

20-5 | Creating an Industrial Utopia

ROBERT OWEN, *A New View of Society* (1813)

Robert Owen (1771–1858) first gained prominence as a successful textile manufacturer who treated his employees generously and beneficently. He later became a tireless promoter of educational reform, and was an early “utopian” socialist and trade-union advocate, providing the inspiration for the founding of the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union in 1834. None of Owen’s schemes for socialist communities succeeded, nor did the early trade unions, but his theories about educating children were very influential during his own lifetime and remain current today.

According to the last returns under the Population Act, the poor and working classes of Great Britain and Ireland have been found to exceed twelve millions of persons, or nearly three-fourths of the population of the British Islands.

The characters of these persons are now permitted to be very generally formed without proper guidance or direction, and, in many cases, under circumstances which *must* train them to the extreme of vice and misery; and of course render them the worst and most dangerous subjects in the empire; while the far greater part of the remainder of the community are educated upon the most mistaken principles of human nature, such, indeed, as cannot fail to produce a general conduct throughout society, totally unworthy of the character of rational beings.

The first thus unhappily situated are the poor and the uneducated profligate among the working classes, who are now trained to commit crimes, which they are afterwards *punished* for committing.

The second is the remaining mass of the population, who are now *instructed* to *believe*, or at least to acknowledge, that certain principles are *unerringly true*, and to *act* as though they were *grossly false*; thus filling the world with *folly* and *inconsistency*, and making society, throughout all its ramifications, a scene of insincerity.

This state of matters has continued for a long period, its evils have been and are continually increasing, until they now cry aloud for efficient corrective measures, or general disorder must ensue. . . .

Did these circumstances not exist to an extent almost incredible, could it be necessary *now* to contend for a principle regarding Man, which scarcely requires more than to be fairly stated to make it self-evident? This principle is, “THAT ANY CHARACTER, FROM THE BEST TO THE WORST, FROM THE MOST IGNORANT TO THE MOST ENLIGHTENED, MAY BE GIVEN TO ANY COMMUNITY, EVEN TO THE WORLD AT LARGE, BY APPLYING CERTAIN MEANS WHICH ARE TO A GREAT EXTENT AT THE COMMAND AND

From Robert Owen, *A New View of Society, or Essays on the Principle of the Formation of Human Character and the Application of the Principle to Practice* (London: Richard Taylor and Co., 1813), pp. 5–6, 9, 26–28, 35–36, 38–41, 49–51.

UNDER THE CONTROL, OR EASILY MADE SO, OF THOSE WHO POSSESS THE GOVERNMENT OF NATIONS."

The principle as now stated is a broad one, and, if it should be found to be true, cannot fail to give a new character to legislative proceedings, and *such* a character as will be most favorable to the well-being of society. . . .

Children are without exception passive agents, or wonderfully contrived compounds, which by due preparation and accurate attention, founded on a correct knowledge of the subject, may be formed collectively into any Human character. And although these original compounds like all the other works of the Great Directing Power of the Universe, possess endless varieties, yet they all partake of that plastic nature or quality, which, by perseverance under judicious management, may be ultimately molded into the very image of rational wishes and desires.

And in the next place, these principles cannot fail soon to create those feelings, which without force, or the production of any counteracting motive, will irresistibly lead those who possess them to make due allowance for the difference of sentiments and manners not only among their friends and countrymen, but also among the inhabitants of every region on the earth, even including their enemies. For, with this insight into the formation of character, where is there any conceivable foundation for private displeasure or public enmity? Say, if it be within the sphere of possibility that children can be trained to acquire *that* knowledge and *these* feelings? The child of eight years growth, who from infancy has been rationally trained in these principles, will readily discover and trace from whence the opinions and habits of his associates have arisen, and why they possess them. And at the same age he will have acquired reasons sufficiently powerful to exhibit to him in strong colors the irrationality of being angry with an individual for possessing qualities which, as an unavoidable passive agent during the formation of those qualities, he had not the means of preventing. Such must be the impressions which these principles will make on the mind of every such child; and in lieu of generating anger or displeasure, they will produce commiseration and pity for those individuals, who possess either habits or sentiments which appear to him to be destructive of their own comfort, pleasure, or happiness, and will promote in him a desire to remove those causes of distress, that his own feelings of commiseration and pity may be also removed. And the pleasure which he cannot avoid experiencing by this mode of conduct, will likewise stimulate him to the most active endeavors to withdraw all those circumstances which surround any part of mankind with causes of misery, and to replace them with others which have a tendency to increase their happiness. He must then also strongly entertain the desire to "do good to *all* men," and even to "love his enemies."

In the year 1784 the late Mr. Dale¹ of Glasgow founded a spinning and weaving manufactory near the falls of the Clyde, in the county of Lanark in Scotland;

¹the late Mr. Dale: Robert Owen's father-in-law.

and about that period cotton mills were first introduced into the northern part of the kingdom.

It was the power which could be obtained from the falls of water which induced Mr. Dale to erect his mills in this situation, for in other respects it was not well chosen: the country around was uncultivated; the inhabitants were poor, and few in number; and the roads in the neighborhood were so bad, that the falls of Clyde now so celebrated were then unknown to strangers.

It was therefore necessary to collect a new population to supply the infant establishment with laborers. This however was no light task; for all the regularly trained Scotch peasantry disdained the idea of working from early till late, day after day, within cotton mills. Two modes only to obtain these laborers occurred: the one, to procure children from the various public charities in the country; and the other, to induce families to settle around the works.

To accommodate the first, a large house was erected, which ultimately contained about five hundred children, who were procured chiefly from workhouses and charities in Edinburgh.

These children were to be fed, clothed, and educated; and these duties Mr. Dale performed with the benevolence which he was known to possess. . . .

The benevolent proprietor spared no expense which could give comfort to the poor children which it contained. The rooms provided for them were spacious, always clean, and well ventilated; the food was of the best quality, and most abundant; the clothes were neat and useful; a surgeon was kept in constant pay to direct how to prevent as well as cure disease; and the best instructors which the country afforded were appointed to teach such branches of education as were deemed likely to be useful to children in their situation; and kind, well disposed persons were appointed to superintend all their proceedings. Nothing, in short, at first sight seemed wanting to render it a most complete charity.

But to defray the expense of these well devised arrangements, and support the establishment generally, it was absolutely necessary that the children should be employed within the mills from six o'clock in the morning to seven in the evening summer and winter; and after these hours their education commenced. The directors of the public charities from mistaken economy, would not consent to send the children under their care to cotton mills, unless the children were received by the proprietors at the ages of six, seven, and eight. And Mr. Dale was under the necessity of accepting them at those ages, or stopping the manufactory which he had commenced.

It is not to be supposed that children so young could remain, with the interval of meals only, from six in the morning until seven in the evening, in constant employment on their feet within cotton mills, and afterwards acquire much proficiency in education. And so it proved; for the greater part of them became dwarfs in body and mind, and many of them deformed. Their labor through the day, and their education at night, became so irksome, that numbers of them continually ran away, and almost all looked forward with impatience and anxiety to the expiration of their apprenticeship of seven, eight, and nine years, which

generally expired when they were from thirteen to fifteen years old. At this period of life, unaccustomed to provide for themselves, and unacquainted with the world, they usually went to Edinburgh or Glasgow, where boys and girls were soon assailed by the innumerable temptations which all large towns present; and many of them fell sacrifices to those temptations.

Thus were Mr. Dale's arrangements and kind solicitude for the comfort and happiness of these children rendered in their ultimate effect almost nugatory. They were sent to be employed, and without their labor he could not support them; but, while under his care, he did all that any individual circumstanced as he was could do for his fellow-creatures.

The error proceeded from the children being sent from the workhouses at an age far too young for employment; they ought to have been detained four years longer, and educated; and then all the evils which followed would have been prevented.

And if such be a true picture not overcharged of parish apprentices to our manufacturing system under the best and most humane regulations, in what colors must it be exhibited under the worst? . . .

[Once Owen himself was put in charge of the factory,] the system of receiving apprentices from public charities was abolished; permanent settlers with large families were encouraged, and comfortable houses were built for their accommodation.

The practice of employing children in the mills, of six, seven, and eight years of age, was discontinued, and their parents advised to allow them to acquire health and education until they were ten years old. (It may be remarked, that even this age is too early to keep them at constant employment in manufactories, from six in the morning to seven in the evening. Far better would it be for the children, their parents, and for society, that the first should not commence employment until they attain the age of twelve, when their education might be finished, and their bodies would be more competent to undergo the fatigue and exertions required of them. When parents can be trained to afford this additional time to their children without inconvenience, they will, of course, adopt the practice now recommended.)

The children were taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, during five years, that is, from five to ten, in the village school, without expense to their parents; and all the modern improvements in education have been adopted, or are in process of adoption: some facilities in teaching arithmetic have been also introduced, which were peculiar to this school, and found very advantageous. They may therefore be taught and well trained before they engage in any regular employment. Another important consideration is, that all their instruction is rendered a pleasure and delight to them; they are much more anxious for the hour of school time to arrive, than end: they therefore make a rapid progress; and it may be safely asserted, that if they shall not be trained to form such characters as may be the most wished and desired, not one particle of the fault will proceed from the children; but the cause will rest in the want of a true knowledge of human nature, in those who have the management of them and their parents.