulty in the government of such a population'.[55] By comparison with governing in transitional circumstances – a task akin, recall, to running an asylum where the inmates are armed, and the only resources available to the governors are reason and kindness – this looks like a sinecure. In non-transitional circumstances, Owen suggests that to 'govern the world … will become, not only easy, but a constant source of pleasure, a pastime' to those whose task it is 'assisted as they will be, cordially and heartily, by those of every age and qualification'.[56]

There is much that is puzzling and problematic about these claims. There are some obvious reasons for scepticism; for instance, about whether coercion is so easily made

redundant. There is also some need for elaboration; for instance, about the nature of law. Contemporary legal codes function as a monument to 'the barbarism which yet covers the earth'; their biggest flaw is predictably their commitment to false ideas of responsibility and punishment, but their component laws are also 'innumerable'; 'opposed to nature'; 'inconsistent', and 'too complicated'.[57] The form, content, and function, of non-transitional laws will be very different.

First, these laws are 'fundamental laws of nature, not of man's invention'.[58] 'Human laws' are needed in transitional circumstances, but once 'all shall be trained from their birth within rational circumstances, and of course made rational in their feelings, thoughts, and actions, no human laws will be required'.[59] At this point 'nature's laws, well understood and consistently applied to practice, will be sufficient to secure the well-being, well-doing, and the permanent happiness of the race, and then will all human laws be for ever abolished'.[60] Properly understood, these natural laws are both laws of reason and '*divine* laws' proceeding from a cause unknown and mysterious to us (Owen's hostility to existing religions did not make him doubt the potential of natural religion to benefit humankind).[61] The role of individuals is simply to discover these laws (which Owen claims to have already done), and then live according to them (which he is trying to arrange).

Second, the content of these 'twenty-five substantive laws, all deduced from, and in unison with, the ascertained *laws of nature*' is striking.[62] They are sufficient for the government of humankind partly because they have the form of basic, or constitutional law (rather than of ordinary statutes). They include: that 'all will have liberty to express the truth, not only as respects their natural thoughts and feelings, but upon all subjects, civil and religious' (first law);[63] that '[b]oth sexes shall have equal education, rights, privileges, and personal liberty' (eleventh law);[64] and that 'there shall be no individual reward or punishment' (thirteenth law).[65] In short, these laws look like broad statements of Owenite principle – grounded, of course, in the sciences of human nature and society – which are to be applied in particular cases by the communal governments in question.

Third, and reinforcing this impression of their quasi-constitutional form, these laws function to constrain government. Owen's commitment to something like 'the rule of law' might be surprising (given his obsession with the formation of character), but it is consistent with the natural and divine character of the relevant laws. As the twenty-second law states: the home and foreign councils 'shall have full power of government, *in all things under their direction*, as long as they shall govern in accordance with the divine laws of nature, which will be their sole guide'.[66] In non-transitional circumstances, it is 'scarcely possible' that they won't do this, yet the twenty-fifth *and final* law does provide for a situation where the general councils 'have acted, or attempted to act, in opposition to these divine laws'.[67] These emergency procedures involve an investigation initiated by those who have previously held office, conducted 'calmly and patiently', and ultimately judged by a majority of non-governing members of the community over the age of sixteen (exclusion from office being the result for those found to have acted, or attempted to act, against natural law).[68]

Thus far, I have described Owen as endorsing minority rule, but said nothing about how that minority is to be selected. Having rejected all standard forms of government – 'despotism, limited monarchy, oligarchy, aristocracy, republicanism or democracy' all fail to produce a superior character or happiness for those governed – Owen recommends a kind of gerontocracy as the only rational form of government.[69] He doesn't use that term

himself, but 'gerontocracy' seems an appropriate label for government involving the rule of a natural aristocracy of 'age and experience'.[70] (In what follows, 'gerontocracy' denotes only Owen's distinctive variant of rule by age and experience.) The form that this gerontocracy takes, its main justification, and its many advantages, are all of interest.

First, Owen's endorsement of gerontocracy forms part of a wider account of age as the only 'natural and rational' social division (unlike the artificial and irrational contemporary divisions of 'class and station').[71] Apart from the distinctions of age, individuals will have 'a perfect equality in their education, condition, occupations, and enjoyments'.[72] Owen recommends 'precise, permanent, divisions of human life' (revisable in the light of experience) which identify age groups (and corresponding social roles).[73] The precise divisions vary between texts, but a representative account gives us: from birth to five years old (rational training at nursing and infant schools); five to ten years (education increasingly integrated into light work); ten to fifteen (training in the scientific principles of the arts of life and productive activity); fifteen to twenty (productive activity, instructing the young, and exposure to new and superior marriage arrangements); twenty to twenty-five (senior roles in production and instruction); and twenty-five to thirty (ensuring efficient distribution and consumption). Only with the seventh and eighth group do we get to the two groups who will govern domestic and external affairs respectively. Thirty to forty year olds form a general council governing domestic affairs; its various committees directing production, distribution, and education. Forty to sixty year olds govern external affairs: receiving visitors; arranging transfers of surplus produce; communicating new inventions and discoveries; assisting with the creation of new communities; and so on. They might be viewed as 'sovereigns of the world' travelling widely, enjoying the best the new civilisation can offer, and ensuring that none remain 'in an ignorant or barbarous state', that local prejudice is eroded and rational arrangements spread universally.[74] Finally, there is the ninth group of those effectively retired from governmental duties which, we can assume, are less pleasurable and effective given waning 'physical and mental vigour'.[75] In rational circumstances, Owen speculates that adults will typically die in the same proportions between a hundred and a hundred-and-forty years old, as they currently die between sixty and one hundred years old.[76]

Second, gerontocracy is seemingly the best kind of rule since it embodies 'nature's genuine and unopposed aristocracy'.[77] On Owen's account, governing is a science which requires a considerable level of competence, the acquisition of which is a function of human development, learning and experience (for which age, I take it, is an appropriate marker). It takes some thirty years to form 'the physical, mental, moral, and practical character of each man and woman' so as to ensure they are 'well prepared' in the knowledge and spirit of governing justly.[78] Prior participation in the areas of communal activity which require direction (production, distribution, and education) is a vital part of this preparation; 'it is known', Owen writes, 'that no one can *govern* well unless he has previously served well, and has made himself master of those things respecting which he has to give instructions to govern'.[79] In the old immoral world very few had anything like the relevant skills, and those few typically came from privileged social backgrounds. However, in more rational circumstances, all individuals 'will gradually, as the necessary experience to accomplish all well shall be acquired, become … local or home governor, and general or foreign governor'.[80] Indeed, in rational circumstances, all individuals at the ages stated 'will be far more than competent to the easy task which they will have to perform'.[81]

Third, gerontocracy has several additional advantages. It is compatible with equality, which is crucial since 'all, by nature, have equal rights'.[82] Owen's insistence that 'male and female' should both govern is especially striking, since in other contexts he endorses a gendered division of labour.[83] In addition, gerontocracy promotes happiness. Where age and experience match social duties we are likely to discharge those duties 'in a superior manner, willingly, cheerfully, and with high gratification to every one'.[84] Gerontocracy will also promote subjective legitimacy, ensuring that 'the whole business and affairs of each association will be governed without jealousy'.[85] People accept the rule of their elders because, from the earliest age, everyone will understand that 'at the proper period of life' they themselves will hold the same office.[86] Moreover, gerontocracy avoids the permanent rule of particular minorities; people understand that governors 'possess this precedence for a short time only', and that incumbents will change soon enough.[87] In addition, gerontocracy provides conflict-free succession. Age is sufficient qualification to govern directly, and 'there shall be no selection or election of any individuals to office'.[88] Lastly, Owen maintains that gerontocracy minimises abuses of office. Education in the science of government seems crucial here; the relevant classes 'will all be well trained, and properly prepared', ensuring that they enjoy the responsibilities 'without making abuse of any part of it'.[89]

(v)

Owen's account of gerontocracy confirms the importance of science in his communitarian writings, and casts some doubt on the adequacy of traditional characterisations of his political thought. The entry of humankind into the new moral world is only possible because of recent breakthroughs in the natural sciences, in the science of human nature, and in the science of society. The importance of science to the Owenite project is confirmed by Owen's discussion of government. Communal governors need social scientific knowledge of how to build and operate the kind of environment that can produce a highly intelligent, moral, and happy population. That much applies to both transitional and non-transitional communities. What differs is the distribution of this architectonic political knowledge amongst the population.

If we restrict our attention to transitional circumstances, Owen's enthusiastic embrace of scientific governance lends plausibility to the traditional characterisations of his political thought as 'undemocratic', 'aristocratic', and so on. He maintains that governing a community is a very particular kind of skill, that only a few will have competence in it, and that this minority will typically be found in the ranks of the already socially privileged. (Those traditional characterizations also have plausibility because of Owen's lack of a democratic sensibility, the patriarchal structure of Owenite movements, his occasionally imperious behaviour within them, his rejection of political change and class struggle, and his concessive attitude towards existing elites.)

However, in non-transitional circumstances matters look very different. Scientific governance is still crucial, but Owen allows that these competences have now become universal, albeit that it takes age and experience to develop the relevant skills (we only get to govern 'at a proper period of life').[90] In the new moral world, the requirement of equality is no longer in such tension with the distribution of the skills needed to govern. Provided we reach the age of thirty, public office will become just another social role that we are all called upon to perform; everyone enjoying, without contest, their 'fair full share of the government of society'.[91] In this way, Owen's distinctive form of

gerontocracy reminds us that some kind of political equality can be realised outside of more conventional democratic arrangements. Indeed, his model allows all individuals (male and female) to govern, and they do so directly and without any form of representation. There remains the strict age constraints on government, but these reflect Owen's understanding of the lengthy experience and training required to become skilled in the science of government, together with his desire to avoid the burdens of office in old age. They do not reflect a rejection of political equality as such.

At the very least, Owen's account of the science of government in non-transitional circumstances complicates the traditional characterizations of his political thought. It looks counterintuitive to characterise as 'undemocratic' without qualification, a thinker whose political ideal requires all members of a community to undertake directly 'their fair share in governing'.[92] My intention is not to replace that traditional picture with an equally one-sided 'democratic' reading, but rather to acknowledge the complexity here, and suggest that the context of Owen's remarks helps us make sense of it. Whether we are in transitional or non-transitional circumstances makes a significant difference to Owen's recommendations about the form that scientific governance should take.

References:

M. Beer, *A History of British Socialism*, volume 1 (London, 1929).
Arthur Bestor Jr., *Backwoods Utopias. The Sectarian and Owenite Phases of Communitarian Socialism in America 1663-1829* (Philadelphia, 1950).
Gregory Claeys, *Citizens and Saints. Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism* (Cambridge, 1989).
Gregory Claeys, '"Individualism", "Socialism", and "Social Science": Further Notes on a Process of Conceptual Formation, 1800-1850', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 47/1 (1986), 81-93.
Hal Draper, 'The Two Souls of Socialism', *New Politics* 5/1 (1966), 57-84.
Ralph Miliband, 'The Politics of Robert Owen', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 15/2 (1954), 233-245.
New Moral World, 1834-45.
Robert Owen, 'A New View of Society' (1813-16), *Selected Works of Robert Owen*, edited by Gregory Claeys, volume 1 (London, 1993), 23-100.

Robert Owen, 'From the Manifesto of Robert Owen' (1840), Robert Owen, *A New View of Society and Other Writings*, edited by Gregory Claeys (London, 1991), 358-364.
Robert Owen, 'Further Development of the Plan' (1817), *Selected Works of Robert Owen*, edited by Gregory Claeys, volume 1 (London, 1993), 213-32.
Robert Owen, 'A Development of the Principles and Plans on which to Establish Self-Supporting Home Colonies', *Selected Works of Robert Owen*, edited by Gregory Claeys, volume 2 (London, 1993), 337-407.
Robert Owen, 'Report to the Committee for the Relief of the Manufacturing Poor' (1817), *A New View of Society and Other Writings*, edited by GDH Cole (London, 1927), 156-69.
Robert Owen, 'Six Lectures at Manchester' (1839), *A New View of Society and Other Writings*, edited by Gregory Claeys (London, 1991), 333-357.
Robert Owen, *The Revolution in the Mind and Practice of the Human Race* (London, 1849).
Robert Owen, 'The Book of the New Moral World', *Selected Works of Robert Owen*, edited by Gregory Claeys, volume 3 (London, 1993).
Robert Owen, *A New View of Society and Other Writings*, edited by G.D.H. Cole (London, 1927), 231-2.
Robert Owen, 'Letter' to *The Poor Man's Guardian*, 14 March 1835.
Robert Owen, 'The Future New Rational and Happy State of Society', *Millennial Gazette*, 1 January 1857, 12-21.
Frank Podmore, *Robert Owen. A Biography* (London, 1923).
Sidney Pollard and John Salt (edited), *Robert Owen. Prophet of the Poor* (London, 1971).
Maximilien Rubel, 'Robert Owen à Paris en 1848', L'Actualité de l'histoire, 30 (1960), 1-12
W.L. Sargent, *Robert Owen and his Social Philosophy* (London, 1860),
Keith Taylor, *The Political Ideas of the Utopian Socialists* (London, 1982).

---

[1] Beer, *A History of British Socialism*, 160.
[2] Owen, 'A New View of Society', 27-8.
[3] Owen, 'From the Manifesto of Robert Owen', 358.
[4] Owen, 'A New View of Society', 62
[5] Owen, 'Further Development of the Plan', 219.
[6] Owen, 'A Development of the Principles and Plans', 347-8.
[7] Advert in *New Moral World* 27 December 1834, 72.
[8] See Eileen Yeo, 'Robert Owen and Radical Culture', Pollard and Salt (edited), *Robert Owen*, 84-114.
[9] See Chushichi Tsuzuki, 'Robert Owen and Revolutionary Politics', Pollard and Salt (edited), *Robert Owen*, 20-21.
[10] See Rubel, 'Robert Owen à Paris en 1848'.
[11] See Draper, 'The Two Souls of Socialism'.
[12] Sargent, *Robert Owen*, 37-38.
[13] Beer, *A History of British Socialism*, 162.
[14] Podmore, *Robert Owen*, 427.
[15] Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias*, 64.
[16] Miliband, 'The Politics of Robert Owen', 233.
[17] Valuable exceptions to this consensus include Claeys, *Citizens and Saints*, and Taylor, *The Political Ideas of the Utopian Socialists*.

[18] Owen, 'Further Development of the Plan', 214.
[19] Owen, *New Moral World*, June 8 1844, 402.
[20] Owen, 'Letter' to *The Poor Man's Guardian*, 14 March 1835.
[21] Owen, *The Revolution in the Mind*, xix.
[22] *Ibid.,* vii.
[23] Owen, *New Moral World,* 22 Oct 1842, 133.
[24] Owen, 'Book of the New Moral World', 4.
[25] Owen, *The Revolution in the Mind*, 'Preface'.
[26] Owen, 'A Development of the Principles and Plans', 378.
[27] Owen, *New Moral World*, 11 July 1838, 595.
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] Owen, 'Book of the New Moral World', 341.
[30] *Ibid.*, 341.
[31] Owen, 'Development of the Principles', 347 and 390.
[32] *Ibid.*, 356.
[33] *Ibid.*, 347
[34] Owen, *New Moral World*, 13 April 1839, 394.
[35] Owen, 'A New View of Society', 62.
[36] Owen, 'Six Lectures at Manchester', 349.
[37] Owen, 'A Development of the Principles', 348.
[38] See Claeys, '"Individualism", "Socialism", and "Social Science": Further Notes on a Process of Conceptual Formation, 1800-1850'.
[39] Owen, 'Book of the New Moral World', 86.
[40] *Ibid.*, 340.
[41] Owen, 'Development of the Principles', 377.
[42] *Ibid.*, 351.
[43] *Ibid.*, 362.
[44] *Ibid.*, 57.
[45] *Ibid.*, 122.
[46] *Ibid.*, 121-122.
[47] *Ibid.*, 121.
[48] *Ibid.*, 188.
[49] *Ibid.*, 85.
[50] *Ibid.*, 301.
[51] *Ibid.*, 294.
[52] *Ibid.*, 348.
[53] *Ibid.*, 358-359.
[54] *Ibid.*, 188.
[55] *Ibid.*, 338.
[56] *Ibid.*, 308.
[57] *Ibid.*, 355.
[58] *Ibid.*, 25.
[59] *Ibid.*, 308.
[60] *Ibid.*, 308.
[61] *Ibid.*, 348.
[62] *Ibid.*, 354.
[63] *Ibid.*, 309.
[64] *Ibid.*, 325.
[65] *Ibid.*, 329.
[66] *Ibid.*, 348.

[67] *Ibid.*, 354.
[68] *Ibid.*, 354.
[69] *Ibid.*, 371.
[70] *Ibid.*, 347.
[71] *Ibid.*, 286.
[72] *Ibid.*, 293.
[73] *Ibid.*, 287.
[74] *Ibid.*, 295.
[75] *Ibid.*, 34.
[76] Owen, 'The Future New Rational and Happy State of Society', 18.
[77] Owen, 'Book of the New Moral World', 342.
[78] *Ibid.*, 339.
[79] *Ibid.*, 338.
[80] *Ibid.*, 306.
[81] *Ibid.*, 347.
[82] *Ibid.*, 286.
[83] Compare *ibid.*, 347, with, for example, Owen, 'Report to the Committee for the Relief of the Manufacturing Poor', 163.
[84] Owen, 'Book of the New Moral World', 287.
[85] *Ibid.*, 294.
[86] *Ibid.*, 296.
[87] *Ibid.*, 294.
[88] *Ibid.*, 341.
[89] *Ibid.*, 295.
[90] *Ibid.*, 61.
[91] Owen, 'Six Lectures at Manchester', 355.
[92] Owen, 'Book of the New Moral World', 342.