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**OWENISM, CO-OPERATION, SOCIALISM AND POLITICAL**  
**ECONOMY, 1817 - 1835**

RUSSELL DEAN, B.A. (Hons) Murdoch

This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of  
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**SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research, and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any University.

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### **Incorporation of Published Work**

I am the sole author of the following published or accepted papers which have been approved by the Board of Research of Murdoch University for incorporation in my thesis - in accordance with Degree Regulation 20 (1).

1) 'Owenism and the Malthusian Population Question, 1815-1835', History of Political Economy, 27.3 (1995), 579-597.

(This is an earlier draft of chapter seven)

2) "'Pre-Trading Owenism" and Capitalism, 1817-1827', History of European Ideas, 21.3 (1995), 353-366.

(This is an earlier version of chapter one).

3) "'Trading Owenism", Co-operation, Socialism and Capitalism, 1827-1834', The Scottish Labour History Society Journal (accepted for 1996).

(This is an earlier draft of chapter two).

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**OWENISM, CO-OPERATION, SOCIALISM AND POLITICAL ECONOMY,****1817 - 1835****ABSTRACT**

This thesis analyses the complex interrelationship between British socialism and political economy in the period in which both discourses flourished. The thesis begins by reviewing previous studies of Owenism and suggests an alternative thematic approach to elucidate the relationships between Owenism and political economy, in terms of both differences and similarities. Chapter one focuses on the initial period when Owenism was most closely identified with key individuals like Robert Owen, and argues that the pervasive historiographical view that Owenism was essentially incompatible with political economy is too simplistic. In fact, early Owenites were never totally successful in extricating themselves from the competitive, capitalist theoretical web which they closely identified with political economy. Chapter two extends this argument to the period when Owenism emerged from its largely eponymous stage, and a variety of Owenite, co-operative and socialist discourses developed, with divergent perspectives on their relationships with competitive capitalism. Chapter three argues that the ubiquitous view of a binary opposition between pro-private property political economists and 'communistic' Owenites ignores strong contrary evidence. Not all Owenites wanted to abolish private property; indeed some wanted to extend private property rights on the basis of the moral imperative provided by the labour theory of value. Chapters four to six examine the relationship of political economy and Owenism to the labour theory of value/exchange. The major argument in these chapters is that for both Owenites and leading political economists like Ricardo and Malthus, the labour theory of value was a transcendental organising principle, but it was an economic model which neither the socialists nor economists could sustain. Finally, chapter seven argues that the widespread view that the Malthusian population theory represented a significant site of difference between Owenites and economists is erroneous. This thesis demonstrates that the intimate links between Owenism and political economy require a reconsideration of both the historical context and the historical character of British socialism to 1835.

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE HISTORIES OF OWENISM,

### CO-OPERATION, SOCIALISM AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

The central purpose of this thesis is to provide a reconsideration of the relationship between early forms of British socialism and political economy, from the perspective of British socialism; and its consequences for British socialism. Aside from the palpable historical and indeed ongoing significance of both discourses, a primary justification for this thesis lies in the need to address some of the problems raised by the historiography on this field.

Generally the relationship between early British socialism and political economy has been depicted as one of mutual antagonism. As J.F.C. Harrison has argued:

The Owenites regarded the orthodox political economists as among their chief opponents...Owenite socialism was simply ignored by orthodox political economists...[t]he Owenites insisted that their system was not an offshoot from but an alternative to orthodox political economy....Political economy was altogether too narrowly defined to be useful to Owenites.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Gregory Claeys has concurred with Robert Owen's suggestion that 'the old system [i.e. political economy? capitalism?] and the new [socialism?] were wholly incompatible; like "oil and water, they must repel each other".<sup>2</sup> This characterisation of an oppositional relationship between

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1. J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America (London, 1969), pp.67,78.

2. Gregory Claeys, ed., Selected Works of Robert Owen, Vol. 1 (London, 1993), p.I. For similar views see also N.W. Thompson, The People's Science: The Popular Political Economy of Exploitation and Crisis 1816-34 (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 147-8; G. Claeys, Machinery, Money and the Millennium - From Moral Economy to Socialism, 1815-60 (Cambridge, 1987), pp.xxvii, xxviii.

early British socialism and political economy is also clearly evident in the secondary literature on the four themes addressed in this thesis, namely, competitive capitalism, community of property contra private property, the labour theory of value, and Malthusianism. In the case of the labour theory of value, however, several historians have argued that some Owenites or co-operators were indebted to Ricardo for this axiom.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the basic tenets of this binary opposition model of socialism/political economy are clearly correct, e.g. that Owenites were unhappy with the central thrust of non-Owenite/socialist political economy, with its emphasis on the creation rather than distribution of wealth; and that Owenites and co-operators hoped to supersede the concerns of 'orthodox' political economy via 'the larger concept of social science'<sup>2</sup>.

However, this thesis will argue that the idea of a sharp and decisive dichotomy between these two discourses is too simplistic. There are three main interrelated reasons for this argument. First, political economists clearly were the 'chief opponents' of the Owenites, co-operators and socialists in this period, and thus they necessarily shared a common vocabulary, if not logic, in the course of attacking each other; the latter a less common occurrence, at least in direct form, after the 1825 meetings between co-operators and economists like John Stuart Mill. Second, many Owenites, co-operators, socialists and political economists shared

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<sup>1</sup> . See, for example, H.S. Foxell, M.A., 'Introduction' to Dr. Anton Menger, The Right to the Whole Produce of Labour: The Origin and Development of the Theory of Labour's claims to the Whole Product of Industry (New York, 1962, first published 1899), p.lxxxiii; Max Beer, A History of British Socialism, Vol. 1 (London, 1923), p.183.

<sup>2</sup> . J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen, p.78.

common assumptions, even if they disagreed about the consequences of those assumptions. For example, as chapters four to six will argue, there was a parallel development of Owenite/co-operative and political economists' labour theories of value, as well as a common inability to sustain that principle.

Finally, even when the conceptual space separating socialist from non-socialist economics appeared unequivocal, as in the case of anti-competitive/capitalist Owenites and co-operators versus pro-competitive/capitalist political economists, the boundaries of this opposition were blurred. Despite their anti-competitive/capitalist stance, Owenites and co-operators were unable to escape the gravitational pull of that system, not least because it represented one of the main means of generating enough funds to contemplate an escape, reinforcing to some extent the competitive/capitalist system in the process.

Owenism, co-operation, socialism and political economy in this period have also been the subject of a variety of pejorative assessments based on 'scientific', Marxist and/or Whig perspectives. After outlining the growth of British proto-socialism from 1817, this introduction will clarify why these particular perspectives do not represent unproblematic foundations upon which to evaluate discourses like early British socialism and political economy. Specific historiographical problems will be outlined later in individual chapters.

The methodological approach adopted by this thesis is based on the paradigm of the history of ideas. This historiographical perspective is both

diverse and complex, encompassing intellectual history, cultural history, history of ideologies, history of mentalités, the Annales school and others.<sup>1</sup> In the context of this study, the history of ideas model corresponds to an historical, discursive study of competing and intersecting 'ideologies', without undue emphasis being given to key individuals like Robert Owen, and with very limited socio-economic contextualisation. The reason for the emphasis on ideas rather than individuals is largely though not exclusively historiographical. Too often historians have identified discourses like co-operation, early British socialism, and political economy too closely with key individuals like Robert Owen and David Ricardo, respectively. However, whilst Owen and Ricardo were certainly significant figures, they did not monopolise their own group/s (e.g. the eponymous Owenites), nor did they exert an omnipotent influence in co-operative, socialist or political economy circles. These problems will be analysed later in this introduction, along with an overview of the leading theorists in Owenite, co-operative and political economy discourses, weighted in terms of the respective importance of individuals as generators of discourse.

A major reason for refraining from more socio-economic contextualisation is the teleological nature of the implied cause/effect model. For example, some historians have erroneously assumed that

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<sup>1</sup> . A detailed examination of the history of ideas paradigm is beyond the scope of this study. However, Roger Chartier, 'Intellectual History and the History of Mentalités - A Dual Re-evaluation', in his Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations (Cambridge, 1988), pp.19-52, provides a useful, succinct and interesting examination of the 'history of ideas' perspective, the latter a concept which, Chartier correctly argues, resists any singular prescriptive definition, ibid., p.45. For an example of the history of ideas approach in practice, see generally, R. Chartier, Cultural History. See Keith Tribe, Land, Labour and Economic Discourse (London, 1978) for an example of a 'discursive', that is, a non-materialistic approach to the history of ideas.

burgeoning industrialisation, capitalism etc. are causal agents for the emergence of discourses like socialism. Certainly 'socialism' does appear to emerge as a response to multiple contexts. However, it is extremely difficult if not impossible to delimit such contexts, and indeed socialism and political economy for that matter. Moreover, there is the related, arguably insuperable problem of proving that the context 'created' socialism etc. For example, 'industrialisation' would appear to emerge before 'socialism', but there is also a sense in which the development of industrialisation and socialism were not singular events, but ran parallel to each other. These and other problems associated with the concept of socio-economic contextualisation will be analysed in greater depth later in this introduction. This will be followed both by an introduction to the thematic interfaces between Owenism, co-operation, socialism and political economy, and to the thesis chapters.

#### The Emergence of British (Proto)-Socialism from 1817 to 1835

This thesis begins with 1817 texts because that is the year of publication of the first 'Owenite' journal, The Mirror of Truth. From 1817 until approximately 1824, Owenite discourse was seen as essentially synonymous with Robert Owen's views, particularly by various political economy critics. Owen's voice was supplemented by the assiduous journalism of George Mudie and his journal The Economist (1821-2), and the short lived publication The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist (1823). From 1824 until 1828, a period when Owen was absent in America for much of the time, the first major explications of Owenite theory by other writers began to be published. Up to 1827 such elucidations or discussions of Owenite or co-operative theory were still

largely restricted to individual texts. William Thompson published his major work on co-operative political economy in 1824. In 1825 John Gray's Lecture on Human Happiness and Abram Combes' The Sphere for Joint Stock Companies were published, followed by the creation in 1826 of The London Co-operative Magazine, and William Thompson's 1827 text, Labor Rewarded. A significant expansion of discussion of various Owenite and co-operative issues only took place in the period from 1827.

The Owenite, co-operative and socialist movement expanded from 1827 to 1834-5 in a variety of forms, including trading associations, co-operative societies, co-operative journalism, a Co-operative community at Ralahine in Ireland, and a Trade Union, the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union (hereafter the G.N.C.T.U.). The growth in co-operative trading societies was only gradual from 1827 through 1828 and 1829. However, by 1830 there were over 800 co-operative societies in existence.<sup>1</sup> From 1828 and beyond there was a proliferation of Owenite and co-operative journalism, with the continued publication of earlier titles such as The New Harmony Gazette, and new titles like The Crisis, The Lancashire and Yorkshire Co-operator, and The Pioneer.<sup>2</sup> The rise of the G.N.C.T.U., a combination of old Unions led by Robert Owen, was 'meteoric', and some

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<sup>1</sup> . G. Claeys, Machinery, Money, p.55.

<sup>2</sup> . According to Barbara Taylor, Eve and the New Jerusalem (London, 1983), p.97, 'Estimates of [the] sales of [The Pioneer] vary between twenty and thirty thousand, its actual readership, however, (since many copies were kept in pubs or meeting halls or coffee houses, where they could be read by dozens of people) would have been many times this figure....The circulation of The Crisis was much lower: estimates vary between five and ten thousand'.

weeks after its formation in 1834 it was estimated to have a 'million members'.<sup>1</sup>

However, by 1834-5 the Owenite, co-operative and socialist bubble had burst. The initial trading period of the co-operative movement was at an end; subsequent attempts by co-operators to resurrect a system of trade only emerged from 1844. Many of the co-operative journals like The Crisis and The Pioneer had disappeared. The Owenite community at Ralahine closed in 1833, and the G.N.C.T.U. had proved a transient phenomenon. My thesis therefore ends its analysis in 1835, not because this signals the end of Owenism, for Owenism continued well after this date, but rather because it marked the end of the rise of Owenism, co-operation and British proto-socialism.<sup>2</sup> By 1835 all the major texts on Owenite and co-operative political economy had been written<sup>3</sup>, Owenism was palpably enervated, and the shadow of a new workers' movement - Chartism - was looming.

'Scientific', 'Marxist', and 'Whig' Imperatives in the Historiography of Early British Socialism and Political Economy

Chushichi Tsuzuki points out that 'The image of Robert Owen as a utopian socialist [an image also attached to Owenites, co-operators and socialists in this period] has been undergoing significant change in recent years, partly because the orthodoxy of "scientific" [i.e. Marxist], as opposed

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1. See J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen, p.211.

2. See generally ibid.

3. The most significant exception to this was John Francis Bray, Labour's Wrongs and Labour's Remedy (Leeds, 1839).



to "utopian", socialism has been reduced to a humbler position'.<sup>1</sup> Certainly 'Marxism' no longer appears to provide the epistemological foundation on the basis of which other discourses can be evaluated. Nonetheless, the historiography of early British socialism and political economy continues to be riddled with disparaging assessments based on the allegedly superior - still comparatively unchallenged - viewpoints afforded by 'scientific', 'Marxist', and 'Whig' perspectives, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The foundations of these pejorative historiographical assessments of early British socialism, and to a lesser extent early British political economy<sup>2</sup>, are essentially, though usually without any direct acknowledgment Marxist. Marx and Engels combined an ongoing commitment to a 'scientific' imperative with a whiggish sense of the vantage point developed in their own economic theories. Marx and Engels were less than complimentary in their assessment of the (pre-Marxian) Owenites and other 'Utopian' socialists, as in their 1848 pamphlet The Communist Manifesto:

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<sup>1</sup> . Chushichi Tsuzuki, 'Robert Owen and Social Science', in C. Tsuzuki, ed., Robert Owen and the World of Co-operation (Tokyo, 1992), p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> . As the next section of this introduction will argue, the political economists in this period were themselves already engaged in trenchant assessments of their predecessors, hence, for example, the rapid de-canonisation of Ricardo in the 1820s and after. Nevertheless, 'Marxism' is a significant element in the historiography of non-socialist economics, not least because it helped promote and make common currency the (problematic) idea that 'science' was the criterion for evaluating progress, stasis, or decay in economics.

The significance of Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism [e.g. Owenites, co-operators et al.] bears an inverse relation to historical development. In proportion as the modern class struggle develops and takes definite shape, this fantastic standing apart from the contest, these fantastic attacks on it, lose all practical value and all theoretical justification....[The Owenites et al.] still dream of experimental realisation of their social Utopias...of establishing ...duodecimo editions of the New Jerusalem - and to realise all these castles in the air, they are compelled to appeal to the feelings and purses of the bourgeois. By degrees they sink into the category of the reactionary conservative Socialists...differing from these only by more systematic pedantry, and by the fanatical and superstitious belief in the miraculous effect of their social science. They, therefore, violently oppose all political action on the part of the working class; such action, according to them, can only result from unbelief in the new Gospel.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, for Engels in his 1892 work Socialism, Utopian and Scientific, - a selected reprint from his earlier 1878 work Anti-Dühring - 'To make a science of socialism, it had first to be placed upon a real basis'. For Engels the 'Utopian socialists' failed to achieve this solid foundation, providing instead:

a mish-mash...of the most manifold shades of opinion; a mish-mash of such critical statements, economic theories, pictures of society by the founders of different sects, as excite a minimum of opposition; a mish-mash which is all the more easily brewed the more the definite sharp edges of the individual constituents are rubbed down in the stream of debate, like rounded pebbles in a brook.<sup>2</sup>

Numerous historians of British proto-socialism have followed Marx and Engels' lead in their evaluation of the Owenites et al. For example, Barbara Taylor combines 'Marxism' - which appears to enjoy (tacitly) a

1. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto (London, 1986), pp.117-18.
2. Friedrich Engels, Socialism, Utopian and Scientific (London, 1892) cited in Carl Cohen, ed. Communism, Fascism and Democracy: The Theoretical Foundations (New York, 1972), p.14. For further examples of Engels deprecating assessment of the Owenites et al. see The Collected Works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Moscow, 1975), Vol. 3, pp. 385-7, Vol. 4, p. 525. For Marx's avowed support for 'science' see, for example, his 'Preface' to a French edition of Volume One of Capital (Moscow, 1977), p.30; for an example of Marx's evaluation of Smith and Ricardo as anachronistic 'eighteenth-century prophets', see Karl Marx, Grundrisse (London, 1981), p. 83.

'scientific', that is an omnipotent status within Ms. Taylor's work - plus a Whig orientation - the latter necessarily implied by both the 'scientific' and 'Marxist' paradigms - in the following appraisal of the Owenites:

The present must always condescend to the past, and from our vantage point there is much in the thinking of the pre-Marxian Socialists which seems theoretically naive and strategically implausible.<sup>1</sup>

E.P. Thompson's judgment of the Owenites was similarly informed by knowledge of the 'vantage point' of the scientific, Marxist and Whig perspectives:

What was irrational in Owenism (or 'utopian' in its common pejorative meaning) was the impatience of the propaganda, the faith in the multiplication of reason by lectures and tracts, the inadequate attention to the means. Above all, there was Owen's fatal evasion of the **realities** of political power [my emphasis].<sup>2</sup>

Even historians like Gareth Stedman Jones, who have rejected Engels' 'teleological and reductionist' 'approach' to 'utopian socialism' have nevertheless replicated those same reductionist arguments. For example,

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<sup>1</sup> . Barbara Taylor, Eve, p.xvii.

<sup>2</sup> . E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (London, 1986), p.885. For further examples of a deprecating quasi-'scientific/Marxist' evaluation of early British socialism, see G. Lichtheim, A Short History of Socialism (London, 1970), p.46; D. Hardy, Alternative Communities in Nineteenth Century England (London, 1979), p. 28, both of which replicate the belittling epithet 'Utopian', first coined by Marx and Engels, in referring to the Owenites; J.E. King, 'Utopian or Scientific? A Reconsideration of the Ricardian Socialists', History of Political Economy, 15 (1983), 346. For further examples of denigrating 'whig' assessments of early British Socialists/ism see V.A.C. Gartrell, 'Introduction' to Robert Owen: New View of Society and Report to the County of Lanark (London, 1970), p.16, '[Robert Owen's] understanding of social mechanisms was primitive and his economic theory was crude and ill-formulated...he had no real conception of the strength of class antagonisms'; see also R.G. Garnett, Co-operation and the Owenite Socialist Communities in Britain, 1825-45 (Manchester, 1972), p. 227; J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America (London, 1969), pp. 46, 64, 74, 79; N. Thompson, The Market and Its Critics: Socialist Political Economy in Nineteenth Century Britain (London, 1988), p. 92.

Stedman Jones has erroneously claimed that utopian socialism 'lack[ed] ...a specifically economic analysis' and 'possessed...no conception of a capitalist economy', 'for it is an anachronism [in Stedman Jones' Marxian terms?] to assume that [the 'Utopian' socialists] were concerned with such an analysis'.<sup>1</sup>

The historiography of non-socialist political economy is also often characterised by the privileging of scientific and/or Marxist and Whig viewpoints. For example, the dramatis personæ of Joseph Schumpeter's 'classic' text on the history of political economy are determined by the tacit epistemological primacy of 'science':

A science develops by small accretions that create a common fund of ideas from which, by chance as well as merit, emerge the works that enter the Hall of Fame [e.g. Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations; David Ricardo's The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation, et al.]. [Schumpeter includes among 'some of those who also ran...Bailey, Chalmers, Lauderdale, Ramsey, Read, Scrope and Torrens'.<sup>2</sup>

In like fashion, Everett J. Burt Jr. has essentially dismissed all 'economics' - or more accurately *œconomics* - prior to the seventeenth century, because before that period 'Economics as a science' was 'within the province of other fields of knowledge' and was not 'subject to stable and

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<sup>1</sup> . Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Utopian Socialism Reconsidered', in Raphael Samuel, ed., People's History and Socialist Theory (London, 1981), pp. 138-145.

<sup>2</sup> . Joseph Schumpeter, History of Economic Analysis (London, 1972), pp. 480-486.

logically consistent laws'.<sup>1</sup> Marxism clearly forms the basis for J.E. King's precipitate assertion that 'As a systematic thinker Sismondi rates only a little higher than Owen himself'.<sup>2</sup>

The largely untheorised, or inadequately theorised 'scientific' imperatives, can be seen as little more than rhetorical devices, designed to validate a particular philosophical, economic or other agenda, in contradistinction to various others. For example, Joseph Schumpeter has defined 'science' as 'any kind of knowledge that has been the object of conscious efforts to improve it', or 'science' as 'refined common sense' and/or 'tooled knowledge'<sup>3</sup>. However, if 'science' is to be equated with, for example, 'refined common sense' - a term which is essentially discrete and protean, despite the mythically singular meaning attached to the concept

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1. Everett J. Burt, Jr., Social Perspectives in the History of Economic Theory (New York, 1972), p.12. For further examples of the 'scientific' imperative in the history of economics, see William Letwin, The Origins of Scientific Economics: English Economic Thought, 1660 - 1776 (London, 1963); E. Heimann, History of Economic Doctrines: An Introduction to Economic Theory (London, 1972), pp. 3, 14; Claudio Napoleoni, Smith, Ricardo, Marx: Observations on the History of Economic Thought (Oxford, 1973), pp. 21, 58,61; Donald N. McCloskey, The Rhetoric of Economics (Sussex, 1985), p.56; R. Blackhouse, A History of Modern Economic Analysis (Oxford, 1987), pp. 1-9; S. Hollander, Classical Economics (Oxford, 1987), pp.1-14.
  2. J.E. King, 'Perish Commerce! Free Trade and Underconsumption in Early British Radical Economics', Australian Economic Papers, 20 (1981), 243; see also Ian Bradley and Michael Howard, eds., 'Introduction' to Classical and Marxian Political Economy (London, 1982), p.7; Isaac I. Rubin, A History of Economic Thought (London, 1979), p.4; Michael Perelman, Classical Political Economy: Primitive Accumulation and the Social Division of Labour (London, 1983), p. 102. For an exemplary example of the Whig perspective in the history of economics, see J.K. Galbraith, A History of Economics: The Past as the Present (London, 1987), e.g. pp. 65-6, 'The riddle of value in use and exchange would not be **solved** for another century or more, until, in one of the lesser triumphs of economic theory, the concept of marginal utility was discovered [my emphasis]'; see also ibid., pp. 74, 97, 126.
  3. J. Schumpeter, A History, pp. 6-7.

by those who appeal to it as a means of validating their argument - then it hardly deserves the privileged position which it continues to enjoy, not least in the historiography of political economy. Similarly, Everett J. Burt Jr.'s definition of scientific economics as that which is based on 'stable and logically consistent laws' has (arguably) as much to do with the rhetorical requirements of Burt's quasi-positivist perspective, as with the alleged immanence of these laws.<sup>1</sup>

To the extent that Marxism relies on its alleged 'scientific' character, then this problem also applies to Marxism. Like 'science' and 'Marxism', the 'Whig' orientation is also a problematic organising principle. Aside from a certain built in obsolescence, for it is arguably a truism that the vantage point of today is not necessarily the vantage point of tomorrow, the major problem with whig historiography in the history of early British socialism and political economy is that it is often parasitical. The idea of historical progress usually relies on a 'host' which will then provide both an unchanging epistemological, ontological foundation, and a method by which progress can be gauged. The classical and perhaps primary illustration of this is 'science'. Thus, when certain epistemological weaknesses are exposed in the scientific imperative then the idea of progress suffers simultaneously. Whig historiography is therefore a perspective which is haunted by the ghosts of numerous teleological

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<sup>1</sup> . E. J. Burt Jr. Social Perspectives, p.12. On the rhetoric of economics see generally, Donald N. McCloskey, The Rhetoric of Economics (Sussex, 1985); see also Ralph E. Ancil, 'On the Rhetoric of Economics', Review of Social Economy, 45:3 (1987), 259-275. For an interesting analysis of some of the problems associated with the 'positivist' orientation in economics, see Ben B. Seligman, 'The Impact of Positivism on Economic Thought', History of Political Economy, 2 (1969), 256-278; more generally, see Barry Hindess, Philosophy and Methodology in the Social Sciences (Sussex, 1977), pp. 113-141.

positions - positions which promised epistemological certainty but which, in the historiography of this present study at least, have failed to live up to expectations, e.g. 'scientific'; 'Marxist'; 'Scientific' socialism versus 'Utopian' socialism; the present condescending to the past, etc. As the historian of science, Thomas Kuhn, noted in 1970, 'No more than in philosophy and arts...do [social sciences] result in clear cut progress'.<sup>1</sup>

In more recent times, presumably in an effort to strengthen the key 'scientific' axiom, there have been various attempts, notably in histories of non-socialist economics, to demarcate science from non-science. This fortifying process has often been undertaken through the assimilation of the work of such renowned philosophers and historians of science as Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper and Imre Lakatos.<sup>2</sup> However, there are several factors which militate against any significant recapitulation here of both the nature of the scientific models espoused by Kuhn et al., and the significant problems surrounding those models, not least as the 'scientific' contra 'non-scientific' basis for evaluating other discourses. First, in some senses

<sup>1</sup> . Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago, 1970), p.244.

<sup>2</sup> . For examples of Thomas Kuhn's influence on the historiography of economics, see A.W. Coats, 'Research Priorities in the History of Economics', History of Political Economy, 1 (1969), 11; T.W. Hutchison, On Revolutions and Progress in Economic Knowledge (Cambridge, 1979), p.215; Alain Alcouffe, 'The Institutionalization of political economy in French universities: 1819-1896', History of Political Economy, 21 (1989), 313-4. For examples of the affect of Lakatos's scientific model on histories of economics - a model clearly derived and informed by Popperian falsificationism - see S.J. Latsis, ed., Method and Appraisal in Economics (Cambridge, 1976); M. Blaug, 'Kuhn versus Lakatos or Paradigms versus Research Programmes in the History of Economics', in S. J. Latsis, ed., ibid., pp.149-80; G. Fulton, 'Research Programmes in Economics', History of Political Economy, 16:2 (1984), 187-205; Mark Blaug, The Methodology of Economics (Cambridge, 1990); Mark Blaug and Neil de Marchi, eds., Appraising Economic Theories: Studies in the Methodology of Research Programs (Aldershot, 1991).

these developments are tangential to this study, not least because these methodological innovations have seemingly by-passed the historiography of early British socialism, as well as the political economy of the period covered by this study.<sup>1</sup> Second, the limitations of Kuhnian, Popperian and Lakatosian methodology, and particularly the problems surrounding Popperian and Lakatosian 'falsificationism' as a (flawed) criterion for determining science from non-science, and therefore 'progress' in the history of economics, have been discussed at length elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

There are also two more specific reasons for not discussing Kuhn and Popper's methodology here. First, Kuhn's professed aim in his history of science is sociological not epistemological, i.e. he does not attempt to differentiate between science and non-science.<sup>3</sup> Second, the impact of Popper's model of scientific progress on the historiography of economics

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- <sup>1</sup> . For example, Mark Blaug's argument that 'There are unmistakable signs after 1848 of "degeneration" in the Ricardian research programme, marked by the proliferation of "ad hoc" assumptions to protect the theory against the evidence that repeal of the Corn Laws of 1846 had failed to bring about the effects predicted by Ricardo', ('Paradigms', pp.165-66), is clearly outside the chronological boundaries of this thesis.
  - <sup>2</sup> . See, for example, Keith Tribe, 'On the Production and Structuring of Scientific Knowledges', Economy and Society, 2 (1973), 465-78; Keith Tribe, Land Labour, pp.5-23; Joel Jalladeau, 'Research Program versus Paradigm in the Development of Economics', Journal of Economic Issues, 12:3 (1978), 583-608. More generally, see John Urry, 'Thomas S. Kuhn as Sociologist of Knowledge', British Journal of Sociology, 24 (1973), 462-473; Karel Williams, 'Facing Reality - A Critique of Karl Popper's Empiricism', Economy and Society, August (1975), 309-358; A.F. Chalmers, What is this Thing Called Science? (Brisbane 1976); R.J. Anderson, John A. Hughes, W.W. Sharrock, Philosophy and the Human Sciences (Kent, 1986), pp.229-265.
  - <sup>3</sup> . On Kuhn's sociological orientation, see his 'Reflections on my Critics', in I. Lakatos, A. Musgrave, eds., Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge (Cambridge, 1970), p.238.



has arguably been over-estimated by some critics.<sup>1</sup> Certainly Popperian methodology in its vicarious Lakatosian form had some impact on the history of economics. However, as Lakatos suggested in 1968:

The reluctance of economists and other social scientists [ the latter category including (presumably) historians of economics] to accept Popper's methodology may have been partly due to the destructive effects of naive falsificationism on budding research programmes.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, when 'Popperian falsificationism' is occasionally alluded to in histories of economics, the crude implications of this model of 'scientific' veracity are often rejected. For example, as Ben B. Seligman has argued:

confirmation by itself does not lend empirical content to a statement or a theory, said Popper. The economist, [and historian of economics] therefore, must think of ways in which his[sic] model might be disproved. The difficulty here is that asserting the existence of certain conditions may itself not be disconfirmable, hence not empirical by Popper's standards. Perhaps the way out is via the route of probability and contingency, **for in human affairs nothing is really certain** [my emphasis].<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 . For example, Mark Blaug, Economic Theory in Retrospect (Cambridge, 1980), p.697, has argued that 'No economist writing on methodology [nor perhaps, for Blaug, historians of economics] has ever denied the relevance of the now widely accepted demarcation rule of Popper: theories are "scientific" if they are falsifiable in principle or in practice and not otherwise'.
  - 2 . Imre Lakatos, 'Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes', in I. Lakatos, A. Musgrave, eds., Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge (Cambridge, 1970), p.179; T.W. Hutchison, 'On the History and Philosophy of Science and Economics', in S.J. Latsis, ed., Method, p.194, confirms the reluctance of 'economists' - and doubtless historians of economics - to 'accept Popper's methodology'.
  - 3 . Ben B. Seligman, 'The Impact', 263; see also, Maurice Dobb, Theories of Value and Distribution Since Adam Smith - Ideology and Economic Theory (Cambridge, 1973), p.19, 'Professor Popper has himself pointed out that falsifiability is "a matter of degree", with metaphysical statements having "a zero degree of falsifiability". Even the latter "may have helped...to bring order into man's picture of the world, and in some cases have led to successful prediction".'

Owen/Ricardo as the 'Authors' of Socialism/Political Economy?

In the late 1960s Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault began to toll the knell for 'the author' as a central concept in literature, history etc.<sup>1</sup> However, the texts that Barthes and Foucault published after this period were usually accompanied by the authors' names.<sup>2</sup> News of the death of 'the author' was, to paraphrase Mark Twain, greatly exaggerated. Yet, despite this outcome the challenge to 'the author' remains of value for this thesis, and historiography in general, not least as an admonition against the idea that 'the author' constitutes the building block, or DNA of historical research. As Roland Barthes argued in 1968:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, this is a warning that was obviously unknown to historians of economics before the 1960s, and largely unheeded by historians after that period.

In the history of socialist economics the conflation of Robert Owen with the origins and centre of British socialism was popularised by Karl

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<sup>1</sup> . Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', Image-Music-Text (London, 1982), pp.142-148; Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in David Lodge, ed., Modern Criticism and Theory (London, 1988), pp.197-210.

<sup>2</sup> . One exception to this was a published interview that Foucault gave to Le Monde in 1980 in which Foucault 'opted for the mask of anonymity' and proposed that 'For a year books would be published without their authors' names'. To what extent the long-term execution of such a plan (i.e. over Foucault's lifetime) might have jeopardised Foucault's career, and hence the dissemination of his discourse, is debatable. However, in the reprint of Foucault's 'anonymous' interview his name was clearly and repeatedly identified. See 'The Masked Philosopher' in Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed., Michel Foucault - Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and other Writings 1977-1984 (London, 1988), pp. 323-330.

<sup>3</sup> . R.Barthes, 'The Death', p.146.

Marx and Friedrich Engels with their argument, expressed throughout the 1840s, that 'English Socialism arose with Owen'.<sup>1</sup> Numerous later commentators have concurred with Engels. For example, the co-operator George Jacob Holyoake described Robert Owen in 1906 as 'The originator of Co-operation'; similarly, G.D.H. Cole asserted in 1953 that the 'earlier Co-operative Movement [i.e. the period before the Rochdale Pioneers] based itself largely on Owen's teachings'.<sup>2</sup> This historiographical formulation has continued in the post 1960s period. For example, A.J.G. Perkins and Theresa Wolfson reaffirmed Robert Owen's 'right' 'to be called the first English Socialist'.<sup>3</sup> In like fashion, Gregory Claeys argued that the eponymous appellation 'Owenite Socialist' is the most appropriate collective noun for the disparate group/s that constituted the first British

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1 . Frederick Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England (London, 1984), p.262; see also Engels' assertion in The Schweizerscher Republikaner, 9 June 1843, 'The founder of the Socialist movement, Owen', cited in The Collected Works, Vol. 3, pp.385-7; The Communist Manifesto, p.115.

2 . George Jacob Holyoake, The History of Co-operation, Vol. 1 (London, 1906), p.32; G.D.H. Cole, A Century of Co-operation (London, 1944), p.13. See also G.D.H. Cole, Socialist Thought: The Forerunners 1789-1850, Vol. 1 (London, 1967), p. 86, where Cole unquestioningly repeats the statement that 'Owen has been called the founder of British socialism, and of British Co-operation'; A.E. Musson, 'The Ideology of Early Co-operation in Lancashire and Cheshire', Transactions - Lancashire and Chesire Antiquarian Society, lxxviii (1958), 117, where Robert Owen is described as 'the father of Co-operation and Socialism in Britain'; Max Beer, A History of British Socialism, Vol. 1 (London, 1929), pp.182-3.

3 . A.J.G. Perkins and Theresa Wolfson, Frances Wright Free Enquirer. The Study of a Temperament (Philadelphia [City], 1972), p.126.

socialists.<sup>1</sup>

A similar pattern emerges in the historiography of political economy in this period, with David Ricardo occupying the role in economics that Robert Owen was said to occupy in 'socialism'. For example, the political economist J.R. McCulloch began the process of Ricardo's canonisation when, after Ricardo's death in 1823, he asserted that:

As a political economist, Mr. Ricardo stood unrivalled by any of his contemporaries; and if he was inferior to [Adam] Smith, it is alone in the power of illustration; for he was superior to him in the talent with which he unravelled the most abstruse and intricate questions, and in the unerring sagacity with which he traced the operation of general principles, and in his clear conception of their remote consequences. After making proper allowances for its deficiencies in style and arrangement, the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation may be considered as the most **original, profound, and valuable work** on that subject which has appeared since the Wealth of Nations [my emphasis].<sup>2</sup>

Ricardo's reputation has been similarly reinforced in more recent historiography. For example, Barry Gordon has argued that 'for many of

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<sup>1</sup> . Gregory Claeys, Machinery, Money, pp. xxii-xxvi. In making this claim Claeys has noted 'disagreements...over Owen's leadership' etc., and has rejected attempts to define Britain's first socialists(sic) collectively in terms of 'Lockean', 'Smithian', or 'Ricardian' labels. For an examination of some of the the problems with previous attempts to define Britain's first socialists(sic) as 'Lockean', 'Smithian', or 'Ricardian', see chapter five of this thesis. For further examples of the conflation of Robert Owen with the center and origin of British socialism, see Noel Thompson, The People's Science, p.124; William Stafford, Socialism, Radicalism and Nostalgia: Social Criticism in Britain, 1775-1830 (Cambridge, 1987), p. 194.

<sup>2</sup> . 'Extracts from J.L. Mallet's diary', The Political Economy Club, Vol. VI (London, 1921), pp.206-7. See also *ibid.*, p.212, where J.L. Mallet describes Ricardo as 'the chief light and ornament' of the Political Economy Club. See also J.R. McCulloch, A Discourse on the Rise, Progress, Peculiar Objects, and Importance, of Political Economy: Containing an Outline of a Course of Lectures on the Principles and Doctrines of that Science (Edinburgh, 1824), p.65, where Ricardo's Principles are described as forming a 'new and memorable era in the history of the science'.

the influential participants at around the mid-point of this decade [i.e. in 1825, two years after Ricardo's death] **political economy was Ricardianism** [my emphasis].<sup>1</sup>

Aside from Barthes' and others legitimate misgivings about the role of the 'Author-God' as an organising principle<sup>2</sup>, there are significant historical problems with this concept as it relates to the history of early British socialist and non-socialist economics. For example, and in contrast with Gregory Claeys' assertion that there were mere 'disagreements...over Owen's leadership'<sup>3</sup>, it is clear that whilst many Owenites and co-operators were indebted to Robert Owen, they rejected the idea that he was the ultimate authority. The denial of the binding authority of Owen was neatly summed up by The Co-operative Magazine in 1826:

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1. Barry Gordon, Political Economy in Parliament - 1819-1823 (London, 1976), p.5. See also, J.K. Galbraith, A History of Economics, p.126, 'Adam Smith, **David Ricardo**, Thomas Robert Malthus - shaped the history of economics and the view of economic and social order'; Graham Bannock, R.E. Baxter, Ray Rees, The Penguin Dictionary of Economics (London, 1980), p.389, which described Ricardo's 1817 work, The Principles, as 'a work which was to dominate English CLASSICAL ECONOMICS for the following half-century'; Ian Bradley et al., Classical and Marxian, p.7.
  2. See also Jacques Derrida's critique of phenomenology, (i.e. the philosophical movement founded by Husserl which emphasises the primacy of conscious experience as the basis for their ontological and epistemological model), as an integral element of the problematic concept of the 'Author-God', J. Derrida, Introduction to Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry (Lincoln, 1989). See also, Barry Hindess's critique of the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz and Husserl in his Philosophy, pp.49-112.
  3. G. Claeys, Machinery, Money, p.xxvi.

We like not the term "Owenism": it is extremely vague; it defines nothing; it mixes up Mr. Owen's character, (which fortunately has been found irreproachable,) and his private opinions on various subjects, with the new system of social arrangements, in favour of what he has challenged the fullest investigation. The Co-operative Magazine does not propose to support "Owenism", but to call the attention of the public to the principles of mutual co-operation and equal distribution, of which Mr. Owen is a very powerful advocate.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, The Co-operative Magazine asserted in 1827 that:

Of Mr. Owen, we have often said before, and we now say again, that we never considered him either as the author, the infallible high priest or the prophet of the Co-operative, or Communional, - or as accurately as either, the social (for it is the only truly social) system; that we never viewed him as either the Magnus Apollo, the Pythagorus, or the Mohammed, by whose inspirations, whose "ipse dixit", or whose revelations, we should be entirely and implicitly guided. We certainly think him one of those who will have been of the very greatest service to mankind, by his sounding, as it were, the trumpet of resurrection to this system.<sup>2</sup>

Robert Owen was a major figure in the Owenite, co-operative and socialist movement, but he was not **the major figure**. Of almost equal importance, and perhaps more so in terms of his contribution to co-operative theory, was William Thompson. Moreover, in Owen's absence in America in 1825 Thompson headed the co-operative delegation in their debates with various advocates of political economy, headed by John Stuart Mill. During these debates Thompson impressed John Stuart Mill sufficiently to be rewarded with the commendation that he was 'a very estimable man'.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Thompson's work also impressed many within the co-operative movement. For example, J.M. Morgan in his 1826 work, The Revolt of the Bees, regarded Thompson's Inquiry as 'the most able

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1 . The Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald, January 1826, p.28.

2 . Ibid., December 1827, p.533.

3 . John Stuart Mill, Autobiography (Oxford, 1963), p.105.

work upon political economy that has appeared since the Wealth of Nations.<sup>1</sup>

John Gray was a less important figure within Owenite and co-operative discourse than either Owen and Thompson; indeed, according to Gray in 1825 'The plans to which we allude, are altogether different from those proposed by Mr. Owen'<sup>2</sup>. Nonetheless Gray was clearly sympathetic to the Owenite and co-operative agendas. For example, Gray was briefly a member of the co-operative community at Orbiston.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Gray's work enjoyed a significant and undiminished reputation within the Owenite and co-operative discourse for much of this period. For example, the Owenite journal The Associate in 1829 regarded Gray's 1825 Lecture on Human Happiness as required reading for would-be Owenites and co-operators.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, despite some enmity between Gray and Owen in the

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1 . John Minter Morgan, The Revolt of the Bees (London, 1826), p.81. See also the highly complementary review of The Inquiry, in Proceedings of the Second Co-operative Congress (Birmingham, 1831), pp.5-10; The Register for the First Society of Adherents to Divine Revelation at Orbiston, 16 September 1826, pp.141-2 was similarly complementary to Thompson.

2 . John Gray, A Lecture on Human Happiness, 1st American ed. (Philadelphia, 1826), p.59.

3 . Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville, eds., Dictionary of Labour Biography, Vol. 6 (London, 1982), p.122. See also John Gray's cordial letter to Robert Owen, 5 August 1823, National Library of Wales, transcript 14352C, in which Gray asserts that he had anticipated many of the views expressed by Owen at a public meeting 'at the City of London Tavern...twelve months before'.

4 . The Associate, 1 February 1829, pp.11-12.

early 1830s<sup>1</sup>, Gray continued to be held in high regard at Co-operative Congresses in the 1830s, even though he was avowedly 'unconnected to any [co-operative] society.'<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the epithet 'currency reformer' which has been attached to Gray by some historians is not an entirely appropriate one for Gray in the period covered by this thesis.<sup>3</sup>

Robert Owen, William Thompson and John Gray were clearly the leading figures and theorists of Owenism and co-operation in this period. However, they were a very loose and sometimes disharmonious 'leadership' and in the sense that Owen et als. never dominated or monopolised the Owenite or co-operative discourses, 'leadership' is an inappropriate concept. These theorists were supplemented by arguably less original, but no less important co-operative thinkers and leaders such

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- 1 . See, for example, the letter from Gray to Owen, 18 June 1831, National Library of Wales, transcript 14352C, which ended with the following sardonic comment from Gray, 'Wishing you well through the religious mania with which you are presently afflicted'. Richard Pankhurst, William Thompson (1775-1833). Britain's Pioneer Socialist, Feminist, and Co-operator (London, 1954), pp.171-2, also noted the 'skirmishes' that took place in 1832 between Owen and Thompson, ostensibly over Thompson's defence of John Gray against Owen's disparagement of Gray's 'not read[ing] [Owen's] work with attention...not understand[ing] the questions at issue'.
  - 2 . See John Gray's letter to the Third Co-operative Congress, Proceedings of the Third Co-operative Congress...[held] on 23rd of April 1832 (London, 1832), pp.124-5. For the esteem that Gray was held in at other Co-operative Congresses see e.g. Proceedings of the Second Co-operative Congress, held in Birmingham, October 4,5,6, 1831, pp. 5-10, 'Proceedings of the Fourth Co-operative Congress...held on Monday, October 1, 1832,' in The Lancashire and Yorkshire Co-operator, No. 10, 1832, pp.27-8.
  - 3 . See, for example, the entry for Gray in J.M. Bellamy and J. Saville, eds., The Dictionary, Vol. 6, p.123, which is sub-headed 'Early English Socialist and **Currency Reformer** [my emphasis]'. However, The Dictionary documents Gray's interest in currency reform from 1827 which grew to 'dominate his writings', but notes that this took place only 'by the 1840s'.



as George Mudie and Abram Combe. George Mudie, for example, was actively involved in disseminating Owenite and co-operative principles through public lectures, and was an assiduous populariser of co-operative doctrine through his diverse journalistic output.<sup>1</sup> From early in this period Mudie had maintained an independent outlook on co-operative theory, particularly in relation to Robert Owen. For example, by 1821 Mudie had moved from feeling 'idolatry' towards Owen to a position of 'treason' against Owen's autocracy', manifest in Mudie's rejection of one of Owen's 'pet views...spade husbandry'.<sup>2</sup>

As Owenism and co-operation grew apace from 1827 to 1834, primarily in the form of co-operative societies, the importance of key theorists like Owen and Thompson diminished somewhat, at least in the sense that there was a proliferation of alternative, independent co-operative voices. These voices, which were associated with such disparate groups and individuals as The British Association for the Promotion of Co-operative Knowledge (BAPCK), George Skene and The British Co-

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- 1 . On Mudie's public lectures, see Mudie to Owen, 3 January 1823, National Library of Wales, transcript 14352C, f.5. More generally on Mudie's life, ideas and journalistic output, see G.Claeys, Machinery, pp.67-89.
  - 2 . Mudie's move toward independence from Owen in 1821 is recounted in a letter from Mudie to Owen, 29 August 1848, National Library of Wales, transcript 14352C, ff.66-7. Mudie was also estranged from William Thompson, at least on one occasion, being censured in 1825 for 'affixing a nick-name to a deserving school of inquiring philosophers'. Mudie had attached the sobriquet 'the spurious system of political economy' to the doctrines of Smith, Ricardo and Mill; see The Morning Chronicle, 28 January 1825. See chapters two and three of this thesis for further discussion of Mudie's approach to co-operation, and his dissent from Robert Owen. On Abram Combe, the head of the co-operative community at Orbiston and author of The Sphere for Joint Stock Companies: or the Way to Increase the Value of Land, Capital and Labour (Edinburgh, 1825), see J.M. Bellamy and J. Saville, eds., Dictionary of Labour Biography, Vol. 2 (London, 1974), pp.98-100.

operator, and George Mudie, William King and others, continued to reject Owen's authority whilst developing their own perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the contested place of Owen within the Owenite and co-operative movement corresponded in some respects with that of Ricardo in the Political Economy Club, the latter being the principal organisation of economists in this period, but by no means a synonym for economics.<sup>2</sup> Thus, whilst club members like J.R. McCulloch and J.L. Mallet extolled the virtues of Ricardo, others, like Malthus, clearly dissented from this view, hence the comments of Malthus in 1821:

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- <sup>1</sup> . See chapter two of this thesis which documents objections by King, members of The BAPCK, George Skene and others, to Owen's ultimate authority within the co-operative movement, and their alternative models of co-operation. See also the objections to Owen's authority expressed by erstwhile co-operator Bronterre O'Brien in Alfred Plummer, Bronterre: A Political Biography of Bronterre O'Brien 1804-1864 (London, 1971), pp.38-43; similar comments were made by the former editor of The Crisis, cited in W. Anderson Smith, 'Shepherd' Smith the Universalist. The Story of Mind Being a Life of the Rev. James E. Smith, M.A. Editor of 'Family Herald', 'Crisis', etc., and Author of 'The Devine Drama of History and Civilisation' (London, 1892), pp. 112, 171; and a letter in The Crisis, 11 August 1832, p.91, entitled 'Dissatisfaction with Mr. Owen'.
- <sup>2</sup> . For example, many important economists were not members of the Club, e.g. Richard Jones, Sismondi, Thomas Chalmers et al. See the membership list in the Political Economy Club, pp.358-69. See also Lionel Robbins, The Theory of Economic Policy in English Classical Political Economy (London, 1952), p.3, who notes the significant disputes between members of the Political Economy Club. Such disputes make a mockery of any argument which suggests that the Political Economy Club was the locus for an homogeneous form of economics in this period.

Mr. Ricardo's doctrines have certainly captivated some very able men, they are not [spread] very much among the great body of Political Economists and I am inclined to think that many of them will not stand the tests of examination and experience.<sup>1</sup>

Ricardo's reputation also suffered in 1825 with the publication of Samuel Bailey's Critical Dissertation on Value, a book trenchantly critical of Ricardo's labour theory of value. Certainly this book helped effect serious criticism of the Ricardian paradigm from a number of economists including Robert Torrens, Thomas Tooke, and Nassau Senior.<sup>2</sup> However, the demise of Ricardo's reputation, at least within the Political Economy Club, was seemingly completed with Torrens' question to the Club on 14 April 1831: 'Are any of the principles first advanced in [Ricardo's Principles of Political Economy and Taxation]...now acknowledged to be correct?' The consensus response to this question appeared to be largely in the negative.<sup>3</sup>

The complexity and multiplicity of the Owenite, co-operative, socialist and political economy discourses throughout this period needs to be emphasised. All of these meta-discourses (Owenism, co-

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<sup>1</sup> . Malthus to Sismondi, 12 March 1821, in The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo, Vol. VIII (Cambridge, 1973), pp.376-7.

<sup>2</sup> . See Mark Blaug, Ricardian Economics (Westport-Connecticut, 1973), pp. 52-63, for a succinct analysis of the debilitating, if not life threatening, impact of Bailey's book on Ricardian economics, and the status of Ricardianism to 1830.

<sup>3</sup> . Political Economy Club, p.36. See J.L. Mallet's diary, in ibid., pp.223-4, for a discussion of the dissension amongst Political Economy Club members viz. Ricardo's alleged position at the heart of political economy.

operation, socialism<sup>1</sup> and political economy) were all comprised of smaller, semi-permanent and changing themes, bodies etc. which recognised, to a greater or lesser extent, the value of key figures such as Owen and Ricardo without ever becoming simply synonymous with them. It is more accurate to recognise that there were multiple overlapping and divergent Owenite discourses, and indeed multiple co-operative, and political economy discourses, rather than 'true' or 'false' Owenism, political economy etc. Indeed, even Owen's œuvre changed over time; as did the views of other 'Owenites' or 'Owenism' as a collective discourse. Unfortunately, many historians of the Owenite and co-operative movement have ignored this point. For example, R.G. Garnett, whilst noting the diversity of co-operative opinion in this period, nevertheless claimed that '[Owen] was never really a co-operator at heart'. Similarly, J.F.C. Harrison has claimed that William King, editor of The Brighton Co-operator, 'was not an Owenite'. However, given the relative volatility of such concepts in this

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<sup>1</sup> . 'Socialism' did not appear in English until 1835 in The Shepherd, 18 April 1835, p.266, though 'socialist' had been referred to in private as early as 1822, and publicly in November 1827 in The Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald, p.509. See Jacques Gans, 'L'Origine du mot "socialiste" et ses emplois les plus anciens', Revue d'histoire économique et sociale, 35 (1957), 80, which cites a much earlier, though private English use of 'socialist', in a letter from Edward Cooper to Robert Owen, dated 2 November 1822. On the evolution of 'socialism', see generally, Gregory Claeys, "'Individualism", "Socialism", and "Social Science": Further Notes on a Process of Conceptual Formation, 1800-1850', Journal of the History of Ideas, xlvii: 1 (1986), 81-93. The failure of 'socialist' and 'socialism' to become common currency in this period, and indeed, the inability of 'Owenism' or 'co-operation' to ultimately define the ideas of the Owenites, et al., was due to the ongoing debates within these groups about the nature of Owenism, co-operation, and socialism, and how it should be defined, and by whom. Such debates do not, however, simply invalidate the use of 'socialist', 'Owenite' etc. epithets in this period; they merely problematise them.

period, it is perhaps precipitate to reach such a conclusion about the 'Owenite' or 'co-operative' status of Owen, King or others.<sup>1</sup>

### The Problem of Socio-Economic Contextualisation

The idea that 'industrialisation' and 'capitalism' were causal stimuli for the emergence of British socialism and political economy has long been a significant feature of the historiography of both socialism and political economy. For example, Esther Lowenthal argued that 'This outbreak of political activity and economic thought [i.e. both classical and socialist 'economics'] finds an explanation in the financial conditions which prevailed after 1815'.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, George Lichtheim asserted that '[Owen's working class followers] claim our attention...because, unlike their predecessors, they were concerned with the particular set of problems brought to the fore by the industrial revolution. It is this which makes them significant and indeed enables one to describe them as socialists'.<sup>3</sup> In like fashion, J.K. Galbraith asserted in his 1987 book, A History of Economics: The Past as the Present, that 'Economic ideas are not very important when and where there is no economy', and 'Because this is a history of economics and not

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<sup>1</sup> . R.G. Garnett, Co-operation, pp.41, 60; J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen, p.198.

<sup>2</sup> . Esther Lowenthal, The Ricardian Socialists (New York, 1911), p.12.

<sup>3</sup> . G. Lichtheim, The Origins of Socialism (London, 1969), p.120. For similar emphases, see G.D.H. Cole, A Century of Co-operation (London, 1944), p.16, 'In order to understand the genesis of Owen's "plan" it is necessary to realise the conditions under which the factory system had been developing'; G. Claeys, Machinery, Money, p, xvii, 'A brief glimpse at the economic and social background of the period is useful for understanding the emergence of socialism'; *ibid.*, p.xviii, 'post-war distress was the occasion of the birth of Owenite socialism'; N. Thompson, The People's Science, p. 39; B. Taylor, Eve, p. xi; J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen, p.138.

merely of economists and their thought, I go beyond the scholars and scholarship to **the events that shaped the subject** [my emphasis].<sup>1</sup>

In a superficial sense, this materialist conception of history appears to be a perfectly cogent form of analysis.<sup>2</sup> Clearly socialism and political economy did emerge within or in relationship to particular contexts. For example, the period covered by this thesis was a time when the working poor were seen as getting relatively poorer - as reflected in their diet, housing and health - compared to an increasingly affluent middle-class.<sup>3</sup> The strong supporters of co-operation, like the hand-loom weavers, suffered in this period from increasing unemployment due to technical improvements in machinery. Even when employed, these workers experienced plummeting wage levels.<sup>4</sup> There was also added pressure on poor relief from the increasing number of unemployed. The 1834 Poor Law Reform Act sought to means test the right to unemployment benefit, but

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- <sup>1</sup> . J.K. Galbraith, A History of Economics, pp. 2,3. For further examples of this socio-economic contextualisation argument in the historiography of early British political economy, see E. Heimann, History of Economic Doctrines, pp.82-83, 'For a hundred years [from 1817] the [economic] crises were grave enough to harrow the minds of economists'. See also Franz H. Mueller, 'Economic History and History of Economics', Review of Social Economy, 46, 2 (1988), 164-179; and Keith Tribe, 'The "Histories" of Economic Discourse', Economy and Society, 6 (1977), 314-344, esp. 318, for more examples of this pervasive methodology.
  - <sup>2</sup> . The materialist conception of history is particularly associated with Marxism; see, for example, Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, 'The Premises of Materialism' in The German Ideology, in Carl Cohen, ed. Communism, Fascism, and Democracy: The Theoretical Foundations (New York, 1972), pp.66-68.
  - <sup>3</sup> . This was a point recognised by co-operators. See, for example, The Pioneer, 17 May 1834, p.353, which compared 'The tears, the wailings, the sighs and groans of loathsome penury' with 'the ease, the luxury and glitter, the polished iniquity, and villainous tyranny of wealth'.
  - <sup>4</sup> . See generally, Eric Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire (London, 1969), esp. pp.79-96.

always in the malignant shadow of the workhouse. This depressing scenario clearly helped shape the Owenite and co-operative agenda in this period, e.g. co-operative 'trading' in its various guises was clearly designed to overcome, or at least alleviate, these problems. However, significant problems remain with this materialist conception of history which militate against its greater use in this thesis.

The initial problem with the socio-economic contextualisation model centres on the teleological nature of this conceptualisation.<sup>1</sup> Too often in histories of early British socialism and political economy there is the suspicion that 'effects' are unproblematically transposed as 'causes'. For example, Esther Lowenthal's contention that the emergence and growth of 'economic thought' post 1815 was explained by the 'financial conditions' which prevailed at that time implied that the 'financial conditions' were an unproblematic, uniform, and universal given. This is far from the case. Perceptions of 'financial conditions' were as individual as the discourses

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<sup>1</sup> . For a useful exegesis of some of the teleological difficulties surrounding cause/effect models, see Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols/ The Anti-Christ (London, 1985), pp.47-54; e.g. (p.47), 'There is no more dangerous error than that of mistaking the consequence for the cause...I adduce an example. Everyone knows the book of the celebrated Cornaro in which he recommends his meagre diet as a recipe for a long and happy life....[however] The worthy Italian saw in his diet the cause of his long life: while the prerequisite of long life, an extraordinarily slow metabolism, a small consumption, was the cause of the meagre diet. He was not free to eat much or little as he chose, his frugality was not an act of "free will": he became ill when he ate more....A scholar of our day, with his rapid consumption of nervous energy, would kill himself with Cornaro's regimen'.

which they were said to cause.<sup>1</sup> It could be argued that it is not the 'financial conditions' which determine the emergence of socialism and political economy, but the latter which help determine or define the former.

George Lichtheim's argument that it was the problems posed by the 'industrial revolution' which determined and defined the followers of Owen as 'socialists', and made them significant, was similarly inverted, in terms of the cause/effect model. Again, it was simply assumed that the causal element in this conceptualisation - i.e. the 'industrial revolution' - was unproblematic. However, as Maxine Berg has argued:

If the period [of the early nineteenth century] is looked at in terms of aggregative productivity estimates [itself a non-definitive criterion for determining the nature and extent of the industrial revolution, a point which is suggestive of the problematic nature of the concept of the industrial revolution], it now seems that the Industrial Revolution was an historiographical figment.<sup>2</sup>

The inference could be that it is not the 'industrial revolution' which occasioned the emergence of the socialists, but the socialists which helped determine the nature and emergence of (Lichtheim's) 'industrial revolution'.

These examples are suggestive of a more general historiographical and epistemological problem, that concepts like 'the economy', 'capitalism' and others, have been privileged as immanent and pre-discursive, with the power to create discursive interpretations. However, as Keith Tribe has cogently argued:

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- <sup>1</sup> . See, for example, chapters five and six of this thesis which discuss, inter alia, the difficulties experienced by the Owenites, co-operators et als. in determining the boundaries of productive and unproductive labour. This was a concept that was crucial to the socialists in helping to decide what the 'financial conditions' of the country were, i.e. to measure the ratio of productive to unproductive labour.
- <sup>2</sup> . Maxine Berg, 'Progress and providence in early nineteenth-century political economy', *Social History*, 15, 3 (1990), 365.



The pretended privilege of the real world over the world of ideas is nothing more than the privilege of one discursive order over another in which unconditioned descriptive statements condition theoretical ones; since the confrontation takes place within discourse, it cannot be anything else.<sup>1</sup>

Tribe's argument here need not be interpreted as a *reductio ad absurdum*, i.e. that there is nothing outside of the text. Rather, it can be interpreted as meaning that the locus for determining the meaning of 'reality', 'economic reality' etc. is discursive, and that there are no apodictic grounds on which to prefer one discourse as the (problematic) cause of another.

Another problem raised by the socio-economic contextualisation perspective is the difficulty of demarcating contexts, and the discourses said to emerge from those contexts. For example, Maxine Berg's provisional definition of the industrial revolution as a function of 'aggregative productivity estimates'<sup>2</sup> is an insufficient explication of this concept - even with an expanded definition of the industrial revolution, one that would encompass questions of urbanisation, health, growth of factory organisation and others, unanswered and perhaps insurmountable problems remain. For example, there are questions about what criteria for defining the industrial revolution should be left in or taken out, interrelated questions concerning the interpretation and measurement of particular criteria, and how they fit into the chronology of the industrial revolution model. Finally, there is the pervasive difficulty of limited surviving historical records.

Similar problems exist when attempting to delimit the discourses said to arise from such contexts. This may explain why some historians

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<sup>1</sup> . Keith Tribe, 'History and Discourse', pp. 8-9; see also Keith Tribe, 'The "histories" of economic discourse', 341.

<sup>2</sup> . Maxine Berg, 'Progress and providence', p.365.

adopt the 'convenient' method of organising their studies around particular key individuals, or texts.<sup>1</sup> This is the case even when it is clear that the significance of such individuals or texts resides as much in the audience of a particular thinker, as it does in the thinker her or his self, and when such individuals or individual texts do not in themselves constitute a site of interest, but rather the themes, ideas etc. which they may represent.

A further interrelated problem with socio-economic contextualisation centres on the chronology of the cause/effect model. In the case of both the Lowenthal and Lichtheim examples, it was implied that the 'financial conditions' and the 'industrial revolution' were chronologically prior to the effects they were said to produce. However, given the problems of demarcating those 'financial conditions', and Berg's suggestion that the industrial revolution was perhaps a 'figment', it appears that to a large extent the emergence and growth of socialism and political economy ran parallel with industrialisation and financial conditions, rather than the latter precipitating the former.

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<sup>1</sup> . See, for example, G. Claeys, Machinery, Money, whose study is mainly organised around the figures of Robert Owen, George Mudie, William Thompson, and John Gray. William Stafford's book Socialism, radicalism, is based on certain key texts such as Robert Owen's 1820 Report to the County of Lanark. It would be incorrect, however, to suggest that Claeys' and Stafford's studies are not, gestalt-like, greater than the sum of their parts, nor that individuals like Robert Owen et al., or individual texts like Owen's Report, are not highly significant and indeed, defining points in the history of early British socialism. However, these are problematic foundations upon which to base studies of early British socialism, e.g. why is Mudie a key figure in Claeys' text and not, for example, Abram Combe? What is the basis for including one individual, one text etc. rather than another? Moreover, Claeys' approach becomes increasingly more difficult to justify in the period from 1827 to 1834 when Owenite and co-operative discourse expanded rapidly.

Finally, even if the difficulties surrounding the socio-economic contextualisation paradigm are temporarily suspended, there is still the problem of contexts producing sharply contrasted effects. For example, the so-called industrial revolution produced two ostensibly different discourses, socialism and political economy. An historical materialist might argue that such differences reflect the distinct experiences of industrialisation, financial conditions etc., encountered by socialists and political economists, i.e. socialism originates with 'workers', political economy with 'non-workers'. However, the socio-economic backgrounds of Robert Owen and William Thompson appears to invalidate that argument. A more appropriate example of this problem would be the emergence of 'working class' collectivist co-operators like George Mudie, and 'working class' Tory individualists like Thomas Hodgskin, from ostensibly the same 'industrial' context.<sup>1</sup> Evidently, therefore, socio-economic contextualisation is a problematic perspective, but one which cannot be simply dismissed. However, the exploration of such an historiographical outlook is beyond the scope of this thesis, not least because the socio-economic is a large, separate and, in some senses, tangential problem to those focused upon here. The focus of this thesis is on the discourses of early socialism and political economy.

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<sup>1</sup> . For an examination of the differences separating co-operation from Thomas Hodgskin's perspective, see William Thompson, Labor Rewarded. The Claims of Labor and Capital Conciliated. By One of the Idle Classes (London, 1827); see also Thomas Hodgskin, Popular Political Economy (London, 1827).

Thematic Interfaces between Owenite, Co-operative and Political  
Economy Discourses

In contrast to much of the previous historiography on this subject, which has emphasised key individuals in early British socialism and political economy, this thesis will focus on four of the main thematic interfaces between these two discourses: competitive capitalism; private property contra community of property; the labour theory of value; and Malthusianism.<sup>1</sup> Most things in economics, and indeed elsewhere, are connected to everything else. This makes the task of prioritising the respective themes analysed by this thesis extremely difficult. However, this thesis begins with an exploration of competitive capitalism because this is the initial locus for the development of Owenite and co-operative discourse. Owenites and co-operators were sharply critical of the inequities (allegedly) engendered by the competitive capitalist system, a system defended by many political economists. This thesis focuses next on the issue of community of property as another important site of avowed difference between Owenites, co-operators and political economists. For economists like Ricardo and John Stuart Mill, the Owenites and co-operators were ostensibly communists. For their part, co-operators like William Thompson regarded community of property as both a means and an end for co-operative aspirations, aspirations which were contrasted sharply with the competitive capitalists system . The labour theory of value, which underpinned co-operative critiques of the competitive capitalist

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<sup>1</sup> . One important omission from this list is the machinery/division of labour question. However, this has been tackled more than adequately elsewhere. See, for example, Gregory Claeys and Prue Kerr, 'Mechanical Political Economy', Cambridge Journal of Economics, 5 (1981), 251-272; Maxine Berg, The Machinery Question and the Making of Political Economy 1815-1848 (Cambridge, 1980).

system, and their arguments for community of property, is analysed next. This is one of the few areas where Owenites, co-operators and at least some political economists appeared to converge via a common support for a labour theory of value, even if they diverged in terms of the conclusions which they drew from this axiom. Finally, this thesis addresses this issue of Malthusianism which played an important role in political economists' criticism of Owenite and co-operative plans for co-operative communities. For some political economists, Co-operative communities would apparently promote greater population growth than elsewhere. Malthusianism was another (allegedly) key site of difference separating Owenites, co-operators and political economists.

Chapter one questions the widespread view that a significant space separated Owenism from various imperatives of political economy in this period. This chapter argues that in the Owenite pre-trading period the Owenite response to capitalism was not always antagonistic. Even when it was, however, this antithesis was compromised by the inability of Owenism to escape from various capitalist ideas, including barter, competition and security of labour.

Chapter two argues that there were at least three main responses by Owenites, co-operators and socialists to the issue of competitive-capitalism in this period, none of which involved a clear rupture with capitalist concerns. Firstly, Robert Owen's avowed anti-capitalism was undermined when he clearly embraced capitalist trading for profit with alacrity via his Labour Exchanges. A second group of socialists, centred on the BAPCK organisation, were compelled to embrace capitalist trade for

profit as the only effective means by which capital might be raised, and co-operative communities created, albeit at the expense of arguing very much like that political economy which they were trying to overcome. Finally, a third group of socialists - which included George Skene, one time secretary of the BAPCK - who were influenced by the failure of co-operation to diminish working-class poverty, developed more limited aims than community, and begun to sell products at just above wholesale prices, and redistributed any profits to the customers. This third group also cemented their relationship to capitalist discourse by extolling the virtues of such political economy themes as 'selfishness', 'individualism', and 'joint stock companies', albeit in an attempt to expand and promote a more 'social'/'moral' co-operative discourse.

Chapter three questions the historiographical perception of a dichotomy between pro-private property political economists and pro-communist Owenites. This chapter initially argues that the notion of a homogeneous political economy discourse which was consistently pro-private property, and antagonistic to the property ambitions of the working class supporters of Owenism, ignores both the heterogeneous nature of political economy at this time, and important exceptions such as Sismondi. More importantly, this chapter argues that many of the Owenites, co-operators and socialists were, in fact, wedded to the notion of private property via a commitment to a labour theory of value, i.e. labour as the only source, and therefore justification for private property, ergo the need to expand property ownership for the benefit of the working class who produced it. If some Owenites et al. courted such 'communistic' notions as community of property, it was largely because they felt that this was the

only effective means of spreading the ownership, or at least the use of private property, to those who laboured to produce it. However, as this chapter argues, even those Owenites and co-operators who were ostensibly committed communists were unable to break the shackles of a continuing dependence on the institution of private property, e.g. Owenites depended on private property in the form of finance capital to fund their community experiments in this period.

Chapters four to six examine the relationship of political economy and Owenism to the labour theory of value/exchange. The major argument in these chapters is that for both Owenites and leading political economists like Ricardo and Malthus, the labour theory of value was a transcendental organising principle, but it was an economic concept which neither the socialists nor economists could sustain. Chapter four focuses on the inability of the four leading political economist advocates of a labour theory of value in this period, David Ricardo, James Mill, J.R. McCulloch and T.R. Malthus, to maintain the labour principle.

Chapter five examines early Owenite attempts to establish the idea that labour was the sole source and measure of all value. This chapter argues that the labour theory of value of leading Owenites and co-operators, including Robert Owen, William Thompson and John Gray, was undermined by other elements such as capital, utility and land, thereby compromising the integrity of the concept, i.e. labour was avowedly not the sole source of all value. In addition, this chapter argues that the boundaries of the crucial concept of 'productive labour' which underpinned the labour theory of value - for labour was only the source of value for the

Owenites et al. when it was productive - were so insecure as to undercut, not underpin the labour theory. Chapter six argues that as Owenism and co-operation burgeoned in Britain in this period, so too did support for the labour theory of value. However, on three separate but interconnected fronts the co-operators were unable to sustain their labour imperative. These were: the productive/unproductive labour dichotomy, the problematic concept of 'real wealth', and finally, significant difficulties surrounding the exchange of 'labour for labour'.

Chapter seven questions the widespread historiographical view of a dichotomy between the Owenites, co-operators and socialists - and Malthusianism/political economy. Certainly many Owenites et al. opposed Malthusianism over a range of issues raised by the political economists who supported Malthusianism. However, this chapter argues that the nature of this opposition was complex. For example, several Owenites did acknowledge the validity of aspects of the Malthusian argument, even if they rejected its relentless implications, such as the geometrical ratio. Moreover, there was a gradual recognition by some of the protagonists that the rights and wrongs of Owenism et al. were not a function of any discussion of the merits of Malthusianism. Additionally, there were claims and counter-claims by some Owenites and political economists through the 1820s and 30s of a loss of difference between the two discourses, claims of an abandonment of positions and a convergence on Malthusianism. By 1835, this convergence appeared more tangible, with the desertion of Malthusianism by many leading political economists. For some Owenites, co-operators, socialists and political economists, though by no means all,



'Malthusianism' had ceased to be the site of important differences between socialism and economics.

## CHAPTER ONE

### 'PRE-TRADING' OWENISM, CO-OPERATION AND COMPETITIVE CAPITALISM, 1817 - 1827

Analyses of the relationship between Owenism, co-operation, and competitive capitalism have often asserted that Owenites and co-operators were invariably opposed to competitive capitalism, the latter clearly supported by the chief critics of the Owenites and co-operators, the political economists. For example, G.D.H. Cole emphasised the anti-capitalism of Owenism, as in Owen's 'denunciations of the factory system and capitalist competition' in 1817.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, David McNally has argued that '[Owen's] move toward a critique of capitalism which confronted the categories of political economy signified a crucial turn in radical thought'.<sup>2</sup> In relation to the wider co-operative communities response to competitive capitalism J.F.C. Harrison has argued that 'Co-operative institutions...had an appeal as devices for challenging or at least by-passing competitive capitalism'.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to these assessments this chapter will argue that 'competitive capitalism' was both significant within Owenite and co-operative discourse and that there were both positive and negative views

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<sup>1</sup> . G.D.H. Cole, A Century of Co-operation (London, 1944), p.19.

<sup>2</sup> . David McNally, Against the Market - Political Economy, Market Socialism and the Marxist Critique (London, 1993), p.113.

<sup>3</sup> . J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America (London, 1969), p. 198. See also Gareth Stedman Jones, The Languages of Class (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 57-8; Barbara Taylor, Eve and the New Jerusalem (London, 1983), pp. 17, 84-5; Noel Thompson, The People's Science: The Popular Political Economy of Exploitation and Crisis 1816-34 (Cambridge, 1984), p.123; Noel Thompson, The Market and its Critics: Socialist Political Economy in Nineteenth Century Britain (London, 1988), esp. 58-85; D. Hardy, Alternative Communities in Nineteenth Century England (London, 1979), p.28.

of capitalism. Gregory Claeys, one of the foremost modern authorities on Owenism, has certainly recognised some of the nuances of the Owenite responses to capitalists, e.g. Claeys acknowledges the 'distinction' that the Owenite/co-operator George Mudie made between 'productive and unproductive capital and capitalists', as well as the subtlety of William Thompson's 'belief in [the] unification of the labour[sic] and the capitalist in the same person'.<sup>1</sup> But Claeys does not explore the relationship between Owenism, co-operation and the more expansive concept of *capitalism* over this period. For example, 'Capitalism,' does not feature in the index of either of Claeys' major works on Owenism.<sup>2</sup> This thesis will analyse this relationship in depth over the key period of development of Owenism and co-operation, and reject any simplistic binary models of Owenism, co-operation or political economy.

Various metaphorical, non-essentialist conceptions of capitalism, including positive and negative perspectives on individual interest, buying cheap and selling dear, and selfishness helped to define and set the agenda for the Owenite and co-operative discourse, not least in the context of dialogues between the Owenites and some of their political economist critics. The relationship between Owenism, co-operation and competitive capitalism also provides a window on the decline of fixed ideas in the Owenite and co-operative discourse. Eponymous Owenism was clearly diminished in importance in the latter part of this period, not least because Owen was absent, in America, for much of this period after 1824. Multi-Owenite/co-operative discourses began to emerge from 1824, and

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<sup>1</sup> . Gregory Claeys, Machinery, Money and the Millennium: From Moral Economy to Socialism 1815-60 (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 81, 107-8.

<sup>2</sup> . See Ibid. and Gregory Claeys, Citizens and Saints: politics and anti-politics in early British socialism (Cambridge, 1989).

burgeon from 1827 with the expansion of the Owenite and co-operative movement manifested in the growth of co-operative trading associations. This chapter will argue that in the Owenite pre-trading period - which is defined not only by the absence of Owenite trading societies, but also by the view of Robert Owen and others that 'trade' was antithetical to co-operation - the Owenite and co-operative response to capitalism was not always antagonistic. Even when it was, however, this antithesis was compromised by the inability of Owenism to escape from leading capitalist ideas including competition, barter, and the notion of security of labour, i.e. the freedom to dispose of one's property as one saw fit.

To a large extent, political economists in this period were unambiguous supporters of the competitive capitalist system. For example, in 1833 the political economist George Poulett Scrope asserted that:

[The Owenites and Saint Simonians] forget that the industry of which in the present advanced state of society they witness the fruits, has been brought into being, and has hitherto grown and thriven, only under the shelter of the institution of private property and the stimulus of competition.<sup>1</sup>

The leading principles of early political economy have provoked little historiographical controversy. Certainly political economy developed over time, and Ricardo, Sismondi and others raised new questions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . George Poulett Scrope, Principles of Political Economy (London, 1833), p.63. See also chapter three of this thesis for evidence of the political economists' support for the institution of private property, an institution that clearly underpinned the system of competitive capitalism.

<sup>2</sup> . See, for example, chapter four of this thesis which documents the evolution of Ricardo's attitude toward the labour theory of value, and the decline, over time, of political economists' support for that theory of value. See also chapter three of this thesis for a review of Sismondi's alternative political economist approach to economic 'equality' and the institution of private property.

Nonetheless, Joseph Schumpeter expressed a characteristic view of these early years:

The traits of the picture that were selected by the English "classic[al economists]" stand out very clearly. They envisaged the legal institutions...of a private-property economy that left so much room for free contracting as almost to justify the practice of economists to leave limitations out of consideration....The unit of that private-property economy was the firm of medium size. Its typical legal form was private partnership. Barring the "sleeping" partner, it was typically managed by the owner or owners....In the normal case, these firms were supposed to work under what the "classics" called Free Competition.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter will focus initially on Robert Owen as the most important initial site for the development of Owenite attitudes toward competitive capitalism. This will be followed by an analysis of William Thompson's response to competitive capitalism. Thompson (arguably) provided the most significant - in quantitative and qualitative terms - co-operative critique of competitive capitalism. Finally, this chapter will explore the attitude of other Owenites and co-operators toward the question of competitive capitalism. Beginning with the third leading co-operative theorist in this period, John Gray, this section will then assess the views of leading co-operator Abram Combe, and the Owenite and co-operative journalism of George Mudie and others.

### Robert Owen and Competitive Capitalism

Robert Owen's anti-capitalist credentials had ostensibly been established by his 1820 Report to the County of Lanark, where he attacked what he held to be the political economists' axiom of 'individual interest'

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<sup>1</sup> . Joseph Schumpeter, History of Economic Analysis (London, 1954), pp. 544-5. See also Charles Gide and Charles Rist, A History of Economic Doctrines (London, 1923), pp. 149-50 on the capitalist predilections of David Ricardo.

because it was 'opposed... perpetually to the public good.' In the same Report Owen attacked capitalist 'commerce, the principle of which is, to produce or procure every article at the lowest, and to obtain for it, in exchange, the highest amount of labour [ie. 'to buy cheap and sell dear'].<sup>1</sup> For Owen this system had made 'man ignorantly, individually selfish...and [had] engendered fraud and deceit.'<sup>1</sup> For Owen, at least at this time, trade was indelibly vitiated by the capitalist ethos and was thus antithetical to his form of eponymous co-operation.

Given Robert Owen's important, indeed defining role in the expanding, but still embryonic, Owenite movement to 1827, his attitude toward the concepts of 'selfish individualism' and 'capitalistic commerce' raises two important questions about the nature of the conceptual space separating Owenism from capitalism. Firstly, on a personal level, Owen's earlier activities as a benevolent capitalist at New Lanark evoked a certain ironical scepticism about the legitimacy of his criticisms of capitalism, at least among certain political economy critics of Owen. For example, in 1823 the Select Committee on the Employment of the Poor in Ireland (a Committee which included Ricardo) asked Owen to reconcile his criticisms of the wage inequalities engendered by capitalism with the wage structure in place at New Lanark:

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<sup>1</sup> . Robert Owen, 'Report to the County of Lanark' (1820), in The Life of Robert Owen, Vol. 1A (London, 1967), pp. 276, 268-9. See also The Life of Robert Owen, Vol. 1 (London, 1967), p.128, where, in 1817, Owen had described capitalists as 'the most ignorant and injurious of the population.'

Does a superior workman, a man of skill and ability at New Lanark, earn more than a workman of an inferior description? [Owen replied:] Yes; and if the Committee will permit me, I will add that I think that one of the greatest disadvantages which exists in the establishment. [A Committee member then asked:] For what reason do you conceive that to be a disadvantage? [Owen replied:] It is productive of inequality in a variety of ways, which in its consequences produces almost endless evils among the population.<sup>1</sup>

Owen justified this apparent inconsistency to the Committee, whilst at the same time underlining his opposition to any form of capitalist-inspired inequality, by claiming that 'if the establishment [i.e. New Lanark] were entirely my own, I would put it upon a system under which they should not receive that inequality of wage; I should do it immediately.'<sup>2</sup> For Owen, the possible inconsistencies in his critique of capitalism, when compared with his involvement in the capitalist enterprises at New Lanark, were essentially contingent and did not seriously compromise his anti-capitalist stance.

A second, arguably more serious threat to Owen's attempts to distance himself from capitalism in this period was the conspicuous inability of Owenite discourse to cut its links with capital/ists/ism, and generate an independent Owenite discourse. It was ostensibly negative conceptions of such capitalist-derived notions as profit, individual interest and commerce that helped to shape the Owenite discursive agenda. Thus, some of the key terms of political economy were among the key terms of Owenism.

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<sup>1</sup> . The Report from the Select Committee on the Employment of the Poor in Ireland (London, 1823), p.89. See also the similar criticism made by The Scotsman, 12 May 1821, p.145: 'And it would be of as little use to ask Mr. Owen why he supposes the "individual accumulations of wealth should appear quite irrational" to the managers [of] a parallelogram, when it is understood to have appeared in a very different light to himself and his partners?'

<sup>2</sup> . The Report from the Select Committee, p.89.

Equally significant for Owenite anti-capitalism was the danger posed by the prospective inability of Owenites either to transcend or overthrow capitalism except via the resources of the very system that was being attacked. This danger would again appear to compromise the integrity of Owenite anti-capitalism severely. Robert Torrens, a leading political economist and critic of Robert Owen, understood this paradox in 1819, when he argued that the surplus, or profits of the current, capitalist system were the only resources available to finance Owen's anti-capitalist, co-operative experiments:

We must again inform this miscalculating enthusiast [i.e. Robert Owen], that, with respect to the claims of the tax-gatherer, the rent of the land he occupies, the interest of the money he borrows, and the means of accumulating additional capital for employing a growing population, the net produce, or surplus of return above expenditure, is the only fund to which he can look.<sup>1</sup>

Owen also recognised this problem, and he struggled with it. In Owen's 1820 Report to the County of Lanark, a report that was particularly rigorous in its attack on individualism, capitalist commerce and selfishness, Owen also uncritically accepted the role of 'landed proprietors and large capitalists' in helping to establish co-operative communities. Given his avowed anti-capitalism, Owen's argument appears rather perverse here, for he asserted that such an arrangement of capitalist financed co-operation actually generated greater profits than any previous capitalist system. Such claims clearly illustrate the dialectical, and arguably necessary, discursive and practical dependence that existed between Owenism and capitalism. In one sense, therefore, the foundation of Owen's anti-capitalist co-operation was, ironically, a higher, more efficient form of capitalism. In Owen's words:

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<sup>1</sup> . Robert Torrens, 'Mr Owen's Plans for relieving the National Distress,' Edinburgh Review, Vol. XXXII, No. LXIV, October 1819, 465.



As land, capital, and labour, may be applied to far greater pecuniary advantage under the proposed arrangements than under any other at present known to the public, all parties will readily unite in carrying them into execution as soon as they shall be so plainly developed in principle as to be generally understood.<sup>1</sup>

A further related problem confronted Owen's ideas for anti-capitalist co-operative communities. This concerned the extent to which these communities would attempt to compete, in a manufacturing sense, with existing capitalist manufacturers; or alternatively, attempt to establish a form of manufacturing self sufficiency. In either case, as Robert Torrens argued in 1819, the Owenite communities could not escape capitalist or indeed political economy' imperatives. Thus, if Owenite communities attempted to trade within a capitalist environment, they would be subject to the same vicissitudes as other capitalist enterprises, such as 'variations of demand and supply' and 'stagnation or revulsion of trade.' Conversely, Torrens argued, if Owenite communities attempted to remain self-sufficient entities, they would regress and ultimately disappear, because the limited market within Owenite communities would prevent the creation of an extensive division of labour; this would, in turn, restrict output, which would, in turn, further restrict the market, and so on.<sup>2</sup> Owen and subsequent generations of Owenites and co-operators clearly objected to such a pessimistic scenario. Nevertheless, the problem of establishing an alternative discursive order from within the confines of a capitalist paradigm remained an ongoing problem for Owenites, as their experiments in trading, post -1827, would indicate.

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<sup>1</sup> . Robert Owen, 'Report to the County of Lanark,' 1820, The Life, Vol. 1A, pp. 293-4.

<sup>2</sup> . Robert Torrens, 'Mr. Owen's Plans for Relieving the National Distress', 466-7.

### William Thompson and Competitive Capitalism

It is significant - not least for the question of the extent to which a clear opposition between Owenism, co-operation and competitive capitalism existed - that, despite William Thompson's avowed anti-capitalism, his complex and sometimes contradictory discourse never quite escaped the gravitational pull of various capitalist imperatives.<sup>1</sup> In three key areas Thompson conceded, often equivocally, that his favoured system of 'voluntary mutual co-operation' had difficulties in extricating itself from capitalism. These problems were the difficulties of restraining capitalist barter; the capitalist circumstances within which co-operative communities would operate; and last, the inability of co-operative communities to ensure that everyone would enjoy security in 'the free use of [one's] labor, and its products, and the voluntary exchanges thence ensuing.'<sup>2</sup>

For Thompson, the concept of security in 'the free use of [one's] labor', was a vital factor not only in his critique of capitalism, but also in his particular version of co-operative economy. 'Without security [there would

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1. See generally, E. K. Hunt, 'Utilitarianism and the Labor Theory of value: a Critique of the ideas of William Thompson,' History of Political Economy, 11:4, 1979, 545-571. Hunt outlines three hierarchical tiers in Thompson's economic analysis: 'competitive socialism'; a critique of the latter; and finally, Thompson's preference, a system of 'voluntary mutual cooperation.' Hunt's assertion that Thompson believed that all 'the evils of individualistic competition [or capitalism] could be eliminated...[by] voluntary mutual cooperation' (*ibid.*, 559), will be shown to be erroneous. Hunt also relies too much on Thompson's Inquiry, and fails to explore the changes that occurred in Thompson's work from the Inquiry, published in 1825, to Labor Rewarded, written in 1825, but not published until 1827.
  2. William Thompson, An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness; applied to the Newly Proposed System of Voluntary Equality Of Wealth (London, 1824), p.144.

be] no production, without production no wealth to distribute.<sup>1</sup> Thompson's criticism of capitalism was based, in one important sense, on the argument that existing capitalists/ism undermined this security. For Thompson, it was the 'capitalists,' and by implication, capitalism, which both embodied and exploited the various 'restraints of insecurity', including 'entail, primogeniture ...wages regulation direct or indirect...privilege laws, public plunder', and which denied 'the entire use of the products of labor, [to] those who produce them.'

The capitalist getting into his hands, under the reign of insecurity and force, the consumption of many laborers for the coming year, the tools or machinery necessary to make their labor productive, and the dwellings in which they live, turned them to the best account, and bought labor and its future products with them as cheaply as possible. The greater the profit of capital, or the more the capitalist made the laborer pay for the advance of his food, the use of the implements or machinery, and the occupation of the dwelling, the less of course remained to the laborer for the acquisition of any other object of desire.<sup>2</sup>

In his Inquiry Thompson gave initial if contingent support for a quasi-capitalist system based on 'security' and 'competition'. In other words, Thompson advocated securing to labour the full product of their labour plus a form of competition between workers. For Thompson, the former would theoretically provide a working capital for labourers, and restrict the accumulation of capital by the non-working 'idle' 'capitalists', whilst the latter would ensure that 'the mass of the industrious' would 'advance...in

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1 . Ibid.

2 . Ibid., pp. 35, 600, 241. Anton Menger, in The Right to the Whole Produce of Labour (Reprints of Economic Classics, New York, 1962), pp. 53, 55, also notes the importance of 'security' within Thompson's economic model, as well as the latter's anti-capitalism. Menger, however, fails to recognise some of the more problematical aspects of Thompson's attitude toward capitalism.

the scale of remuneration' because they would 'produce more and better'.<sup>1</sup> However, Thompson quickly recognised the limitations of what E.K. Hunt has accurately if variously described as 'laissez-faire market capitalism, but without capitalists', and '[an] egalitarian competitive market system in which the workers owned the means of production.'<sup>2</sup> Thompson outlined in his Inquiry five of the main problems or 'evils' inherent in the notion of 'egalitarian' capitalism, that is, capitalism which is **equally** accessible to all productive labourers. These were selfishness, the dis-economy of family arrangements and individual exertions, lack of resources for old age, accidents etc. and, finally, the despotism caused by individual ownership of property.<sup>3</sup> Thompson then proposed the 'superior' system of 'mutual co-operation' as a means of overcoming these evils.

The sharp edges of Thompson's anti-capitalism were eroded somewhat by his awareness of some of the philosophical problems associated with the idea of eradicating capitalist barter. In 1824 such considerations hardly seemed to exist, for Thompson looked forward to a system of 'united labour' where not only would capitalists and the 'chicanery' of 'barter' be outlawed, but there would also exist a system of exchange 'made on the basis of the presumed amount of labor expended on the respective productions.'<sup>4</sup> With the publication in 1827 of his book Labor Rewarded, Thompson appeared less sanguine about the prospects of free exchange, devoid of capitalist adulteration. Firstly, Thompson argued that to attempt to 'abridge the exchanges and consequent

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<sup>1</sup> . W. Thompson, Inquiry, pp. 250-53.

<sup>2</sup> . E. K. Hunt, 'Utilitarianism and the Labor Theory of value,' 555,548.

<sup>3</sup> . W. Thompson, Inquiry, p.369.

<sup>4</sup> . Ibid., pp. 526-7. See chapter five of this thesis for an analysis of some of the problems experienced by Thompson et al. with this formulation.

accumulations of the capitalist' ignored the fact that labourers too were sometimes subject to or involved in the bartering process: 'It is impossible to separate the character of a capitalist from that of any other barterer or "higgler in the market [including labourers]."'<sup>1</sup> Moreover, to try to eradicate bartering and the interrelated freedoms to exchange and possess was not only impossible, but also undesirable, as far as the freedoms to exchange and possess were concerned. Thompson's argument against any attempt to outlaw bartering was that it involved the impossible exchange of perfect equivalents. In other words, implicit within Thompson's argument was the idea that there were no perfect equivalents in exchange, in capitalist or in labouring circles, outside of the bartering that constituted equivalents.<sup>2</sup> Any attempt to regulate such an exchange, therefore, would be unjust and necessarily arbitrary, an 'edict' which 'would consist of metaphysical subtleties: [which]...would be broken like straw.' In addition, to ban bartering was necessarily to ban freedom of exchange, (including the freedom of labourers to exchange their labour, and the products of their labour, as they saw fit), itself a fundamental element in Thompson's conception of security of labour.<sup>3</sup>

A second problematic area for William Thompson's anti-capitalist perspective concerned the manner in which co-operative communities and associations would function within a capitalist environment. This was a more serious difficulty than two incommensurable systems, of co-operation and capitalism, competing with each other until one should prevail. What

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1 . William Thompson, Labor Rewarded (London, 1827), pp. 16-17.

2 . Paradoxically, despite this conclusion, Thompson never completely abandoned his support for the concept of labour-based evaluations in exchange; see chapter five of this thesis.

3 . W. Thompson, Labor Rewarded, pp. 16-17.

was at stake was the very difference between co-operation and capitalism, the difference that made co-operation worthwhile, at least for William Thompson. For example, when discussing in 1824 the possibility of co-operative communities assuming capitalist characteristics, Thompson was initially dismissive. According to Thompson, no co-operative association would choose the deferred gratification of capital formation 'by means of barter and profit on exchange' over the immediate satisfaction of their needs or wants promised by co-operation. Thompson thought the subject sufficiently important, however, to discuss the unlikely event and its dire consequences:

On the appropriation of a stock for barter, some of the [co-operative] members must be appointed to manage this stock: these delegated capitalists must adopt the usual principles of trade and chicanery, of giving as little and getting as much as possible, which is mostly done by taking advantage of the ignorance or wants of others. By this act the community in fact dissolves itself, and brings upon itself with its own hands all the evils, which the object of its association was to remove - for ever to banish.<sup>1</sup>

Such concerns surfaced again in 1827 when Thompson warned, in tones reminiscent of Robert Torrens' 1819 criticisms of Robert Owen's co-operative plans, of the capitalist competition that co-operative Trades and National Unions would face. Thompson was still optimistic that co-operative associations would transcend such difficulties, but the anxiety nevertheless remained:

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<sup>1</sup> . W. Thompson, Inquiry, pp. 527-8.

[Co-operative] Trades-Manufactories would be liable to almost all the vicissitudes of similar rival establishments conducted by capitalists....To foreign competition, as to the home competition, of capitalists, they would be exposed....To the fluctuations of competition from change of demand, from political or financial causes, from improvements in machinery, they would still be liable. From such causes their manufactories, though the last to yield, might be rendered incapable of affording even the wages necessary to existence.<sup>1</sup>

Thompson's 1827 perspective on the way co-operative associations might function within a capitalist environment had also undergone significant modifications since the publication of his Inquiry in 1824. Despite his continued espousal of anti-capitalism, Thompson appeared to sympathise with various capitalist themes in 1827. For example, in 1824 Thompson had promoted the idea of instant gratification, particularly in relation to capital formation, and in contradistinction to trading for profit. As he explained:

Why should the [co-operative] community set aside any part of the articles procured for their annual consumption and enjoyment, [for capital formation based on bartering for profit?] Has their labor produced them more than they can advantageously consume and enjoy during the year? If so, how absurd to add to it, to make provision for an increase of that which is already superfluous! or, to surrender the immediate enjoyment of large masses for the future uncertain enjoyment of smaller, in the way of profit!<sup>2</sup>

However, by 1827 Thompson was attacking the 'love of immediate sensual gratifications', particularly if such a 'love' should prevent labourers from seeing the advantages to be gained from other forms of gratification, especially the creation of a common capital:

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<sup>1</sup> . W. Thompson, Labor Rewarded, p.89.

<sup>2</sup> . W. Thompson, Inquiry, p.528.

It is in this way, by promoting the acquisition of capital amongst the industrious themselves, that Unions must operate in order to make any real advance towards securing to the industrious the products of their own labor.<sup>1</sup>

It was still true that Thompson retained important distinctions between the capitalists' discourse and his own. For example, in 1827 Thompson argued that capital could be generated by 'savings from the wages of well remunerated labour', rather than quasi-capitalist trade for profits; indeed, co-operative manufacturing associations could, 'with inconvenience, continue [to] manufacture without profits.'<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, while Thompson was still lukewarm in 1827 about co-operative manufacturing for profit, preferring, on moral grounds, capital formation from labourers' savings rather than capitalist profits, he had still moved some distance from his anti-surplus trading position of 1824, when he argued that co-operative communities should primarily address only their immediate needs and avoid surpluses. Thus, Thompson had helped to move the Owenite discourse away from the anti-trade position espoused by Robert Owen, the London Co-operative Society, and those co-operators who expressed various anti-trade views in the co-operative press at this time.

A third area that raises doubts about the extent to which Thompson's version of co-operation could escape from the capitalist paradigm was his acceptance of the limitations of any system of labour organisation. What 'Co-operation' promised was a dramatic improvement in the conditions of labourers' security of their labour, and the use and exchange of its products. For Thompson, Co-operation was an evolutionary improvement over capitalism; the two discourses were thus

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<sup>1</sup> . W. Thompson, Labor Rewarded, p.87.

<sup>2</sup> . Ibid., pp. 87, 89.



historically linked rather than synchronically opposed. However, in another sense, they were opposed, not least because it was a negative perspective on capitalism that was helping to define Owenism and co-operation:

One of the results of my inquiries, was to convince me that as it is impossible in a state of civilization, under any system of labor, to secure to every individual the exact products of his individual labor, so it is impracticable to secure to even large numbers, the products of their labor, by any other proposed mode of industry than that of mutual Co-operation.<sup>1</sup>

The diachronic links between co-operation and capitalism within Thompson's discourse were also reflected in his notion of the 'capitalist labourer', a hybrid concept in both 'egalitarian capitalism' and in 'voluntary mutual co-operation', where 'labourers [would] possess... all the materials and implements [i.e. capital] necessary to render their labor productive.'<sup>2</sup> The retention of 'capitalist' within Thompson's discourse is interesting in this context, because it again illustrates the unavoidable connection between co-operation and 'capitalism.' For Thompson, capitalism could be said to represent 'security,' in the sense that the title of capitalist signified ownership of capital. Co-operation, on the other hand, was rhetorically equivalent to equality; together, capitalism and co-operation represented the two opposite ends of his political economy scales, the crucial balancing of which, according to Thompson, had never been attempted by 'mere political economy': 'Here is the important problem of moral science to be solved, "How to reconcile equality with security; how to reconcile just distribution with continued production."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> . *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> . W. Thompson, *Inquiry*, p. xiv.

Thompson's reference to the rather vague notion of 'moral science' is significant here, particularly when he further suggested that political economists had never addressed '[the] problem of moral science'. In this context Thompson's untheorised concept of 'moral science' can be seen as a rhetorical device, used to differentiate the (allegedly) superior and more rigorous, (i.e. Moral, scientific) discourse of Thompson's form of co-operation, from the (allegedly) immoral, un-scientific discourse of the political economists. However, as Thompson conceded to John Stuart Mill in the 1825 dialogues between co-operators and political economists, political economists were not immoral 'advocates of vice and misery', nor were they 'the enemies of human improvement because [they] differ[ed] from [the co-operators] with regard to the means by which human improvement is to be attained'. At the same time, and more importantly in this context, Thompson agreed with John Stuart Mill that the 'evils' of the 'degradation of the working classes' - evils which, in his 1824 Inquiry, Thompson had considered to be unavoidably linked to the system of individual competition - were not 'necessarily inherent in a system of individual competition'.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Thompson was unable to maintain the (moral) differences that he had earlier claimed separated his co-operative discourse from the system of individual competition advocated by the political economists. In this sense Thompson implicitly reinforced the nexus

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<sup>1</sup> . John Stuart Mill, 'Closing Speech on the Co-operative System', (circa 1825), Fabian Society Archive, Nuffield College, Oxford, transcript, B7/5, ff. 46-7. Thompson's disclosure is in stark contrast to E.K. Hunt's assertion that Thompson believed that the evils of individual competition could be eliminated 'by a system of voluntary co-operation', E.K. Hunt, 'Utilitarianism and the Labor Theory of value', 559, i.e. for Thompson, in 1825 at least, such 'evils' were not 'necessarily inherent in...individual competition'.

between co-operation and political economy because both discourses ostensibly aimed to achieve the same ends, though by different means.

Owenites, Co-operators, Co-operative Journalism and Competitive Capitalism

Given his influential position within the Owenite and/or co-operative discourse, and his contribution to co-operative theory, a contribution arguably secondary only to Owen and Thompson,<sup>1</sup> John Gray's inconsistency toward various quasi-capitalist themes raises important doubts about the veracity of a binary opposition between Owenism, co-operation and competitive capitalism. The centre of John Gray's anti-capitalist perspective was his argument that capitalists were unproductive members of society, and were therefore a 'DIRECT TAX upon the productive classes....Persons employing capital is only another name for persons living by the interest of money. These men are unproductive.'<sup>2</sup> The basis for this argument, which ran counter to some of the more positive views on the role of capitalists, held by Owen and Thompson, was a labour theory of value: 'Every necessary, convenience, and comfort of life, is obtained by human labour.' For Gray, however, not all human labour was equally productive, for anyone not directly employed in agriculture and the manufacture and distribution of 'the produce of the earth to the uses of life' was considered unproductive and was therefore 'USELESS.' Moreover, economic activity by non-members of these groups was seen as inherently 'unjust' by Gray. For example, contracts 'that requir[e] interest for the use

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1 . See the introduction to this thesis for an examination of Gray's significance within co-operative discourse.

2 . John Gray, Lecture on Human Happiness, pp. 11, 21. This is discussed in greater depth in chapter five of this thesis.

of money' were seen as unjust by Gray because the benefits were seen as essentially unearned.<sup>1</sup>

Gray's anti-capitalism was undermined in two major ways. Firstly, it is difficult to reconcile Gray's views on the unproductive nature of capitalists with his labour theory of value which suggested that labour had, originally at least, been the productive source of capital, and that capital and capitalists were theoretically and historically productive. Certainly this was an argument that the pro-capitalist John Stuart Mill intended to use in his dialogues with the Owenites in 1825:

The error lies in considering the labourer and the capitalist as men of a different [genus?] like a man and a beast. It is true that at this advanced stage of society, the same man is [rarely?] a labourer and a capitalist; but all capitalists were originally labourers, or descendants of labourers, and all capital is the saving from the produce of their industry. The transformation of labourers into capitalists frequently takes place even at the present day.<sup>2</sup>

To some extent Gray appears to have conceded this point, for he argued that his plan was 'in every way consistent with individuality and distinctions of property.'<sup>3</sup>

Gray's anti-capitalism is further undermined by problems inherent within the notions of a labour theory of value and 'unproductive labour.' For Gray, such concepts were absolute and unconditional; they functioned as transcendental elements in his paradigm, providing the basis for his argument whilst remaining outside and untarnished by the context in which they were used. Such absolutism was eroded by the same problem that

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1 . *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 32.

2 . John Stuart Mill, 'Intended Speech at the Co-operation Society, never delivered', Connecticut College for Women, MS. f.13.

3 . J. Gray, Lecture on Human Happiness, p.59.

confronted William Thompson, namely the impossibility of eradicating barter. Thus, whilst Gray reiterated his absolutist perspective when unproblematically asserting that 'the propensity to exchange labour for labour...[was] the original principle, by which [man] is enabled to leave, at such an immeasurable distance below him, all the brute creation', he also conceded that the bedrock for such absolutism was a relativism based on negotiation: 'barter, and barter alone, is the basis of society; and ...all other institutions amongst men are built wholly and solely upon it.'<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to many other co-operators in this period, Abram Combe, head of the Owenite community at Orbiston from 1825 until his death in 1827, and author of The Sphere for Joint Stock Companies in 1825, exhibited very little anxiety about capitalists and capitalism. Indeed, in many ways he embraced them both. Combe's advocacy of capitalism can be illustrated in several ways. Firstly, Combe's ideas for Joint Stock Companies as a form of co-operative community or association were in stark contrast to William Thompson's, and were based essentially on economic rather than egalitarian criteria. For example, whilst Combe considered that Joint Stock Companies promoted the Owenite axiom of greater happiness, their primary justification was that they engendered an improved, more efficient division of labour than the hitherto, essentially individualist system.

[B]ecause [of] the united skill of individuals, who have experience in various departments, a concern under the direction of a Company will have advantages which no individual could bestow; and, at the same time, that amount of capital required, is what very few individuals can command.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . Ibid., p.3.

<sup>2</sup> . Abram Combe, The Sphere for Joint Stock Companies: or the Way to Increase the Value of Land, Capital and Labour (Edinburgh, 1825), p.4.

It was Combe's views on trading for profit and self interest that saw him move closest to the capitalist position; and, in the case of his approval of self interest, near to the political economy perspective too.<sup>1</sup> Yet such views should not be seen as necessarily incongruous or antithetical in the Owenite or co-operative discourse. Rather Combe's pro-capitalist stance reveals how elastic the boundaries of the Owenite macro-discourse could be.

Owenite journalism to 1827 essentially mirrored the ambiguity exhibited by Owen toward capital/ists/ism. Thus, in 1821 The Economist launched a withering attack on the moral bankruptcy of capital, capitalists, and by implication, capitalism:

But the most remarkable instance of the tyranny of capital, of its disregard of everything but its own increase or preservation, and the pertinacity with which it adheres to the most disadvantageous employments, occurred about two years ago in Sheffield. The Great Capitalists in one branch of Sheffield manufacture, I believe the springknife trade, after having reduced wages as low as possible, formed a conspiracy, with a view of further securing their capital, to destroy the smaller class of manufactures, because these latter (a very rare thing indeed!) could afford to underwork them! They accordingly prevailed on the Master Grinders to refuse to finish the goods of the small manufacturers ; and it was only after discovering that they had subjected themselves to severe legal penalties, that they abandoned this truly characteristic proceeding!<sup>2</sup>

Conversely, various contributors to The Economist welcomed the support and patronage of capitalists in helping to fund the creation of co-operative villages. Moreover, as The Economist of 4 August 1821 revealed, 'Subscribers toward the fund for forming the Motherwell

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<sup>1</sup> . Ibid., pp. 3-4, 26-7.

<sup>2</sup> . The Economist, 13 October 1821, p.198.

Establishment...are to receive five per cent interest on the capital.<sup>1</sup> In 1821, the editor of The Economist, George Mudie, also could not separate the quasi-capitalist notion of 'self love' from the Owenite concept of 'social affection' in assessing which engendered the greatest happiness for the greatest number - the latter a rationale for both Owenites and political economists: 'The highest degree of happiness which can be attained in this world, must arise from these two sources [i.e. individual and social] of gratification combined.'<sup>2</sup> Some of the small number of Owenite Associations formed in this period also tended to reflect a concern for the profit-making potential of such arrangements, rather than the communitarian, social values emphasised in some of Owen's rhetoric.<sup>3</sup> For example, some of the advantages to be enjoyed by those investors not living in the 'New [Co-operative] Society' formed in January 1821 included 'a secure deposit for their subscription money, and the certainty of a fair profit in proportion to the amount of their share of the fund.'<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, these views and those of Combe's pro-trading position, with their vocabulary of profit and self interest, were at odds with the

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- 1 . The Economist, 4 August 1821, p.27; see also ibid., July 1821, pp. 34-5; ibid., 15 September 1821, p.136.
  - 2 . The Economist, 19 May 1821, p.263.
  - 3 . See, for example, Robert Owen, 'A Sketch of some of the Errors and Evils Arising from the Past and Present State of Society, with an Explanation of some of the peculiar advantage to be derived from the Arrangements of the Unemployed Working Classes into "Agricultural and Manufacturing Villages of Unity and Mutual Co-operation," limited to a Population of from 500 to 1,500 Persons.' - 'Published in the London Newspapers of August 9th, 1817,' in The Life, Vol. 1A, pp. 83-92. See also, A Letter to the Working Classes of Edinburgh, on the Formation of New Societies, and an Outline of Regulations for Their Government, Adapted to the Spirit of the Age (Edinburgh, 1824), p.5 where the advice to the working classes is 'form yourselves into companies'.
  - 4 . The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist, 8 February 1823, p.69.

constitution of the London Co-operative Society, formed in 1825, as well as with some of the sparse co-operative journalism in this period. Thus, the London Co-operative Society asserted that 'We will not ...become a trading and accumulating, but will be, and remain, a producing and enjoying community.'<sup>1</sup> The London Co-operative Magazine in 1826 was clearer:

The system advocated by Mr. Owen, and properly called the co-operative system, is not founded on the principle of trade. No very considerable saving can be effected out of the profits of wholesale and retail dealers, by a society wholly dependent on an external demand. The present cost of distribution, which frequently exceeds the cost of production, can only be avoided when the producers associate in such numbers as to possess a market amongst themselves, and become the consumers of the wealth they create.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the emphasis given by The Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald to the differences that separated Owenism from capitalism in relation to trade, the same criticisms that Torrens had applied to Robert Owen's plans to escape capitalism applied here. Whilst Owenites equivocated on trade, no Owenite association would ever reach a size that would facilitate self-sufficiency, except arguably out of the ashes of capitalist trade. Similarly, The Co-operative Magazine faced the dilemma which, according to William Thompson, confronted all co-operators and political economists: how to reconcile equality with security. Thus, The Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald in 1827 emphasised the space

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<sup>1</sup> . Articles of Agreement Drawn up and Recommended by the London Co-operative Society for the Formation of a Community on Principles of Mutual Co-operation (London, 1825), p.13.

<sup>2</sup> . The Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald, January 1826, p.32. See also *ibid.*, December 1826, p.367, where a letter signed a 'Co-operator' declares that 'Commercial or trading life is diametrically opposed in principle to Christian life [and presumably, and problematically, to Co-operative life]. The object of the one is self, that of the other social interest'.



separating co-operators from the pro-capitalist position of various political economists:

The chief question on this point...between the modern, (or Mill and Malthus) Political Economists, and the Communions or Socialists, is, whether it is more beneficial that this capital should be individual or in common? We say it is much more beneficial that it should be in common.<sup>1</sup>

That difference was diluted somewhat, however, by the need of the co-operators to temper their goal of a common capital with the necessity of safeguarding the security of labourers' freedom to enjoy the products of their labour.

This chapter has shown that pre-trading Owenism and co-operation embodied a wide range of responses to the important concepts of competitive capitalism. It has also been suggested that there was no essentialist definition of the nature of competitive capitalism within Owenite and co-operative discourse, or at least none that dominated. Rather, competitive capitalism functioned as an umbrella concept in Owenite and co-operative discourse, incorporating a wide range of pejorative and positive metaphors, including notions of 'individual interest'; 'trading for profit', and others. Ironically, in one sense, Owenite and co-operative attitudes toward capitalism were characterised by a binary opposition between Owen's avowed anti-trade, anti-individualist perspective, and the profit motive of Abram Combe. However, neither position is representative of a wider Owenite orthodoxy, not only because there was no ultimate, definitive voice in Owenism or co-operation, including Owen's, but also

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<sup>1</sup> . The Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald, November 1827, p.509.

because Owenite and co-operative responses to these topics, and others, were relatively diverse.

An added complication was that even the various anti-capitalist statements of the Owenites and co-operators were undermined in miscellaneous ways. For example, Robert Owen's anti-capitalism was weakened by his own position as a capitalist. Additionally, part of the absolutism of William Thompson and John Gray's anti-capitalism was necessarily diluted by their acceptance that concepts like bartering provided an indispensable link between Owenism and capitalism. Whilst it was implicit within Thompson and Gray's anti-capitalist outlook that any attempt to eradicate bartering within co-operation was impossible, that is without creating either arbitrary edicts about value, or worse, a system very much like that which it was designed to replace, there was still a perception in Owenite and co-operative circles, that bartering in a market economy was different from that form of bartering proposed under co-operation. For many of the Owenites and co-operators in this period, market place bartering was regarded as being unfettered by any other concerns than its internal logic to exchange, usually by buying cheap and selling dear. Under co-operation, however, co-operators like Thompson held that whilst bartering would still be necessary, it would be subject to, and policed by, superior moral, social, and political concerns.

Whether Owenites, co-operators, and socialists after 1827 were subsequently successful in achieving this contrasting form of barter, and escaping the net of 'competitive/capitalism', is a question that will be addressed in the next chapter, in an analysis of the next phase of

Owenism and co-operation - Trading Owenism, Co-operation, Socialists and Competitive Capitalism, 1827 to 1835.

## CHAPTER TWO

### 'TRADING OWENISM', CO-OPERATION, SOCIALISTS AND COMPETITIVE CAPITALISM, 1827-1835

The prevailing historiographical characterisation of the relationship between proto-British Socialism and capitalism up to the 1830s is the view that the Owenites, Co-operators, and Socialists were antagonistic towards competitive capitalism. Numerous historians have emphasised the anti-capitalist nature of Owenite and Co-operative discourse. For example, Gregory Claeys, one of the most prominent contemporary scholars on Owenism, has underlined the anti-capitalist nature of Robert Owen's labour exchanges which aimed at 'eliminat[ing] all forms of middlemen (as well as, eventually, capitalists)'.<sup>1</sup> However, Claeys, like other historians discussed below, essentially eschews discussion of the alternative strands within early British socialism, (alternative strands that opposed the anti-capitalist stance that Claeys et al. view as representative of the entire co-operative socialist movement in this period), in this major work on Owenite - co-operative political economy. More recently, Claeys has alluded to, but not analysed the 'large consumer co-operation movement [which] mushroomed', 'especially after 1828'. In Claeys view, this movement 'was often inspired by Owen's work, even if its chief aim (the distribution of profits among members) was more limited than his'.<sup>2</sup>

J.F.C. Harrison, in his influential book Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America, identified 'The Economy of Cooperation'

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<sup>1</sup> . Gregory Claeys, Machinery, Money and the Millennium: From Moral Economy to Socialism 1815-60 (Cambridge, 1987), p.55.

<sup>2</sup> . G. Claeys, ed., 'Introduction' to Selected Works of Robert Owen Vol. 1 (London, 1993), p.xxxviii.

with an 'anti-capitalist economics'.<sup>1</sup> E.P. Thompson argued that 'Cooperative Socialism was [a problematic attempt] to displace capitalism'.<sup>2</sup> G.D.H. Cole noted Robert Owen's 'denunciations...of capitalist competition'; J.E. King pointed to the Owenite William Thompson's 'sustained critique of competitive capitalism'; whilst R.G. Garnett suggested that Owenism was 'an alternative to the capitalist system'.<sup>3</sup> W.H. Oliver appears to share this perspective, arguing that the 'founders' of the nineteenth century co-operative movement 'attacked the profits of the capitalist manufacturer'. However, Oliver makes the important point that not all co-operators in this period shared the same ultimate aims of co-operative community, though this insight isn't developed.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, this chapter will argue that, far from presenting a united and anti-capitalist front, Owenite and Co-operative discourse from 1827 to

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1. See J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America (London, 1969), pp.63-4. Gareth Stedman Jones, The Languages of Class (Cambridge, 1983), p. 57, has also equated 'Owenism' with 'an anti-capitalist political economy'. Barbara Taylor, Eve and the New Jerusalem (London, 1983), p.84, concurs with Stedman Jones' assessment of the relationship between Owenism and capitalism.
  2. E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (London, 1986), p.885.
  3. G.D.H. Cole, A Century of Co-operation (London, 1944), p.19; J.E. King, 'Perish Commerce! Free Trade and Underconsumption in Early British Radical Economics', Australian Economic Papers, XX (1981), 245; R.G. Garnett, Co-operation and the Owenite socialist communities in Britain, 1825-45 (Manchester, 1972), pp. ix, 268. See also Noel Thompson, The Market and Its Critics: Socialist Political Economy in Nineteenth Century Britain (London, 1988), pp.58-102; and Elisabeth and Richard Jay, Critics of Capitalism: Victorian Reactions to Political Economy (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 27-30, for similar emphases.
  4. W.H. Oliver, 'The Labour Exchange Phase of the Co-operative Movement,' Oxford Economic Papers, n.s., x (1958), 355-57. The failure of Oliver's article to develop this important insight adequately is as much a function of the purpose and brevity of Oliver's article, as it is an effect of the paucity of primary material which Oliver cites (361).

1835 was characterised by significant differences, dissension and debate over aims and means. These debates were often centred on how such quasi-capitalist activities as trade, buying cheap and selling dear, profits, selfishness and divisible capital impacted on co-operative aims and means. For many Owenites, and non-Owenite co-operators (the latter including those associated with the British Association for the Promotion of Co-operative Knowledge - hereafter BAPCK), quasi-capitalist trade was an important means of establishing their ultimate aim of co-operative communities. Yet these co-operators also decried such notions as 'selfishness', and profit-making as an end. Unfortunately, as some critics of Owen and the BAPCK asserted, there was little difference, in effect, between co-operators pro-capitalist 'trading' means and their anti-capitalist communitarian ends. These critics of Owen's labour exchanges, and the policy of 'buying cheap and selling dear', argued that these policies not only did little immediately to improve the lot of many working-class co-operators, but they deferred co-operative ends indefinitely - because of their inherent inefficiencies - and tainted the co-operative discourse with a capitalist hue.

An alternative disparate strand that developed within co-operative discourse in this period included not only the critics of Owen's labour exchanges, but co-operators like William King - of Brighton Co-operator fame, George Skene - one-time secretary of the BAPCK, and others, as well as several co-operative societies. In one sense these co-operative critics of Owenism and 'co-operation' anticipated the revisionism of German Marxist Eduard Bernstein, who asserted in the late nineteenth century that 'the goal [of socialism] means nothing to me. The movement

means everything'.<sup>1</sup> King, Skene et al. were concerned with means rather than ends, with the amelioration of the conditions faced by working class co-operators immediately, rather than deferring that outcome to some abstract, ill-defined point in the future. King, Skene and others openly embraced such capitalist means and ends as 'selfishness', 'individualism', and 'joint-stock companies'. Yet, whilst co-operators like Skene openly appeared to court the capitalist paradigm, and whilst their emphasis was more on co-operative means rather than ends - though the former tended to define the latter - Skene and others also shunned the capitalist policy of 'buying cheap and selling dear'. Indeed, Skene was one of several co-operators championing various forms of profit re-distribution, in stark contrast with the individualist and pro-capitalist strategies of other Owenites and co-operators. Paradoxically, therefore, the proto-British socialists were united in utilising various capitalist concepts, despite significant differences over means and ends.

This chapter will initially focus on Robert Owen. Owen was both a leading light in the co-operative trading movement which viewed trading for a profit as a means to promote communitarian ends, - at least after his conversion to co-operative trade in the late 1820s - and a key locus for much criticism from other co-operators for the quasi-capitalist nature of this strategy. The support of various non-Owenite co-operators - some of whom were associated with the leadership of the central co-operative organisation at this time, the BAPCK - for a similar form of co-operative trading, again as a means to engender co-operative communities, will then be explored. The criticism levelled at this form of co-operative trade will

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<sup>1</sup> . Bernstein, quoted in Albert S. Lindemann, A History of European Socialism (New Haven, 1983), p.152.

then be analysed. Important co-operators like George Skene, erstwhile secretary of the BAPCK, regarded the trading strategy of Owen and others as little more than an assimilation of co-operation by the capitalist system. Finally, this chapter will assess the alternative co-operative/capitalist ends promoted by Skene and others. This was significant, not least, because it raised fundamental questions about the nature of co-operative philosophy - questions which were discussed at the highest levels within co-operative discourse, i.e. at the Co-operative Congress.

### Robert Owen and Co-operative 'Trading'

The Owenite trading period - which included manufacturing and trading associations, as well as labour exchanges, banks and bazaars - began in a tangible sense with William King's transient Union Exchange Society formed in the summer of 1827 in London, which was designed to facilitate the exchange of goods between workers. The movement grew only gradually from 1827 through 1828 and 1829. By 1830 there were over 800 co-operative societies in existence.<sup>1</sup> By 1834-5 the trading period of the co-operative movement was at an end; subsequent attempts by co-operators to resurrect a system of trade only emerged from 1844.

Owenite or co-operative trading associations were thus still in their early development in 1829 when Robert Owen returned from America, and reiterated his objections to trade. Lovett, one of the founders of the London Co-operative Trading Association formed in 1829, recalled that "When Mr. Owen first came over from America he looked somewhat coolly on those "Trading Associations," and very candidly declared that mere buying and

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<sup>1</sup> . G. Claeys, Machinery, Money, p.55; see also J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen, esp. p. 199.



selling formed no part of his grand "co-operative" scheme'. According to Lovett, it was not Owen's depleted finances, post-New Harmony, but the popularity of trading associations among co-operators which subsequently persuaded him of the benefits of such methods of achieving co-operative communitarian ends. Owen then became actively involved in the trading movement, still somewhat reluctantly, when he opened a labour exchange in September 1831.<sup>1</sup>

For Sidney Pollard and others, Owen's labour exchanges, along with co-operative trade, represented 'a half-way house to [communitarian] settlements'. Yet, in spite of their perceived limitations - i.e. they were not an alternative to community - Pollard et al. have argued that the exchanges were also intrinsically anti-capitalist, designed to 'remov[e] people from the adverse effects of the capitalist market place'.<sup>2</sup> Pollard et al. note some of the quasi-capitalist elements in Owen's exchanges, e.g. the advantageous pricing policy for capitalists at Owen's exchanges; the utilisation of a market, not labour system of pricing etc. However, Pollard et al. do not conclude that such inconsistencies seriously jeopardised the anti-capitalist nature of the exchanges.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . William Lovett, Life and Struggles of William Lovett, Vol. 1 (London, 1920), p.44. See also the letter from William Watkins to Robert Owen in January 1832, where the former laments Owen's delay in establishing a Labour Bank, William Watkin to Robert Owen, 23 January 1832, Manchester Co-operative Union, MS. No. 503.

<sup>2</sup> . Sidney Pollard, 'Robert Owen as an Economist', Co-operative College Papers, 14 (1971), 34-5. See also J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen, pp.201, 206-7; W.H. Oliver, 'The Labour Exchange', 358, 360,366. Gregory Claeys, ed., 'Introduction', Selected Works of Robert Owen, Vol. 1 (London, 1993), p.xl; B. Taylor, Eve, p.86.

<sup>3</sup> . See, for example, Pollard, ibid., 35, J.F.C. Harrison, ibid., p.206.

This is at best a misleading argument, for Owen's exchanges functioned very much like a capitalistic venture. Certainly this was the impression of some co-operators, whose horizons did not stretch as far as co-operative communities at this time. They accused Owen of shifting too far in favour of capitalist trade. Thus, The Exchange Bazaar Gazette, edited by a former resident of Orbiston, George Mudie, claimed in 1832 that Owen's Gray's Inn Road Exchange Bazaar was not run on co-operative principles:

Most unfortunately, [Robert Owen, Governor of the Gray's Inn Road Bazaar] does not discern any other practical means by which the sufferers from the present system of excessive competition, low prices, and restrained demand, can be relieved from the evils which competition and low prices have inflicted upon them, than that of his resorting, on the part of himself and his followers, to a still more rigorous competition, and to still lower prices than those which are at present attainable in the markets of this country.<sup>1</sup>

For The Exchange Bazaar Gazette there was little to separate Owen's Gray's Inn Road Bazaar from any other capitalist enterprise:

The evils of [the labourers'] condition are confessedly owing to their interests being at variance with the interests of capitalists, - to labour, in the aggregate, being destitute of capital, or very nearly so. Does the Gray's Inn Road Bazaar reconcile the interests of capitalists with the interests of Labourers? NO.-It confessedly sacrifices all other interests to the interests of those who possess large capital and extensive machinery! Does the Gray's Inn Road Bazaar make provision for the creation of a capital that shall be devoted to working out the independence of the labouring Depositors,-that shall endow labour with capital, and thus confer upon it the advantages of which it is now destitute? No.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . The Exchange Bazaar Gazette, 29 September 1832, p.19.

<sup>2</sup> . Ibid., 20 October 1832, p.54. See also William King's (of the Gothic Hall Bazaar) criticisms of Owen's labour exchanges in ibid., 29 September 1832, pp.22-3. In The Crisis, 13 October 1832, pp.126-7, Owen himself confirmed some of the criticisms levelled at his labour exchanges by Mudie and King.

No doubt the arguments of The Exchange Bazaar Gazette were coloured by the experiences of its editor, George Mudie, who had not only been financially if not spiritually depressed by his experiences at Orbiston, but was increasingly estranged from Robert Owen.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding any possible personal context for Mudie's arguments, however, clearly there was a discrepancy between Owen's anti-capitalist aims, and the pro-capitalist functioning of his labour exchanges. For example, it is generally accepted in the secondary literature on Owenism and co-operation that Owen's labour notes, introduced in his labour exchanges to facilitate fairer, non-capitalistic exchanges of labour for labour, were, in fact, directly linked to capitalist, market price equivalents. Moreover, it was the 'market price' which determined the value of 'raw materials' in Owen's exchanges in June 1832, because 'it is not easy in practice to ascertain immediately the cost-price of raw materials in hours, or the time and labour that it has taken in passing through the various stages of growth and manufacture'.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, Owen refuted the suggestions that his exchanges were vitiated by the capitalist ethos, returning the same accusations which his detractors had levelled at him. For example, Owen accused William King, head of the alternative co-operative Gothic Hall Bazaar, and contributor to The Exchange Bazaars Gazette, (not to be confused with William King of The Brighton Co-operator), of operating the Gothic Hall Bazaar for 'individual advantage' and 'private speculation,' and with 'no property to indemnify the public from loss'.<sup>3</sup> For his part, King expressed surprise and

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1 . See, for example, George Mudie's retrospective letter to Robert Owen, 29 August 1848, National Library of Wales, MS. 145325C, ff.66-67.

2 . The Crisis, 30 June 1832, p.60. See chapter six of this thesis for a fuller discussion of these issues.

3 . The Exchange Bazaars Gazette, 29 September 1832, pp.22-3.

dismay at the vehemence of Owen's attack. Despite his criticisms of Owen's exchanges, King had been and continued to be an advocate of Owen's plans.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, King espoused a position in his own Gothic Hall Bazaar that not only fell short of Owen's communitarian ambitions, but was also opposed to Owen's policy of 'buying cheap and selling dear'.<sup>2</sup>

Owen's aggressive defence of the aims and means of his Exchange did little to allay criticism. Indeed, the continuing criticism of the Exchanges was sufficient to prompt discussions at the Fourth Co-operative Congress in October 1832. As one delegate - Mr. Styles, a director himself - conceded: 'It had been said that the Labour Exchange was merely a scheme to aggrandise personal wealth to the directors.' Mr. Styles disputed this allegation, but in so doing he deflected one argument on the capitalist nature of Owenite labour exchanges only to draw attention to the quasi-capitalist foundations of the Owenite labour exchange, based on profit and interest for investors:

[Mr. Styles] referred, however, to the 7th law of the association, which enacted that "all surplus profit beyond the amount necessary to pay the incidental expenses, and 5 per cent. interest to the members, shall be applied to extending the exchanges, by providing employment for the industrious classes, and educating their children."....This certainly looked not like personal aggrandisement.<sup>3</sup>

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1 . King held Owen in the 'highest regard'; see letter from William King to Robert Owen, 10 May 1832, Manchester Co-operative Union, MS. No. 544; see also The Exchange Bazaars Gazette, 29 September 1832, p. 23.

2 . The Exchange Bazaars Gazette, 29 September 1832, p.10. See also William King, Gothic Hall Labour Banks (1833), pp.1-4.

3 . 'Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of Delegates from Co-operative Societies of Great Britain and Ireland....held on Monday, October 1, 1832,' in The Lancashire and Yorkshire Co-operator, No. 10, [no date - October ?] 1832, pp.26-7.

Despite the '7th law of the association' and Owen's communitarian ambitions, it appears clear that Owen's labour exchanges functioned very much like a capitalist enterprise based on the profit motive, with interest to members, use of market prices etc. Indeed, Owen's journal The New Moral World virtually admitted as much in 1836: the co-operative trading experiment had been a failure, not least in its inability to overthrow or transcend competitive capitalism:

This [i.e. Co-operative societies...a sort of benefit trading compan[y] for mutual advantage] was the preliminary notion among Socialists of doing away with competition....These were called Co-operative, but were not so except in regard to their ulterior views in some instances: otherwise the proper name for them should have been combined competitive societies....Mr Owen has shewn times beyond number, that the old system and the new, whether in principle or practice, can no more be united together, than can oil and water by simple admixture.<sup>1</sup>

The reference to Owen's views on the incompatibility of the competitive capitalist and co-operative systems is more suggestive of Owen's desire for such an outcome, than an accurate representation of his own, and the wider Owenite and co-operative discourse in this period.

#### Non-Owenite Co-operation and 'Trade'

The focus by many co-operators on trade was associated with a shift in co-operative discourse away from Owen as the locus for co-operative wisdom. As William Lovett recalled in conversation with Francis Place, the founders of the London Co-operative Trading Association -

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<sup>1</sup> . The New Moral World, 3 December 1836, p.41. See also Edward Owen Greening, Memories of Robert Owen and the Co-operative Pioneers (Manchester, 1925), p.12, where Owen's ideas for 'community' were compared with 'Cadbury's' 'factory in a garden' experiment at 'Bournville' where 'Capital was to have its interest [at] 5 per cent'.

which included such significant co-operative figures as Lovett himself, George Foskett and Skene, and later Henry Hetherington - 'sought':

in the propagation of [their] principles, [based on the 'writings of Owen, Thompson, Morgan, Gray and others,'] to avoid the course Robt. Owen had steered, which they conceived had materially impeded his progress; that of insisting on principles, strongly opposed to the prejudices of the multitude....By which proceedings they were led to consider him a person inimical to their interests, and accordingly they attended his meetings and carried resolutions counter to his own.<sup>1</sup>

But these innovations in co-operative discourse did not mean the abandonment of some of Owen's concerns about trade. There were still regular protests in the Owenite and co-operative press about the evils of 'buying cheap and selling dear'; and about selfishness, and profit-making as an end. What was new about these developments was the emphasis by many Owenites on the need to obtain a common capital, via trade, and thus to establish a new co-operative society.

The clarion call for many Owenites throughout the Owenite trading period was capital, and the need to create common capital, not least to counterbalance the threat of unemployment, and also for many co-operators to promote community. As The Brighton Co-operator asserted in 1828, 'It is capital we want.'<sup>2</sup> C. Fry made a similar point in 1829: 'The primary object of a Co-operative Society is to form a capital:- it is capital that the working classes so much stand in need of.'<sup>3</sup> From 1827 the means by which labourers might obtain such a common capital was no longer restricted to meagre weekly subscriptions, but included profits from trading.

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<sup>1</sup> . 'Manuscript account given by Lovett to Place (1835). From the Place MSS. 27,822, f.17', in G.D.H. Cole and A.W. Wilson, eds., British Working Class Movements 1789-1875 (London, 1951), p.212.

<sup>2</sup> . The Brighton Co-operator, 1 May 1828, pp. 2-3.

<sup>3</sup> . The Weekly Free Press, 5 December 1829.

The ostensible purpose of raising such a capital, and the means by which it would be achieved, was succinctly put by G.C. Penn at a meeting of the Lambeth Co-operative Trading Union in April 1829:

This [co-operative] principle might be simply stated; it was to unite in societies, deposit from 1d. upwards, weekly, according to their ability, and when the amount was sufficiently large, to lay it out in the wholesale purchase of such articles as their families were generally in the habit of consuming, retail them to their families (and to the public) at the usual retail prices, and add the difference (the profit) to the common stock. As the capital increased, to put such of their members to work as required the least capital to purchase raw materials with. These would supply the members of the Union (or of other Unions) with the articles of manufacture. Gradually all would be employed, and become independent, not, in the common acceptation of the term, by being idlers, and living upon the profits of other people's labour, but independent of capitalists or masters, and by means of their own labour.<sup>1</sup>

From 1827, and the ostensible public birth of the socialist neologism in the pages of The Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald,<sup>2</sup> many Owenites and co-operators had contrasted their position on capital with that of the political economists. This contrast was based on a perception that many Owenites and co-operators were advocating a common, social use of capital, largely devoid of the selfish profit motive which was said to characterise the political economy perspective. For example, the co-operative journal The Pioneer emphasised in 1834 the space separating co-operators from the political economists, regarding the latter as mere

<sup>1</sup> . Ibid., 11 April 1829. See also ibid., 16 January 1830, the 'Laws of the British Association for Promoting Co-operative Knowledge'; The Associate, 1 February 1829, pp.8-9; ibid., 1 March 1829, pp.17-20; The Official Gazette of the Trade Unions, 7 June 1834, p.34. Gide and Rist erroneously claimed in their classic History of Economic Doctrines (London, 1923), pp. 239-44, that Robert Owen (if not the Owenites, though the two were virtually synonymous for Gide and Rist) wanted to abolish profits.

<sup>2</sup> . The London Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald, November 1827, p. 509. See the introduction to this thesis for a discussion of the evolution of this term.

apologists for capitalism: 'The political economists, champions as they are for the dreadful system, in the pay of Capitalists.'<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in 1832 the Owenite and co-operative journal The Crisis equated political economists with an historical spirit of selfishness inherent in capitalism:

From the first ages of the world, a very narrow and selfish principle had actuated all mankind; which was to benefit themselves without thinking of the welfare of their neighbour; nay, further, even to benefit themselves at the expense of their neighbours...The whole superstructure of what was called political economy, was based on the false notion that the aggregate happiness of a people depended on this principle being practised.<sup>2</sup>

Many other co-operators during this period also attacked capitalist trade and its related selfishness. For example, at a public meeting of the BAPCK in 1829, P.O. Skene and William Lovett attempted to define some of the philosophical tenets of co-operation, in tacit contrast to competitive capitalism:

[P.O. Skene speaking]...The Co-operative system proposed no dazzling scheme for amassing riches, or for an immediate exemption from the restraints which the ignorance of ages had accumulated, and laid on our social rights. The object it proposed was the legitimate exercise of what rights remained in working out the independence of the working classes of the community, by securing for them the real value for their labour.

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<sup>1</sup> . The Pioneer, 5 April 1834, p.283.

<sup>2</sup> . The Crisis, 15 December 1832, p.162.



[Mr. Lovett speaking]...My first position is this, that the very foundation of society implies this agreement - a relinquishment on the part of all its members, of the selfish, and natural feeling, for the general good....the real basis of society is the co-operative or social principle; and that by departing from this and pursuing the selfish, man has made a sacrifice of his fellow-man, and himself become wretched and despised, on the one hand, or a slave or despot on the other. Tis this that has divided it into a thousand different factions, each warring against the other; and until this feeling of self be sacrificed to the social principle of society, mankind can never be happy.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the Owenite Charles Fry-Carlile denounced the capitalist pursuit of profit in November 1829:

Did the workmen but know the train of evils attendant upon the principle of profit on cost price, they would to a man set their faces against it, as the curse of mankind. And such may it be called, in very truth: contrary to every precept, moral or religious; incompatible with truth, justice, and brotherly love; fruitful source of envyings, oppression, and strife, do we find competition developed in the practice of buying cheap and selling dear.<sup>2</sup>

However, this important difference between some Owenites and co-operators and political economists on the issue of capitalism was undermined by an ongoing commitment on the part of many socialists to a form of quasi-capitalism based on the purchase of goods at wholesale prices, and selling them to their members and the general public at retail,

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<sup>1</sup> . The Weekly Free Press, 17 October 1829. See also Lovett in Report of the Proceedings at the Second Quarterly Meeting of BAPCK, October 8th 1829 (London, 1829), pp.9-10; and the Owenite Wigg attacking 'interest on capital,' in Report of the Proceedings at the Third Quarterly Meeting of BAPCK, January 7th 1830 (London, 1830), pp.31-33.

<sup>2</sup> . The Weekly Free Press, 7 November 1829. See also The Brighton Co-operator, 1 May 1829, pp.2-4, and its criticisms of interest as a 'cunning way of making money for those who can not labour'.

market prices, albeit as a means.<sup>1</sup>

The case for the adoption of such quasi-capitalist tactics was put by BAPCK member James Tucker in 1830:

The employment of united subscriptions, by buying and selling, was the only means upon which co-operation could be practically adopted; the first and simple principle, easily understood, to co-operate to raise a small capital....It was the only point upon which they could practically unite, and organise themselves at first; the foundation on which to raise the superstructure; the preparatory school to teach the higher principles of social science. How many thousands are now occupied in studying the social science of co-operative economy, who, but for these trading associations, would never have had their attention drawn to it. It is the first time co-operation came into actual combat with competition; let us hope co-operators will maintain their ground, and not be beaten out of field by the old system.<sup>2</sup>

More tangibly, The First London Co-operative Association, formed in 1829, regarded profit making, 'arising out of trade by the purchase of goods at wholesale prices, and selling them at retail prices, to the associates and the public,' as one of the 'Primary means for carrying [their] object [i.e. 'the mutual happiness and common wealth of all its associates'] into effect.' Similarly, The First Armagh Co-operative Society, founded in February

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- <sup>1</sup> . Noel Thompson's argument that '[socialist] writers [in this period were] moved to throw the market baby out with the capitalist bath water' appears particularly suspect here. See Noel Thompson, The Market and Its Critics: Socialist Political Economy in Nineteenth Century Britain (London, 1988), p.117. Ironically, Thompson concedes as much himself. For example, in ibid., p.68, Thompson notes that '[William Thompson et als.] critique of the functioning of the market did not lead on necessarily or logically to its rejection'. Similarly, in ibid., p.93, Noel Thompson notes that the 'committees [of Owenite and co-operative exchanges]...valu[ed] goods at their market prices'.
- <sup>2</sup> . The Weekly Free Press and Co-operative Journal, 28 August 1830. See also G.C. Penn in ibid., 28 March 1829; William Thompson, in ibid., 6 February 1830; The Belfast Co-operative Advocate, January 1830, pp.3-4.

1830, advocated the 'purchase [of] commodities which they use at the wholesale prices, and sell[ing] them to each other at the retail.'<sup>1</sup>

Many Owenites and co-operators were thus faced with a dilemma, even if some failed to recognise it as such: how could a moral, social, post-selfish discourse like 'socialism' rise untarnished out of the ashes of capitalist trade, and establish co-operative communities? The simple answer was that it couldn't. No matter how sincere and vociferous the anti-capitalist rhetoric of the Owenites and co-operators was, it was contaminated by the capitalist ethos within which it worked. For example, one of the First London Co-operative Association's main objectives was to prevent the 'accumulation of wealth into the hands of single individuals.' However, the strategy adopted by the First London Co-operative Association for effecting such an anti-capitalistic objective was identical with that same system of individual accumulation, market prices, retail purchases, and money transactions, i.e. capitalism.<sup>2</sup>

The experience of the United Trades' Loan and Savings' Fund, formed in 1833, whose provisional treasurer was Robert Owen, provides a further window into the inability of Owenite discourse to break free from its

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1 . The First London Co-operative Association: Its Objects and Laws (London, 1829), p.3; Words of Wisdom, addressed to the Working Classes; containing Simple Directions, by which they may secure to themselves, and to their descendants for ever, an abundant supply of all the comforts and conveniences, with many of the luxuries and refinements of life. To which are subjoined, The Laws of the First Armagh Co-operative Society (Armagh, 1830), p.13.

2 . The First London Co-operative Association, 1829, p.3.

capitalist roots.<sup>1</sup> The ostensible 'object' of the fund was 'the raising of an unlimited capital, to be applied (exclusively) to the use of the United Trades, by the means of loan.'<sup>2</sup> A more expansive purpose for the fund was indicated by 'one of the producing classes,' namely the overthrow of 'murderous competition', which included the pernicious activities of 'the capitalist, who comes as master between the producer and consumer.' However, the basis for this opposition was not only undermined by calls from the same correspondent for producers to become capitalists,<sup>3</sup> but also by the rationale of the fund itself. The latter can be illustrated not only by the quasi-capitalist, interest-bearing features built into the fund,<sup>4</sup> but also by correspondence from a co-operator named J.D., which illustrates perfectly the difficulties faced by co-operators in extricating themselves from the capitalist, competitive paradigm:

The object of the Trades' Fund is, I understand, to open a way to the raw material market, and thus allow labour to liberate herself from the manacles of monopoly....But I confess I do not see very clearly the means by which this object is to be attained. Loans from the fund are to be advanced upon security, and to be returned with interest....what means will the Trades' Societies have, unless they sell for money, and at a profit, to return the loan with interest?<sup>5</sup>

It is too simplistic to conclude that the integrity of the anti-capitalist ambitions of many of these co-operators were compromised by their pro-capitalist means. Nonetheless, the difficulties faced by the Owenite and co-

1. The Crisis, 18 May 1833, p.149. For a succinct discussion of the influence of Owenism and co-operation on the United Trades, see W.H. Oliver, 'The Labour Exchange', esp. 357-61.

2. The Crisis, 18 May 1833, p.149. The Crisis was an Owenite and/or co-operative journal edited by Robert Owen and his son Robert Dale Owen for much of its life. The journal was subsequently closed down by Robert Owen in 1834 due to what Owen regarded as the seditious (i.e. antagonistic to his own) views of its last editor, James E. Smith.

3. Ibid., 8 June 1833, pp.175-6.

4. Ibid., 18 May 1833, p.19.

5. Ibid., 15 June 1833, p.181.

operative discourse in escaping from the capitalist imperative resulted in serious debates over what constituted the 'true' course for co-operative discourse. There was significant divergence during this period among the broad Owenite community over what constituted co-operation, including the question of whether co-operators were necessarily opposed to such capitalist ends as trading for profit. Such concerns surfaced in 1829 when Charles Fry-Carlile evoked the myth of a unique, unconditional co-operative discourse. He decried those co-operative associations that failed to comply with his own version of co-operation:

It is not to be wondered at, that amongst the numerous societies which have lately sprung into existence, there are some that mistake the means for the end, and from the success attending trading at their store, regard buying and selling as the main object; forgetting that our motto is, "Labour is the source of Wealth." It is very important that persons forming themselves into a Co-operative society should thoroughly understand what are the original and legitimate principles of such associations. Trading is only the ladder by which we ascend, and must not be confounded with the objects we are climbing after: those objects are, first, to form a capital upon which to labour for ourselves; and, secondly, to acquire knowledge and wisdom to direct us in the use of it. We invest our savings in trade as the readiest means of forming this capital.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, the BAPCK castigated The Brighton Co-operator in 1829 for daring to suggest that the aim of co-operative societies was 'to combine to raise the wages of its members, by buying at wholesale prices and selling at the same, for ready money.' This position was then contrasted with the BAPCK's avowed co-operative aim of:

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<sup>1</sup> . The Weekly Free Press, 7 November 1829. Interestingly, Fry-Carlile's objectives for co-operation fall short of community, at least at this point.

rais[ing] a capital sufficient to purchase and cultivate land, and establish manufactories of such goods as the members can produce for themselves, and to exchange for the productions of others; likewise to form a community, thereby giving equal rights and privileges to all.

The BAPCK also attempted to limit the impact of such views by disparagingly referring to The Brighton Co-operator as 'a periodical edited by, and the property of, a private individual.'<sup>1</sup>

However, the attempts by the BAPCK to control the boundaries of Owenite discourse were at odds with the democratic dialogues that emerged at the Second Co-operative Congress in October 1831. Issues concerning the nature of the co-operative discourse, including the question of whether that discourse was inherently opposed to money-making, at least as an end, and was therefore anti-capitalist, were high on the agenda, as were arguments about the extent to which co-operation should be simply identified with any of its 'leading lights.' For example, William Thompson, recognising some of the confusion generated by problems surrounding the definition and objectives of co-operation, suggested that one way to resolve this was to develop a co-operative canon:

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<sup>1</sup> . Ibid., 6 March 1830.

We call ourselves Co-operative Societies; there are many points on which we all agree. There are some others on which we have different opinions. Some think the main object is to get money, and then divide it; while others think (very properly) there is nothing of Co-operation in such an object. Now it is very important we should not have different doctrines being preached, and for this purpose there should be some code of Co-operative doctrines which may be referred to. This is a matter of some difficulty, but until it can be effected, I suggest that Messrs. Owen, Morgan, Gray, and myself, and others who have written on Co-operation, do give a copy of the whole of their works to each Missionary, and that it be an instruction from this Congress that no Missionary preach any doctrine in which all of such writers do not agree; and that the London Committee draw up and print a code of instructions for the use of Missionaries.<sup>1</sup>

This discussion was directly connected to a resolution concerning the employment of missionaries to disseminate co-operative opinion. The resolution was passed unanimously, but not without significant dissension about the validity of reducing the co-operative discourse to the views of Owen, Thompson et al. For example, the Rev. Marriot declared that, 'Much as we may esteem the men named by, Mr. Thompson - much as we may admire the great zeal, yet, in the great question of private judgement, we call no man master.' Similarly, Mr. Beatty argued that 'No person appreciates the opinions of Mr. Owen and Mr. Thompson more than I do; but I think if the Missionaries are tied to their opinions it will injure our cause.' Other Owenites like Benjamin Warden took the view that, without adopting the views of Owen et al. as a theoretical centre around which other co-operators could orbit, 'we only shift the [semantic, political] difficulty, and perhaps shall gain no advantage.'<sup>2</sup>

Thus, even at the most highly centralised level of co-operative discourse - the Co-operative Congress - there was a recognition of the

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<sup>1</sup> . Proceedings of the Second Co-operative Congress (Birmingham, 1831), pp.5-10.

<sup>2</sup> . Ibid.

divergent ambitions of co-operators, including a move away from an anti-capitalist perspective. Significantly, no 'code of instructions' for the use of Missionaries appears to have been proposed or agreed, let alone printed. Indeed, at the Third Co-operative Congress the following Resolution, passed by Congress, was reprinted in the official report of proceedings:

WHEREAS, the Co-operative World contains persons of all religious sects and of all political parties, it is unanimously resolved,-  
That Co-operators, as such, are not identified with any religious, irreligious, or political tenets whatever; neither those of Mr. OWEN, nor of any other individual.<sup>1</sup>

Such publicised resolutions reveal not only the decline of Robert Owen's personal authority, but also the diverse nature of the wider co-operative community.

#### A Co-operative - Capitalist Convergence?

The dominant historiographical view of Owenism and co-operation as inherently anti-capitalist is further eroded, though not extinguished, by the continuation of pro-selfish views within the Owenite and co-operative camp in the 1830s - views which implied an accommodation with the capitalist paradigm. For example, William Lovett of the BAPCK criticised George Skene in 1830 for advocating selfishness. Skene saw little to apologise for:

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<sup>1</sup> . Proceedings of the Third Co-operative Congress (London, 1832), Title page.



I cannot agree with Mr. Lovett, "that selfishness is the greatest obstacle in the way of our bringing about the social system." It is the main spring of human action, and the proper direction of it will secure the establishment and duration of co-operation. A clear investigation of this subject will open the eyes of Mr. Lovett to the causes of all co-operation. Mr. Lovett has yet much to learn before he shall be able to discover truth unmixed with error. Selfishness is a law of human nature; co-operation is founded on the laws of human nature, and must be in accordance with human nature.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier in his dialogue with the BAPCK, Skene had been less emphatic in his support for the principle of selfishness. Skene justified this principle on the contingent grounds that unless co-operators adopted a more aggressive, that is more selfish, approach to the creation of capital, in contrast to the 'trifling profits realised after paying great expenses to a retail grocer's shop', no co-operative association could be 'expected to keep men together for more than one or two years.'<sup>2</sup> Skene's stronger advocacy of selfishness may owe as much to the acrimonious nature of his dialogues with the BAPCK, as to the volatility of the wider-co-operative discourse at this time. Nevertheless, Skene had clearly moved quite close to the position espoused by political economists since Adam Smith, i.e. self-love.<sup>3</sup>

Lovett's argument that notions of self interest, if not selfishness, were antithetical to the spirit of co-operation, as when he asserted that 'I have the firmest conviction that selfishness is the greatest obstacle in the

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<sup>1</sup> . The Weekly Free Press and Co-operative Journal, 21 August 1830, letter from George Skene.

<sup>2</sup> . Ibid., 24 July 1830.

<sup>3</sup> . For an example of the political economy axiom of 'self-love,' see John Stuart Mill's 1825 'Closing Speech on the Co-operative System', Fabian Society Archive, Nuffield College, Oxford, transcript, B7/5, extra folios, f.4, where Mill declared that 'There is a principle in man far more constant and far more universal than his love for his fellows; I mean his love for himself.'

way of our bringing about the social system'<sup>1</sup>, was contradicted to some extent by the views of such leading co-operative figures as William Thompson. Thompson had spoken of the notion of 'enlarged self interest' when discussing co-operation in his 1827 book Labor Rewarded. This was not synonymous with capitalist self interest, rather it referred to the set of expanded worker interests that Thompson saw as being facilitated by co-operative communities. More ambiguously, The Brighton Co-operator in 1828 asserted that self interest is 'much better secured in...[a co-operative] community'.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, such explicit support for pro-selfish views wasn't common currency amongst the wider co-operative community in the Owenite trading period. Moreover, Lovett's position as secretary within the central co-operative organisation, the BAPCK, gave his views on the seditious nature of Skene's pro-selfishness position, and his attempts to marginalise them, some authority. However, as will be shown when discussing the BAPCK's criticisms of Skene's First London Manufacturing Association, the BAPCK was not only divided itself over some of these issues, as was the wider co-operative community to some extent, but had no effective power to control the debates on co-operative means and ends.

Despite the ostensibly limited appeal of his pro-selfish perspective, Skene was joined by other co-operators who saw in co-operation the

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<sup>1</sup> . The Weekly Free Press and Co-operative Journal, 14 August 1830.

<sup>2</sup> . William Thompson, Labor Rewarded. The Claims of Labor and Capital Conciliated (London, 1827), p. 23, The Brighton Co-operator, 1 May 1828, p.4. See also The Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald, December 1827, p.537 where it was argued that 'There are two kinds of "self-interest" or "selfishness"; and they differ as widely as any two things can having one particular in common, as, rivers do that flow north and south from the same source. [and yet] They both, we allow, have a feeling for self; and of this feeling it is impossible for human nature to divest itself'.

means of promoting an individual rather than a social interest. Such an emphasis reflected not merely Skene and others' means, but also, to some extent, their ends. These co-operators often sought the metamorphosis of labourers into capitalists, and saw no inconsistency in the notion of co-operative joint stock companies. For example, when William King - of The Brighton Co-operator - wrote to the politician and political economist Henry Brougham in 1828, ostensibly to explain the principles of a newly formed co-operative association in Brighton, King not only revealed rather limited ambitions for the co-operative society in 'mutual insurance', but he also alluded to the capitalist incentives that might await a worker within such a co-operative society: 'the workman will...get the whole produce of his labour to himself; and if he chooses to work harder or longer, he will benefit in proportion.' Such rewards clearly raised the spectre of another generation of co-operatively bred capitalists. In promoting the idea that workers should enjoy the exclusive use of the whole product of their labour, and that they should be rewarded for (the necessarily) unequal exertion or the variable length of their working day, King was returning to the inequalities of a capitalist paradigm; the injustice of which 'co-operation' was said by some to be designed to transcend.<sup>1</sup>

William Carson was equally revealing about the individualistic, if not capitalist motivations of some co-operators in his 1831 'lecture on the necessity of holding a discussion on co-operation'. Carson's opening remarks on his own conversion to co-operation lacked any reference to the co-operative 'social principle'. Rather, his emphasis was on the greater capacity of the co-operative, in contrast to the prevailing capitalist-

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<sup>1</sup> . William King to Henry Brougham, M.P., 12th December 1828, in T.W. Mercer, ed., Co-operation's Prophet (Manchester, 1947), pp.168-9.

competitive system, to satisfy individual needs: co-operation was thus, provisionally at least, an improved capitalism:

Mr. Carson...stated that the circumstances which first led to his conversion to the principles of co-operation...was owing to his having discovered that the increase from 4½d. to 7d. per lb., upon a sheep, arose from the number of persons through whose hands it had to pass, he and a few friends resolved to purchase a sheep, by which he found that he had saved in flesh meat for his family, 2s. 2½d. in a week. He then set about forming a [co-operative] society.<sup>1</sup>

In this spirit, other co-operators sought to recapitulate the views of William Thompson on Co-operative Capitalists, and Abram Combe on the role of joint stock companies. For example, in 1833 The Crisis reviewed a book entitled Capital and Labour, published under the superintendence of The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, which argued that:

Capital and labour are inseparable companions, and ought to "ride on the same horse"; but how can they be and do so if labour resides with one class of men, and capital with another? Capital ought to guide and direct, for it is the prime mover of labour, although produced by labour, for capital is nothing but labour preserved; and, therefore, when we say that capital should direct labour, we only say, in other words, that past labour should have the direction of, or should produce, future labour, which is the order of nature. But though capital should direct, it should not monopolise; it came originally from the many, why should it be lodged with the few?<sup>2</sup>

Such arguments are revealing in a number of ways, for they show not only how close some co-operators were to capitalism (though not necessarily pro-capitalist), in the sense that capital was seen as stored up labour and that, as such, capital had a limited role in directing labour; but also, as this

<sup>1</sup> . The Voice of the People by an Association of Men, 9 July 1831.

<sup>2</sup> . The Crisis, 10 August 1833, p.247. See also ibid., 18 May 1833, p.19; The Advocate of the Working Classes, 7 April 1827, pp.114-20, which discussed the need for productive capitalists to co-operate with the labourers, or disappear; and, Benjamin Warden, The Rewards of Industry (London, [1832?]), p.2, where Warden declared that the co-operative labour exchange 'will make **all** masters.'

chapter has already argued, how close the co-operators were to some political economists on this issue.<sup>1</sup>

Conversely, such authoritative co-operative figures as William Pare ridiculed the 'Useful Knowledge Society[']s] proposal that labourers should attempt to become capitalists' at the Third Co-operative Congress in 1832. Pare thus tacitly revealed once again the pluralistic leitmotiv of trading Owenism - no individual in this period of the Owenite discourse had the power to repress the myriad alternative Owenite and co-operative voices:

This Society [for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge]...is most excessively kind, and manifests a ludicrous desire to better the condition of the working classes, by telling them "to become capitalists"; but they neglected one most important particular, and that is, to tell them how they are to become such, and "hold back" their labour, with wages amounting to not more than, perhaps, five, seven, or ten shillings a week - and out of this pittance to keep a wife and children, dependent on them for their daily bread.<sup>2</sup>

Pare's incredulity at this suggestion - no doubt a stance adopted to effect the greatest distance between the co-operative and the decidedly non-socialist 'Useful Knowledge Society', and to underline the perilous economic condition of the working classes - was more ironic than convincing. As someone intimately acquainted with the works of William

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<sup>1</sup> . For example, John Stuart Mill had argued in 1825 that 'The first capitalist was the man who laboured harder than his neighbours...The error lies in considering the labourer and the capitalist as men of a different [genus?] like a man and a beast...all capitalists were originally labourers...the transformation of labourers into capitalists frequently takes place even at the present day', John Stuart Mill, 'Intended Speech at the Co-operation Society, never delivered', Connecticut College for Women, MS. f.15. See also G. Poulett Scrope, Principles of Political Economy (London, 1833), p.60.

<sup>2</sup> . Proceedings of the Third Co-operative Congress, 1832, pp.30-1.

Thompson<sup>1</sup>, Pare was undoubtedly aware that the notion of 'capitalist-labourer' had long been in currency in the co-operative discourse. Moreover, given Pare's leading role in the co-operative hierarchy, he can hardly have been unaware of the major dialogues during this period concerning the role of capitalist means and aims.<sup>2</sup>

The perception that co-operative trading associations functioned very much like Joint Stock Companies, with the implication that they were not necessarily antagonistic to capitalist trade, was a view held by some co-operators and their critics in this period. For example, for the First Salford Co-operative Society formed in October 1829, 'CO-OPERATION, ASSOCIATION, JOINT-STOCK AGENCY, CO-PARTNERSHIP, MUTUAL ASSURANCE: by any of these terms, and by any other word or term of like significance, may the sum of the means by which Co-operators effect their ends, be designated.'<sup>3</sup> In apparent contrast, the erstwhile co-operator John Gray drew a sharp distinction in 1831 between 'the principles of [his] social system' and 'the rules of an ordinary joint stock company.' For Gray, 'private advantage [wa]s the ultimate object' of joint stock companies; whereas, in Gray's co-operative system, 'The ultimate object...[was] to give to the public, and to every individual composing it, in portions proportionate

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- 1 . Pare was a close friend of William Thompson, and was, in fact, one of the trustees of Thompson's estate when the latter died.
  - 2 . In fact, Pare later endorsed (paradoxically) the concept of 'capitalist-labourer' in his Preface to William Thompson's Inquiry (London, 1850), pp.xiv-xv.
  - 3 . Principles, Objects, and Laws, of the First Salford Co-operative Society, (Manchester, 1831), p.5. See also The Birmingham Co-operative Herald, 1 June 1830, p.64, which saw little to separate co-operative associations from 'Joint Stock Companies and partnerships', save that the former 'confer[red] less responsibility and offer[ed] fewer temptations' than the latter; 'Rules of the Carlisle Co-operative Society formed 13 April 1829', quoted in R.G. Garnett, Co-operation, p. 55.

to his industry and wealth, the entire advantage of the [co-operative] compact.<sup>1</sup>

However, by emphasising his opposition to any concept of equality, as when he asserted that 'I look upon all systems of equality as unjust in principle, and quite impracticable'<sup>2</sup>, Gray was extinguishing an important part of the difference between his 'social' system and his idea of a joint stock company. In fact, by exclusively emphasising the security of labour, Gray's system clearly resembled his version of a joint stock company in that they were both based on the idea of personal advantage. The differences between the two systems, at least in this context, were based on Gray's perception of the increased number of people that would enjoy such 'private advantage' under his 'compact' system, in contrast to the limited utility of a non-co-operative joint stock company. Ironically, however, even these differences were degraded. Without the countervailing influence of some notion of equality, any system like Gray's, based exclusively on securing to labour what William Thompson called 'the entire use of the products of labor, [to] those who produce them', risked the creation of monopolies and greater inequalities that would ultimately place Gray's system of security of labour in jeopardy. Thus the differences between Gray's system and his version of joint stock companies were further reduced, for both promoted inequality.

Some critics of the Co-operatives also saw a clear association between co-operatives and the principles of joint stock companies. For

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<sup>1</sup> . John Gray, The Social System: A Treatise on the Principle of Exchange (Edinburgh, 1831), pp.37-8.

<sup>2</sup> . J. Gray, The Social System, p.106.

example, townspeople antagonistic to the Co-operative Society which was formed in Poole, Dorset, in 1829, saw that Society as little more than another competitor for the limited retail trade available in Poole, rather than the vanguard for any movement that would transcend such trade. At a public meeting of 'Tradesmen, Manufacturers, and Ship Owners' held on 29 October 1829:

The Following RESOLUTIONS were moved and carried unanimously. First. That this Meeting cannot but lament that at a time when all tradesmen feel the extreme pressure of the times, a combination should be formed by a Joint Stock Company [i.e. the Poole Co-operative Society] for the ostensible purpose of monopolising to themselves the Retail trade of this Town.<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which such views were common currency among co-operative associations in this period for, as J.F.C. Harrison has pointed out, 'they [i.e. co-operative associations and societies] left no records and in the vast majority of cases the only clues to their existence are the brief reports in the co-operative journals.'<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, from these limited sources it is clear that, whilst some co-operators regarded capitalism as antithetical to co-operative ends if not means, other co-operators saw capitalist institutions, such as Joint Stock Companies, as facilitating, and in some instances, defining, the limits of their co-operative goals.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . Leaflet, 'At a Meeting of upwards of 120 of the Tradesmen, Manufacturers, and Ship Owners, of the Town and County of Poole, held at the London Tavern Inn, on Thursday, October 29th, 1829. Mr. James Waterman in the Chair', in K.E. Carpenter, ed., Owenism and The Working Class - Six Pamphlets and Four Broad-sides 1821-1834 (New York, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> . J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen, p.201.

<sup>3</sup> . See, for example, The Pioneer, 21 September 1833, p.8, which argued that 'Our object would be greatly promoted by the introduction of the most approved methods of bookkeeping, and by diffusing a knowledge of the way in which commercial transactions are conducted.'



### An Alternative Co-operative Capitalism?

An alternative version of co-operation and capitalism in this period again appears to confirm the argument that any simple dichotomy between the co-operative and capitalist discourses is a gross oversimplification of a complex interrelationship. A fusion of Owenite and co-operative capitalism emerged around the figure of G.R. Skene, one-time secretary of the BAPCK, editor of The British Co-operator, and one of the leading lights of the First London Manufacturing Community formed in April 1830. The major studies of co-operation have paid little or no attention to Skene. For example, Skene is only fleetingly referred to in J.F.C. Harrison's Robert Owen, as the brother of 'Philip Orkney Skene, an ex-army officer and educationist' and one of several 'middle-class [Owenite] sympathisers'.<sup>1</sup> Skene is also not featured in Claeys' Machinery, Money, nor current editions of The Dictionary of Labour Biography. A possible reason for the relative historiographical neglect of Skene may be a perception that he was a marginal figure in British co-operation. However, his position within the BAPCK, his editorship of The British Co-operator, inter alia, would appear to at least partly dispel that argument. Moreover, there was seemingly little about Skene the co-operator that was maverick, at least in 1830. For example, his journal The British Co-operator often printed, without derogatory or critical commentary, lectures by Robert Owen.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen, pp.199-200.

<sup>2</sup> . See, for example, 'Mr Owen's System as developed in a public Lecture, delivered by himself, at the Freemason's Hall, Sept. 6, 1830', in The British Co-operator, October 1830, pp. 146-157; see also *ibid.*, June 1830, pp. 69-72, 'A Voyage to Mexico, by Robert Owen, Esq'. Owen's journey to Mexico was also recorded in subsequent issues of this journal.

However, even if this implicitly dismissive (dubious) historiographical view of Skene is accepted, the main themes which define this faction of the wider-co-operative discourse - the advocacy of a divisibility of capital; the decision to buy wholesale and sell at a (nominal) profit, and the related issue of distribution of profits via cheap consumer goods, dividends and divided profits - did in fact exist outside of Skene's experiments. Skene's dialogues with the BAPCK in 1830 in the pages of The Weekly Free Press confirm this. Therefore, Skene is still important in this context because he helps provide an important window into these views.

The critique of Skene by James Tucker and William Lovett of the BAPCK was, firstly, that the 'First London Association' of which Skene was a leading member promoted the idea of a divisible, that is, individual capital. By implication, therefore, Skene was apparently advocating a political economy viewpoint on capital. As Tucker admonished in 1830:

A most dangerous principle of division among Co-operative Societies is contended for by an association [i.e. The First London Manufacturing Association] recently formed in London, several members of which have withdrawn themselves from other associations to enter it. Those members demand from their former associations the money paid by them as entrance fees, to be transferred to their new society. Such a practice once established...every society would be in danger of dissolution; their capital and measures liable to be continually disturbed in their operations;...as a member, conceiving he had formed better arrangements, and more profitable plans, which he could not prevail on his own association to adopt, might withdraw, and be the centre of attraction for those fond of novelty, who finding such a facility of transfer, not only of entrance fee, but also, hereafter, of a share of the profit accumulated since entering, would withdraw themselves and their support, and thus...dissolve several societies and keep the co-operative world in continual fluctuation and confusion.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . The Weekly Free Press and Co-operative Journal, 3 July 1830.

Tucker was not only criticising the confusion promoted by what he termed the idea of 'divisible capital', but also the profit-taking opportunities that would be created by it - opportunities that had the potential to change or modify the definition of 'co-operation' from a co-operative to a joint stock discourse. The implicit danger was that co-operation might come to signify a collective capitalism, where individual labourers would only combine to increase their income. Tucker thus proposed the creation of a 'universal and fundamental law' excluding the idea of divisible capital.<sup>1</sup>

William Lovett's criticisms of Skene centred on what Lovett saw as Skene's convergence with the capitalist competitive system as an end in itself. Lovett attacked Skene's advocacy of selfishness, and his hypocrisy in both advocating and denouncing competition. For Lovett, the First London Manufacturing Association was a 'cost price community' (i.e. an association that sold articles of consumption at cost price), which had clearly lost sight of the ultimate, and even intermediate objectives of the co-operative system, i.e. to raise a capital and create a co-operative community:

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<sup>1</sup> . Ibid. Lovett accused Skene of hypocrisy over the issue of divisible or indivisible capital, claiming that Skene had changed his mind on the virtues of indivisible capital, see ibid., 14 August 1830. Skene subsequently agreed with Lovett's point, but again saw no reason for any shame to be attached to this change in viewpoint, see ibid., 21 August 1830. The fear that co-operation was becoming synonymous with money making, at least for some co-operators, was shared by William Thompson in 1831; see Proceedings of the Second Co-operative Congress, pp.5-10.

The First "Co-operative manufacturing community" seems to have been "ushered into existence by the exertions of a few individuals, who think the time is arrived when it is necessary to appeal still more strongly to the selfish feelings of human nature", that it is fruitless to think of raising a capital, in order to purchase land, by saving the profits on trading, and dealing in articles of consumption. They consequently prefer giving the profits to their members, in order to oblige and pacify their wives, the more effectually to abolish their selfish feelings and bad tempers.<sup>1</sup>

Lovett further charged Skene with advocating competition between co-operators and capitalists, a policy apparently doomed from the start:

Of course [The First London Trading Association] will be able to compete with great capitalists, bankrupt stock, and machinery of every description. Have they forgot Gray's Lecture, in which they are told, that "competition limits production"? The effects must constantly press on the workman first.<sup>2</sup>

The vehemence of Lovett's critique of Skene suggests that the views of Skene may have enjoyed a wide currency. When Lovett attempted to dismiss the impact and threat posed by Skene's First London community, as when he concluded that 'the principles of [Skene]...may be estimated from the [poor] reception they meet with in the committee of the British Association, [i.e BAPCK]',<sup>3</sup> he was perhaps revealing how serious a threat Skene's co-operative experiments posed. Certainly this point appears to be confirmed in the dialogues that emerged over the divisibility of capital issue.

Skene's initial reaction to being accused of advocating a divisible capital was to deprecate such an outcome, whilst at the same time reiterating its necessity:

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1 . The Weekly Free Press and Co-operative Journal, 31 July 1830.

2 . Ibid.

3 . Ibid.

The periodical division of the societies' capital amongst the members of co-operative societies, is of all things, the one most to be avoided. But the expediency of allowing members to withdraw with the capital they have subscribed only, who, from a variety of causes-as incompatibility of temper, jealousy, unfeelingness, or other local circumstances, cannot co-operate, is quite another question. Numerous societies have suffered from these injurious causes; so much so, that members of the best dispositions, to avoid painful disputes, have withdrawn at a great loss from these societies; whilst other societies have broken up altogether.<sup>1</sup>

Skene was not simply arguing for the political economy view that capital should be individual; indeed Skene was at pains to emphasise how little there was to separate his views from Tuckers', if not quite Lovetts', on this and other related issues. Nevertheless, Skene's view that a degree of flexibility, if not quite divisibility of capital, was a necessary means to achieve co-operative ends, not only introduced an element of latitude into the co-operative axiom of indivisible capital, but more importantly, promoted co-operative objectives that appeared to fall short of co-operative community. For example, at one point in his dialogues with Tucker and Lovett, Skene equated the 'principles of co-operation' with 'common property, equality of state, equal enjoyment, equal distribution of labour, and universal education', but did not mention community.<sup>2</sup> For Skene, therefore, there was rather less space between the political economy/competitive capitalist and co-operative discourses than co-operators like Lovett were prepared to concede.

On the question of the significance of Skene's views on the divisibility of capital within the wider co-operative movement, Skene reminded Lovett that not only did other co-operative associations concur with him, but so did many members of the BAPCK:

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<sup>1</sup> . *Ibid.*, 7 August 1830.

<sup>2</sup> . *Ibid.*, 24 July 1830.

Mr. Gregory, of Twickenham, tells me [that the divisible capital facility] has restored peace and harmony to their meetings. Mr. Arnaud, of the First West London Society, tells me they came to the same determination...This subject induces me to give an extract from the laws of the Armagh Society, quite in point:- "...If any member wished to leave the Society, he should have perfect liberty to do so, and the value of his share should be given to him." By these simple rules, there would be no members in the community, except such as could live on terms of friendship with each other...Mr. Lovett says, the principles of the First Community may be estimated from the reception they met with in the British Association. Yes, they may be estimated by such a test; when men identified with the earliest efforts of co-operators, decided in its favour, as Messrs Watson, Wigg, Barrett, Voak, Davis, Handy, McDiamid, Lowe, Jennison, Aitkins, &c.; and when it was decided against by a majority of only one, although the Chairman's voice was not enumerated as being in its favour.<sup>1</sup>

Thus there was support for Skene's views on divisible capital, although neither the BAPCKs' nor Skene's views on this topic came to dominate the wider-co-operative discourse in this period. For example, this same question was still being debated at the Third Co-operative Congress in April 1832, where co-operators like Mr. Styles lamented 'a division of capital...[and the] probable ruin of the Westminster Society.'<sup>2</sup> What was significant about the continuing discussion of this issue in this context was that it again illustrated the significant diversity about means and ends in co-operative discourse in this period.

Lovett's assessment of Skene's policy of selling goods at cost price as largely a policy to pacify obstreperous wives, or that Skene's activities converged too much with capitalism via competition with 'great capitalists',

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<sup>1</sup> . Ibid., 7 August 1830. See also Principles...First Salford Co-operative Society, p.17: 'Withdrawal of Members...any member may be at liberty to withdraw his subscriptions ...but will forfeit one-fourth on the value of such share to guard the society against losses from the withdrawal of capital.'

<sup>2</sup> . Proceedings of the Third Co-operative Congress, p.83.

was both misogynistic<sup>1</sup> and crude - crude in the sense of avoiding unpalatable 'irregularities' in co-operative discourse. Lovett disregarded Skene's cogent argument that it was the official policy of Lovett and the BAPCK, rather than his own, which involved a greater complicity with capitalist competition. As Skene asserted, 'It is greatly to be regretted, that the raising a capital, by buying cheap and selling dear, has hitherto been the principal, nay the sole object of Co-operative Societies.'<sup>2</sup> Lovett's condescending analysis of Skene's cost price policy also ignored the wider support for wholesale co-operative retailing which included, for some co-operators, the concept of not simply saving profits, but distributing them in the form of cheaper goods, dividends and interest upon investment. Many other co-operators, including a reluctant William Thompson, acknowledged these methods as defining aims in the co-operative movement.

Skene's justification for selling consumer goods at a nominal profit was based on his critique of many existing co-operative associations and their alleged inability to deliver tangible benefits to their members, including a working capital to create a co-operative community; education, not least about the ultimate ends of co-operation; reduced prices for goods; and employment for unemployed co-operators. For Skene, the dominant co-operative policy of 'buying cheap and selling dear' was not only too slow in creating a working capital<sup>3</sup>, but was also directly responsible for creating the anti-social, anti-co-operative feelings that Lovett had accused Skene's

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1 . The position of women within the co-operative movement was an important area of discussion and schism within that movement; see generally, Barbara Taylor, Eve and the New Jerusalem (London, 1983). See also chapter six of this thesis for a discussion of the relationship between co-operative women and the labour theory of value.

2 . The Weekly Free Press and Co-operative Journal, 7 August 1830.

3 . See ibid., 24 July 1830.

scheme of creating: 'if that [co-operative] object [under the regime of buying cheap and selling dear] were realised tomorrow, are the members prepared to enter into a community, having their minds stored with elementary knowledge, their habits improved, their dispositions full of charity and kind feeling? No.'<sup>1</sup> Here Skene did broach the question of community, only to defer it as a likely outcome, at least in the immediate future.

For Skene, too many members of the working classes were excluded from involvement in the co-operative movement because their limited incomes prevented them from purchasing goods at co-operative stores, where the policy was 'to buy cheap and sell dear.' Even when they did join, however, the working classes enjoyed few benefits from their association, including employment when they were unemployed: 'It is notorious that the members of co-operative societies, for reasons before exhibited, will not employ their brother members, when they can obtain the things they want elsewhere at a lower price'.<sup>2</sup> Thus, whilst Skene's views on co-operation appeared antithetical to Tucker and Lovett, and they were to some extent, particularly with Skene's pro-selfishness perspective, they also hinted at a more effective form of co-operation promoting the social principle immediately via discounting profits. It is in this sense that Skene's discourse entailed a fusion of capitalism and co-operation - of capitalist selfishness and the co-operative social principle.

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<sup>1</sup> . *Ibid.*, 7 August 1830. Skene's *British Co-operator*, April 1830, p.3, confirmed his view that it was 'buying cheap and selling dear' that constituted the barrier to co-operative social principles when it asserted in 1830 that: 'So long as Co-operative societies draw their funds from the profit of retail dealing, they must adopt the same measures as other retail dealers do in the *competitive* system'.

<sup>2</sup> . *The Weekly Free Press and Co-operative Journal*, 21 August 1830.



The attempt by Tucker and Lovett to marginalise the cut price retail policy of Skene by accusing him of fraternising with capitalism was clearly undermined by their ostensible failure to separate their version of co-operation from competitive capitalism. As Skene had argued, it was Tucker and Lovett who were pursuing the (quasi)-capitalist policy of 'buying cheap and selling dear.' The position of Lovett and the BAPCK, as the aspiring definitive authority of co-operative discourse, disappeared with the dissolution of the BAPCK in early 1831. Moreover, the influence of Lovett et als. position on this topic was further diminished when co-operative wholesale retailing not only became official Co-operative policy at the First Co-operative Congress held in May 1831, and it was also seen as a necessary strategy by co-operators other than Skene. The third resolution passed by the First Co-operative Congress was:

That this Congress considers it expedient to establish, as soon as possible, various Wholesale Trading Companies, formed by Unions of Co-operative Societies, and conveniently situated at the various Sea Ports of the United Kingdom, in order to purchase and sell every article of general consumption, at the lowest possible price, for the benefit of the several Societies forming such companies; and also, to encourage and promote the sale and exchange of co-operative manufactured, and other produce.<sup>1</sup>

This strategy enjoyed the support of co-operators such as the Gothic Bazaar's William King who asserted in The Exchange Bazaar Gazette in 1832 that 'if you buy cheap you must also sell cheap. If you have a fair remuneration for your goods and labour, you must render the same to others in your purchases; and it will be found to be true self-interest to do

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<sup>1</sup> . National Library of Wales, MS. 14352C, 'Resolutions, &c. passed at the first Meeting of the Co-operative Congress, held in Manchester, on Thursday and Friday, May 26 and 27, 183[1] and composed of delegates from Co-operative Societies in all Parts of the United Kingdom, convened by circular from the 'Manchester Association for the Spread of Co-operative Knowledge.'

so; but if you want to sell dear and buy cheap, you not only act unjustly to others, but it will be sure to re-act upon yourselves'.<sup>1</sup> Of course such a policy could not refute the charge levelled at Skene by Lovett, of convergence with capitalism via competition with capitalists. But it did promise, theoretically at least, the more rapid achievement of limited co-operative ends, e.g. cheaper food, clothes etc.

The other means by which Tucker, Lovett and the BAPCK's assumed place at the head of the co-operative discourse - and by association, their critique of wholesale trade - was subverted, until the demise of the BAPCK in 1831, was the growth in profit distribution among co-operative associations. Although it is difficult to assess the extent of this development, there is clear though limited evidence to suggest that profit distribution via interest and dividends paid to co-operators wasn't a phenomenon restricted to Skene and others' redistribution of wealth via discounted pricing of consumer goods.<sup>2</sup> For example, in the 'Proposed Rules and Regulations of the Equitable Labour Exchange, Birmingham,' members could look forward 'annually...[to] Labour Notes to the value of two hours, as interest in consideration of every one pound, or forty hours

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<sup>1</sup> . The Exchange Bazaar Gazette, 29 September 1832, p.10. See also The Associate, 1 February 1829, pp. 8-9; The Birmingham Co-operative Herald, 1 November 1829, p.29; The Brighton Co-operator, 1 January 1830, p.135; and the laws of the 'North West of England United Co-operative Company,' in The Midland Representative, and Birmingham Herald, 2 July 1831.

<sup>2</sup> . G.D.H. Cole et al., eds., British Working Class Movements, 1789-1875, p.431, suggests that 'dividend on purchases...had in fact been practised by a number of earlier Societies.' Cole gave only one example, The First Western Co-operative Union, p.432, taken from The Poor Man's Guardian, 7 April 1832.

labour, which they may deposit.'<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in April 1832 the First Western Co-operative Union introduced in its constitution the concept of co-operative dividends: 'That every member of the Union shall receive a percentage upon his or her dealings, to be paid quarterly.'<sup>2</sup>

This chapter has argued that the widespread historiographical characterisation of trading Owenism and co-operation as essentially anti-competitive and anti-capitalist is erroneous. Certainly anti-competitive/capitalist rhetoric was a significant element in Owenite and co-operative discourse at this time, but such arguments never dominated in any simple sense. Rather, many socialists embraced the quasi-capitalist activity of 'buying cheap and selling dear' as a means of facilitating their co-operative ends, though as critics of these co-operators argued, such pro-capitalist means often degenerated into pro-capitalist ends. Other Owenites and co-operators, with perhaps more limited horizons, if not ambitions, went further and extolled the virtues of selfishness and divisible capital. At the same time these Owenites and co-operators advocated seemingly more social, less capitalistic policies, e.g. buying goods at wholesale prices and selling them at marginal rates of profit. Such a

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<sup>1</sup> . The Crisis, 15 July 1833, p.182. See also Henry Nicholl's 'Letter on the Formation of a Cooperative land and business association', (London, J. Brooks, 1834), in K.E. Carpenter, ed., Owenism and the Working Class (New York, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> . The Poor Man's Guardian, 7 April 1832, p.341; in a similar vein, The Potters' Labour Bank in December 1833 proposed the return, by instalments, of any subscriptions to the Bank after a period of twelve months trade; see The Crisis, 14 December 1833, p.122. See also the Union Exchange Society, formed in 1827 which 'met weekly to exchange goods on which a general percentage was levied, the commission to be divided periodically', cited in John Richard Knipe, 'Owenite Ideas and Institutions, 1828-1834', (unpublished) M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1967, p.53.

paradoxical strategy clearly contributed to the already vigorous debates surrounding the issue of co-operative means and ends. Those debates reveal the intimate historical links between Owenism, co-operation and political economy. In a context where many Owenites and co-operators were seeking to define their views in contradistinction to political economy, the existence of such links was inevitable. If socialism was to effect any distance between itself and what was regarded as the inhumanity of political economy, it had to adopt the same methods and ground as that which it was seeking to contest.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### OWENISM, CO-OPERATION, SOCIALISTS, POLITICAL ECONOMY AND THE PRIVATE PROPERTY VERSUS COMMUNITY OF PROPERTY QUESTION, 1817-1835

The dominant, if underdeveloped historiographical model of the significant relationship between socialism and political economy on the property question generally restricts itself to the suggestion that Owenites, co-operators and socialists were egalitarian adherents of the concept of community of property. The (implicit) contrast with the allegedly non-egalitarian, pro-private property political economists remains largely unexplored. An influential example of the former historiographical approach is Friedrich Engels unequivocal identification of Robert Owen with 'communism' in Engels' 1892 text, Socialism, Utopian and Scientific:

The newly created, gigantic productive forces, hitherto used only to enrich individuals and to enslave the masses, offered to Owen the foundations for a reconstruction of society; they were destined, as the common property of all, to be worked for the common good of all.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, J.F.C. Harrison has concluded that:

the contemporary notion that ideas of equality were somehow built into the foundations of Owenism was fundamentally correct. A belief in community of property distinguished Owenites from other Ricardian socialists like Hodgskin and utopian socialists such as Fourier.<sup>2</sup>

Gregory Claeys has also argued that 'on the whole socialism in this period was defined overwhelmingly by its relinquishment of private property,

<sup>1</sup> . Frederick Engels, 'Socialism, Utopian and Scientific', in Carl Cohen, ed., Communism, Fascism, and Democracy: The Theoretical Foundations (New York, 1972), pp.12-13. B. Taylor, Eve and the New Jerusalem (London, 1983), p.17, no doubt following Engels lead, has also argued that by 1820 Robert Owen was a 'committed communist'.

<sup>2</sup> . J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America (London, 1969), p. 6.

individual competition and the individual appropriation of the means of production'.<sup>1</sup> R.G. Garnett suggested that:

The basis of communitarian thought was equality - economic rather than political - in that the labourer had a right to the full value of the product of his labour....The communities adhered to a system of common property....There was to be equality of status and effort..."according to age and capacity".<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the historiography on this topic which has largely eschewed discussion of the differences between socialists and political economists on the issue of property, Gregory Claeys has correctly suggested a dichotomy between pro-private property political economists and early British socialists committed to community of property.

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- <sup>1</sup> . Gregory Claeys, Machinery, Money and the Millennium - From Moral Economy to Socialism, 1815-60 (Oxford, 1987), p. xxiv. For similar emphasis see *ibid.*, pp. p.32; G. Claeys, ed., 'Introduction' to Selected Works of Robert Owen, Vol. 1 (London, 1993), pp. xlix-l; G.Claeys, 'Introduction' to Robert Owen - A New View of Society and other Writings (London, 1991), p.xiv.
  - <sup>2</sup> . R.G. Garnett, Co-operation and the Owenite socialist communities 1825-45 (Manchester, 1972), pp. 26,28. Garnett's suggestion that the 'right to the full product of one's labour was to some extent synonymous with 'equality' requires some comment. Certainly such a 'right' might promote an equality of access to the full product of one's labour; however, given the necessarily unequal levels of skill, effort etc. (which Garnett essentially acknowledges, i.e. 'equality of...effort..."according to ...capacity"') such a form of 'equality' might also tend to reflect these inequalities of effort, and generate inequalities of reward. See the following for similar emphases on Owenite and co-operative adherence to equality of property, distribution etc.: A.E. Musson, 'The Ideology of Early Co-operation in Lancashire and Cheshire', Transactions - Lanashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society lxxviii (1958), 121; Sidney Pollard, 'Robert Owen as an Economist', Co-operative College Papers, 14 (1971), 28; W.H.G. Armytage, 'Owen and America', in Sidney Pollard and John Salt, eds. Robert Owen - Prince of the Poor (London, 1971), pp.232-33; J.E. King, 'Perish Commerce! Free Trade and Underconsumption in Early British Radical Economics', Australian Economic Papers, 20 (1981), 242.

[E]arly British socialists conceived of individuals first as members of an **egalitarian**, just, democratic society, and only then as productive agents. Owenism [and co-operation] was not in this sense an economic discourse, [or] a variety of political economy.[my emphasis]<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Claeys has noted the differences separating John Stuart Mill's pro-private property perspective from what Mill perceived to be the co-operative adherence to the idea of community of property.<sup>2</sup> The nature of this opposition is complex, and remains largely unexplored within Claeys' analysis. However, it appears clear that for political economists in this period the concept of private property implied the security to dispose of one's property as one saw fit, with the by-product of a certain amount of inequality based on differences in effort, skill, deferred gratification etc. The capitalist, for example, was considered by economists like John Stuart Mill to be someone who 'worked harder, or squandered less, or [had] more skill, or more ingenuity'.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, the Owenite, co-operative model of community of property, as worked out by Robert Owen, but most thoroughly, if problematically, by William Thompson and others,<sup>4</sup> involved secure possession by the co-operators of what they had collectively produced, plus equality of distribution and/or possession of collective

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1 . G. Claeys, Machinery, Money, p.192. In ibid., xxv, Claeys has noted that 'the early socialists disagreed sharply with [Adam] Smith's defence of inequality'. See the introduction to this thesis for a more general discussion of some of the problems associated with the binary opposition model/approach to the question of the relationship between early British socialists and political economists.

2 . G. Claeys, 'Justice, Independence, and Industrial Democracy: The development of John Stuart Mill's Views on Socialism', Journal of Politics, 49 (1987), 123, 125-6.

3 . John Stuart Mill, 'Intended Speech at the Co-operation Society, never delivered', (circa 1825), Connecticut College for Women, MS. p.13.

4 . J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen, p.77 has suggested that William Thompson derived his concept of 'social...security' from Robert Owen.

property, i.e. collective ownership of the means of production.

In contrast to the oppositional characterisation of the relationship between Owenites, co-operators, socialists and political economists on the property question, this chapter will initially explore the attitudes of political economists toward private property, as well as the basis for their critique of the Owenites and co-operators. Some leading political economists erroneously emphasised the Owenites' and co-operators uniform adherence to community of property. This chapter will also focus on two arguments that challenge, from the political economists' position, the notion of a significant conceptual space separating Owenites and co-operators from economists on this issue of property. A small number of political economists diverged from parts of that critique of Owenite and co-operative ideas about community of property. More significant was John Stuart Mill's argument in 1825 that Owenite ideas on economic equality were flawed, because any adherence by Owenites to security of labour would necessarily undermine any attempts at implementing equality.

This chapter will then address a second, more serious weakness in current historiography on this subject, namely the inadequacies of the identification of Owenism and co-operation with a largely positive response to a community of goods. Owenites and co-operators were often ambiguous about whether their concept of community of property might involve equality of distribution. In addition, William Thompson's concept of the secure possession of collective property arguably implied insecurity as much as security. Certainly the collective property of co-operative



communities was theoretically secure from the 'forcible seizure of others'<sup>1</sup>, but individual co-operators were not free to dispose of the property that they had helped to produce as they saw fit. However, such freedoms - usually associated with the political economist's perspective of security of private property - were important to many co-operators. Hence the schism, identified in chapter two, between those elements of the co-operative community which argued for collective security of property, and those like George Skene, The British Co-operator and others, who demanded, amongst other things, divisible capital in co-operative associations, i.e. the ability of individual co-operators to withdraw their (private) capital as they saw fit. Finally, the idea of equality of distribution and/or possession of collective property in co-operative communities and associations was itself based on the necessarily unequal efforts and skills of individual co-operators within these communities.

The main reason for the reluctance of Owenites and co-operators like George Mudie, John Gray and others to jettison private property and embrace equality of distribution and/or property, was that they were all, to a greater or lesser extent, adherents of a labour theory of value which regarded labour as the only justification for property ownership. They therefore wanted to expand property rights for those who allegedly created all property - with all, or perhaps some of the concomitant emphasis on security of (private) property, and inequality of skill and effort that that might imply - though by co-operative means. Other Owenites like Robert Owen could not unequivocally abandon private property, not least because this might jeopardise funding for his community experiments. To the extent

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<sup>1</sup> . William Thompson, Labor Rewarded: The Claims of Labor and Capital Conciliated (London, 1827), p.14.

that some Owenites and co-operators embraced community of property, which might or might not imply 'equality' of distribution, they did so largely because they felt that the expansion of property rights for those who laboured to produce it was impossible under the competitive capitalist system.

Political Economists, Private Property, and their Critique of Owenite and Co-operative Community of Property, 1817 to 1835

For many political economists private property was generally regarded as sacrosanct or, in Ricardo's words, 'sacred', and was to be protected and secured at all costs. The Owenites and co-operators were clearly identified by many political economists as a threat to the security of private property. For example, in 1819 David Ricardo, the leading political economist in this period, attacked the idea of a 'community of goods' - an idea which he clearly associated with Robert Owen's plans - as 'visionary', with 'the experience of [the] ages against [it]'.<sup>1</sup> In 1825 John Stuart Mill, whilst revealing the limited space separating his discourse from the Owenites, regarded 'the community of property [as] the fundamental principle of Mr. Owen's plan, and *the only principle of that plan to which I*

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<sup>1</sup> . David Ricardo, The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo, Vol. VIII (Cambridge, 1973), p.46. See also J.R. McCulloch, The Principles of Political Economy: with a Sketch of the Rise and Progress of the Science (London, 1830), pp.81-2, 'Security of property is the first and most indispensable requisite to the production of wealth. Its utility in this respect is, indeed, so obvious and striking, that it has been more or less respected in every country, and in earliest and rudest periods. All have been impressed with the reasonableness of the maxim which teaches that those who sow ought to be permitted to reap - that the labour of a man's body and the work of his hands are to be considered as exclusively his own.'

*do not assent*'[my italics].<sup>1</sup> Aside from the political economists' assertions about the inviolability of private property, their main critique of the idea of community of property, and the Owenites' alleged adherence to the principle, was that it took away the major incentive for people to work, i.e. self-preservation. Many political economists also suggested that the absence of incentives to work would encourage rapid and irresponsible increases in childbirth, thereby raising, or more accurately, reinforcing, the spectre of Malthusianism.<sup>2</sup>

The political economists' sanctification of private property, and the related critique of Owenite ideas on community of property, were arguably weakened in several ways. Without seriously compromising his opposition to Owenism over a range of issues, including community of property, David Ricardo argued in 1819 that an Owenite system of equality, whilst facilitating a faster increase in population than at present, would not be jeopardised by such an outcome.<sup>3</sup> Other non-Owenite economists went further than Ricardo, and actually embraced the idea of varying degrees of economic equality. For example, the Swiss economist Sismondi, in a conversation with David Ricardo, argued that:

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- 1 . John Stuart Mill, 'Closing Speech on the Co-operative System', (circa 1825), Fabian Society Archive, Nuffield College, Oxford, transcript, B7/5, f.47.
  - 2 . See, for example, T.R. Malthus's 1817 edition of his Essay on the Principle of Population, ed. Patricia James, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1989), p.335.
  - 3 . See David Ricardo, Works, Vol. IX (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 49-50.

the great cause of the misery of the bulk of the people in all countries is the unequal distribution of property, which tends to brutalize and degrade the lower classes. The way to elevate man, to prevent him from making inconsiderate marriages, is to give him property, and an interest in the general welfare.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst Ricardo was avowedly opposed to many of Sismondi's views on political economy, he agreed with these comments at least, paraphrasing Sismondi's argument thus: 'The way to elevate man, to prevent him from making inconsiderate marriages, is to give him property, and an interest in the general welfare', and concluding, 'thus far we should pretty well... agree'.<sup>2</sup> However, if Sismondi's views here strongly resembled at least some Owenite views on community of property, a view seemingly endorsed by Sismondi's positive reception in the co-operative press<sup>3</sup>, the same could not be said for Ricardo. Ricardo may well have endorsed the idea of extending property ownership to the 'lower classes'; however, the means by which this was to be achieved was essentially via individual acquisition, rather than the co-operative or social method said to be advocated by Owenites like Robert Owen and William Thompson.

It could be argued that Sismondi constitutes a special case; that he was not representative of the classical political economy tradition, and that his example is misleading when attempting a comparison between political

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<sup>1</sup> . Sismondi's conversation with Ricardo was partly recorded in a letter from Ricardo to Trower, 14 December 1822, in *ibid.*, p.243.

<sup>2</sup> . *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> . See, for example, The Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald, August 1827, inside page of contents, where it was argued that 'Say and Sismondi...do not build on the anti-social foundation of the theories of the school alluded to [i.e. James Mill, Malthus and McCulloch et al.], and between whose doctrines and ours there is in principle scarcely a shade of difference'. J.E. King, 'Perish Commerce!', 235-257, pp.243,245, has also noted the close ties between Sismondi and leading Owenites like Robert Owen and William Thompson. King's article also provides a window into the diverse character of political economy in this period.

economy and Owenism on this issue. To some extent this is true; certainly Sismondi was no laissez-faire economist, arguing rather for state intervention, unemployment and sickness benefits, and pension schemes for workers.<sup>1</sup> He was also not a member of the Political Economy Club.<sup>2</sup> However, such an argument is based on the false premise that a homogeneous, Ricardian political economy tradition existed at this time. In fact, there were multiple political economy discourses, themes and centres of authority, none of which was sufficient in itself to define the classical political economy tradition. The influential Ricardian school of political economy which included James Mill and J.R. McCulloch had never persuaded all economists of its ideas and, while it is difficult to actually date the relative decline of Ricardian economics, it was clearly degenerating from the mid-1820s and after.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, membership of the Political Economy Club did not, in itself, represent political economy orthodoxy during this period. Aside from Sismondi, the academic economist Richard Jones was never a member, and John Stuart Mill did not become a member until 1836.<sup>4</sup>

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- 1 . See the succinct entry for Sismondi in Graham Bannock, et al., The Penguin Dictionary of Economics (London, 1980), p.410. Sismondi was also described by Marx and Engels in their 1848 pamphlet The Communist Manifesto (London, 1986), pp. 109, 114, as the 'head' of 'petty-bourgeois Socialism', in contrast to the 'Critical-Utopian' label attached to Owen et al. Nonetheless, despite the alleged differences between Sismondi's and Owen's brand of socialism, the link made by Marx and Engels between Sismondi and socialism is again suggestive of the nexus between political economy and socialism, the latter an argument which is avowedly central to this thesis.
  - 2 . See list of members in Political Economy Club - Centenary Volume (London, 1921), pp.358-372.
  - 3 . See the introduction to this thesis for a more thorough examination of this argument.
  - 4 . See Political Economy Club, 1921, p.360.

The 'flaw' in Owenite arguments for community of property that was 'exposed' by John Stuart Mill in his 1825 draft for his debates with the Owenites had clear implications for those Owenites and co-operators who advocated community of property. Mill's argument also undercut the notion of a dichotomy between pro-private property economists, and their community of property antagonists, the Owenites. Owenite communities were seen by Mill as potentially recreating the same inequalities that their system was designed to eradicate:

Let us suppose then, that wealth were distributed in the best possible manner. I ask, would private property have any existence under that system? I ask the question, because I wish to be informed, what distribution of wealth [this Owenite] gentleman would have...If private property had existence: if the man who produced most, were allowed to have most, if he who saves...were suffered to have an exclusive right to that which he [saves] there would be in a few years the same inequalities.<sup>1</sup>

This problem was particularly acute for Owenites like William Thompson who repeatedly and rigorously defended the need for 'security of acquired property'.<sup>2</sup> Thompson's attempts to overcome this problem by arguing that in Owenite communities some level of security of property would need to be sacrificed to the needs of the wider community was not entirely successful in surmounting this predicament.

#### Owenism, Co-operation, and Community of Property, 1817-1827

As J.F.C. Harrison correctly noted, for much of the period from 1817 to 1827 Robert Owen was ambivalent on the subject of community of

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<sup>1</sup> . John Stuart Mill, 'Intended Speech', p.11.

<sup>2</sup> . William Thompson, An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth most Conducive to Human Happiness (London, 1824), p.149.

property.<sup>1</sup> For example, the 1819 Committee set up to investigate Owen's plans for alleviating the distress of the poor rejected the accusation that Owen's plans 'necessarily involve a community of goods':

In the establishment which is now proposed there would be no community of goods nor any deviation from the established laws of property. Mr. Owen, it is true, has expressed on a former occasion some opinions in favour of a state of society in which a community of goods should exist, but he has never considered it as essential to the success of such an establishment as is now proposed, nor required it as the condition of his superintendence.

Next, the Committee rejected the idea that Owen's plans 'have a tendency to the equalisation of rank's':

This notion is connected with, and depends upon, the erroneous one [idea] that they [Owen's plans] involve a community of goods. If the laws of property are preserved, and the plan rests, as it does, upon the supposition of its being a profitable mode of investing capital, it has no other tendency to equalisation than all plans which have for their object the extension of the comforts, the intelligence, and the virtues of the poorer classes of society.<sup>2</sup>

The rejection of the notion of a community of property, as well as the apologetic tone of this part of the Committee's 'Address', may be partly explained by the composition of the committee, including such establishment figures as the Duke of Kent, David Ricardo, and others, few of whom would have been likely to endorse such a policy. Moreover, Owen

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<sup>1</sup> . J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen, pp.75-6. This view is in stark contrast to Claeys' erroneous assertion that from as early as 1817 Robert Owen emerged as an unequivocal supporter of the idea of community of property. See G. Claeys, ed., Selected Works, Vol. 1, pp. xlix-l: 'After 1817, [Owen] did not retreat from [this aim of a community of goods], and remained inflexible about alternatives'.

<sup>2</sup> . 'Address of the Committee, August 23, 1819', in The Life of Robert Owen, Vol. 1A (London, 1967), pp.245-6.

was consistently deferential to members of the 'upper classes'.<sup>1</sup> This factor, when combined with the Committee's appeal for £100,000 for the establishment of an agricultural and manufacturing community based on Owen's experiences at New Lanark, might explain Owen's apparent dismissal of the idea of a community of property. However, the argument that Owen's apparent change of mind on this issue was partly psychological, partly tactical, is less convincing when set against the Committee's 'supposition' that such a community experiment was founded on the idea that it was 'a profitable mode of investing capital'. This argument is reinforced by Owen's 'pledge' that 'capital [invested in the community experiment] shall return an adequate profit'.<sup>2</sup> Far from threatening private property, at this time Owen was reinforcing it.

In his 1820 Report to the County of Lanark, Owen returned to an unequivocal advocacy of the idea of equality of property. In the context of a proposal for nationwide villages of Co-operation, Owen asserted that they would be '*founded on the principle of united labour, expenditure, and property, and equal privileges*[Owen's italics]<sup>3</sup> The Report was not directly combined with an appeal for funds, hence, presumably, its more polemical style and its overt support for the idea of equal privileges which must necessarily imply community of property. However, it is important to stress that Owen's support for equality in property was, at this stage, still within the confines of community experiments, a context which, in itself, offered no immediate threat to the institution of private property.

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<sup>1</sup> . See, for example, James H. Treble, 'The Social and Economic Thought of Robert Owen', in John Butt, ed., Robert Owen: Prince of Cotton Spinners (Newton Abbot, 1971), p.42.

<sup>2</sup> . The Life, Vol. 1A, p.246.

<sup>3</sup> . Ibid., p.282.



Moreover, as the 'Minutes of the General Meeting of the County of Lanark' - held on the 16 November 1820 to respond to Owen's Report - show, such proposals for Owenite communities of property were still founded on proposals for the investment of Council capital, that is, investment of private property held in trust by the Council. Additionally, when established, these communities would actually provide interest on this capital investment, thereby augmenting and perpetuating the system of private property.<sup>1</sup> The extent to which Owen's schemes for community of property could emerge from this private property, political economy context were thus seriously problematised, if not jeopardised.

Given Owen's deference to authority, and the specific demands placed on Owen's message by particular audiences, particularly those he was hoping to obtain capital from, it is hardly surprising to see Owen return to a more indeterminate position on the question of equality of property in his evidence to the 1823 Select Committee on Unemployment in Ireland, where he was again seeking funds to establish Owenite communities. Whilst Owen envisaged that these communities would tend towards greater equality, such as 'the system of equality of profits', which might be 'generally introduced' in time, Owen felt that 'It would not render it necessary to alter the situation of any of the higher ranks in society'. Such vague assurances did not convince the Select Committee, which later concluded that:

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<sup>1</sup> . Ibid., p.313.

When it is considered, that Mr. Owen's plan is founded upon a principle that a state of perfect equality can be produced, and can lead to beneficial consequences, Your Committee consider this position so irreconcilable with the nature and interests of mankind, and the experience of all ages, that it is impossible to treat this scheme as being practicable.<sup>1</sup>

Such summations are somewhat misleading, however. Certainly Owen paid more than lip-service to the notion of a community of property in this period, but the problem for Owen, even if he did not view it as such, was that the only plausible means of his superseding the system of private property was to utilise it, supplementing and reinforcing it in the process. Moreover, Owen's structural dependence on private property was reinforced and reflected in his unwillingness to expropriate existing private property. Thus, when the first edition of The Co-operative Magazine declared in 1826 that 'Mr Owen does not propose that the rich should give up their property to the poor; but that the poor should be placed in such a situation as would enable them to create new wealth for themselves', the Journal summed up Owen's dilemma perfectly.<sup>2</sup> Owen could not afford to attack or alienate the main potential source of investment for his communities, ergo, the only means of achieving a form of economic equality was to level property up, not down. Owen was therefore quite correctly seen, by co-operators at least, as arguing for an extension of private property rights, not their abolition.

In his major 1824 work on co-operative political economy, The Inquiry, William Thompson had emphasised the need to temper or 'reconcile equality with security' of property.<sup>3</sup> Later, Thompson anticipated

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<sup>1</sup> . Report of the Select Committee on the Employment of the Poor in Ireland (London, 1823), pp.98,89.

<sup>2</sup> . The Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald, January 1826, p.31.

<sup>3</sup> . W. Thompson, The Inquiry, p.xiv.

that security of property would be sacrificed or diminished, specifically within co-operative communities, for the benefits to be derived from 'equality' - a concept which he variously described as 'equality of remuneration', 'Joint possession', and 'equal distribution'.<sup>1</sup> According to Thompson, such benefits, facilitated by 'collective exertion', promised a state of 'bliss' where, for example, 'The Industrious...[would] live in "gardens, pleasure-grounds, and palaces"...[and] Physical, intellectual, and social pleasures will be so united...that every moment will be attended with its appropriate pleasures.'<sup>2</sup>

To some extent Thompson had theoretically overcome some of the problems associated with Robert Owen's dependence on private property as a source of investment for prospective Owenite communities. In his 1827 book Labor Rewarded Thompson had suggested that 'Capital may be accumulated *out of the savings from the wages of well remunerated labor*, as well as out of the profits of stock'.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding several problems with this incipient idea - e.g. the relatively slow pace at which workers accumulated savings/capital; the continuing reliance on external capital for wages etc. - Thompson at least provided a map for the worker to escape from the private property, political economy maze. Workers could, theoretically, provide their own capital from savings, thereby overcoming their dependence on existing private property. However, Thompson was unable to break his own links with the political economy, private property perspective from which his ideas had clearly emerged. This is clearly illustrated in Thompson's declaration in The Inquiry that all 'past real

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1 . W. Thompson, Labor Rewarded, pp.36, 114.

2 . Ibid., p.118.

3 . Ibid., p.87.

accumulations' were to be left 'untouched', that is, despite his later assertion in 1826 that 'the very foundation of the system of mutual Co-operation which we advocate, is equality and community of wealth, (land and capital) *amongst all members* [my italics]'.<sup>1</sup> Thompson's differences with the political economists, champions of private property, were therefore more a question of intent. Not only did the continued existence of private property necessarily limit the ability of Thompson's communities to expand and transcend the system of private property, but Thompson's retention of the concept of private property, albeit negatively, continued to colour his arguments for community of property with a political economist cast.

Thompson's inability to jettison the notion of private property in favour of the community of property position that he was advocating within Owenite communities was basically due to his retention of a political economist's view of security of property as a key element of his labour theory of value formulation. This is apparent in Thompson's defence of rights to freedom of exchange. In his book Labor Rewarded Thompson had argued:

The freedom of exchanges...cannot be limited without infringing on the right of the laborers to possess the whole produce of their labor. Of what avail to a laborer to produce and to possess, if he cannot dispose of any part of what he has produced, for such equivalents as he may deem satisfactory?<sup>2</sup>

Such freedoms must necessarily include the rights of workers to bequeath the product of their labour to, for example, their eldest son. Paradoxically, however, Thompson had earlier attacked many of the institutions and

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<sup>1</sup> . W. Thompson, Inquiry, p.600; The Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald, January 1826, p.231.

<sup>2</sup> . W. Thompson, Labor Rewarded, p.16.

regulations that guaranteed such freedoms of security of private property rights, including 'primogeniture'. Thompson called for:

The entire abolition...of all the restraints of insecurity, (entail, primogeniture, combination local and general, wages regulation direct or indirect, monopolies of knowledge of professions, of trades, bounties, game, privilege laws, public plunder, with all other expedients incompatible with equal security or the natural laws of distribution,) with as little inconvenience as possible to any individual.<sup>1</sup>

For Thompson, the point here was that although primogeniture etc. helped guarantee the rights of security of property for the original owner or creator of the property, it also guaranteed unearned, unjust property ownership for the inheritor. Thompson's emphasis was on the injustice of the latter, from which he appears to have implicitly concluded that there was a greater unfairness in retaining primogeniture, than in the loss of freedoms because of the abolition of primogeniture. However, having emphasised that it was up to the labourer to decide how the product of her or his labour should be disposed or exchanged, it was clearly contradictory for Thompson to issue edicts prohibiting certain forms of disposal of property. Thompson was thus unable to free himself from the political economy, private property paradigm - a paradigm which he was still palpably working within.

Thompson created some space between his views and the economists by compromising his support for the political economists' axiom of security of individual property in favour of the social benefits, or 'social security', to be derived from co-operative communities, including equality of

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<sup>1</sup> . W. Thompson, The Inquiry, p.600.

property.<sup>1</sup> However, Thompson's move away from the political economists' security of private property viewpoint was based on the dubiously optimistic assertion that workers would choose to sacrifice their already flimsy security of property for the benefits of co-operative community of property and equal remuneration. Thompson analysed this important issue in Labor Rewarded:

It may be objected that these two objects..."securing to labor the whole products of its exertions, and giving equal remuneration to all the laborers", would be incompatible with each other. If the best producers took all they produced, how could the remuneration be equal? - Under individual competition, it is true, these objects would be incompatible with each other; but not under other arrangements. Though labor might be secured in the *right* to the whole products of its exertions, it does not follow that labor might not, in order to ensure a vast increase of production and enjoyment to every one, as well as mutual insurance from all casualties, *voluntarily agree before production* to equality of remuneration - should such agreement be demonstrated to be productive of such effects. What laws cannot directly effect, the progress of enlightened self-interest, of reason and benevolence, may accomplish.<sup>2</sup>

The initial problem with this formulation is, as chapter two has argued, that many co-operators, including William King, George Skene, and others associated with the First London Manufacturing Association, plus George Mudie, John Gray and others, were ultimately unwilling to relinquish their individual rights to security of property. One of their main goals - and indeed one of Thompsons', at least in 1824 - was to ensure that workers enjoyed a greater share of the product of their labour - a goal not

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<sup>1</sup> . W. Thompson, Labor Rewarded, p.14. J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen, pp.76-7; G. Claeys, Machinery, Money, p. 101, both appear to concur uncritically, and problematically with William Thompson's argument here. David McNally's assertion that William Thompson retained a 'liberal', if not a political economist's perspective on the issue of private property is thus only partially correct, in the sense that Thompson was straddling arguments for liberal security of property with co-operative equality of property. See Against The Market - Political Economy, Market Socialism and The Marxist Critique (London, 1993), p.121.

<sup>2</sup> . W. Thompson, Labor Rewarded, p.37.

necessarily advanced by Thompson's proposals for equality of remuneration. Thus, far from constituting a 'way out of the dilemma' of how to 'reconcile equality with security', to adopt J.F.C. Harrison's phrase, Thompson's formula no doubt represented insecurity for some co-operators.<sup>1</sup>

Another key phrase and problem in Thompson's argument here is the reference to 'under other arrangements'. Implicit in this statement is the sanguine assumption of an easy transfer from a system of private property to equal remuneration and community of property. However, as Thompson himself admitted, the situation was far more complex than that. For example, as Thompson conceded to John Stuart Mill in 1825, there would be 'competition between communities'. Even if Thompson dismissed the idea that such 'competition' would produce 'rivalry' between communities, the existence of any such 'competition' had the potential to jeopardise the application of equal remuneration, if not within single communities, then between communities, for if one community was more competitive than another, it might enjoy greater remuneration than the other.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, as Thompson noted in Labor Rewarded, co-operative communities 'would be liable to almost all the vicissitudes of similar rival establishments conducted by capitalists', e.g. "fluctuations of competition from change of demand, from political or financial causes, from improvements in machinery' etc.<sup>3</sup> Such competition had a number of potential consequences, all of which threatened to compromise the anti-

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<sup>1</sup> . J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen, p.77.

<sup>2</sup> . John Stuart Mill, 'Closing Speech', f.53.

<sup>3</sup> . W. Thompson, Labor Rewarded, p.89.

private property, political economy perspective of Thompson. For example, it would be difficult to maintain the policy of equal remuneration if co-operative communities competed with capitalists. The reason for this is that the costs to productivity ratio of co-operative communities, where all were to be equally rewarded no matter how much they produced, were potentially inferior to capitalist enterprises where wage costs were directly attached to levels of productive output. Co-operative communities might therefore be compelled either to return to an emphasis on security of property, at the expense of community of property, that is, provide economic incentives for those co-operators who worked best, most skilfully etc., or face bankruptcy.<sup>1</sup>

A further significant problem for Thompson's plans for 'equal distribution' within co-operative communities was the existence of inequalities of skill and exertion - inequalities which would necessarily undermine any calls for equal remuneration. Thompson attempted to down play the significance of these differences, arguing in Labor Rewarded that the stronger, more skilful workers were already 'appropriately rewarded', and that they should therefore have few objections to equality of remuneration, particularly as they were already 'equally [poorly] remunerated' under the present competitive capitalist regime:

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<sup>1</sup> . Owenites like Robert Owen sought to overcome some of the problems associated with the impact of competition on co-operative communities by advocating various forms of agrarian self-sufficiency, based on spade husbandry, see generally, G. Claeys, Machinery, Money, pp.45-6.



It may be said, the consequences of one species of labor produce a greater quantity of preponderant good, tend more to increase human happiness, than another. If so, the agent, the laborer, mental or muscular, has been already...appropriately rewarded. The wise, the skilful, and the strong, do more good, with the same inclinations, than the foolish, the unskilful, and the weak. If their efforts have been exerted for the same time, the wise, the skilful, and the strong, will have had greater ease and pleasure in their labor than the inefficient, besides the superior pleasures of benevolence and sympathy in store for them.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the possibility that more skilful workers might enjoy greater benefits under the co-operative system, the idea that their superior skills, strength etc. were reward enough in themselves (under either a competitive or co-operative system) was at odds with one of the prime justifications for co-operation. That is, to rectify the situation whereby those who laboured to produce the wealth of a country did not enjoy a greater share of the products of their (necessarily unequal) labour. Indeed, this was a policy endorsed by Thompson himself on more than one occasion, though he had clearly retreated from this position by 1827.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . W. Thompson, Labor Rewarded, pp.22, 21. In his 1824 book The Inquiry, p.16, Thompson had been less dismissive of the differences in skill etc. between workers, acknowledging that 'Greater skill it is evident is exerted in one species of labor, and by one laborer at the same work, than in another'. Nonetheless, Thompson still insisted that these differences are 'resolvable into [an average concept of] ordinary labor of the community'.

<sup>2</sup> . See, for example, W. Thompson, The Inquiry, p.35; W. Thompson, Labor Rewarded, Subtitle - 'How to Secure to Labor the Whole Product of its Exertion'. Thompson's move away from this co-operative canon was occasioned by his belief that it was both impractical to implement, and immoral, the latter because the successful implementation of such a policy might engender starvation for the aged, the young, the sick et als. See W. Thompson, Labor Rewarded, pp.99, 13. This reorientation by Thompson put him at odds with many other co-operators who continued to espouse the principle of securing to labour the full product of their labour. See, for example, P.O. Skene in The Weekly Free Press, 17 October 1829; William King to Henry Brougham, M.P., 12 December 1828, in T.W. Mercer, ed., Co-operation's Prophet (Manchester, 1947), pp.168-9.

George Mudie, an important, and in some senses pioneering Owenite journalist from the 1820s to the 1830s, was consistently hostile in his attitude toward community of property, if marginally less consistent in his animosity toward those Owenites like Robert Owen who appeared to support the idea of equality in property.<sup>1</sup> Like the political economists, Mudie regarded 'the right to private property, and of individual accumulation and possession' as inalienable.<sup>2</sup> Mudie rejected the idea that community of goods was synonymous with Owenism or co-operation:

The first remark I would make on the distinguishing feature of the new system, is, that even as respects each society, the object sought to be obtained is not equality in rank or possessions, - is not community of goods, - but full, complete, unrestrained CO-OPERATION, on the part of ALL the members of EVERY purpose of social life, whether as regards the means of subsistence, or of promoting the intellectual and moral improvement and happiness of the WHOLE BODY.<sup>3</sup>

Mudie's consistent rejection of community of property was expressed most strongly in a retrospective letter to Robert Owen on 29 August 1848. Mudie bemoaned his treatment by Owen, admitting his

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<sup>1</sup> . Claeys has erroneously suggested that in this period 'equality itself' was not a central concern for Mudie, 'but rather the form which equal property took', *Machinery, Money*, p.74. However, Claeys has failed to appreciate that Mudie was consistently hostile to the principle of community of property, from his editorship of *The Economist* onwards. Only belatedly does Claeys allude to Mudie's disdain for community of property that was manifest in Mudie's 1849 book *A Solution of the Portentous Enigma of Modern Civilisation Now Perplexing Republicans as Well as Monarchs with Fear of Change*; see Claeys, *ibid.*, p.87.

<sup>2</sup> . *The Economist*, 11 August 1821, p.46.

<sup>3</sup> . *Ibid.*, p.43; see also, *ibid.*, 14 July 1821, p.389; *The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist*, 11 January 1823, p.12; *The Report of the Committee Appointed at a Meeting of Journeyman, Chiefly Printers, to take into Consideration Certain Propositions, Submitted to Them By Mr. George Mudie, Having for Their Object A System of Social Arrangement, Calculated to Effect Essential Improvements in the Condition of the Working Classes, and of Society at Large* (London, 1820), p.12.

former 'idolatry' of Owen but assailing Owen's 'autocracy', and his fallibility in 'committing errors which were sure to be fatal to the cause of co-operation'. According to Mudie, one such major error was Owen's allegedly avowed allegiance to community of property:

[I saw] that you [i.e. Robert Owen] had lost your own cause in the Select Committee of the House of Commons, in 1823, by your persisting in giving the repulsive and abhorred as well as mistaken names of a "system of equality" and of a "community of goods" to what were to have been in reality nothing more than the co-partneries and co-operative societies of the New Villages - that you persisted in using these revolting and absurd terms in spite of your "real knowledge" to the contrary, although, in Nov. 24, 25, etc., of The Economist in 1821, I had "carefully separated" the mere co-partnership of the intended co-operative societies from those fatally abnoxious[sic] systems and doctrines of equality and community of goods.

In the same letter Mudie attempted to distance himself not only from Owen, but also from what he sardonically termed 'soi-disant [i.e. literally: 'calling oneself', but in this context 'so-called'] Political Economists'.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Mudie reiterated the same 'soi-disant Political Economist' perspective on private property. This remarkable letter underlined the limited nature of Owen's hold over the Owenite discourse, and revealed how close Owenism was to political economy for Mudie on the issue of private property.

John Gray in his 1825 book A Lecture on Human Happiness aligned himself with those Owenites and co-operators who regarded labour as the sole justification for private property<sup>2</sup>, and the extension of property rights to productive workers as imperative: 'This is the reform we want...to enable

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<sup>1</sup> . George Mudie to Robert Owen, 29 August 1848, National Library of Wales, transcript 14352C, ff.66-7.

<sup>2</sup> . John Gray, A Lecture on Human Happiness (Philadelphia, 1826), p.11.

the useful labourer to keep for his own use the property he creates'.<sup>1</sup> Like Mudie, Gray wanted just and equal rights to private property for all productive workers. As such Gray's plans involved extending property rights, and necessarily precluded equal distribution and consumption, confirmed by Gray's assertion that his 'plans' were 'in every way consistent with individuality and distinctions of property'.<sup>2</sup>

As R. G. Garnett and Gregory Claeys have noted, there was significant dissent over the issue of community of goods amongst members of the Owenite community at Orbiston.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the debates both within and outside Orbiston on these issues were significant enough to occupy substantial space in the Owenite and co-operative press at the time, and later at the 1832 Co-operative Congress.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, key Owenite figures like George Mudie, and to a lesser extent John Gray, were both residents at Orbiston, as was the important Owenite thinker and head of the Orbiston community Abram Combe. Orbistonian responses toward community of property are a significant measure of Owenite commitment toward equality of property at this time.

The London Co-operative Magazine was a major co-operative journal in this period, providing a vehicle for the views of key Owenites like William Thompson, whilst its anonymous editors maintained a position

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1 . Ibid., p.47.

2 . Ibid., p.59.

3 . R.G. Garnett, Co-operation, pp. 80-2; G.Claeys, Citizens and Saints. Politics and anti-Politics in early British socialism (Cambridge, 1989), p.133. However, the arguments of Garnett and Claeys are diminished to some extent by their unhelpful insistence that Owenism was simply synonymous with a community of goods.

4 . See, for example, Proceedings of the Third Co-operative Congress (London, 1832), p.88.

independent of Robert Owen.<sup>1</sup> In a series of articles over the last three months of 1826 the London based Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald discussed the deficiencies of the Orbiston community on the issue of community of property. Ostensibly responding to a correspondent 'D.H.', an inhabitant of the Orbiston community, the October issue of The Co-operative Magazine lamented the failure to implement a policy of community of goods at Orbiston :

What has most retarded the Orbiston establishment's progress is, we are persuaded, the delay of fully adopting the principle and practice of equal distribution, or community of property. If it were known, that this co-operation were fundamental and indispensable points in the community, no one would offer himself to the establishment without inquiring into these points.<sup>2</sup>

In November 1826 The Co-operative Magazine attempted to clarify the co-operative position on community of goods by differentiating itself from the Orbistonian axiom of 'equal distribution':

We will just mention that we think *community of property* a more accurate expression of what the co-operative system intends than *equal distribution*. Every person cannot consume, and does not wish for an *equal* quantity; and the *equal distribution* to all would be but useless trouble. But all should obtain the *equal distribution* should they want it; and this they would obtain by community of property.<sup>3</sup>

Such statements of principle reveal several complexities. For example, whilst 'equal distribution' was seen as both untenable and undesirable, it was emphasised that it could theoretically be achieved through community of property. More importantly, whilst distancing itself from the axiom of 'equal distribution' - a principle which, according to correspondent 'S.F.' many Orbistonians were not 'prepared for', at least initially<sup>4</sup> - The Co-

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<sup>1</sup> . See the introduction to the thesis for examples of the independence of The Co-operative Magazine.

<sup>2</sup> . The Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald, October 1826, p.325.

<sup>3</sup> . Ibid., November 1826, p.340.

<sup>4</sup> . Ibid., December 1826, p.391.

operative Magazine reaffirmed its acceptance of, if not commitment to, inequality. While community of property implied equal ownership of the means of production, a policy of unequal distribution was to apply. The commitment of The Co-operative Magazine to community of property appears, at least at this point, to be more concerned with 'justice' and the extension of access to common property to all (e.g. housing, cooking utensils etc.), rather than the extinction of private property itself. The differences between political economists and Owenites on this issue rest on these distinctions.<sup>1</sup>

In December 1826 The London Co-operative Magazine reiterated its critical comments on Orbiston's reluctance to embrace 'the two fundamental principles, the very essence of association - *general co-operation* and *community of property*'.<sup>2</sup> This helped provoke the following response from The Orbiston Register, the official journal of the Orbistonian co-operators. Whilst reiterating the potential benefits of 'voluntary equality of wealth', The Register nonetheless endorsed the principle of private property, not least because to deny it would be to extinguish liberty by force. Moreover, to destroy the notion of private property was to destroy that axiom adhered to by political economists, Owenites and co-operators alike, albeit in different forms - the justice of securing to labour the product of its labour:

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<sup>1</sup> . See also ibid., May 1827, p.235, where it was argued that a 'community of property' would not 'confine all to an equal quantity of consumption, but ...would give to all the power of consuming in the quantity most conducive to the happiness of each'.

<sup>2</sup> . Ibid., December 1826, p.394.

We have been blamed by the editor of *The London Co-operative Magazine*, for not beginning with equal distribution, which he conceives to be the only right principle on which we could commence. But suppose we had begun upon this principle and found it did not work well, should we be compelled to abide by it, because we had previously willed it? My having determined a certain way yesterday, does not necessarily prevent my changing that determination to-day. Equality of wealth, to give satisfaction to all minds, must always be voluntary, otherwise it ought not to exist. No system ought to prevent, at any time, an individual doing what he pleases *with what is strictly his own*. [my italics] If this is the case, however it may be disguised, force is still in existence.<sup>1</sup>

Such diversity and complexity in Owenite responses to the principle of community of property were not isolated but pervasive; Owenite journalism of the non-Mudie variety reflected the variety of opinions on property in this period. For example, a correspondent to The Co-operative Magazine declared in 1827 that 'The system of private property belongs rather to the savage than the civilised state; or is, at least, but the first step towards civilisation. To appropriate to himself all that he can, is the instinct of the savage'.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, another correspondent to The Co-operative Magazine asserted, again in 1827, that:

It is now regarded as an indisputable principle in the science of government, that to the rights of private property, and to the active spirit of competition which springs from the desire of acquiring individual property, are attributable the wealth, and energy of character which distinguish the British people.<sup>3</sup>

Such simplistic binary opposition was relatively rare. The more common Owenite approach to this problem was varying degrees of commitment to

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<sup>1</sup> . The Orbiston Register, 17 January 1827, p.2. See also ibid., 16 March 1826, pp.107-9, where reference was made to 'equitable' rather than equal distribution, and where a strong emphasis was placed on the ability of the co-operative community at Orbiston to deliver 'liberty, security, and independence'.

<sup>2</sup> . The Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald, September 1827, p.401.

<sup>3</sup> . ibid., November 1827, pp.484-5.

various notions of equality, even if this was often accompanied by structural or strategic ties to private property.<sup>1</sup>

Owenite and co-operative views on the question of community of property appear paradoxical at times. However, as this chapter has argued, this reflects the reluctance and inability of Owenite and co-operative discourse simply to abandon some of their major concerns arising from the concept of private property. Security of property based on a labour theory of value was generally seen as necessary and just. Indeed, for some co-operators like Mudie this was an overriding principle. The problem for the Owenites and co-operators was that any attempts to expand the rights to private property for the people who produced it were likely to be thwarted by the unequal concentrations of capital - capital which employed many workers, including Owenites, and which, protected by existing security of property legislation, deprived worker/s of the full product of their labour. Many Owenites and co-operators were attempting to go beyond the limited objectives of many political economists on the property question by arguing for expanded property rights, but they remained trapped within liberal/political economy notions of property. A distinctive Owenite view of 'equality' in property was struggling to emerge, but was impeded by the cultural strength of the commitment to private property.

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<sup>1</sup> . See, for example, the ameliorating tone of *ibid.*, January 1827, p.16, where it was suggested that co-operation corresponded, in one sense, to the 'use in common, or equally, *as far as their necessities or desires require*, the produce of their common exertions', (my italics).



Owenism, Co-operation, Socialists and Community of Property, 1827-1835

In the period from 1827 when Owenism, co-operation and embryonic socialists began to emerge from their association with the ideas and experiments of a small number of individuals, and expanded into a national movement of trading companies, associations etc., Owenite and co-operative attitudes toward community of property both changed and continued as before, with neither appearing to dominate in any crude sense. On the one hand the attitudes of some Owenites and co-operators hardened toward the institution of private property, with calls for the abolition of private property, primogeniture, and the introduction of community of property. Conversely, the ambivalent attitude of Robert Owen and William Thompson on the private property/community of property question continued - an ambivalence shared by many in the co-operative press. Others in the co-operative movement continued to embrace the concept of community of property on the basis of equality of exertions. However, this was at best a problematic concept, not least because of the difficulties in actually establishing a consensus on the nature of equality of exertion; this concept therefore helped to undermine the concept of community of property, rather than reinforce it. Finally, there were those in the co-operative movement, like Georges Lovett and Mudie who openly rejected community of property, and some in co-operative journalism who, if they did not entirely embrace private property - and some ostensibly did - did not reject it either.

Owenite and co-operative attacks on the institution of private property took their most extreme form in the context of burgeoning trade union activity in the early 1830s. Here, for perhaps the first time, united

workers looked capable of actually mounting a threat to private property and much else, hence the comments of 'O.P.Q.' in The Pioneer in 1833:

"What, then, is it intended to attack property?" - It is. "And private property?" - It is! "And that on a large scale?" - Yes, on a very large scale! "And is this, after all, the real object and the eventual tendency of the Trade Unions and coalitions of workmen now organizing in England, France, and Germany?" - Precisely so! "And can you encourage such objects?" - Most certainly. "And is that what you mean by a social revolution?" Precisely so.<sup>1</sup>

Outside of this particular context, however, Owenite and co-operative criticism of private property, and their calls for a community of property, were less obviously seditious, but no less emphatic. This is clearly illustrated in an 1830 petition from the British Association for the Promotion of Co-operative Knowledge (BAPCK) to the British House of Commons:

Your Petitioners, therefore, pray your Honourable House:...That the law of primogeniture, which unjustly leaves the junior branches of a family in a partial state of destitution, be also repealed, in as much as it offers several inducements for pensioning the younger sons and daughters of many noble peers; degrades the nobility generally in the estimation of the people at large; materially increases the public burdens; and exhibits to the world the lamentable spectacle of a nobility boasting of their high honour, and revelling in all the luxuries of life, meanly casting the burdon of supporting and educating their families upon an impoverished population, while the children of the industrious mechanic and artisan are fed, clothed, and educated by their parents out of a weekly stipend, seldom as high as thirty shillings, and too frequently descending from that sum as low as ten.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . The Pioneer, 30 November 1833, p.104; see also *ibid.*, 22 March, 1834, p.257; *ibid.*, 3 May 1834, p.330; The Destructive and Poor Man's Conservative, 2 February 1833, p.5; The Lancashire and Yorkshire Co-operator, No. 3 (c. 1832), p.14; The Crisis, 28 April 1832, p.11, for similar 'revolutionary' emphases.

<sup>2</sup> . Report of the Committee, and Proceedings of the Fourth Quarterly Meeting of the British Association for Co-operative Knowledge, pp.14-15; see also the calls for the abolition of private property and/or the introduction of equal property in The Crisis, 14 July 1832, p.71; The New Moral World, 8 August 1835, p.325; 29 August 1835, p.347.

In contrast, whilst Robert Owen sought throughout this period to condemn if not destroy the principle of what he termed the 'most unjust and cruel system of private property', he was never able to jettison the object of his scorn totally.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this are various. First, he had no other discursive resources than the language of property with which to condemn property. Owen's discourse was grounded in that which he was seeking to denounce. Further, Owen never abandoned the idea that 'property', in the right conditions, was a positive good. Moreover, the extension of private property rights to all who 'laboured' had been regarded by Owen, and many other co-operative adherents to labour theories of value, as the just and logical outcome of any extensive application of that moral axiom. If Owen, William Thompson and others had to some extent sacrificed the extension of private property rights for the alleged greater benefits of co-operative communities, and what Owen termed 'public property'<sup>2</sup>, this did not signify that securing to labour the full, or fuller fruits of its labour, was a dead ideal in Owenite discourse.<sup>3</sup>

The extent to which Owen's pro-community of property arguments were unavoidably linked to the institution of private property is clearly

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<sup>1</sup> . The New Moral World, 16 May 1835, p.225.

<sup>2</sup> . Ibid., 9 May 1835, p.220.

<sup>3</sup> . See, for example, the impassioned tones of The Destructive and Poor Man's Conservative, 2 February 1833, p.5, which proclaimed: 'And what is property, if not the fruits of man's labour be not property? Can anything, indeed, be justly termed property that is not the legitimate offspring of labour?'

evident in an 1838 edition of Owen's New Moral World:<sup>1</sup>

The socialists claim no more for themselves than is claimed by every other owner of private property, namely, to do what they like with their own, or rather to use as they like, the private property which may belong to them. They prefer enjoying their own property in common, to enjoying it separately, and on that point they wish others to feel and think as they do; but as to having any hostile intentions against the private property of other people, or broaching any doctrines of a tendency to compromise the security of property in general, they are as guiltless as any other class of her Majesty's subjects.

This argument is particularly revealing, not least because it suggests that the Owenites at least, and perhaps other co-operators and socialists as well, were as committed to the institution of private property as the political economists were, even if they would have preferred that private property disappeared. Owen and the Owenites could not simply abolish private property, for to do so would be to remove all rights to property, including the rights to property held in common. Moreover, to cancel private property was a practical impossibility for the many co-operators who opposed revolution; for how else was community of property to be established except via individual accumulation? Finally, to abolish private property would suggest that socialism was as iniquitous as it accused political economists of being, not least because such a policy would affect Owenites as well as capitalists. Socialism, political economy and private property were thus inextricably linked.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . Whilst this example is outside the chronological parameters of this study it openly expresses a perspective about the problems which Owen had tacitly confronted over many years, i.e. the new system of co-operation being necessarily born from, and (negatively) defined by, the old competitive, capitalist system of private property.

<sup>2</sup> . The New Moral World, 15 December 1838, p.122.

Another apposite illustration of Owen's complex relationship to the property issue is contained in his February 1835 lecture on that subject. Owen, in a fashion that clearly resembled the position of the political economists on the property question - a position that he was clearly seeking to criticise - eulogised the benefits of 'property':

We shall use the term property, as expressing all that man can acquire for his use and enjoyment...Property, then, wisely produced and applied, will insure happiness to the human race; unwisely produced and applied, it is capable of being made the cause of endless evils.

What Owen was criticising as the 'cause of endless evils' was not private property in itself, but rather the 'private **unequal** [my emphasis] property'<sup>1</sup> that had characterised a previous stage in human development. Owen looked forward to a time when there would be 'a full and equal supply of property for all'.<sup>2</sup> Such 'equality' did not necessarily imply that the labourer was to be deprived of her or his private property, however - unless voluntarily in a co-operative community - for this would be to re-introduce inequality.<sup>3</sup> Rather Owen's critique was aimed at that private property that acted as a barrier to the extension of property rights for all. In this sense

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<sup>1</sup> . The New Moral World, 21 February 1835, p.130.

<sup>2</sup> . Ibid., p.131.

<sup>3</sup> . See, for example, ibid., 16 May 1835, p.226, where Owen asserted that 'the godlike system of public, or rather united property...will be easily maintained, in all its integrity, without either **force or fraud** [my emphasis]'. The legitimate misgivings that may exist concerning the basis for Owen's optimism only serve to reinforce the idea that private property, as long as it did not interfere with the property rights of others, would be allowed to exist under Owen's 'public property' regime, not least to offset charges of coercion.

Owen's critique of private property also re-asserted property rights.<sup>1</sup>

William Thompson's accommodation with private property was less veiled than that of Robert Owen. Indeed, Thompson was at pains in this period to emphasise both the continued existence of private property under a regime of community of property, and the non-levelling nature of co-operation. For example, in 1830 Thompson argued the subtle point that community of property did not imply the extinction of property rights, but rather their expansion. In the process, Thompson also provided a response to what had hitherto been an essentially unanswered question in co-operative discourse, i.e. what did community of goods signify:

By community of property or possessions, **we do not mean, that no person shall possess anything** [my emphasis], but that every adult person shall possess everything, that is to say, all the lands, houses, machinery, implements and the stock of the community, in as ample a manner as they are possessed by any other member whatever, the pleasure of such possession not being lessened by the self-tormenting feelings of antipathy rejoicing in the exclusion of others, but being enhanced by the pleasures of sympathy with numerous friends deriving similar pleasure from the same objects; and such **proprietorship** [my emphasis] being essential to personal independence.<sup>2</sup>

Thompson's version of community of property thus appears to combine public and private property, rather than advocate the 'public' alone. Whilst

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<sup>1</sup> . On Owen's distance from the revolutionary, anti-private property views of some co-operative Trade Unionists, see Owen's letter to Lord Brougham, April 1834, Brougham Papers, MS.14.065, where Owen urged an 'immediate change in the principles of governing in respect to the producing classes', so as to avoid the possibility of a 'revolution of violence', not least a revolution against private property. For a succinct analysis of the relationship between Owenism and Trade Unionism see J.F.C. Harrison, *Robert Owen*, pp.208-16.

<sup>2</sup> . William Thompson, Practical Directions for the Speedy and Economical Establishment of Communities, on the Principles of Mutual Co-operation, United Possessions, and Equality of Exertion and the Means of Enjoyments (London, 1830), p.6.

Thompson clearly envisaged that the stock of a community would be publicly owned, the benefits of that common ownership could be privately enjoyed. From the point of view of personal gratification, therefore, the eclectic marriage of public - private 'proprietorship' functioned very much like private property.<sup>1</sup>

In 1831, whilst lecturing on co-operation in Manchester, Thompson confirmed that for him co-operation did not involve the abolition of private property via the confiscation of existing private property, and that co-operative 'equality' was of the levelling up, not the levelling down variety:

The object of co-operation was not, as some had ignorantly or maliciously stated, to divide the wealth at present in existence, or to bring down the rich to the level of the poor; on the contrary, it sought to create fresh wealth, which, for the future, should, by combined exertions, be retained in the hands of its industrious producers, and by receiving the best education that could be given them, they would be raised to an **equality** [my emphasis] with the rich.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . Though not widespread, at least in this form, such a 'marriage' was not an isolated phenomenon in the history of socialism. See, for example, The New Moral World, 25 April 1835, p.202, where it was asserted that 'All property will be held in trust for the use of the public...[but] the public alone will be the actual possessor of all the property of the New Moral World'. Thompson and The New Moral World also appear to anticipate elements of the thought of the French anarcho-socialist P.J. Proudhon, who argued in the 1840s that private ownership of the means of production should be replaced by 'possession and use [only]...leaving to [the worker] **for the time being** [my emphasis] the ownership of the things he produces', cited in James Joll, The Anarchists, 2nd. ed. (London, 1979), p.48.

<sup>2</sup> . The Midland Representative, and Birmingham Herald, 11 June 1831. See also William Thompson's less diplomatic, if not sardonic response in 1830 to the question of whether co-operation threatened the 'luxuries' of the rich: 'it is a gross misunderstanding of co-operative industry, to suppose that it would snatch a single bauble or plaything from a single one of the rich. As long as the rich liked, they might keep them', The Weekly Free Press and Co-operative Journal, 1 May 1830, p.23.

Thompson failed to specify how such 'fresh wealth' might be distributed under the new co-operative order. Nonetheless, it was Thompson's avowed intention that no matter how the 'fresh wealth' might be distributed, such a distribution would not impinge upon existing private property, even if this might jeopardise the implementation of a co-operative regime - the latter a caveat which Thompson invariably and sanguinely ignored.

Other Owenites and co-operators in this period adopted a similarly ambivalent attitude toward the private property/community of property question. For example, in 1835, a co-operative lecturer, Mr. Simkins, differentiated between public and private property, favouring the former on the basis of an argument that parodied Christian teaching: 'render unto the public the things that belong to the public [i.e. mostly everything]'. In spite of such an open flirtation with community of property arguments, Mr. Simkins nonetheless affirmed the non-levelling down principles of co-operation, and the value of the principle of private property to the working classes and co-operators:

We are not Destructives, but Renovators, and Improvers. We have no wish to plunder, but to protect. We have no desire to destroy property, but to preserve and increase it, that all may enjoy. Everything that can sustain life and make it desirable; everything that can preserve health, and increase happiness, is property; and as we love our species, and desire their welfare, we can have no wish to destroy that by which it is produced.<sup>1</sup>

Other co-operators, whilst embracing the idea of community of property, nevertheless reaffirmed their commitment to the institution of private property. For example, co-operator Mr. Smith lecturing on 'Liberty and Equality' in 1834, argued that 'There must be some property common

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<sup>1</sup> . The New Moral World, 29 August 1835, p.345.



to all, and that property is the original boon of nature - the soil'. However, Mr. Smith also declared that 'The productions of human ingenuity [a necessarily nebulous concept, that could be expanded to cover almost everything, despite Mr. Smith's insistence that it be restricted to the 'fine arts']...are private property by the unalterable laws of nature'. Moreover, for Mr. Smith, 'such species of private property will always have an existence, and will be preserved entirely by the law of honour, which even among the modern aristocracy of Europe, is already quite sufficient to give perfect security to all such moveables as these'.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, The Social Bible - a key policy expression of the central Owenite organisation in 1835, the Association of all Classes of all Nations (hereafter AACAN) - asserted that 'public property is to be created by members of the Association, without infringing upon the rights of any private property now in existence'.<sup>2</sup> The Co-operator T. Wayland, a staunch critic of the 'unnatural and unjust accumulation of [private] property' and advocate of an 'equalization of property' so as to engender that 'most desirable state of human society, a state of equality', nevertheless implicitly concluded that security in property was paramount:

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<sup>1</sup> . The Crisis, 15 February 1834, p.201.

<sup>2</sup> . Social Bible - Laws and Regulations of the Association of all Classes of all Nations - Social Hymns for the use of the Friends of the Rational System of Society (Manchester, 1835), p.xlv.

It may be true that we are all of us equally entitled to the land, and that our right is absolute; but it does not follow that we have the right to take it from the hands of others.<sup>1</sup>

Another significant example of the inability of co-operative discourse to extricate itself from the conceptual web of private property was evident in the calls by many co-operators for a version of community of property predicated on the notion of equality of exertions. For example, at the third quarterly public meeting of BAPCK in 1830, Mr. Lovett asserted that 'the object of co-operation is simply this: **First, to share equally the labour** [my emphasis], and then, the produce'.<sup>2</sup> This argument was also emphasised at the first meeting of the Co-operative Congress in Manchester in 1831, where it was asserted that 'this Congress considers it highly desirable that a community, on the principles of "mutual co-operation, **united possessions, and equality of exertions** [my emphasis], and the means of enjoyments", should be established'.<sup>3</sup> This argument presented real difficulties for those co-operators seeking to establish community of property - how was such an equality of exertions to be assessed and who was to determine it?

For William Thompson in 1827 the significant difficulties involved in determining the relative merits of individual skills, exertions etc. militated

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- 1 . Thomas Wayland, National Advancement and Happiness Considered in Reference to the Equalization of Property, and the Formation of Communities (London, 1832), pp. 13,17,19,23. See also the comments in The Lancashire and Yorkshire Co-operator, 24 December 1834, p.2, where co-operative equality was defined as 'not...bringing down...all to the most miserable condition of human life; [but]...a raising of all to the most elevated'.
  - 2 . The Weekly Free Press and Co-operative Journal, 16 January 1830. See also *ibid.*, 10 April 1830.
  - 3 . 'Resolutions, & c. passed at the first meeting of the Co-operative Congress, held in Manchester, on Thursday and Friday, May 26 and 27, 183[1]', National Library of Wales, transcript 14352C.

against any idea of justly rewarding the unequal skills of individual workers, hence one of the reasons for his call for equality of remuneration:

How are these varying principles to be applied to the varying dispositions and capabilities of different laborers in every different district? An inquest must be held on every laborer in the country. Who are to be the inquisitors? How often is the inquisition to be renewed in order to keep pace with the moral and physical changes of the laborers? What a machinery of complicated laws and regulations would be necessary to carry these just and philosophical valuations of labor, and these beneficent applications of them, into effect!....Better the old, the existing system of chance inequality of remuneration, than such an effort of competitive wisdom to effect a just inequality of remuneration. From difficulty of operation, we ascend to impracticability.<sup>1</sup>

However, the problems that William Thompson had identified in relation to the theoretical attempt to reward 'justly' the individual skills of workers under competitive conditions also applied to co-operators who insisted on the principle of equality of exertions, i.e. how was this to be determined? Moreover, the inequality that underlay, and indeed betrayed the calls for 'equality of exertions'<sup>2</sup> potentially precluded an equality of possessions or remuneration, in the sense that only those that worked

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<sup>1</sup> . W.Thompson, Labor Rewarded, p.35.

<sup>2</sup> . See, for example, The Free Enquirer, 9 January 1830, p.87, which, whilst deprecating the existence of inequalities in property etc. nevertheless declared that 'Equal advantages, in every respect, [all men] cannot have; so long as men and women are born, as we see them, with various powers, unequal talents, and dissimilar dispositions'. See also ibid., 30 June 1832, p.285, 'The inequality of the human condition is, of course, ultimately to be ascribed to the inherent imperfections of human nature'.

equally well, skilfully, hard etc., might justifiably experience that equality.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, those that worked least skilfully, least well etc. might experience an equality of remuneration or of possessions, to the detriment of those that worked best, most skilfully, etc. thereby ushering in a new form of inequality. Unless these co-operators could implement a regime based on the uncertain 'equality of exertions', the implementation of community of property was still-born, and the problem of the relationship between co-operation and private property remained.

Like George Mudie in his 1848 letter to Robert Owen, erstwhile co-operative leader William Lovett condemned the idea of community of property in later life, though in Lovett's case this represented a change of mind.<sup>2</sup> In his autobiography, first published in 1876, Lovett repeated his support for co-operation whilst attacking the idea of community of property, on the ground that it undermined security of worker's property rights, not least by penalising those workers with the most talent; and those who

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<sup>1</sup> . The first Armagh co-operative society attempted to overcome this problem by suggesting that no one should work harder than anyone else, 'if by doing so [it] deprived [anyone] of [their] rights', in Words of Wisdom...The Laws of the First Armagh Co-operative Society (Armagh, 1830), p.5. This suggestion was implicitly problematic. An equality of exertions might preclude material affluence and who was to determine the nature of such an equality of exertions, how was it to be determined etc?

<sup>2</sup> . It is difficult to date Lovett's conversion from a community of property perspective. Mudie's antagonism toward the idea of community of property was entirely consistent throughout this period and beyond. See, for example, Mudie's The Alarm Bell, c.1838, p.10, where Mudie exhibited a profound scepticism about the possibilities of 'a state of perfect equality', where 'there were **no private property**, - [where] **all** were bound to **labour alike**, and **did labour alike**, - [where] all things were in **common, equally possessed** by all, and **enjoyed** by all [my emphasis]'.

worked hardest etc. For Lovett, and unlike Owen and Thompson, there should be no attempt to promote equality over security of property:

mature reflection has caused me to have lost faith in "a *Community of Property*", I have not lost faith in the great benefits that may yet be realized by a wise and judicious system of *Co-operation in the Production of Wealth*. The former I believe to be **unjust, unnatural, and despotic in its tendency, a sacrificing of the intellectual energies and moral virtues of the few, to the indolence, ignorance and despotism of the many.**[my emphasis] The latter I believe to be in accordance with wisdom and justice, an arrangement by which small means and united efforts may yet be made the instruments for upraising the multitude in knowledge, prosperity, and freedom.<sup>1</sup>

The failure of some Owenites and co-operators to sanction the idea of community of property in this period may be partly explained by their unwillingness to exacerbate the already heady, if not seditious, political atmosphere, before and after the 1832 Reform Act. This trend also reflected a significant Owenite and co-operative tendency to affirm private property rights through their extension to the working classes. To this end, co-operators often openly eschewed the levelling principle by condemning attacks on private property. For example, The Brighton Co-operator in 1829 denounced, in a style suggestive of the political economy perspective on private property, the quasi-Luddite activities of machine breakers. The basis for The Co-operator's argument was the idea that 'property is a sacred thing - and to injure it in any way is the greatest violation of all law, human and divine'.<sup>2</sup> This pattern was repeated in other co-operative journals over this period. For example, The Crisis in 1833 conceded that

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<sup>1</sup> . William Lovett, Life and Struggles of William Lovett, Vol. 1, p.46; see also Vol. 2, p.438.

<sup>2</sup> . The Brighton Co-operator, 1 January 1829, p.3. See also ibid., 1 March 1830, p.2, where co-operation 'is not a deep laid scheme for invading the property of the upper classes'. See also ibid., 1 April 1830, p.1, which reiterates this point.

'As long as private property exists it must be protected'. Similarly, The Scottish Trades Union Gazette urged the working classes in 1833 to 'apply your immense powers of production to your own advantage, **without seeking to encroach upon the Rights and Property of others**[my emphasis]'.<sup>1</sup>

The basis for much of the Owenite, co-operative and socialist support of the principle of private property in this period was thus a belief that co-operation or socialism was synonymous with expanding property rights for workers, not ending them. For example, The Brighton Co-operator asserted in 1830 that:

Co-operation aims at giving property and character to the working classes: it aims at transforming them from paupers into self-supporting industrious men - from criminals into men of their own hands, and the saving of their own frugality. We conceive that the possession of property is the basis upon which is built, not only the comfort of the possessor, but the improvement of his moral and intellectual character...The possession of property tends, more than any cause, to produce respect for the property of others.<sup>2</sup>

What is perhaps most characteristic about this statement is the extent to which co-operative adherence to property rights was seen as a means of morally reshaping the working classes, a suggestion reminiscent of the political economists at their most condescending.

Such arguments were not restricted to The Brighton Co-operator. For example, a co-operative pamphlet published in Birmingham in 1832,

<sup>1</sup> . The Crisis, 21 June 1833, p.194; The Scottish Trades Union Gazette, 30 November 1833, p.96. See also The Lancashire and Yorkshire Co-operator, 24 December 1831, p.2, and The Principles, Object, and Laws of the First Salford Co-operative Society (Manchester, 1831), p.12, for similar arguments.

<sup>2</sup> . The Brighton Co-operator, March 1830, p.3.

which adopted the Socratic method common to much co-operative journalism, suggested that co-operation was incorrectly seen as:

contrary to the best principles of political economy, as laid down by Ricardo, MaCculloch and others. It promotes levelling principles, and therefore, if general, would be subversive of good government and social order.

Whilst admitting a certain ignorance of political economy, the supporter of co-operation refuted this charge, embracing property rights and their extension to the working classes:

I think...that any system of society [i.e. co-operation] which secures to labour its reward; and to the successful, the peaceable and undisturbed possession of their gains, cannot grossly violate the principles of political science, or endanger the welfare and order of society.<sup>1</sup>

Gregory Claeys has argued that Owenite community of property was 'predicated' on a 'vision of abundance'.<sup>2</sup> Material affluence would facilitate the installation of community of property because it would negate the impact of inequalities of skill, intelligence etc. and transcend the need for such categories as equality of exertions. Conversely, under less affluent conditions, these inequalities might threaten the cohesion of any attempted community of property, not least because some might work harder, longer or better than others, yet receive the same reward. The implementation of community of property on the basis of material affluence would ensure that all members/co-operators would receive their due

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<sup>1</sup> . Table Talk on the State of Society - Competition and Competition, - Labour and Capital, -Morals and Religion (Birmingham, 1832), pp.1-16. See also The Crisis, 9 November 1833, p.85, which published the objectives of 'The Friendly and Protective Agricultural Association', which were based on 'the principles of unity, equality, and **security**[my emphasis]'.  
<sup>2</sup> . G. Claeys, Machinery, Money, pp.31-2.

according to need and based on ability - a paradox of equal inequality, that is, united possession but unequal distribution.

The problem with Claeys' view, and for those Owenites like Owen whom Claeys regards as adherents of this idea, is that it is teleological, that is it appears to identify 'affluence' as a foundation or cause with 'community of property' as a result. But, whilst material affluence might overcome many of the problems associated with community of property, the benefits of such wealth were arguably only achievable after the implementation of a community of property, for those non-revolutionary Owenites and co-operators at least. Certainly this was appreciated by The Lancashire Co-operator in 1831, when it argued that the potential benefits of machinery and increased material wealth could only be realised in a different sort of society based on 'co-operation' and 'community of property'.<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between political economy, Owenism, co-operation, socialism and community of property is thus complex and inter-connected, rather than a simple separation of political economist and socialist views. Whilst there was strong support by political economists for the institution of private property, the relatively heterogeneous character of political economy, manifest in the arguments of Sismondi, John Stuart Mill et al militates somewhat against the conclusion that economists and socialists were separated on this issue.

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<sup>1</sup> . The Lancashire Co-operator, 25 June 1831, p.8.



Owenites, co-operators and socialists weren't either simple 'communists', or social reformers who shied away from supporting community of property. As this chapter has argued, the relationship between Owenism, co-operation and community of property was far more complex. Up to 1827 leading Owenites like Owen and Thompson appeared to fluctuate in their sometimes ambiguous support for community of property. Conversely, key co-operative journalists like George Mudie rejected the notion of equality of property, attacking in the process the myth of Robert Owen's hegemony over co-operative discourse. Co-operative journalism at this time, of the non-Mudie variety, tended to reflect this diversity of opinion.

In the post-1827 period, this complexity continued in the paradoxical nature of much co-operative support for community of property in an expanded co-operative discourse. During this time there was also an outbreak of vitriolic anti-private property rhetoric from some co-operative quarters, particularly from those co-operators associated with the burgeoning Trade Union movement. However, such sentiments did not dominate the co-operative discourse. Conversely, Owen and Thompson continued to advocate community of property arguments, without ever quite discarding private property. Other co-operators mirrored this ambivalence, arguing for community of property, but floundering, not least because of the problems associated with 'equality of exertions'. Co-operators like Mudie and Lovett rejected 'communism'.

The links between co-operation and private property were thus fundamental, and difficult to break. Co-operation could not simply divorce

itself from the system of private property that it needed to establish itself. This was further complicated by the struggle within co-operative discourse to define its relationship to the property question as part of a complex debate about problematic questions concerning justice, security and equality. For some co-operators like Mudie, Gray and others the only form of equality that was just was the equality that enabled workers to secure the full product of their labour, even if this entailed some form of inequality, on the basis of individual differences between workers. They therefore rejected as iniquitous any scheme for equality of remuneration and community of property. Those co-operators associated with George Skene and the First London Manufacturing Association also rejected, as inequitable, ideas associated with William Thompson's notion of collective rather than individual security of property. Other co-operators, like the post-1827 William Thompson and others, embraced community of property and equality of remuneration as the only practical means by which working people might obtain some form of economic justice in terms of reward and possessions. As this chapter has shown, they were less than successful in fulfilling this objective.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE LABOUR THEORY OF VALUE AS A 'PHILOSOPHER'S STONE' FOR POLITICAL ECONOMISTS, 1817 - 1835

Previous approaches to the issue of the relationship between political economists' and Owenite/co-operative adherence to a labour theory of value/exchange have emphasised the search for the intellectual origins of the early British socialist labour theory of value, or the labour theory of value as an important locus of difference between socialists and political economists.<sup>1</sup> The next three chapters of this thesis will focus mainly on a significant third theme, that of the transcendental nature of both political economists' and Owenite/co-operative labour theories of value.

There are several reasons for adopting this approach. There has been relative neglect of a key methodological, if not metaphysical function of the labour theory of value for economists, Owenites and co-operators - as a transcendental reference point. Unfortunately commentators often use the occasion of their identification of the metaphysical nature of the labour theory of value to simply dismiss the concept, or at least as a reason not to explore its complexity. For example, Joan Robinson noted that 'One of the great metaphysical ideas in economics is expressed by the word "value", however 'when you try to pin it down...[the labour theory of value] like all metaphysical concepts...turns out to be just a word'. Similarly, William J. Barber concluded that 'Many later commentators have treated this [transcendental - labour] approach [to value theory] as superfluous

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<sup>1</sup> . The extent and limitations of these two approaches will be explored in the next chapter.

metaphysics'.<sup>1</sup> This discussion/rejection has often been associated with Marxist use of value theory, as Louis Dumont noted: [With Marx] value became a metaphysical entity unrelated in actual fact to the exchange of anything but agricultural goods....To wit, in Schumpeter's terms - that is to say, in strictly economic terms - there has never been a labor theory of value worthy of the name. It has always been a very imperfect affair, rooted in meta-scientific needs'.<sup>2</sup>

My analysis helps elucidate the non-dependent nature of the relationship between the Owenite and co-operative labour theory of value and political economists' use of value theory. Owenites and co-operators did not simply inherit the labour theory of value from Ricardo et al. As Yoshio Nagai has concluded, 'There are some who say that Owen accepted Ricardo's theory of value. I am of the contrary opinion - that he was never acquainted with it in the strict sense of the word'.<sup>3</sup> There was a contemporary and parallel development of both political economists' and Owenite/co-operative labour theories of value, as well as a shared inability to sustain that organising concept.

Both leading political economists such as Ricardo, James Mill, McCulloch and Malthus, and many Owenites and co-operators regarded the labour theory of value as what Lionel Robbins has termed 'the

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1. Joan Robinson, Economic Philosophy (Chicago, 1963), p.26; William J. Barber A History of Economic Thought (London, 1977), p.31.'
  2. Louis Dumont, From Mandeville to Marx (Chicago, 1977), p.99.
  3. Yoshio Nagai, "'Co-operation" and Socialism in Robert Owen', in Chushichi Tsuzuki, ed., Robert Owen and the World of Co-operation (Tokyo, 1992), pp.70-1.

philosopher's stone'.<sup>1</sup> This concept was also applied by a delegate to the 1832 Third Co-operative Congress. The delegate, named Joseph Smith, asserted that 'We have at last found out that which philosophers have been so long in search of, but in vain, the philosopher's stone', i.e. co-operation, which necessarily included the labour theory of value.<sup>2</sup>

Any attempt to define the 'philosopher's stone' definitively must inevitably meet with ultimate and decisive resistance. One of the main reasons for this impasse is that if the 'philosopher's stone', or what one historian had described as the 'metaphor of metaphors'<sup>3</sup>, could be defined, then one would paradoxically undermine the protocols that help constitute the concept of the 'the metaphor of metaphors' itself, i.e. the 'metaphor of metaphors' is such by virtue of being, inter alia, non-metaphorical, that is, transcendental, beyond ultimate definition.

The evident if inevitable inability of historians, philosophers et al. to settle upon one term in attempting to define this 'God-like' principle - itself a simile and therefore not the principle in itself - is suggestive of its ultimate indefinability. Thus, the 'philosopher's stone' coexists with the 'metaphor of metaphors', the 'transcendental signified'<sup>4</sup>, and others, as alternative descriptions of the 'God-like' principle. However, despite their apparent interchangeability these concepts should not be seen as mere synonyms.

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1. Lionel Robbins, Robert Torrens and the Evolution of Classical Economics (London, 1958), p.70.

2. Report of the Third Co-operative Congress (London, 1832), pp. 28-9.

3. Hayden White, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe (Baltimore, 1973), p.150.

4. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', in Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology (Baltimore, 1976), pp. ix-lxxxvii, for a useful discussion of some of the complexities and problems associated with the concept of the transcendental signified.

For example, the 'philosopher's stone' is clearly a less complex concept than the 'metaphor of metaphors', i.e. the 'philosopher's stone' - another metaphor which is suggestive of an ultimately indefinable foundation - is arguably subsumed by the broader, meta-concept of the 'metaphor of metaphors'. Whatever the term used, however, the transcendental function of these concepts is essentially the same.

Despite the ultimately insuperable problems in defining the 'philosopher's stone' etc., the modern French theorist, Jacques Derrida, has provided a working definition of some of the main functions of the God-like concept, a concept which he has described as 'centered structure':

By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center **represents the unthinkable itself** [my emphasis]. Nevertheless, the center also closes off the play which it opens up and makes possible....At the center, the permutation or the transformation of elements (which may of course be structures enclosed within a structure) is forbidden....Thus it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality [i.e. the center is transcendental]. This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside it*. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center. The concept of centered structure - **although it represents coherence itself**, the condition of the *episteme* as philosophy or science - is contradictorily coherent. And as always, **coherence in contradiction expresses the force of desire** [my emphasis].<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference* (London, 1978), pp.278-9. Derrida's rather obscure reference to 'coherence' or consistency in 'contradiction express[ing] the force of desire' requires some exegesis. Essentially, Derrida appears to be arguing that the continued advocacy of a particular perspective or position, despite significant contradictory evidence and argument, is suggestive of a 'desire' or need to persist with that advocacy - a 'desire' that overcomes or transcends any such contradiction/s.

Adapting Derrida's insight, it is clear that the labour theory of value 'ideally' functioned as a transcendental centre or 'philosopher's stone' around which the respective discourses of Ricardo et al. and the Owenites and co-operators were organised. The labour theory of value was transcendental because it constituted a unique organising principle at the centre of the structure of political economists', Owenite and co-operative discourses, whilst paradoxically remaining independent of and greater than that structure.

For Ricardo the labour theory of value was at the heart of his system of political economy, providing a prospectively invariable, that is, transcendental 'measure of value': 'The most that any man can do is to find out a *measure of value*....This is all I have pretended to do, or now pretend to have done'.<sup>1</sup> This measure was theoretically immune from the vicissitudes in value suffered by other measures of value, e.g. paper money, specie etc. Such an invariable measure was crucial for Ricardo in allowing him to 'determine' what he regarded as 'the key problem in political economy', namely 'the laws which regulate [the] distribution' of 'the produce of the earth' between the three classes in society, i.e. the recipients of 'rent, profit, wages'.<sup>2</sup> Without an immutable criterion, common to all three areas of the economy, Ricardo's political economy model was unworkable.

The labour theory of value was also a central and transcendental organising principle for the Owenites and co-operators, though ostensibly

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<sup>1</sup> . Ricardo to Malthus, 15 August 1823, The Works of David Ricardo, Vol. IX (Cambridge, 1973), pp.346-7.

<sup>2</sup> . David Ricardo, On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation, in The Works, Vol. I (Cambridge, 1970), p.5.

on a much grander philosophical scale. The concept of labour was the original 'philosopher's stone' for the Owenites and co-operators. From it they derived a theory which regarded labour not only as the source, synonym, and measure of use and exchange value, but the labour theory itself as a peerless and transcendental imperative that should shape the Owenite's, the country's, and more ambitiously, the world's moral, economic and social value system. For example, as chapter three has argued, the labour theory of value was the foundation of a theory of justice which underpinned Owenite claims for expanding property rights to workers, including, paradoxically, arguments for community of property. Thus, the labour theory of value represented an immutable and categorical principle for many political economists and Owenites alike.

In contrast with the ostensibly self-confident advocacy of the labour theory of value outlined above, this chapter will argue that the economist supporters of the labour principle (and in the next two chapters, the Owenites and co-operators) retreated from, or were unable to sustain, the transcendental aspect of the labour theory in the course of this period. The extent to which they continued to advocate the principle is thus suggestive of Derrida's reference to 'coherence in contradiction' as an 'express[ion] of desire'.<sup>1</sup> A further dimension is therefore added to the transcendental nature of the labour theory of value, i.e. the desire by supporters for an immutable labour principle overcame or transcended, at least to some extent, the contradictions thwarting that aspiration. In spite of the desire for a God-like organising concept, neither Ricardo, Malthus, or other political economist champions of an invariable labour theory of value, nor their

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<sup>1</sup> . J. Derrida, Writing and Difference, p.279.



counterparts in the Owenite and co-operative movement, were able to defend the argument that labour was an unchanging measure or source of value. The first part of this chapter will focus on David Ricardo's inability to uphold the invariable labour theory of value, as well as the views of the major political economist critics of Ricardo's perspective on value, Robert Torrens and Samuel Bailey. The abortive attempts by James Mill, J.R. McCulloch and T.R. Malthus - key proponents of an invariable labour standard - to perpetuate the idea of an invariable labour theory of value standard will then be analysed. Finally, this chapter will focus on the general abandonment of the labour theory of value by political economists to 1835 - in contradistinction to the rhetoric of the Owenites/co-operators at the same time - a development which coincided, if it wasn't precipitated by, the diminishing authority of Ricardo's ideas after his death in 1823.

This chapter is not breaking new ground in suggesting that Ricardo, plus his disciples James Mill and J.R. McCulloch, and Malthus with his alternative labour theory of value, were incapable of sustaining their value theories. However, this chapter outlines a process model which was contemporary, at least until some time after Ricardo's death in 1823, with Owenite and co-operative attempts to establish the labour theory of value as a 'philosopher's stone'. It is based on important research on the history of political economy, and provides a synthesis of major views and arguments. It also provides an essential comparative and contextual framework for the analysis of Owenite and co-operative models in the succeeding two chapters.

Classical Political Economists and the Invariable Labour Theory of Value,  
1817-1835

Most commentators on the subject of Ricardo's adherence to an invariable labour theory of value have accepted that Ricardo was unable to maintain it sometime after 1817. For example, as Eric Roll has argued:

To establish a theory of value and then to make it inoperative in its most important application [i.e. the idea that labour itself is a commodity, and therefore subject to variations in price or value, and is therefore unable to function as an independent measure of the value of all other commodities] was a contradiction in Ricardo's work which his opponents soon discovered and used to destroy the whole theory. Ricardo's formulation made it impossible for him to solve the problem.<sup>1</sup>

Maurice Dobb and Ronald Meek rejected the idea that Ricardo regarded the problems associated with the labour theory of value as necessarily insuperable, at least up until the second edition of his Principles of Political Economy, and that he retreated from his support for the invariable labour principle in the final edition of that text.<sup>2</sup> However, as Dobb and Meek recognised, whilst Ricardo may have never totally given up his support and/or desire for an invariable labour measure of value, he was increasingly unable to support this position. Thus, for Dobb:

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- <sup>1</sup> . Eric Roll, A History of Economic Thought (London, 1973), p.181. See also, Jacob H. Hollander, 'The Development of Ricardo's Theory of Value', Quarterly Journal of Economics, XVIII (1904), 455-491; Mark Blaug, Ricardian Economics: A Historical Study (Westport, 1973), p.16; Samuel Hollander, Classical Economics (Oxford, 1987), p.108; J. A. Schumpeter, History of Economic Analysis (London, 1954), p.594; Mark Blaug, 'What Ricardo Said and What Ricardo Meant', in Giovanni A. Caravale, ed., The Legacy of Ricardo (Oxford, 1985), p. 6.
- <sup>2</sup> . Maurice Dobb, 'Introduction' to The Works, Vol. 1, pp. xxxviii-xli, Maurice Dobb, Theories of Value and Distribution Since Adam Smith (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 80-81, Ronald L. Meek, Studies in the Labour Theory of Value, 2nd ed. (New York, 1975), pp.105-6.

while there was no shift in [Ricardo's] standpoint on "the real foundation of exchangeable value", hesitation and doubt become increasingly evident in his search for a precise definition of the conditions necessary to make such a standard invariable. In his third edition [Ricardo] seems to have accepted the view that invariability in a standard was not only impossible to find in practice but was impossible in principle.<sup>1</sup>

To some extent, Ricardo's (ostensibly limited) notion of an invariable *measure* of exchangeable value seems to restrict not only the view of the metaphysical or transcendental nature of the theory - in the sense that only one element of the theory was immutable, and therefore transcendental, not the theory itself - but also the idea that political economy and Owenism shared a common theoretical nucleus. This appears to be Mark Blaug's initial conclusion: 'Ricardo's system does not rest, as Marx's [and the Owenite's/co-operator's] system does, upon the philosophical significance of labour costs'.<sup>2</sup> Certainly there appears to be ample evidence to support the view that, for Ricardo, any discussion of notions of 'real' value was to be restricted to discussions of exchangeable value, for the two were synonymous. For example, in a letter to Trower in 1821 Ricardo asked whether the two concepts of 'real value' and 'exchangeable value' were 'not kept distinct by prefixing the word "real" to one, and "exchangeable" to the other?'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . M. Dobb, Theories of Value and Distribution, p.82. Meek noted the inability of Ricardo's labour theory of value to overcome the problem that 'embodied labour ratios were not in normal cases strictly proportionate to exchange ratios', Studies in the Labour Theory of Value, p.119.

<sup>2</sup> . Mark Blaug, Ricardian Economics, pp. 33-6.

<sup>3</sup> . Ricardo to Trower, 4 October 1821, The Works, Vol. IX (Cambridge, 1973), p.87. See also Ricardo to McCulloch, 21 August 1823, ibid., p.358, where Ricardo asserted, 'I do not see the great difference you mention between the circumstances which determine the value of commodities, and the medium of that value'. Of course, the latter would have presented no real problem to the Owenites should that medium remain 'labour'; however, with Ricardo this became increasingly unlikely, at least in any sense of a strictly labour medium of exchange.

While Ricardo was primarily interested in the labour theory of value as it related to exchangeable value, this concern was clearly informed by a more expansive appreciation of the unique if not transcendental role played by labour as the ultimate source of value. As Blaug has noted, 'Though it was rarely made explicit, the "philosophical" aspects of the labor theory of value [i.e. the idea 'that labour [was] the constituent principle of value']...were probably at the back of most "empirical" versions encountered in the literature of the period', including 'the economists of Ricardo's generation'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Ricardo acknowledged as much in the third edition of his Principles of Political Economy:

That [labour] is really the foundation of the exchangeable value of all things, excepting those which cannot be increased by human industry, is a doctrine of the utmost importance in political economy; for from no source do so many errors, and so much difference of opinion in that science proceed, as from the vague ideas which are attached to the word value.<sup>2</sup>

Even in Ricardo's more usual, restricted usage of the labour theory of value, it is clear that 'labour' had a metaphysical function, for when two commodities varied in 'value', it was labour which was posited as the constant against which any variation was to be measured. For example, in the first two editions of Ricardo's Principles the author had asserted that 'the relative value of commodities...*depends solely* [on] the relative quantity

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<sup>1</sup> . Mark Blaug, Ricardian Economics, pp.33-6. See also Donald Winch, 'Introduction' to The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation, 3rd ed. (London, 1973), p.xiii. Winch notes the ambiguity of Ricardo's language in the chapter on value and the tacit conflation of 'the cost theory of the *causes* of exchange value' and 'the closely related, but nevertheless distinct, question of the *measurement* of changes in value in time'.

<sup>2</sup> . The Works, Vol. 1, p. 13.

of labour' embodied in it.<sup>1</sup> Ricardo also appeared convinced of the veracity of this principle when, in a letter to McCulloch in 1821, he asserted that 'I am fully persuaded that in *fixing* on the quantity of labour realised in commodities as the *rule* which governs their relative value we are in the right course'.<sup>2</sup> However, it appears clear that Ricardo's invariable labour theory of value had been subject to qualification, if not adulteration, from at least 1817.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Ricardo became increasingly pessimistic about the prospects of establishing such an invariable measure, particularly in the last year of his life, 1823.

In the first edition of his Principles, published in 1817, Ricardo had accepted that after a reasonable period of capital accumulation the relative value of commodities would be influenced not just by the quantity of embodied labour, but also by a rise in wages when 'fixed and circulating capital were in different proportions', and when fixed capital was 'of different durability'.<sup>4</sup> Ricardo subsequently attempted to restrict the implications of these significant qualifications which had the potential to undermine, if not invalidate, a strict labour theory of value. In a letter to

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1. The Works, Vol. 1, p.xxxix. Ricardo later retreated from this position in the third edition of The Principles, where exchangeable value was now 'almost exclusively' determined by the labour embodied in a commodity, see *ibid.*, p.xxxix.
  2. Ricardo to McCulloch, 25 January 1821, The Works, Vol. VIII (Cambridge, 1973), p.344.
  3. Unfortunately Ricardo's inability to sustain the labour theory of value is a point that many historians of socialism have failed to appreciate, though some, admittedly, were not privy to Pierro Sraffa's definitive collected works of Ricardo, e.g. Esther Lowenthal, Max Beer et al. Claeys only alludes to Ricardo's eventual 'rejection' of the idea of 'natural value', see G. Claeys, Machinery, Money and the Millennium (Oxford, 1987), p.205. However, this is too hasty and simplistic an assessment of the complex evolution of Ricardo's relationship to the value question. Claeys undervalues the importance of Ricardo's change of mind on the labour theory of value, not least when rejecting the category of 'Ricardian socialist'.
  4. The Works, Vol. IV (Cambridge, 1966), p.305.

James Mill in 1818 Ricardo underlined that the 'greater or lesser durability of capital...never superseded...but...only modified' labour inputs as the measure of exchangeable value.<sup>1</sup>

The context for these comments was an ongoing debate between Robert Torrens, who was a trenchant critic of the concept of an invariable measure of value, and Ricardo and McCulloch, who were ostensibly advocating this concept. For Torrens, following Lord Lauderdale's 1804 strictures on the quest for an invariable measure of exchangeable value<sup>2</sup> :

Every marketable commodity which exists, or which can be supposed to exist, is perpetually varying in its power of effecting purchases, it is as impossible to discover a measure or standard of exchangeable value, as it would be to obtain a measure of length, or of weight, if everything in nature were undergoing incessant changes in its dimensions and specific gravity.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst there was some significant conceptual space separating Torrens from Ricardo and McCulloch on the labour theory of value issue<sup>4</sup>, Ricardo was clearly unhappy with at least aspects of the idea of an invariable theory of value. For example, in a famous letter to McCulloch in 1820 Ricardo repeated his reservations on the unadulterated labour-embodied theory of value, asserting that:

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1 . Ricardo to Mill, 28 December 1818, in *ibid*; Vol. VII (Cambridge, 1973), p.377.

2 . Cited in Lionel Robbins, *Robert Torrens*, p. 69.

3 . Robert Torrens, *An Essay on the Production of wealth with an Appendix in Which the Principles of Political Economy are Applied to the Actual Circumstances of this Country* (London, 1821), p.65.

4 . See Lionel Robbins, *Robert Torrens*, pp. 60-72, and Ricardo's 'Fragments on Torrens' in *The Works*, Vol. IV, pp. 305-322, for a discussion of the differences between these economists on this issue.

I sometimes think that if I were to write the chapter on value again which is in my book, I should acknowledge that the relative value of commodities was regulated by two causes instead of by one, namely, by the relative quantity of labour necessary to produce the commodities in question, and by the rate of profit for the time that the capital remained dormant, and until the commodities were brought to market. [pessimistically he concluded that] Perhaps I should find the difficulties nearly as great in this view of the subject as in that which I have adopted.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, almost from the first moment that Ricardo had countenanced the labour theory of value, the idea had been subject to modification and qualification of the absolutism of invariability. Ricardo was simply unable to sustain the view that the value of labour was inviolable, and he appeared increasingly unwilling not to admit as much. In a letter to Malthus in 1823, part of an intense exchange of views on this topic between Ricardo, Malthus and others, Ricardo conceded 'the extreme difficulty of finding an unobjectionable measure of value'.<sup>2</sup> Later, in another missive to Malthus, Ricardo went further and admitted that there 'will never be any perfect measure of value'.<sup>3</sup> Ricardo never completely abandoned labour as a measure of value, but it no longer functioned as the ideal type, i.e. a perfect measure. Labour was therefore retained by Ricardo as the best single approximation to a consistent measure of value, for as he argued late in 1823 in an unfinished version of his paper on 'Absolute Value and Exchangeable Value':

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1 . Ricardo to McCulloch, 13 June 1820, The Works, Vol. VIII, p.194.

2 . Ricardo to Malthus, 3 August 1823, ibid., Vol. IX, p.325.

3 . Ricardo to Malthus, 15 August 1823, ibid., pp. 346-7.

It must then be confessed that there is no such thing in nature as a perfect measure of value, and that all that is left to the Political Economist is to admit that the great cause of the variation of commodities is the greater or less quantity of labour that may be necessary to produce them, but that there is also another though much less powerful cause of their variation which arises from the different proportions in which finished commodities may be distributed between master and workman in consequence of either the amended or deteriorated condition of the labourer, or of the greater difficulty or facility of producing the necessaries essential to his subsistence.<sup>1</sup>

Given the complex, if not sometimes ambiguous nature of Ricardo's reflections on the labour theory of value, and his palpable and progressive retreat from support of an immutable labour measure of value, Samuel Bailey's assault on the 'Ricardian' labour theory of value in 1825 was both unsurprising and surprising. The nature of Bailey's critique and its not uncritical reception by the economists' community has been discussed at length elsewhere<sup>2</sup> and needs little recapitulation here, save to say that the ostensible object of Bailey's ire was Ricardo's alleged adherence to the idea of absolute value and the existence of an invariable measure of value. Bailey, in opposition to Ricardo's alleged position, reinforced the idea that any discussion of 'real value' was 'metaphysical', arguing that 'Value...denotes...nothing positive or intrinsic, but merely the relation in which two objects stand to each other as exchangeable commodities...it denotes a relation between two objects'.<sup>3</sup> However, what does need to be emphasised here, (in spite of Bailey's perception of Ricardo, and the ambiguity of Ricardo's position on 'absolute value', given his assertion that

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<sup>1</sup> . Ibid., Vol. IV, pp.404-5.

<sup>2</sup> . See, for example, Robert M. Rauner, Samuel Bailey and the Classical Theory of Value (London, 1961); Mark Blaug, Ricardian Economics, pp.52-63; Maurice Dobb, Theories of Value, pp.99 - 103.

<sup>3</sup> . Samuel Bailey, A Critical Dissertation on the Nature, Measures, and Causes of Value; Chiefly in reference to the Writings of Mr. Ricardo and his Followers (London, 1825), pp. 1, 4-5.



labour was the *ultimate source* of exchangeable value<sup>1</sup>) is the extent to which Ricardo and Bailey appeared to share a similar agenda on the issue of value. For example, Ricardo had on occasion subsumed 'real value' under the heading of exchangeable value - as had Bailey - and conflated the cause of exchangeable value with the medium used to measure that value.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Ricardo was increasingly unable to support the notion of an invariable standard of value - an idea detested by Bailey.

The two leading acolytes of Ricardo - James Mill and J.R. McCulloch - both advocated the invariable labour theory of value and their views are an important part of the context of popularisation of Ricardo's ideas in which the Owenites and co-operators developed their theories/concepts. In 1816 Mill noted with approval Ricardo's 'explanation of the general principle that quantity of labour is the cause and measure of exchangeable value, excepting in the cases which you except'.<sup>3</sup> In 1821, in the first edition of his Elements of Political Economy, Mill, like Ricardo, endeavoured to account for important exceptions to his invariable labour theory of value, presumably in an effort to combat criticism of the too narrow formulation of the exclusively labour theory of value. Mill incorporated 'capital' into his value equation: 'The value of commodities...is determined by the quantity of capital and labour necessary to produce them', albeit capital as 'hoarded labour'.<sup>4</sup> In 1824, in the second edition of his Elements, Mill attempted to do the same thing with 'machinery' as he

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1 . The Works, Vol. 1, p.13.

2 . See, for example, Ricardo to Trower, 4 October 1821, The Works, Vol. IX, p.87; also, Ricardo to McCulloch, 21 August 1823, ibid., p.358

3 . James Mill to Ricardo, 18 November 1816, ibid., Vol. 1, p.xvi.

4 . James Mill, Elements of Political Economy, 1821, pp.59, 75.

had done with the more generic term 'capital' - for Mill mechanical labour and manual labour were synonymous.<sup>1</sup>

Having followed, and indeed promoted Ricardo's early invariable labour theory of value, Mill appeared reluctant to abandon it. Ricardo criticised Mill as he became increasingly aware of the limitations of an invariable labour theory of value - criticism which, though it exposed serious weaknesses in Mill's labour theory, appeared to do little to deflect him from this perspective. Thus, in 1821 Ricardo commented on the first edition of Mill's Elements of Political Economy, and rebuked Mill mildly: 'What I call exceptions and modifications of the general [labour theory of value] rule you appear to me to say come under the general itself.'<sup>2</sup> Later in 1823, Ricardo concluded that '[Mill and McCulloch] make the best defence for my [labour] measure but they do not really get rid of all the objections'.<sup>3</sup>

Ricardo's criticism of Mill was both more trenchant and comprehensive in his 1823 draft paper on 'Absolute Value and Exchangeable Value':

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<sup>1</sup> . Ibid., 2nd ed. (London, 1824), pp.95-99.

<sup>2</sup> . Ricardo to Mill, 18 December 1821, The Works, Vol. IX, p.127.

<sup>3</sup> . Ricardo to Malthus, 3 August 1823, ibid., p.325.

Mr Mill says that commodities are valuable according to the quantity of labour worked up in them and when the objection is made to him that cloth and wine which has been kept several years are not valuable in proportion to the quantity of labour worked up in them as the wine must in its price pay a compensation for the time that the merchants capital has been invested in it he answers that such an objection shews that the principle contended for is too strictly applied. The wine is not valuable exactly in proportion to the quantity of labour worked up in it, but that its value is regulated by the value of the commodity in which labour is worked up, and which for a sufficient reason has been chosen as the measure of value. But this is not exactly true. Wine now bears some relative value to cloth and let us suppose cloth the measure of value. Next year a greater proportion of the finished commodity is paid for labour in consequence of a scanty supply of or a greater demand for labour. It becomes necessary then that wine should alter in relative value to cloth, although there is the same quantity of labour, neither more nor less, worked up in the cloth. If it did not so alter, if wine did not fall in this measure, the wine manufacturer's profits would be greater than those of the clothier, and consequently competition would immediately operate on trade. How can Mr. Mill then be right in saying that the value of wine is regulated by the quantity worked up in cloth the measure, when it may exchange for a greater or smaller quantity altho' no alteration has taken place in the mode of producing it.<sup>1</sup>

This passage points to Mill's tacit withdrawal from the invariable element of their labour theory of value. Moreover, as Ricardo was keenly aware, the example applied by Ricardo to Mill's value model, which exposes some of the inadequacies of a strictly labour input theory of value, would necessarily affect Ricardo's own (exclusively) labour theory of value.

Like Mill, McCulloch was a staunch advocate of the invariable labour theory of value. McCulloch declared in an 1823 letter to Ricardo that 'were it not for the doubts which you entertain *I should myself have none* respecting the proposition that it is by the quantity of labour only that all exchangeable value is to be estimated'.<sup>2</sup> However, McCulloch was unable to maintain the tranquil simplicity of this position. McCulloch, like Mill, attempted to answer critics of the labour theory of value by incorporating

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<sup>1</sup> . 'Absolute Value and Exchangeable Value', in *ibid.*, Vol. IV, pp.375-76.

<sup>2</sup> . McCulloch to Ricardo, 11 August 1823, *ibid.*, Vol. IX, p.342.

disparate elements like machinery as fixed capital into the labour theory. McCulloch argued that this was made possible by extinguishing 'the distinction ...between immediate labour and the labour of capital'; however, such sleight of hand had failed to persuade Ricardo (when the issue had been broached earlier) that the integrity of an exclusively labour theory of value could be maintained, given the problems posed by the role of capital in creating and measuring value.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, McCulloch conceded in an 1823 letter to Ricardo that 'It is evident I think that there neither is nor can be any real and invariable standard of value; and if so it must be very idle to seek for that which can never be found'. Yet, having admitted this, McCulloch was still keen to re-establish the invariable labour theory of value by another route: 'The real inquiry is to ascertain what are the circumstances which determine the exchangeable value of commodities at any given period - and these are all clearly reducible to one - the comparative quantities of labour bestowed on their production'.<sup>2</sup> But as Ricardo remarked to Trower in 1823, 'if we were in possession of the knowledge of the law which regulates the exchangeable value of commodities, we should be only one step from the discovery of a measure of absolute value'.<sup>3</sup> Despite these profound difficulties McCulloch continued to maintain, in public at least, a sanguine

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<sup>1</sup> . McCulloch to Ricardo, 24 August 1823, *ibid.*, p.369; see Ricardo to Malthus, 3 August 1823, in *ibid.*, p.325, for Ricardo's criticism of Mill and McCulloch's attempts to perpetuate the invariable labour theory of value via the inclusion of mechanical capital as labour.

<sup>2</sup> . McCulloch to Ricardo, 11 August 1823, *ibid.*, p.344.

<sup>3</sup> . Ricardo to Trower, 31 August 1823, *ibid.*, p.377.

commitment to an invariable labour theory of value, even though it lacked the sanction of McCulloch's intellectual inspiration, Ricardo.<sup>1</sup>

Like Mill and McCulloch, Malthus was another important author on political economy who was wedded to the idea of an invariable measure of value. Indeed, in correspondence with Ricardo in 1823, Malthus asserted that the 'den[ial] [of] the existence of absolute value...would unquestionably confuse one of the most important distinctions in political economy, and would take up a position which after all appears to me to be by no means tenable'.<sup>2</sup> However, Malthus differed from Ricardo's, Mill's and McCulloch's perspective on value in at least one important respect. Following Adam Smith, Malthus argued that it was what labour could command, rather than the labour embodied in a commodity, which was the key to an invariable measure of value. In the 1820 edition of his Principles of Political Economy Malthus declared that 'I shall continue to think, that the most proper definition of real value in exchange, in contradistinction to nominal value in exchange [i.e. the price of a commodity], is, the power of commanding the necessaries and conveniences of life, including labour, as distinguished from the power of commanding the precious metals'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . For example, see J.R. McCulloch's A Discourse on the Rise, Progress, Peculiar Objects, and Importance of Political Economy (Edinburgh, 1824), pp. 66-67. Here, despite his knowledge of Ricardo's clear misgivings on an invariable labour theory of value, McCulloch insisted on erroneously asserting that 'The fundamental principle maintained by Mr. Ricardo in [his work The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation] is, that the exchangeable value, or relative worth of commodities, as compared to each other, depends *exclusively* on the quantities of labour necessarily required to produce them'. See The Works, p. xxxix, for an examination of the public changes to Ricardo's perspective on this topic in the third edition of The Principles.

<sup>2</sup> . Malthus to Ricardo, 11 August 1823, The Works, Vol. IX, p.341.

<sup>3</sup> . T.R. Malthus, Principles of Political Economy (Cambridge, 1989), ed. John Pullen, Vol. 1, p.62.

However, Malthus's desire for a transcendental concept of value was at odds with the necessary qualifications, exceptions and discrepancies that accompanied his attempts to establish a value theory. This tension seemingly overwhelmed Malthus's capacity to settle on one concept as the site of transcendental value, on the basis of which other questions could be examined. In a letter to Ricardo in 1823, Malthus acknowledged:

The general concession that the value of commodities is determined by the quantity of labour employed upon them, when time is not concerned, is the foundation on which I rest. This foundation once allowed, puts an end at once to all idea of arbitrary selection in taking labour as measure.<sup>1</sup>

In a subsequent missive to Ricardo, Malthus appeared to refute, or at least qualify his earlier assertion:

It is no doubt true that demand and supply are the real foundation of all exchangeable value, and that the only reason why labour is a correct measure of this value when nothing else is concerned, is that supplies from the same kind and quantity of labour would on an average be in the same proportion to the demand for them.<sup>2</sup>

However, when Malthus adopted his more usual concept of 'labour commanded' as the basis and measure of 'real value in exchange'<sup>3</sup>, the flaws in his transcendental labour theory of value were most conspicuous. Ricardo had consistently and cogently argued in his dialogues with Malthus that the concept of 'labour commanded' was itself variable.<sup>4</sup> In other words, Malthus's measure of value was based on circular logic: the value of a commodity was to be determined by the amount of labour it could command; but the amount of labour it could command was determined by the value of the commodity. 'Labour commanded' could not therefore

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<sup>1</sup> . Malthus to Ricardo, 21 July 1823, The Works, Vol. IX, p.308.

<sup>2</sup> . Malthus to Ricardo, 11 August 1823, ibid., p.341.

<sup>3</sup> . T.R. Malthus, Principles, Vol. 1, p.62.

<sup>4</sup> . See, for example, Ricardo to Malthus, 29 April 1823; 3 August 1823; 15 August 1823, The Works, Vol. IX, pp.282, 324, 346-7.

function as an immutable centre around which Malthus's economic model could be organised, because it too was subject to the same vicissitudes that it was said to be both immune from, and indeed, orchestrating.

To the extent that 'labour commanded' survived these criticisms, it did so only because Malthus chose to ignore them. Only a short time after Ricardo's death in 1823, Malthus published an article in The Quarterly Review in 1824 which was critical of the so-called Ricardian school of political economy.<sup>1</sup> Malthus again extolled the virtues of the concept of 'labour commanded', and argued that for Adam Smith and himself 'the value of the same quantity of labour remains substantially the same', in terms of 'the mass of commodities' that labour can command, and it is only 'the produce of labour' which varies 'in the progress of wealth'.<sup>2</sup> Yet, given that for Malthus the focal point of 'real value in exchange' is the 'power to command the necessaries of life' (i.e. the produce of labour), then it must follow that the value 'of the same quantity of labour' must also be subject to fluctuation since its value depends on, and is defined by, the variable product of labour.

All the leading political economists who were proponents of an invariable labour theory of value were thus unable to preserve this concept, even if they retained a sense of its desirability. Some theorists, like Ricardo, modified their labour theory of value. In the course of his

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<sup>1</sup> . The anonymous article which reviewed McCulloch's 'Essay on Political Economy' in The Encyclopedia Britannica in 1823 appeared in The Quarterly Review, 30 (January 1824), 297-334. It was attributed to Malthus by Barry Gordon, in his 'Criticism of Ricardian Views on Value and Distribution in the British Periodicals, 1820-1850', History of Political Economy, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Fall, 1969), 372.

<sup>2</sup> . The Quarterly Review, 30 (January 1824), 334, 332.

studies on this question Ricardo became increasingly aware that 'labour' in itself was incapable of sustaining the transcendental role that he had initially assigned to it. Others, like Mill, McCulloch to a somewhat lesser extent, and Malthus, were unwilling to abandon their labour theory of value. Nevertheless, they tacitly did so, though with supplements, qualifications, exceptions and exemptions. The unqualified association between classical political economy and the labour theory of value was therefore clearly coming to a close sometime after Ricardo's death in 1823.

Ronald Meek is one of several commentators who have documented the loss of faith in the labour theory of value by many 'classical' economists after 1823:

After Ricardo's death, the retreat of the more respectable economists from [the labour theory of value] was quite remarkably rapid. After 1826, when the third edition of James Mill's Elements of Political Economy was published, practically the only reputable economist to defend Ricardo's theory of value (apart from a few relatively unimportant popularisers who did little more than expound it) was J.R. McCulloch, and his defence contained a number of rather bizarre elements which afforded an easy target for the critics.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly there is a wealth of evidence to support Meek's view. For example, when Colonel Torrens suggested to the Political Economy Club on 14 January 1828 that they adopt 'the following definitions in order to establish a conventional and understood nomenclature in the Club', 'Value' was defined - without reference to labour - as 'The power of purchasing'.<sup>2</sup> The economist Samuel Read, in his 1829 text An Inquiry into the Natural Grounds of Right to Vendible Property, or Wealth, concluded that there had been an 'almost universal rejection of labour as the standard [measure

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<sup>1</sup> . R. L. Meek, Studies in the Labour Theory, p.121. See also Mark Blaug, Ricardian Economics, pp. 52-63; Barry Gordon, 'Criticism of Ricardian Views', 370-387.

<sup>2</sup> . Political Economy Club, Vol. VI (London, 1921), p. 31.



of value] by later political economists', even though he personally lamented that outcome.<sup>1</sup> The epitaph for the labour theory of value in the classical economists' circle was seemingly recorded by the Political Economy Club stalwart, J. L. Mallet, in his diary entry for 13 January 1831:

The only other subject of discussion we had [in the Political Economy Club] was as to the progress made in the *Science* of Political Economy since the publication of Ricardo's work, and whether the principles of that work were still held in the same estimation. The first part of the Enquiry was not gone into, but Torrens held that all the great principles of Ricardo's work had been successively abandoned, and that his theories of Value, Rent and Profits were now generally acknowledged to have been erroneous. As to value the dissertation on the Measure of value published in 1825 by Mr. Baillie [sic] of Leeds has settled that question.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the demise of the classical economists' adherence to an invariable, transcendental labour theory of value was apparently complete by the 1830s. However, the end of economists' support for the labour theory of value was never complete, e.g. John Stuart Mill was one

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1. Samuel Read, An Inquiry into the Natural Grounds of Right to Vendible Property, or Wealth (Edinburgh, 1829), p.203.
  2. Political Economy Club, p. 223; see also extracts from Mallett's diary on 15 April 1831, and 16 April 1832, in *ibid.*, pp. 225, 234, which appear to confirm these sentiments. See also The Quarterly Review, No. LXXXVII, Vol. XLIV, January 1831, pp.14-15; The Westminster Review, No. XVII, October 1832, pp. 294-5, which, in rejecting the notion of an invariable labour theory of value, asserted that 'Value...like greatness, has in all cases a reference, direct or implied, to something else'; James Mill, who in 1832 described as 'absolute nonsense' the suggestion that labour was the source of all value, cited in James A. Jaffe, 'The Origins of Thomas Hodgskin's Critique of Political Economy', History of Political Economy, 27:3 (1995), 495; G. Poulett Scrope, Principles of Political Economy (London, 1833), p.167; Mountifort Longfield, -Professor of Political Economy at Dublin University from 1832 to 1836 - '1834 Lectures on Political Economy - Lecture 6', cited in R.D. Collison Black, ed., Readings in the Development of Economic Analysis 1776-1848 (Newton Abbot, 1971), pp. 242-3.

economist who retained his support for the labour theory of value idea.<sup>1</sup> As the next two chapters will argue, Owenites and co-operators never abandoned the idea of a transcendental labour theory of value in the way that post-Ricardian economics apparently did, and they were just as unsuccessful in their attempts to sustain the concept as Ricardo et al. had been.

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<sup>1</sup> . See J. S. Mill's letter to publisher and economist Henry C. Carey, 15 February 1845, in The Earliest Letters of John Stuart Mill, 1812-1848, ed. Francis E. Minerva, Vol. XIII (Toronto, 1963), p. 659, where Mill asserted that 'In the case of all useful articles which admit of indefinite increase by means of labour, the labour required for producing them is, no doubt, the regulator and measure of their value; and I look upon it as one of the chief merits of Ricardo to have established in its full generality this law, which is still far from being admitted by the common herd of political economists'.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### OWENISM, CO-OPERATORS AND THE INVARIABLE LABOUR

#### THEORY OF VALUE, 1817 - 1827

#### 'Ricardian Socialism' and the search for the origins of labour theories of value

The view that early British socialist labour theories of value were largely derived from David Ricardo's labour theory of value has long been a fundamental characteristic of much of the historiography of early British socialism. For example, Marx noted 'the equalitarian [i.e. Owenite/co-operative] application of Ricardian theory' as early as 1847; whilst in 1885 Engels wrote that 'the entire communism of Owen, so far as it engages in polemics on economic questions, is based on Ricardo'.<sup>1</sup>

H. S. Foxwell's introduction to Dr Anton Menger's The Right to the Whole Produce of Labour, first published in 1899, reinforced this view, arguing that David Ricardo's labour theory of value was inherited by leading co-operators William Thompson and John Francis Bray, erstwhile co-operator John Gray, and avowed anti-socialist, Thomas Hodgskin - collectively defined as the 'Ricardian Socialists'. For Foxwell, 'Ricardian socialism was the yeast of the Owenite movement, and the foundation of all the more able contributions to Owenite literature....It was Ricardo, not Owen, who gave the really effective inspiration to English socialism'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> . Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, The Collected Works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Vol. 6 (Moscow, 1975), p.138; Friedrich Engels, in Capital, Vol. 2 (Moscow, 1961), p.13.

<sup>2</sup> . H.S. Foxell, M.A., 'Introduction' to Dr. Anton Menger, The Right to the Whole Produce of Labour: The Origin and Development of the Theory of Labour's claims to the Whole Product of Industry (New York, 1962, first published 1899), p.lxxxiii.

Similarly, Max Beer suggested only a slightly less fundamental role for Ricardo's labour theory of value within Owenism and co-operation. For Beer '[co-operative socialism] as it issued from purely Owenite sources...[was] supplemented by deductions from the Ricardian theory of value'.<sup>1</sup> J.F.C. Harrison concurred with Beer, arguing that 'Ricardo provided [the Owenites] with the basis for a socialist theory of value'.<sup>2</sup>

Other scholars have adopted a more critical approach to the attachment of the Ricardian label to the early British socialists, though without abandoning the concept. For example, Esther Lowenthal in her book The Ricardian Socialists argued that 'Although we have said that the socialist use of the labor theory followed hard on the publication of Ricardo's Principles, there is no evidence that the socialists were particularly impressed by his teachings'.<sup>3</sup> J.E. King suggested that the Ricardian socialists were 'not "Ricardian" in any important sense. They were "Socialists" only on a very loose usage of the term, and Ravenstone and Hodgskin not even then. The label has stuck, however, and it seems unnecessary to invent a new one here'.<sup>4</sup> There are obvious limitations in the 'Ricardian socialist' label, including the absence of references to Ricardo in the major works of co-operative political economy, though not in interpreters of Ricardo, e.g. James Mill. Additionally, the concept of 'Ricardian socialist' incorporates such self-confessed anti-socialists as

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<sup>1</sup> . Max Beer, A History of British Socialism, Vol. 1 (London, 1923), p.183.

<sup>2</sup> . J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America, (London, 1969), p.17; Harrison later questioned - correctly, if somewhat ambiguously, given his earlier assertion - the extent to which Owenites took their views on the labour theory of value directly from Ricardo, see p.70.

<sup>3</sup> . Esther Lowenthal, The Ricardian Socialists, (New York, 1911), p.103.

<sup>4</sup> . J. E. King, 'Utopian or Scientific? A Reconsideration of the Ricardian Socialists', History of Political Economy, 15:3 (1983), 346.

Thomas Hodgskin et al. However, there has been a relatively tranquil acceptance of the influence of Ricardo's labour theory of value on early British socialism in much, though not all, of the historiography of the latter.<sup>1</sup>

Partly in an effort to overcome the problems associated with the 'Ricardian socialist' label, two alternative genealogies for the Owenite/co-operative labour theory of value have been suggested. The first model traces the Owenite/co-operative labour theory of value back to the ideas of the sixteenth century English political theorist John Locke, who had argued in his Second Treatise on Government that 'labour, in the beginning, gave a right of property, wherever anyone was pleased to employ it'.<sup>2</sup> Thus Gareth Stedman Jones has argued that 'The labour theory of value, as it was developed by Thompson and Hodgskin in the 1820s, looked back to

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1. See, for example, Janet Kimball, The Economic Doctrines of John Gray - 1799-1883 (Washington, 1948), p.4; Joseph Schumpeter, A History of Economic Analysis (New York, 1954), p.479; John Richard Knipe, Owenite Ideas and Institutions, 1828-1834 (Unpublished Master of Arts thesis - University of Wisconsin, 1967), pp.29-30; George Lichtheim, A Short History of Socialism (London, 1970), p.40; Mark Blaug, Ricardian Economics (Westport - Connecticut, 1973), pp.140-150; Maurice Dobb, Theories of Value and Distribution Since Adam Smith, (Cambridge, 1973), p.137; Keith Tribe, Land, Labour and Economic Discourse (London, 1978), pp.155-58; E.K. Hunt, 'Utilitarianism and the labour theory of value: a Critique of the ideas of William Thompson', History of Political Economy, 11:4 (1979), 550; Barbara Taylor, Eve and the New Jerusalem (London, 1983), p.84; Bill Brugger, 'Classical Socialist Theory: Socialist Industrialism and Anarchism', in Norman Winthrop, ed. Liberal Democratic Theory and Its Critics (London, 1983), pp.224, 228. There is also, of course, the more generic problem with 'origins', i.e. the reductio ad absurdum of the origin of origins, and so on.

2. John Locke, Two Treatises of Government (London, 1984), p. 138.

Locke as much as it looked forward to Marx'.<sup>1</sup> To some extent the 'Lockean' label is an improvement on the 'Ricardian socialist', for it arguably precludes, for example, the need to reconcile the socialism of William Thompson with the Tory-individualism of Thomas Hodgskin. However, there appears to be little evidence of Locke's direct influence on Owenite and co-operative discourse<sup>2</sup>, although Chushichi Tsuzuki has established that Locke influenced Robert Owen's concept of 'social science'.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Locke's ideas did not anticipate the collective ambitions of many Owenites and co-operators.

A second alternative genealogy for the Owenite/co-operative labour theory of value links it with the political œconomy of Adam Smith, and not Ricardo's labour theory of value, as the inspiration for Britain's first socialists. For example, Esther Lowenthal has argued that 'all of [the so-called Ricardian socialists] quote[d] Adam Smith as their authority for the labour theory of value, as indeed Ricardo did himself'.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, though with more emphasis on the inheritance of the Smithian analytical category

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1 . Gareth Stedman Jones, The Languages of Class (Cambridge, 1983), p.57; see also Barbara Taylor, Eve, p.84; Mark Blaug, Ricardian Economics: A Historical Study (Westport - Connecticut, 1973), pp. 33-35; Anne E. Balcer, 'Value and Nature: An Examination of the Economic and Philosophic Ideas of the "Ricardian Socialists"', Ph.D. Thesis, (University of Cambridge, 1982), pp. 46-7; J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen, p.70.

2 . Locke's was one of several works recommended to prospective Owenite social missionaries by the Central Board of the Owenite organisation - the Association of all Classes of all Nations - in 1839. Other recommended author's included Malthus, Adam Smith, Godwin, Minter Morgan et al. See J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen, p.219.

3 . See Chushichi Tsuzuki, 'Robert Owen and Social Science', in Chushichi Tsuzuki, ed., Robert Owen and the World of Co-operation (Tokyo, 1992), pp. 33-4, 36-8.

4 . Esther Lowenthal, The Ricardian Socialists, p.103.

of 'productive' and 'unproductive' labour by the Owenites et al., Noel Thompson has argued that:

In developing their labour exploitation theories thus, along what may be termed "Smithian" lines [i.e. productive and unproductive members of society], it was almost inevitable that the Ricardian socialists came to be particularly concerned with the sphere of exchange.<sup>1</sup>

Again the Smithian socialist label has some merit, not least because many of the Owenites and co-operators were manifestly familiar with many of Smith's ideas. However, this classification not only fails to resolve the contradiction of socialist and anti-socialist author's (i.e. Thompson and Hodgskin) retained under the same category, but also ignores the profound differences separating Smith's political œconomic paradigm, from that of the Owenites and co-operators, e.g. Smith's defence of a rigid division of labour, inequality and unproductive labour.<sup>2</sup>

Gregory Claeys has recently attempted to move the analysis of Owenite and co-operative labour theories of values away from a pre-occupation with the political and political economy antecedents of those theories. Criticising, then rejecting, the lineages of Lockean, Smithian and Ricardian influences, for some of the same reasons outlined above<sup>3</sup>, Claeys has suggested that, far from simply having a political economy pedigree, the Owenite 'labour theory of production', as opposed to the labour theory of value, was the site of significant differences between the Owenites and the political economists:

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<sup>1</sup> . Noel Thompson, The People's Science: The Popular Political Economy of Exploitation and Crisis 1816-34 (Cambridge, 1984), p.93.

<sup>2</sup> . See generally Gregory Claeys, Machinery, Money and the Millennium: From Moral Economy to Socialism 1815-60 (Cambridge, 1987), p.xxv.

<sup>3</sup> . Ibid., pp.xxii-xxvi.

[E]conomic socialism was not a form of political economy. Far from constituting individuals as economic agents by embedding them in economic categories Owenism did not even ground them in a productivist, activist framework, for its distinction between socially useful and useless production was logically prior to its description of individuals in their productive roles. Accordingly, early British socialists conceived of individuals first as members of an egalitarian, just, democratic society, and only then as productive agents. Owenism was not in this sense an economic discourse, a variety of political economy or for that matter a moral philosophy or anthropology alone. The vast majority of socialist thought instead was derived from and remained subordinate to Owenite social theory generally.<sup>1</sup>

Claeys has subsequently contradicted one important element of this argument, namely the idea the Owenism 'did not even ground [individuals] in a productivist, activist framework'. For example, in his book Citizens and Saints Claeys argued that 'The Owenite analysis...was based upon a material definition of wealth and, very often, an activist conception of production in which actual exertion was required in order to be accounted a genuine "productive labourer"'. Similarly, in his article, 'After "Socialism": Mr Owen, Democracy, and the Future', Claeys maintained that 'This "vitalist" or "activist" conception of production and exchange in fact demarcates Owenite thinking from any kind of classical economic theory'.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Claeys has made an important point: the labour theory of value was an important site of difference between political economists and Owenites, illustrated by the enmity exhibited by the Owenite George Mudie

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<sup>1</sup> . Ibid., pp. 191-2.

<sup>2</sup> . G. Claeys, Citizens and Saints, p.178; G. Claeys, 'After "Socialism": Mr Owen, Democracy, and the Future', in Chushichi Tsuzuki, ed. Robert Owen, p.20. There appears to be no obvious reason for Claeys' inconsistency here. However, the point is that both elements of Claeys' polarised assessment of 'economic' socialism are correct, depending on the particular historical context from which they are derived. See the introduction to this thesis for an examination of some of the problems associated with Claeys' preferred epithet for Britain's proto-socialist movement, 'the Owenites'.



to the subsistence, 'natural price for labour' aspect of Ricardo's labour theory of value.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to previous problematic approaches to this topic, (i.e. the search for the intellectual pedigree of the early British socialist labour theory of value; or the labour theory of value as an important locus of difference between socialists and political economists), the next two chapters will focus on the relationship between Owenites, co-operators, socialists and the transcendental labour theory of value.<sup>2</sup> This chapter will break at 1827 because that is the year when Owenite and co-operative discourse first began to expand rapidly from its association with key individuals like Owen, Thompson et al.

Historiographically, the relationship between Owenism, co-operation and the transcendental labour theory of value in this period has been either neglected, or else condescendingly dismissed with a minimum of analysis. For example, J.E. King has argued that 'It would be wrong to claim that the Ricardian socialists had managed to develop anything approaching a coherent theory of value'. Similarly, David McNally has suggested that 'Owen does not construct a theory of value [in the 1820 Report to the County of Lanark] so much as he puts forward a series of first principles which he asserts to be true'. McNally's argument is essentially a sound one. However, it is undermined somewhat by his failure to explore sufficiently the nature and extent of the problems surrounding the

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<sup>1</sup> . G. Claeys, Machinery, Money, pp.76-8.

<sup>2</sup> . It must be stressed, however, that despite their limitations, some of which have been explored here, previous modes of analysis on this topic remain relevant, and are not supplanted but supplemented by the proposed alternative analysis.

profoundly significant relationship between Owen, the Owenites, co-operators and the labour theory of value<sup>1</sup>

This chapter will redress previous neglect of this topic by exploring the attempts by Robert Owen, William Thompson, and co-operators John Gray, Abram Combe, George Mudie and others, to establish the claim for an invariable labour theory of value, in particular problems associated with the Owenite/co-operative principle of productive/unproductive labour. This was a crucial concept for the Owenites and co-operators, for without this category the boundaries of labour were too elastic, potentially erasing important, defining differences between Owenite discourse and that of political economy. The Owenites and co-operators sought, via this opposition, to differentiate the 'labour' of workers from the 'labour' of capitalists, distributors et al., and thereby to establish the economic and moral superiority, and indeed priority, of labour over capital, in contradistinction to economists who had made claims for the priority of capital, and in Malthus's case 'unproductive consumers' as productive of value.<sup>2</sup> However, as economists like James Mill recognised - though few if any Owenites or co-operators - the productive/unproductive binary

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<sup>1</sup> . J.E. King, 'Utopian or Scientific?', 353; David McNally, Against the Market - Political Economy, Market Socialism and the Marxist Critique (London, 1993), p.117. See also R.G. Garnett, Co-operation and the Owenite socialist communities in Britain 1825-45 (Manchester, 1972), p.6; and W. Stafford, Socialism, radicalism and nostalgia: Social Criticism in Britain, 1775-1830 (Cambridge, 1987), pp.182, 214, for a similarly superficial examination and rejection of Robert Owen's and William Thompson's labour theory of value.

<sup>2</sup> . T.R. Malthus, Principles of Political Economy ed. John Pullen, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1989), p.463. For the argument that capital was an equally important component of value, see James Mill, Elements of Political Economy (London, 1821), p.59, and John Stuart Mill, 'Intended Speech at the Co-operation Society, never delivered', Connecticut College for Women, MS. f.17.

category was intrinsically unstable.<sup>1</sup> For example, different Owenites/co-operators utilised contrasting definitions of productivity: some Owenites and co-operators excluded capitalists, distributors et al. from their definition of what constituted 'productive labour'; conversely, others did not. Some co-operators exhibited an ambivalence about the boundaries of productivity, while others appeared to change their minds about who was, and who was not 'productive'. Other co-operators advocated the idea that the creation of equivalents was the sound basis for defining productivity. However, this was at best convoluted, if not untenable logic, for it placed the burden of establishing the productive nature of labour in the sphere of exchange - for equivalents could only be established in exchange - whereas for most Owenites and co-operators, exchange was simply to reflect the inherent, invariable value of labour. This chapter is thus clearly at odds with Claeys argument that 'It was this distinction [i.e. between productive and unproductive labour] which gave a sharpness and clarity to [the Owenite/socialist] use of variations on the "labour theory of value"'.<sup>2</sup> This chapter will also examine early Owenite ideas on establishing the invariability of labour principle in exchange via Robert Owen's problematic notion of 'average prime cost' of labour - problematic because the concept of 'average prime cost' was itself variable, based on the unstable foundation of Owen's protean concept of labour.

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1. James Mill had significant doubts about whether it was possible to 'draw the line precisely between' the productive/unproductive dichotomy; see Elements, 1821, pp.179-183.

2. G. Claeys, 'The Reaction to Political Radicalism and the Popularisation of Political Economy in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Case of "Productive " and "Unproductive" Labour', in Terry Shinn and Richard Whitley, eds., Expository Science: Forms and Functions of Popularisation (Dordrecht, 1985), p.119.

### Robert Owen and the Invariable Labour Theory of Value

Throughout this period to 1827 Robert Owen was an advocate of an invariable labour theory of value, though he was rather more ambiguous in his support for the related category of productive/unproductive labour. In an 1817 'Report on the Poor' Owen asserted that 'Human labour...[was] the great source of wealth in nations'. Similarly, in his 1820 'Report to the County of Lanark' Owen declared that 'the natural standard of value is, in principle, human labour'.<sup>1</sup> Owen's adherence to the concept of productive/unproductive labour was more problematic. As Gregory Claeys has noted, Owen - following Patrick Colquhoun's thesis - when lecturing in Ireland in 1823 on the topic of productivity, divided society into different classes on the basis of their relative productivity, and criticised those elements whom he regarded as unproductive, albeit in tones guaranteed not to excite too much anxiety on the part of the accused.<sup>2</sup>

However, while Owen clearly acknowledged the distinction between productive and unproductive labour, the boundaries of that difference were not particularly sharp. Claeys arguably over-emphasises the importance of Owen's critique of the so-called 'idle rich' elements of society. For example, in his 1820 'Report to the County of Lanark', Owen incorporated into his labour 'standard of value' not just the inputs of the 'productive labourers' but all 'the material contained in or consumed by the manufacture of [an] article [or commodity]'; in other words, capital, even if it was derived from unproductive, 'idle rich' sources, was itself a productive element in a labour

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<sup>1</sup> . 'Report to the Committee of the Association for the Relief of the Manufacturing and Labouring Poor, referred to the Committee of the House of Commons on the Poor Laws. March, 1817', and 'Report to the County of Lanark', in The Life, Vol. 1A, pp. 55, 268.

<sup>2</sup> . See G. Claeys, 'The Reaction to Popular Radicalism...', pp. 125-6.

standard of value.<sup>1</sup> The labour theory of value tended to be an inclusive rather than an exclusive concept in Owen's hands. For example, in contrast with some Owenites and co-operators in this period, and in agreement with economists like James Mill and John Stuart Mill, Owen argued that several, seemingly unlikely groups and classes, including 'Master...Agriculturists, Mechanics, and Manufacturers', constituted 'the industrious producers of abundance'.<sup>2</sup> Owen's reluctance to exclude such groups from his category of productive labour was, no doubt, partly the result of his perception of the productive role played by them - a view enhanced by his own experience at New Lanark - but also reflected his unwillingness to antagonise groups whose support he was relying on to help finance his co-operative community experiments.

With his views on the positive role played by capital within a labour theory of value, his insistence on the primacy of the latter, and his inclusion of master manufacturers within the productive labour category, Owen's

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1. 'Report to the County of Lanark', The Life, Vol. 1A, p.278. See also ibid., p.268, where Owen argued that 'The natural standard of value is...the combined...powers of men *called into action* [my emphasis]', i.e. 'called into action' by capital presumably. For Claeys, 'about this time [i.e. 1819] Owen began to imply publicly that there existed a class who did not work but who nonetheless accepted "that bread of idleness, which, if the State did justice to them or to itself, would never be claimed by any not naturally infirm except as the reward of useful industry". This was not, however, the idle poor, but the idle rich', Claeys, Machinery, p.43. However, Claeys' argument, which is based on Owen's 1819 'Address to the Master Manufacturers of Great Britain', is based on an erroneous interpretation of this text, for Owen was palpably referring to the 'offspring of the poor' as the recipients of 'that bread of idleness', not the idle rich; see 'Address to the Master Manufacturers', in G. Claeys, ed., The Works of Robert Owen, Vol.1 (London, 1993), p. 272.

2. 'Address to the Agriculturists, Mechanics, and Manufacturers, Both Masters and Operatives, of Great Britain and Ireland, 1827', in G. Claeys, ed. The Works of Robert Owen, Vol. 2 (London, 1993), pp. 105-6.

approach to value resembled that of the political economists who advocated a labour theory of value, and not simply in a methodological sense. Like those economists, however, Owen's labour theory of value<sup>1</sup> had already been compromised because both capital and labour formed the basis of value, and both capitalists (i.e. masters) and labourers were regarded as productive components of the definitive standard of value. Owen's invariable labour theory of value was undermined still further by difficulties in defining the nature of labour, and by the variable nature of Owen's framework for labour as an invariable standard of value in exchange.

Owen's first major defence of the definitive role of labour as a standard of value occurred in 1820 in his 'Report to the County of Lanark'. In this text Owen qualified his labour criterion, tacitly relegating 'mental' labour below 'manual' labour in a manner suggestive of the productive/unproductive labour debate: '[M]anual labour, properly directed, is the source of all wealth, [i.e. value] and of national prosperity'.<sup>2</sup> However, Owen was unable to sustain such a restricted definition of (productive) labour, noting that Britain's 'powers of production' had 'progressively increased' due to 'a rapid advancement in scientific [i.e. mental]

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<sup>1</sup> . For Owen, 'where there is inconsistency there must be error', 'Report to the County of Lanark', *The Life*, Vol. 1A, p. 281. Owen, like many proto-positivists in this period, was unwilling to broach any exceptions or qualifications to his laws. See also David McNally, *Against the Market*, p.117, who asserts that Owen's 'assumptions - that we can determine the value of an input of average labour, and that we can then ascertain the amount embodied in any commodity - enable Owen to skirt the crucial problems in the classical theory of value [my emphasis]', *ibid*. In fact, far from allowing Owen to 'skirt' problems associated with the classical theory of value, Owen's discourse in this context actually embroils him in those problems.

<sup>2</sup> . 'Report', *The Life*, Vol. 1A, p. 264.

improvements and arrangements', and 'That the direct effect of every addition to scientific, or mechanical and chemical power, is to increase wealth [and value]'.<sup>1</sup>

Later in the 'Report', in an effort to account for the role of 'mental power' in his labour equation, Owen modified his exclusively manual definition of labour as the model for value. Now, 'THE NATURAL STANDARD OF VALUE IS, IN PRINCIPLE, HUMAN LABOUR, OR THE COMBINED MANUAL AND **MENTAL** POWERS OF MEN CALLED INTO ACTION'. Owen had not abandoned his emphasis on the definitive role of manual labour, for when discussing the problems associated with utilising labour as a standard for value in exchange, given the necessarily unequal quality of the labour of different individuals, Owen insisted that it was possible to adopt labour as a measure of value on the basis that the 'average *physical* power of men' could be calculated, just like horse power.<sup>2</sup> Implicit within this return to a manual definition of labour is the suggestion that whilst the physical powers of workers were capable of being measured accurately, mental power or labour was not. Owen's desire to establish first principles was thus consistently thwarted by the inherent instability of the concept of 'labour'.

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<sup>1</sup> . *Ibid.*, pp. 264-5.

<sup>2</sup> . *Ibid.*, p.268. Owen's belief that the 'average physical power of men' could be readily calculated, and could therefore provide a sound foundation for an invariable labour form of exchange value, was at best optimistic. For example, there was only one form of horse power, but myriad forms of labour, not all of which were easily subsumed under the epithet of 'physical power of men'. Owen's argument here also provides an illustration of the power of scientism on metaphors.

Owen's inviolable labour standard of value was subject to further problems associated with his ideas on exchanging 'labour...for labour' or 'value for value', via some form of labour note as a representation of 'real' value, thereby avoiding the twin problems of exploitation of workers, and unemployment.<sup>1</sup> In his 1820 'Report to the County of Lanark', Owen argued that:

To make labour the standard of value it is necessary to ascertain the amount of it in all articles to be bought and sold. This is, in fact, already accomplished, and is denoted by what in commerce is technically termed "the prime cost", or the net value of the whole labour contained in any article of value, - the material contained in or consumed by the manufacturer of the article forming a part of the whole labour.<sup>2</sup>

There are several difficulties with this argument. First, Owen's assumption that one could readily estimate the labour content of a commodity is problematised by the difficulties involved in measuring the 'mental' labour component of that commodity, hence Owen's reliance on 'average physical power', itself unclear given the impossibly large range of labour that this crude concept was meant to represent or signify. The further supposition that the value of the labour content of a commodity is indicated by the dual category of 'prime cost' or 'net value' begs the question of 'cost' or 'value' in relation to what? Labour? Certainly Owen appeared to think so, despite the fact that it is clear that 'prime cost' is not simply a synonym for labour in exchange because of Owen's inclusion of a capital component in the concept of 'prime cost', i.e. 'the material contained in or consumed by the manufacturer of the article forming a part of the whole labour', i.e. '**capital**'. However, Owen, like James Mill and J.R.

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1. Report of the Select Committee on the Employment of the Poor in Ireland (London, 1823), p.98; 'Address to the Agriculturists, Mechanics', 1827, in G. Claeys, ed., The Works of Robert Owen, Vol. 2, p. 110.

2. 'Report', The Life, Vol. 1A, p. 278.



McCulloch problematically subsumed capital under the labour concept after 1824. Even without this complication, however, this is clearly an untenable, circular argument, for the value of labour cannot be signified by its 'net value' or 'prime cost', for the value of 'prime cost' or 'net value' is itself indeterminate, dependent on the value of the labour in it.

Like Malthus, Owen was certainly loath to admit that he was unable to sustain the concept of a 'real and unchanging' standard of value. For example, it is not surprising to find that when Owen embraced barter - a mechanism for exchange which did not rely on mythically invariable categories - Owen merely returned to the difficulties associated with variable 'prime cost' and 'labour': 'The genuine principle of barter was, to exchange the supposed prime cost, or value of labour in, one article, against the prime cost, or amount of labour contained in any other article'.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Owen argued in 1822 that:

This exchange... may be advantageously effected on the principle of estimating the value of commodities by the quantity of labour required for their production; the quantity, with reference to each article, being previously ascertained and mutually agreed upon and fixed for defined periods.<sup>2</sup>

Such debate on the question of the value of commodities represents an improvement on Owen's previous reliance on mythically invariable categories like 'prime cost'. However, it is clear that Owen has not strayed too far from his previous concerns. For example, a distinct quantity of labour is still seen to be inherent in a commodity, and merely has to be 'ascertained' to determine its value, even though that value has to be

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<sup>1</sup> . *Ibid.*, pp. 279, 278.

<sup>2</sup> . Robert Owen, 'Permanent Relief for the British Agricultural and Manufacturing Labourers, and the Irish Peasantry', 1822, in G. Claeys, ed., *The Works*, Vol. 1, p. 347.

subsequently agreed upon. Moreover, there is still a trace of the search for the invariable in this text, e.g. values are to be 'fixed for defined periods', but fixed in relation to what?

None of the components of Owen's value/exchange model were capable of fulfilling his desire for a category that might independently determine or reflect value. In part, Owen's failure to address these congenital weaknesses in the labour theory of value reflected the importance of the theory for the whole architecture of Owen's and Owenite discourse. If any imperfection in the labour theory of value was admitted, then the danger was that the rationale for a number of Owen's arguments might simply wither away, e.g. his criticism of the effects of competition. Finally, perhaps, in the context of Britain's burgeoning economic success, a major cause of which was a proportionately un-rewarded British labour force, there was a sense in which, for Owen, the labour theory of value did not need to be justified in a technical, or economic sense; labour was morally transcendental, and this was perhaps its greatest strength and the greatest weakness.

#### William Thompson and the Invariable Labour Theory of Value

Like Robert Owen, William Thompson was ostensibly an unequivocal advocate of a labour theory of value as the source and measure of both use and exchange value: 'Wealth is produced by labor: no other ingredient but labor makes any object of desire an object of wealth. Labor is the sole universal measure, as well as the characteristic

distinction, of wealth'.<sup>1</sup> However, as Esther Lowenthal has pointed out, 'It is true that [Thompson] asserts that labor creates and measures value...[but] he does not consistently hold to this view'.<sup>2</sup> For example, Thompson conceded that 'As an article must be an object of desire to be an article of wealth, and as these desires and preferences are apt to vary with circumstances...it is evidently impossible that the absolute quantity of labor can be any accurate index to these'.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding this and other important qualifications to Thompson's labour theory of value<sup>4</sup>, it is clear that Thompson, like Ricardo, still regarded labour as 'the best approximation to such a standard' of value: 'What is asserted, is, that in any given state of society, with any given desires, at any particular time, labor, employed with ordinary judgement on objects of desire, is the sole measure of their values; and under such circumstances, an accurate measure'.<sup>5</sup>

However, Thompson's ability to sustain the integrity of what was

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1 . William Thompson, An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness; applied to the Newly Proposed System of Voluntary Equality Of Wealth (London, 1824), p.6; see also ibid., p.269: 'Property, rightful property, is the creature of labor'.

2 . Esther Lowenthal, The Ricardian Socialists, p.43. Lowenthal also quite correctly asserted that 'There are more elements in [Thompson's] idea of value than he takes account of in his final formula', ibid., p.30. However, Lowenthal's notion of Thompson's 'final [value] formula' is either arbitrary or teleological, for such a conception presents significant, if not insuperable problems as to determination (e.g. 'final' in relation to what?).

3 . W. Thompson, Inquiry, p.15.

4 . Lowenthal noted other adulterations to Thompson's strictly labour theory of value, e.g. 'utility', 'scarcity' and the 'profits of capital', see ibid., pp. 30-33.

5 . W. Thompson, Inquiry, pp.16, 15.

already an alloy-like labour theory of value<sup>1</sup> was further jeopardised by problems associated with his conception of productive/unproductive labour.

Thompson outlined his criterion for productivity in 1824:

If then any man wishes to know whether he is a productive laborer, or a mere consumer, in the great field of national wealth, let him simply ask himself, "whether he produces anything of exchangeable value, during the day, the month, the year of his consumption, to the full amount at least of what he has consumed?" If he have produced nothing directly himself, has he by the making of tools, machines, &c., set productive laborers to work? or has he by any contrivances, by acting as a carrier or agent between the producers and consumers, by any means, enabled them, by concentrating their attention, to produce more than they would otherwise have done? If he have not been directly or indirectly instrumental to the production of as much or more than he has consumed of the tangible matter of wealth, he is not only useless but pernicious to society as the increase, nay the preservation, of the national wealth is concerned.<sup>2</sup>

This is a major statement containing important implications and problems for Thompson's labour theory of value and merits extensive analysis. Perhaps the first major problem with Thompson's conceptualisation of productive labour is the idea that labour - which was regarded by Thompson, with qualification, as the 'sole measure of the...value' of 'objects of desire'<sup>3</sup> - was itself only productive, that is, of value, when it produced or facilitated the production of anything of exchangeable value. Of course this is a circular argument, for Thompson had earlier argued that labour was also the source of all articles of wealth, including items of exchangeable value. By emphasising that labour was itself only productive or valuable when it produced items of exchangeable value, Thompson

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1 . For example, Thompson had accepted by 1827 that the ultimate mechanism for determining equivalents in exchange was 'barter' not labour. The attitude of Thompson to the concept of 'barter' is discussed later in this chapter, and in chapter one of this thesis

2 . W. Thompson, *Inquiry*, pp.202-3; see also *ibid.*, p. 195.

3 . *Ibid.*, p.15.

helped shift the locus of value determination from labour to exchange, thereby further undermining his labour criterion of value.<sup>1</sup>

A related difficulty centres on Thompson's argument that labour productivity is determined by the creation of articles of exchangeable value 'to the full amount at least of what [the labourer] has consumed'. The notion of exchange to the 'full amount' between production and consumption begs the question of how such equivalents were to be ascertained, i.e. how could the 'full amount' be established, and in what way? Gregory Claeys is partly correct when he concludes that 'against Owen's stress upon the equality of exchanges of labour for labour, Thompson's main concern [in his 1824 Inquiry]...was with "voluntary" rather than equal exchange' - voluntary exchange based on the 'subjective estimation of the utility of an article'.<sup>2</sup> For example, Thompson asserted in The Inquiry that 'The produce of no man's labor, nor the labor itself, nor any part of them, should be taken from the laborer, without an equivalent by HIM deemed satisfactory. The principle of voluntary exchanges admits

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1. William Stafford, Socialism, radicalism and nostalgia, p.214, has alluded to the 'circular reasoning' of Thompson's argument that labour was the 'sole parent of wealth' - 'wealth' tautologically defined as 'that portion of the...productions of nature' worked on by human labour. However, Stafford continues to maintain that Thompson's adherence to the labour theory of value was consistent and unproblematical; see, for example, ibid., p.228.

2. G. Claeys, Machinery, pp. 93, 94. Claeys does allude to Thompson's inheritance of 'Adam Smith's notion of productive and unproductive labour and the theory of equivalency [i.e. labour for labour] which it implied', ibid., p.95. However, Claeys clearly regards Thompson's emphasis on the voluntary and subjective basis of exchange as his principal argument on the subject at this time; see, for example, ibid., p.94 where Claeys reiterates Thompson's apparent rejection of Owen's formula of equivalency.

of no exception'.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the amounts produced and consumed by workers could be balanced and accounted for by voluntary exchange based on negotiation. This suggests that Thompson had moved some distance from labour as the measure of the exchangeable value of desirable objects - not least because the value of labour, in itself, was negotiable - thereby further weakening the Owenite/labour theory of value nexus.

However, in contrast to Claeys' main argument that Thompson held a primarily 'subjective' view of voluntary exchange in 1824, it is clear that Thompson had not entirely forsaken labour as the measure and basis for exchange; hence his comments in the Inquiry on the foundation of exchange in, and between, co-operative communities:

labor for labor, equal amounts for equal amounts; if no exact estimate can be found, mutual good faith will arrange, to the satisfaction of both parties, the apprehended amount of the labor to be exchanged as represented by the commodities...The exchanges...will be made on the basis of the presumed amount of the labor expended on the respective productions.<sup>2</sup>

Voluntary and subjective exchange was not, therefore, Thompson's main concern at this time, at least not in any simplistic sense, but rather such concerns complemented Thompson's views on the labour theory of exchange value. Moreover, whilst Thompson allowed that there was a subjective element involved in the estimation of the utility of any

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<sup>1</sup> . W. Thompson, Inquiry, p.78. See also W. Thompson, Labor Rewarded. The Claims of Labor and Capital Conciliated (London, 1827), p.52.

<sup>2</sup> . W. Thompson, Inquiry, p.526.

commodity<sup>1</sup>, this did not mean that this represented a sound and just basis for future exchanges. One reason for this was that such exchanges might facilitate the type of unfair exchange which Thompson was criticising, and attempting to distance himself from at this time, in his trenchant criticism of 'the inevitable evils of barter' or 'profit on exchanges'.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in emphasising labour as the basis for exchange, Thompson merely returned to the problems associated with that criterion - problems which he was clearly familiar with, i.e. the instability of labour as the value criterion - source and measure.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Thompson implicitly acknowledged in 1827 that labour could not provide perfect equivalents in exchange; indeed, that there were no perfect equivalents in exchange outside of the bartering that potentially constituted such equivalents.<sup>3</sup> Thompson also recognised in 1827 the differences in skills, capacities etc. between workers, and suggested that this might require a different scale of payment 'twice or thrice, above or below the remuneration of ordinary labour', thereby implying a different scale of value of labour. However, he also suggested that such differences were unjust, impractical, and also unnecessary under a system of co-operative equality of remuneration and

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1 . See *ibid.*, pp.55-6, where Thompson asserted that 'Who that is not acquainted with *all the circumstances* of both parties exchanging, with their moral and physical character, their previous supply, all their domestic and external arrangements and connexions, could possibly hazard an opinion as to the utility or inutility of any particular exchange in the case of any two individuals? From a hundred accidents, the exchange that may be useful to-day, may be useless or pernicious tomorrow'.

2 . *ibid.*, pp. 529, 526.

3 . W. Thompson, Labor Rewarded, pp. 16-17.

abundance for all.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Thompson also recognised that co-operative communities could not simply eradicate these differences, not least because these communities would be 'liable to the vicissitudes of similar rival establishments conducted by capitalists'.<sup>2</sup>

A further problem with Thompson's 1824 definition of productive/unproductive labour, and his labour theory of value, centres on a point in that text which appears to contravene its own value system. For Thompson, productive or valuable labour was initially defined by its capacity to produce exchangeable commodities to the value of what was consumed. However, Thompson also allowed that those who helped facilitate or increase production were also productive or of value.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in his 1827 book Labor Rewarded, Thompson rejected the mental/manual labour dichotomy, and the tacit idea that it was only manual labour that was productive of value. For Thompson, the maintenance of this distinction would have detrimental consequences and was also unsustainable. Not only was mental labour itself productive of use and exchange value, but the extent of that value was arrived at through barter or negotiated exchange, not because it was inherent in any particular category of labour:

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1 . Ibid., esp. pp.12-13, 26, 31.

2 . Ibid., p.89.

3 . W. Thompson, Inquiry, pp.202-3.



If you say that all exchanges of *physical* things, the articles of wealth, shall be left free as being easily appreciated, while the exchanges of *mental* things, imaginary values, the equivalents of priests, philosophers, jugglers, shall be regulated, you preserve to the acquirers of capital all their means of accumulation and influence, their dealings being in physical things; but you exclude from accumulation and influence *mental* labor, and thus overthrow the wishes of the 'Labourer' who would leave to mere capitalists no share of the national produce, because they produce with their own hands no wealth. If on the contrary you give freedom to the exchange of physical produce for mental or imaginary labor, and restrain the exchange of material things for material things, you promote perhaps the theory of the laborer, but at the expense of the physical comfort and security of the producer. You cannot abridge the exchanges and consequent accumulations of the capitalist without at the same time abridging all barter.<sup>1</sup>

The initial difficulty with Thompson's cogent arguments on the need for a more expansive conception of productive labour is that it actually undermines the category of productive labour itself. Under Thompson's model of productivity, a case could be reasonably made that most forms of activity - mental, manual, or a combination of both - were productive in some fashion. Moreover, Thompson's extended, if not elastic view of productive labour threatened to extinguish an important difference between co-operative discourse and that of political economy. Thompson's argument might support the idea of at least some capitalists as productive, or at least, still deserving of remuneration. Whilst such an outcome was arguably unavoidable given Thompson's apparent unwillingness to circumscribe certain forms of labour as productive, he clearly saw the dangers involved in not doing this. Hence Thompson's return to a more capricious definition of productive labour in 1826 in The Co-operative Magazine, when he decried the 'factors, carriers, wholesale and retail

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<sup>1</sup> . W. Thompson, Labor Rewarded, p.16; see also ibid., p.31, 'Whether then we refer to laborers of the same class, or to different species of laborers, there appears no just reason for difference of remuneration'.

dealers; those who contribute to your amusement by word, writing, or gesture' as 'classes, who are now preying upon...[the] labor' of productive labourers.<sup>1</sup>

Thompson was thus unable, and in some cases unwilling, to sustain the argument that labour was the ultimate invariable source and measure of value. Thompson, like Ricardo, retained the labour theory of value as the closest approximation to a stable measure, if not, source of value. Moreover, like Owen, Thompson continued to maintain the primacy of labour value as a sort of transcendental moral precept, even though that precept was often betrayed by the logic of some of Thompson's arguments. However, as Thompson conceded in the Inquiry, 'first principles....cannot...ensure mathematical certainty', though they might ensure one's arrival 'at that strong and overwhelming probability'.<sup>2</sup>

#### Owenites, Co-operators and the Invariable Labour Theory of Value.

Like Owen and Thompson, the co-operator John Gray was clearly a champion of the labour theory of value. In his major work on co-operative political economy, A Lecture on Human Happiness, first published in 1825, Gray affirmed his commitment to the labour principle, and provided a taxonomy of 'productive' 'occupations', as well as a criterion for determining whether or not an individual was productive:

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<sup>1</sup> . The Co-operative Magazine, November 1826, p.335; see also ibid., May 1826, p.140, where Thompson attacked 'landowners, capitalists, church-men, navy and army men, and all other classes living at comparative ease on the products of the labours of the industrious classes'.

<sup>2</sup> . W. Thompson, Inquiry, p.2.

Every necessary, convenience, and comfort of life, is obtained by human labour. 1st. By labour in cultivating the earth itself. 2d. By labour in preparing, making fit, and appropriating the produce of the earth to the uses of life. 3d. By labour in distributing the produce of both the former kinds of labour. These are the three grand occupations of life; to which may be added three others. The government or protection of society; the office of amusing and instructing mankind; and the medical profession. Every member of the community, who is not engaged in one of the two former classes of occupation is an UNPRODUCTIVE member of society. Every unproductive member of society is a DIRECT TAX upon the productive classes. Every unproductive member of society is also an USELESS member of society, unless he gives an EQUIVALENT for that which he consumes. These are truths so plain and so important, that they must be asserted to by every rational mind, which considers them for a moment.<sup>1</sup>

There are at least two major problems with Gray's formulation here, at least as regards the character of his labour theory of value, and his ability to sustain that theory. First, Gray's assertion that those workers involved in 'distributing the produce of both the former kinds of labour' were productive is at odds with his later, sardonic comments on one significant group of distributors - 'Shopkeepers and tradesmen retailing goods':

Certain it is, that these men are not unproductive, for never upon the face of the earth, was there anything half so productive of deception and falsehood, folly and extravagance, slavery of the corporeal, and prostitution of the intellectual faculties of man, as the present system of retail trade. In these particulars certainly, tradesmen are productive enough, but not so according to our former definition. And that they do not give to society an equivalent for that which they consume is certain.

Gray attacked not only the excess numbers of 'tradesmen retailing goods', for Gray argued that their numbers could be productively reduced by two-thirds<sup>2</sup>, but the productiveness of this type of labour itself: 'How much longer will mankind be so wilfully blind as not to know that all trades-

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<sup>1</sup> . John Gray, A Lecture on Human Happiness (Philadelphia, 1826), p.11.

<sup>2</sup> . Ibid., p.22.

people, from the merchant to the apple-woman, are mere *distributors of wealth, who are paid for their trouble by the labour of those who create it*.<sup>1</sup> However, 'retailing' is not simply a minor aberration which can safely be ignored, thereby preserving the consistency of Gray and other co-operator's productive/unproductive labour category. Rather, the 'retailing' example exemplifies the inability of Owenites and co-operators to establish a theoretical definition of 'productivity' on the basis of which all forms of labour could be evaluated. Certainly, it might be relatively easy for Owenites and co-operators to achieve a consensus on the unproductive nature of such peripheral figures in an economy as the aristocracy, the clergy et al. However, when it came to assessing more problematical, and more significant - both quantitatively and qualitatively - forms of 'labour' such as distribution, the inadequacies of the productive/unproductive labour category were exposed. Thus, there is an unresolved and enervating tension within Gray's labour theory of value; an antithesis between Gray's acceptance of the necessary, even productive role played by distributors, and their failure to measure up to Gray's ultimately arbitrary criterion of social utility or value.

A second, serious difficulty undermining Gray's labour theory of value centred on his criterion of productivity, i.e. one is productive, (that is, one's labour is of value), when one 'gives an equivalent for what one consumes'. For Gray, 'the propensity to exchange labour for labour...is the original principle, by which [man] is enabled to leave...all the brute creation'.<sup>2</sup> However, it is clear that such a form of exchange is

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<sup>1</sup> . Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> . Ibid., p.3.

unsustainable within Gray's economic model at this point.<sup>1</sup> The reason why this form of exchange was untenable is because - as Gray's ambivalence on the productivity of distributors suggests - there are serious, if not insuperable problems associated with Gray's attempts to define productive labour as a prerequisite for establishing labour equivalents. Such prerequisites were clearly necessary for, as Gregory Claeys has correctly noted, in relation to the money 'equivalents' proffered by the non-labouring wealthy: 'Though the wealthy gave money in return for the produce of others' labour, this was for Gray no real equivalent, and it is evident that it was only *labour* itself, actually performed - though this did not necessarily exclude mental labour - which could be considered as "equivalent" here'.<sup>2</sup> The problem for Gray was in actually defining, in any definitive or canonical sense, what productive '*labour*' itself was. In any case, as Gray freely admitted, the final arbiter in determining the nature of equivalents in exchange was not labour but barter.<sup>3</sup> Like Owen and Thompson, therefore, Gray retained and maintained his labour theory of value essentially as a moral precept in this period. As Claeys has suggested, 'the whole theory of productive labour was subordinate to Gray's notion of utility and its social context, and his conception of labour was in this sense constituted not economically but morally or socially'.<sup>4</sup> However, if one allows that Gray's labour theory was basically a moral theory, and this is certainly correct to some extent, there is still the substantively economic argument adopted by Gray to justify his moral principles. Its internal inconsistencies manifestly eroded Gray's ability to sustain the labour theory of value.

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<sup>1</sup> . Gray pledged to provide, 'In a future Lecture', a model of a new system of exchange 'on the basis of a national capital', see *ibid.*, p.59.

<sup>2</sup> . G. Claeys, *Machinery*, p.115.

<sup>3</sup> . J. Gray, *A Lecture*, p.3.

<sup>4</sup> . G. Claeys, *Machinery*, p.114.

Although Robert Owen incorporated a capital element into his theory of value, most Owenites and co-operators in this period, including Owen, tended to emphasise labour, more or less, as the exclusive origin and measure of value. The important though neglected head of the Owenite community at Orbiston, Abram Combe, was something of an exception to this rule, in that he argued that labour was not the exclusive basis of value. As Combe explained in his 1825 *Prospectus on Co-operative Joint Stock Companies*, 'Mankind have no means of honestly obtaining the necessaries and comforts of life, except by means of Land, Capital, or Labour'.<sup>1</sup> However, to the extent that he regarded 'Labour', rather than the other two categories, as the most worthy of 'serious consideration' - not least because 'the buyers and sellers of [labour]...are by far the most numerous body' and the most subject to 'deception and injustice'<sup>2</sup> - Combe was in sympathy with at least the priorities of other Owenites, even if he appeared to eschew support for an exclusively labour theory of value.

Moreover, following other Owenites, Combe produced an incipient model of unproductive labour, criticising 'Those individuals who act as distributors of food and clothing' for being 'greatly overpaid'. However, Combe was unable or unwilling to sustain even this nascent critique, arguing that 'every individual who receives money for his services may be called a labourer'.<sup>3</sup> For Combe, it was apparently money that conferred productive value on a labourer, not the other way round. At least this

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<sup>1</sup> . Abram Combe, *The Sphere for Jount Stock Companies: or the Way to Increase the Value of Land, Capital and Labour* (Edinburgh, 1825), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> . *Ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>3</sup> . *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 25.

position represented a means of transcending the difficulties faced by other Owenites concerning the boundaries of productive/unproductive labour. However, in drawing such conclusions Combe also helped to extinguish important differences between Owenism, co-operation and their chief critics, the political economists; hence Combe's complicity with 'capitalists' and the 'capitalist' paradigm, outlined in chapter one - a 'capitalist' paradigm sponsored by political economists like John Stuart Mill and others.

Most Owenite and co-operative journalism in this period tended to reflect the value theories and themes of the major Owenite and co-operative thinkers like Owen, Thompson et al., notably the labour theory of value and various models of what constituted productive labour. For example, George Mudie's The Economist was clearly an advocate of the labour theory of value, declaring in 1821 that 'the real and only power of production, beyond the spontaneous gifts of nature, is the labour of men'. Similarly, The New Harmony Gazette asserted in 1826 that 'the poor and working classes create all the wealth which the rich possess'.<sup>1</sup> A similar pattern emerged in the journalistic response of Owenites and co-operators to the issue of unproductive labour. For example, in 1821 The Economist defined 'retail traders' as 'unproductive labourers'; in 1823 The Political

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<sup>1</sup> . The Economist, 10 March 1821, p.103; The New Harmony Gazette, 8 February 1826, p.154. See also The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist, 11 January 1823, p.18; The Co-operative Magazine, January 1826, p.29; The Advocate of the Working Classes, 10 March 1827, p.68; The Orbiston Register, 14 February 1827, p.21. See also The Co-operative Magazine, June 1826, pp.178-9; July 1826, pp.214-215; September 1826, pp.294-295, where two correspondents, 'Hector Campbell' and 'C.E.' of 'Chertsey', championed the relative merits of corn and precious metals, respectively, as alternative standards of value, albeit under the abhorred 'competitive system'.

Economist and Universal Philanthropist ridiculed the notion - said to be advocated by the political economist, James Mill - that 'mere consumers' could ever function in an economically productive fashion.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, though not surprisingly, most of these endorsements of both the labour theory of value, and the related theory of productive labour, included only a cursory treatment in the co-operative press. Indeed, throughout this period there was often a conspicuous lack of systematic analysis of the labour theory of value within Owenite and co-operative circles. The reasons for this absence can only be speculated on. However, this was a period when Owenite and co-operative discourse was defined by a relatively small number of people, most of whom seemed to accept implicitly, without question, the notion that labour was the source, measure etc. of all value. This was still the case, even if that theory was subject to significant, largely unselfconscious, modifications and supplements, e.g. the productive labour category. In this sense, therefore, dissemination of this 'inalienable truth' was clearly more important to many Owenites and co-operators - some of whom were also suffering material hardship - than introspective ruminations on the nuances inherent in the labour theory of value.

George Mudie's journalistic output in this period was often an exception to this Owenite/co-operative trend, and provides an important window into the inability of what might be termed rank-and-file elements in the co-operative movement to sustain a labour theory of value. Perhaps

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<sup>1</sup> . The Economist, 4 August 1821, pp.31-2; The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist, 25 January 1823, pp.29-30. See also The Co-operative Magazine, January 1826, p.29; ibid., February 1826, p.63.



the major weakness in Mudie's labour theory of value is its modification by other factors like land. In 1823 Mudie had erroneously concluded that all non-Owenite political economists held the view that land, or a combination of land and labour, was 'the sole source of wealth'. In an obvious attempt to differentiate his discourse from the non-Owenite economists, or what he perceived to be the non-Owenite economists' position on the value issue, as well as in an endeavour to outline co-operative first principles on the value question, Mudie asserted that:

It is quite obvious that the Land is a *passive* Agent, while Labour, or Man, is an *active* Agent, in the production of all those constituents of Wealth which are essential to human sustenance, comfort, or luxury....The land, while in a state of nature, unquestionably produces, spontaneously, a certain quantity of organized vegetable and animal matter that is fit for the food of man. So very limited, however, is the supply thus spontaneously produced, that even in the richest countries of the New World, a few wandering tribes could with difficulty obtain a subsistence from extensive regions....[More importantly] Even the greater part of the constituents, or materials, of wealth, which the Land presents upon its surface or contains within its embrace, in its vegetable and mineral productions, cannot be considered as of any value to man, until man, ascertained that they are *convertible into Wealth*, has employed his labour in fashioning them into commodities or productions that are subservient to his wants or to his pleasures. It is only then that they become WEALTH [i.e. of value].<sup>1</sup>

By 1827, however, Mudie had essentially reversed his negative views on both the role of land as a productive source of value, and of landowners, qualifying his labour theory of value in the process:

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<sup>1</sup> . The Political Economist and Universal Philanthropist, 25 January 1823, pp.28-9, 35-36. See also ibid., p.43 for a similar emphasis.

It is from the land that the labourers produce all the wealth which they themselves consume...and, it is the wealth which is produced by labour, that the landowners, on their part, enjoy. It is therefore, clear and incontrovertible that the land-owners and the labourers are reciprocally serviceable to one another....the common enemies of the landowners and the labourers...[are] the active capitalists and unproductive consumers, who constitute a consuming power which already devours nearly all the products of labour, [and] which has already imperceptibly obtained their estates from many of the ancient land-owners.<sup>1</sup>

There is no clear reason for Mudie's change of mind on this issue, save perhaps that the initial rejection of land, land-owners and/or farmers was seen as precipitate by Mudie, especially if the landowner was a 'working' farmer. In this context, however, the significance of Mudie's change of mind concerning the productivity or otherwise of landowners is to reveal again the inability of the Owenite and co-operative discourse to secure a stable definition of 'productivity' as one important component of the labour theory of value.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter began by suggesting that the dominant historiography on the question of the relationship between Owenism, co-operation and the labour theory of value was essentially two-dimensional. That is, the Owenites and co-operators, or more problematically the 'Ricardian Socialists', are generally depicted as more or less slavish disciples or inheritors of the Ricardian labour theory of value. Less often, as with

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<sup>1</sup> . The Advocate of the Working Classes, 10 March 1827, p.68.

<sup>2</sup> . Such equivocation was not restricted to Mudie, however. For example, some contributors to the co-operative press agreed with Mudie's expanded concept of value; see, for example, The Orbiston Register, 14 February 1827, p.23, which regarded 'landed proprietors', 'Mechanics', and 'labourers' as the three main elements in society which were productive of value. Conversely, other co-operators clearly did not agree with this view, e.g. The Co-operative Magazine, January 1826, p.29, attacked 'farmers' along with several other employment categories, describing them as that one per cent of society whose 'comforts' were supplied exclusively by the 'working classes'.

aspects of Gregory Claeys' work, the Ricardian labour theory of value is seen as an important site of difference between the classical economists and the Owenites et al. This chapter has argued that there was an important third dimension to the relationship between the labour theory of value, classical political economy, and the Owenites and co-operators. Both the economists and the Owenites and co-operators shared a common adherence to the idea of an invariable labour theory of value, notwithstanding important differences in emphasis, and they also shared an inability to sustain that invariable principle. Leading political economy supporters of the labour theory of value, such as Ricardo, his supporters James Mill and J.R. McCulloch, and a leading critic of Ricardo, T.R. Malthus, all attempted to establish the idea of labour as an invariable centre around which the balance of their theoretical model could orbit. Unfortunately, as Ricardo admitted, this proved impossible, not least because of insurmountable problems over, for example, the differences in the durability of capital. These economists didn't abandon the labour theory of value, indeed they continued to support the idea in various forms, but it was no longer the pristine, definitive theory of value, impervious to outside influence.

For the Owenites and co-operators in this period, the labour theory of value was not simply a theory, but a morally transcendental theme, informing most elements of their social and economic policy, as well as their plans for future co-operative communities. The Owenite labour theory of value functioned best as a moral axiom, explaining contemporary inequalities, and promising a brighter future on the basis that it was natural justice to reward those who laboured to produce a society's wealth with the

full fruits of that wealth, though this might involve different remuneration outcomes for different Owenites.

In an analytical sense, however, the Owenite and co-operative labour theory of value was flawed. The invariable labour theory of value extolled by some though not all Owenites and co-operators in this period was invariably sullied by other elements, e.g. capital, utility, land. Moreover, the boundaries of the productive labour category which underpinned the labour theory of value - for labour was only the source of all value for the Owenites and co-operators when it was productive labour - was also unstable, e.g. the ambivalence exhibited by some co-operators about whether capitalists, distributors et al. were productive. For both Owenite, co-operative and political economists, therefore, the invariable, transcendental labour theory of value was essentially a myth; but it was a myth that was too powerful to disappear quickly, for the socialists at least, as an examination of the period from 1827 to 1835 will demonstrate.

## CHAPTER SIX

### OWENITES, CO-OPERATORS, SOCIALISTS AND THE INVARIABLE

#### LABOUR THEORY OF VALUE, 1827-1835

The relationship between Owenism, co-operation, socialists from at least 1827<sup>1</sup>, and the invariable labour theory of value from 1827 has been the subject of much historiographical attention, usually in the area of Owenite and co-operative labour exchanges. Unfortunately, the focus of these often pejorative and dismissive analyses is too narrow, and fails to do justice either to the significance or the complexity of the labour theory for the Owenites et al., or the reasons why Owenites et al. were unable to sustain it. For example, Noel Thompson has suggested that:

While one might sympathise with the ideal of stable values which accurately reflected utility and labour inputs and while one can appreciate the critical force of this attack upon the socially divisive and exploitative consequences of price formation under early industrial capitalism socialist suggestions that the market might be short-circuited in this way [i.e. labour exchanges] was culpably naive and manifestly impractical.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, George Lichtheim argued that:

It did not occur to [Robert Owen] that the economy might simply be operating in accordance with its built in principles. As he saw it, all the trouble was due to a simple failure to perceive that labor certificates were a better medium of exchange than gold and silver.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . See the introduction to this thesis for an examination of the public emergence of the 'socialist' neologism from 1827, and 'socialism' from 1835.

<sup>2</sup> . Noel Thompson, The Market and Its Critics: Socialist Political Economy in Nineteenth Century Britain (London, 1988), p.92.

<sup>3</sup> . George Lichtheim, The Origins of Socialism (London, 1969), p.119. See the following for similar emphases: R.G. Garnett, Co-operation and the Owenite socialist communities in Britain 1825-45 (Manchester, 1972), p.142; G. Claeys, Machinery, Money and the Millennium: From Moral Economy to Socialism, 1815-60 (Cambridge, 1987), p.139.

The analyses of this topic by Harrison, McNally, and Nagai represent a qualitative and quantitative improvement on the studies of Noel Thompson et al., but still fall far short of a substantive examination of the relationship between Owenism, co-operation and the labour theory of value, that is, beyond the area of labour exchanges. For example, McNally provides only a cursory exploration of the complex issue of productive versus unproductive labour, whilst all three historians ignore the question of 'real value', a crucial concept in the co-operative labour theory of value, and explored later in this chapter.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to this often superficial historiographical approach, this chapter will initially focus on the continuing support of the labour theory of value by Owenites, co-operators and socialists - a support which signified a divergence between Owenites et al. and the political economists in this period as the economists largely abandoned the labour theory of value. The manifold factors underlying the inability of Owenites et al. to sustain this theory will then be explored.

Throughout this period of rapid expansion, dissemination and, by 1835, relative decline for Owenite, co-operative and socialist discourses, support for the labour theory of value remained undiminished. For example, in 1828 The Co-operative Magazine asserted that 'Labour is the source of wealth'. Similarly, in 1829, at the second quarterly meeting of The Society for the Promotion of Co-operative Knowledge (BAPCK), co-operators claimed that it was impossible to create any wealth without

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<sup>1</sup> . See David McNally, Against the Market - Political Economy, Market Socialism and the Marxist Critique (London, 1993), pp. 116, 133-8; J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America (London, 1969), pp.201-7; Yoshio Nagai, "'Co-operation" and Socialism in Robert Owen', in Chushichi Tsuzuki, ed., Robert Owen and the World of Co-operation (Tokyo, 1992), pp.70-2.

'labour'. Loyalty to the labour axiom was also clearly evident in the 1830s, as when in 1830 The Belfast Co-operative Advocate declared that 'Labour is the source of all wealth, and consequently the working classes have created all wealth'. In like manner, The Lancashire Co-operator insisted in 1831 that 'There can be no Wealth without labour'; whilst in 1835 The New Moral World contended that 'all wealth [and value] is produced by human labour'.<sup>1</sup>

However, as in the preceding period, whilst Owenites and co-operators continued to espouse the principle that labour was the source, standard and measure of all value, they were unable to sustain that tenet as a central organising principle due to significant problems in at least three main areas. The first of these concerned ongoing attempts to define the parameters dividing productive from unproductive labour. This took at least three problematic forms, including inconsistent or ambiguous attacks on a variety of professions and activities; less frequent and more generic attempts to provide a formula for determining productivity; and finally, significant ambivalence about the productive or non-productive nature of

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<sup>1</sup> . The Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald, January 1828, p.16; Report of the Proceedings at the Second Quarterly Meeting of the Society for the Promotion of Co-operative Knowledge, October 8th 1829 (London, 1829), p.20; The Belfast Co-operative Advocate, January 1830, p.24; The Lancashire Co-operator, 25 June 1831, p.1; The New Moral World, 11 July 1835, p.295. See also Words of Wisdom Addressed to the Working Classes...Laws of the First Armagh Co-operative Society (Armagh, 1830), p.3; Report of the Proceedings at the Third Quarterly Meeting of the British Association for the Promotion of Co-operative Knowledge (London, 1830), p.3; Principles, Object, and Laws, of the First Salford Co-operative Society (Manchester, 1831), p.3; The Political Magazine, September 1831, p.21; Proceedings of the Third Co-operative Congress (London, 1832), p.26; The Pioneer, 30 November 1833, p.98.

work done by women, both within and outside of the home.<sup>1</sup> Collectively these problems added up to an inability to define 'productive labour', thereby helping to undermine any claims that labour might have to a unique and central status, and also extinguishing important differences between the socialist and economist discourses.

The second problematic area undermining Owenite and co-operative attempts to establish a transcendental labour theory of value centred on problems relating to the nature of the 'real value' created by labour. For the most part Owenites and co-operators appeared content to assume a tacit consensus on the nature of 'real wealth' in this period. However, on the odd occasion when it was defined or discussed openly, it appeared to correspond to such seemingly homogeneous, tangible and utilitarian items as 'food, clothes and houses'. The importance of the concept of 'real wealth' for the socialist labour theory of value was that whilst productive labour was said to create all wealth or value, it was 'real wealth' which helped define productive labour, albeit, not exclusively, i.e. 'productive labour' and 'real wealth' were to some extent mutually defining.

Throughout this period, therefore, Owenites and co-operators attacked existing mediums of exchange for failing to reflect 'real value', a 'real value' that would only, and could only, be reflected in socialist 'labour

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<sup>1</sup> . Barbara Taylor's Eve and the New Jerusalem (London, 1983), esp. pp.83-117, has addressed many of these issues. However, because Ms. Taylor's study is not primarily concerned with 'economic' issues, (for example, there is no reference to the labour theory of value in the index to Ms. Taylor's book), it doesn't analyse the implications of Owenite and co-operative ambiguity over the productivity of work done by women for the Owenite and co-operative labour theory of value. Thus, some of the material covered by Ms. Taylor's pioneering study bears some recapitulation and further development here.



notes'. However, the major difficulty with 'real wealth' or 'value' is that whilst it might invite an initial, fuzzy unanimity, for few would disagree that clothes etc. are essential items of universal value, the concept ultimately amounted to little more than a truism and/or a solipsism. In other words, the notion of 'real wealth' or 'value' was an individual, even arbitrary definition of use value - much like the 'productive' epithet attached to labour in fact. Therefore the concept of 'real wealth' necessarily failed to provide an unchanging, transcendental basis for the new labour standard and medium of value and exchange.

The third set of problems besetting Owenite and co-operative attempts to establish a transcendental labour theory of value were related to the second, but more directly in the area of exchange. In attempting to define the new labour standard or medium of value in exchange, Owenites and co-operators argued that the new labour note medium had first to increase or decrease as 'real wealth' did; and second, had to be unchanging. However, the idea that socialist 'labour notes' would simply reflect, unchangingly, the increase or decrease of 'real' 'use' value or wealth was based on the erroneous premise that 'real wealth' itself constituted the unproblematic and unchanging source of value determination. Owenites and co-operators attempted to eliminate any implicit ambiguity or uncertainty relating to 'real wealth' as the basis for exchange via a formula that stated that the 'intrinsic value' of an item was to be determined by the quantifiable labour time taken to produce it. However, as several Owenites acknowledged, attempts to quantify what was an inherently heterogeneous phenomenon like labour were at best problematic, e.g. Owenites and co-operators were unable to provide a

criterion for demarcating works of genius from more humble forms of activity. Moreover, as numerous historians have recognised, Owenite and co-operative plans to establish a new labour currency on the basis of labour time, and thus circumvent market prices - the latter a key site of difference between Owenites, co-operators et al. and their political economist opponents - was compromised by the fact that co-operative labour notes were invariably tied to prevailing market price values.<sup>1</sup>

Another problem area in Owenite and co-operative exchange concerned difficulties related to 'evaluation'. First, the basis for socialist exchange was ostensibly 'labour for labour'. However, this formula was subject to enough modification for there not to be any sense in which Owenites and co-operators could continue to maintain that it was unadulterated labour that constituted the basis for exchange. There were also enormous problems with evaluating items of exchange within Owenite and co-operative exchanges and Bazaars - problems which again thwarted any attempts at retaining a homogeneous and transcendental notion of labour. There were allegedly three different types of buyers and sellers in Owenite and co-operative exchanges, not all of whom were able to benefit from economies of scale; as a result of this not all items exchanged at these labour exchanges were evaluated on the same labour scale, i.e. there was not one invariable standard of labour but several. Work done by women, and particularly that which was submitted for exchange at Owenite and co-operative establishments, was also subject to non-labour-based evaluations. Items produced by women were also significantly undervalued in relation to work done by males, (though the latter was itself subject to

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<sup>1</sup> . See generally, J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen, pp.205-7; David McNally, Against the Market, pp.133-38.

significant variations in evaluation), thereby further vitiating the pristine image of the socialist labour theory of value. Finally, Robert Owen's concept of 'prime cost' as the most appropriate basis for exchange also emerged again at this time, with all the concomitant difficulties that that entailed for a transcendental labour theory of value, i.e. labour was not the only ingredient that constituted the basis for exchange.

Owenism, Co-operation, Socialists, the Labour Theory of Value and the Productive/Unproductive Labour Dichotomy

The Owenite and co-operative concept of 'productive labour' continued to be a Pandora's box of discrepancies and ambiguities from 1827, a melange which helped to deprive them of a stable and invariable definition of 'productivity', thereby weakening the standing of their central organising principle, the labour theory of value. The initial area where such instability emerged was in the myriad discussions on the productivity, or otherwise, of individual and/or collective professions and activities. As chapter five has suggested, it was relatively easy to achieve a consensus amongst co-operators about the unproductive nature of such economically marginal figures as the Monarch and the higher echelons of the clergy, amongst others. However, when discussing the productive merits of distributors, master manufacturers, artists, teachers et al., or the unproductive nature of 'non-producing consumers', (as some of the more significant areas for debate on this question, in quantitative and qualitative terms), agreement proved more elusive.

Distributors, and shopkeepers especially, were prime targets of the numerous attacks on unproductive labour by Owenites and co-operators in

this period. These categories ostensibly formed one of the central pillars in the socialist definition of productive labour, albeit negatively, i.e. productive labour was not synonymous with distribution. For example, The Co-operative Magazine in 1828 asserted that 'The class of distributors must indeed be annihilated'; similarly, The Crisis in 1832 declared that 'In the front rank of non-producers stand - shopkeepers. A very respectable, though, as the issue will prove, a really useless class of individuals'.<sup>1</sup> Shopkeepers and distributors were ostensibly an 'easy target' for these attacks, because their defining function relied on the 'productive' activities of others, and they didn't produce items for exchange at the socialist Bazaars. However, as several Owenites and co-operators acknowledged, this group was also not entirely useless, dispensable or lacking in 'value'. Certainly this was the view of The Political Magazine, a journal much admired by Robert Owen<sup>2</sup>, which in 1831 argued that:

The distributors [i.e. one of the two classes; the other being the 'producers'] do not in any degree augment or multiply the wealth of the community; but they are, nevertheless, necessary, for the purpose of facilitating the interchange of commodities among those by whom they are produced.<sup>3</sup>

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1 . The Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald, January 1828, p.12; The Crisis, 22 September 1832, p.114. See also The Weekly Free Press, 28 March 1829; ibid., 25 April 1829; ibid., 15 August 1829; The Birmingham Co-operative Herald, 1 January 1830, p.38; The Weekly Free Press and Co-operative Journal, 16 January 1830.

2 . The Political Magazine was edited by William Carpenter whose reputation as a co-operator appeared somewhat tarnished at the Third Co-operative Congress in 1832, when 'Mr. Hirst, a Delegate from Huddersfield...[asserted that] Mr. Carpenter deserted us'. However, at the same Congress, the co-operative credentials of The Political Magazine remained undiminished for it was 'a work highly eulogised by Mr. Owen'. See Proceedings of the Third Co-operative Congress, pp. 35-40.

3 . The Political Magazine, September 1831, p.21.

Similarly, The Crisis and The Bee in 1832 described 'Shopkeepers and retail dealers' as 'Necessary, but too numerous'.<sup>1</sup> This raises a different and more complex point, i.e. a proper minimum of shopkeepers et al. However, in the sense that distribution etc. could not be simply dismissed as an area of non-value, or anti-value, then distribution did not represent a stable site upon which co-operators could base their definition of productive labour or, more accurately, what was not productive.

A similarly ambivalent pattern emerged in Owenite and co-operative discussion of the productive nature of 'Master Manufacturers', an ambiguous term which might correspond to either a 'Capitalist', or direct, hands-on management of the manufacturing process, or often both. Evidence of debates in this area is relatively sketchy compared to the discussions on distributors. However, it is clear that for some socialists at least, 'Master Manufacturers' were an unproductive, exploitative, and useless class of individuals. For example, G.C. Penn, writing in The Weekly Free Press in 1829, posed the question:

Labourers of Britain, are you mad? Are you really sunk into the lowest depths of ignorance, of apathy? You seem content to give away eight millions of pounds sterling every year to those who supply you with commodities in exchange for your hard-earned wages; and every year you allow master manufacturers...&c. to gain about 126 millions more by the sale of what you have made.... You ought to...manufacture and sell for yourselves....for, as these idlers or non-producers cannot produce anything for themselves, they must go to you for the articles they require, as they are so helpless that they cannot produce food, clothing, furniture, or habitations for themselves.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . The Crisis, 17 May 1832, p.47; The Bee, 22 December 1832, p.2.

<sup>2</sup> . The Weekly Free Press, 25 April 1829; see also ibid., 28 March 1829.

Penn's rhetoric implies an almost iron certainty concerning the unproductive, and therefore value-less nature of master manufacturers (i.e. to believe that master manufacturers were productive or of value was madness). This was not a view shared by all socialists in this period. As chapter five has argued, Robert Owen, himself a master manufacturer at New Lanark, had been reluctant to dismiss master manufacturers as unproductive in the period to 1827. This reluctance continued after that time because Owen, not unnaturally, continued to regard master manufacturers as productive, and was also anxious not to alienate a potential source of capital for community experiments, hence his comments in The Pioneer in 1834:

You [i.e. the editors of the Journal] have drawn a line of opposition of feelings and interests between the employers [e.g. master manufacturers] and the employed in the production of wealth, which if it were continued, would tend to delay the progress of the great [co-operative] cause, and to injure those noble principles which you are so desirous of seeing carried into practice.<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, in 1833 The Pioneer had acknowledged the productive nature of the manufacturers via the following catechism, a technique much favoured by the early socialists:

Q.- How is society divided?

A.- Into agriculturists, manufacturers, governors and idlers.

Q.- How are the various wants of society supplied?

A.- The agriculturist by his labor supplies the articles of food, and the manufacturers by their labour supply raiment, houses, and the conveniences of life.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . The Pioneer, 11 January 1834, p.149.

<sup>2</sup> . The Pioneer, 5 October 1833, p.38. See also ibid., 10 May 1834, p.337, where The Pioneer revealed another ironic rationale for the retention of 'masters' within the 'productive' or 'valuable' taxonomy of employment: 'It is mischievous to teach the people that they are wiser than their masters; it is not only false, but it has a tendency to destroy the stimulus to useful exertion.... There must always be distinctions analogous to those which exist: there must be genius to direct and invent and the mechanic to execute'.

In similar fashion The Bee in 1832, and The Crisis in 1834 reluctantly concurred with Owen's assessment of the value of master manufacturers, arguing that 'Capitalists [e.g. Master Manufacturers] in manufacturing and mechanical operations...in clothing, &c....in building and engineering...Ship builders and ship owners', were a 'Necessary...but too numerous...Second Class'.<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly The Pioneer's 1833 conception of the manufacturer was as an active, productive 'manufacturer', and not simply a parasitic master or capitalist. This emphasis may also explain why The Bee and The Crisis demoted capitalist manufacturers to the 'second class' below the problematic 'first class' of 'The labouring population', i.e. the idea that master manufacturers were not necessarily directly productive.<sup>2</sup> However, as the example of Robert Owen suggests, it was not a simple exercise to separate the productive from the unproductive aspects of master manufacturers; nor in the case of Owen et al. was it necessarily a desirable exercise. Like distribution, therefore, master manufacturing was a precarious, ambiguous area in relation to the Owenite and co-operator's labour theory of value.

The question of the productivity, or otherwise, of teachers, artists et al. was not discussed as a significant issue within socialist discourse in this period, but it was nevertheless important because it again brought into question the criterion of productivity that had been the basis for socialist criticism of distributors and master manufacturers. Moreover, it recalled the manual/mental view of the productive/unproductive labour dichotomy that had been rejected by William Thompson in 1827. For The Pioneer in 1833, 'teachers, writers, physicians, [and] artists' were 'not considered as directly

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<sup>1</sup> . The Bee, 22 December 1832, p.2; The Crisis, 17 May 1834, p.47.

<sup>2</sup> . Ibid.

productive'. Yet, in The Bee in 1832, and The Crisis in 1834, 'Artists, sculptors &c.' were regarded as part of the 'First Class' of society, 'The Labouring Population', 'Producers of all Wealth'. Moreover, teachers in Universities and schools were seen as 'Indispensable and eminently useful'.<sup>1</sup>

What is perhaps most significant in this context about The Pioneer's categorisation of teachers et al. is that there was the implication that teachers might be indirectly productive. Similarly equivocal were the taxonomies of productivity provided by The Bee and The Crisis. Thus, whilst artists, sculptors and teachers were all regarded as productive or useful, the artists and sculptors were placed in the first class of society, presumably because they might be productive of items for exchange, whilst teachers et al. were put into the fourth class, only just above the fifth and last class which comprised 'the most wealthy and least useful'.<sup>2</sup>

What such tensions reveal is that Owenites and co-operators were unable and unwilling to sustain an exclusively materialist, manual conception of productivity, a conception which would necessarily exclude mental labour.<sup>3</sup> However, the socialists also appeared unable or reluctant to maintain a more expansive definition of productive labour in this period - a definition that might embrace manual and mental labour; hence the

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<sup>1</sup> . The Pioneer, 8 February 1834, p.189; The Bee, 22 December 1832, p.2; The Crisis, 17 May 1834, p.47.

<sup>2</sup> . Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> . For example, the adoption by socialists of an exclusively manual definition of productivity may have ironically entailed the devaluation of the defining work of William Thompson, a thinker who was an avowed member of the 'idle classes'. See W. Thompson, Labour Rewarded (London, 1827), title page.



effective demotion of teachers et al. within the hierarchical models of productivity supplied by The Bee and The Crisis. Therefore, neither manual nor mental labour, nor a combination of both, could provide a fixed point or definition for the socialist's concept of 'productive labour' in this period.

Attacks on 'non-producing consumers' and the allegedly 'unproductive' labour that was employed in satisfying their 'artificial wants' were commonplace in socialist journalism in this period. For example, The Free Enquirer in 1829 argued that 'with the aid of machinery, two hours of [useful] labour from each would ensure abundance for all'. Yet this scheme was thwarted by 'the large proportion of **non-producing consumers**, in the form of priests, lawyers, soldiers, merchants, traders, bankers, brokers, capitalists, to say nothing of fine gentlemen and ladies [my emphasis]'.<sup>1</sup> The main problem with this argument, which depicts a world divided into producers contra consumers, is the inability to demarcate the nature of and the actual boundaries between production and consumption, and therefore to define 'productive labour' in opposition to consumers or consumption. As The Co-operative Magazine asserted in 1828:

Society consists of three orders:- first, producers; second, distributors; third, consumers. And their definition is first, the producers or working people; second, distributors or salespeople, from the pedlar to the merchant; third, consumers, being all the persons unconnected with the two former. [However] each class must of a certainty be consumers, but it is by no means an easy task to define them in a more comprehensive manner.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . The Free Enquirer, 1 April 1829, p.183. See also The Crisis, 28 April 1832, p.15; Proceedings...of the First Salford Co-operative Society, p.8.

<sup>2</sup> . The Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald, January 1828, p.12.

William Thompson offered a more substantive critique of 'artificial wants' (and by implication the labour undertaken to satisfy them) in 1830 when, in responding to the objection that 'Co-operative industry would deprive many individuals of comforts, called luxuries, such as riding horses...handsome furniture, carpets, couches...and such like', he argued that:

The possession of most of the articles is not now sought for on account of their direct pleasures, which their use or enjoyment confers...whichever of these articles afforded pleasure in the use, whether immediate or lasting for many years, more than to counterbalance the time and effort to produce them or their equivalents in exchange, would be produced, for the equal use of all, in a co-operative community. The fictitious longing for useless conveniences or elegancies, would as shortly and easily be cured as the longing of children for play-things in the moon, when such longings come to be looked upon with pity as indicating imbecility of mind instead of respect.<sup>1</sup>

For Thompson, therefore, luxury or items based on 'artificial' wants appear to be defined by the sense in which they were not 'sought for on account of their direct pleasures'. Thus, such 'luxury' items as 'handsome furniture', should they be productive of 'direct pleasure', enough to 'more than to counterbalance the time and effort necessary to produce them' etc., would be made available in co-operative communities. Yet, for Thompson, the latter outcome was unlikely and undesirable because 'the longing for...conveniences or elegancies' is essentially a 'fictitious' desire for 'useless' items.

The initial difficulty with this formulation is that Thompson's definition of luxury is ambiguous, given that direct or indirect pleasure may not be effects that are mutually exclusive. Moreover, the important issue of who is

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<sup>1</sup> . The Weekly Free Press and Co-operative Journal, 1 May 1830, p.23.

to determine whether the pleasure is direct or not is eschewed because Thompson arbitrarily assumes that luxury items, by definition, are not acquired for the purposes of direct pleasure. In addition, Thompson's conclusion that such luxury items are necessarily 'useless' is not only an individual prescription of their value, rather than a universal truth, but is also at odds with his assertion that they cease to be luxury items, in the pejorative sense, if they produce (problematically) direct pleasure, etc. Finally, Thompson's assertion that the desire for so-called luxury items is a fiction is not only betrayed by his rationale for the discussion of the issue, but is also an individual opinion, not necessarily representative of other co-operators and Owenites.<sup>1</sup> Thus, like distributors, master manufacturers and teachers et al., consumers, consumption, luxury items and artificial wants proved to be an indeterminate and inadequate basis upon which to define what productive labour was not.

In addition to the profession or activity-specific attempts to determine what uniquely defined productive labour, Owenites and co-operators provided a more generic recipe or blueprint for 'productivity'. However, as the following examples will illustrate, 'productivity' proved hardly less evasive a term to capture here than it had been elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> . See, for example, The Magazine of Useful Knowledge and Co-operative Miscellany, 15 October 1830, pp.17-18, 'Wealth does not mean only money and trading capital - it includes also all the supports of life and luxury...whatever does conduce or can be made to conduce to the satisfaction of our natural wants or wishes'. See also Principles...First Salford Co-operative Society, p.12 for a similar argument. Unfortunately, Gregory Claeys' analysis of Thompson's qualitatively significant critique of luxury items, mainly in The Weekly Free Press, does little more than replicate Thompson's own problematic conception of 'luxury'; see G. Claeys, Machinery, Money and the Millennium: From Moral Economy to Socialism, 1815-60 (Oxford, 1987), pp.103-106.

Thus, in 1830, William Pare, Corresponding Secretary to the Birmingham Co-operative Society, whilst lecturing on the pernicious effects of competition, referred to 'the great majority of mankind - those who have something to do in getting their own living', as victims of that competitive system. For Pare, virtually everyone had something to do in 'getting their own living' - including presumably, capitalists who also laboured in a manual sense - and were therefore productive in some sense, save 'those who have a fixed money income'.<sup>1</sup> However, Pare may have been unable to sustain the one exception to his already bloated rule of productivity, for to exclude those on 'a fixed money income' would have meant the possible exile of William Thompson from the productive fold, for as Thompson confessed in his 1827 book, Labor Rewarded, he had been 'living on...rent' for 'the last twelve years'.<sup>2</sup> As an acolyte of Thompson, and executor of his estate, Pare would no doubt have made an exception of Thompson, and refused to relegate him to the sphere of unproductive labour.<sup>3</sup> Such exceptions could hardly be justified without undermining the defining differences of productive labour contra unproductive labour, and with it any semblance of significance that may have been attached to the productive appellation, for all might now be deemed productive.

In sardonically reiterating the socialist attack on distributors et al., The Free Enquirer in 1830 attempted to resolve the issue of what

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<sup>1</sup> . Magazine of Useful Knowledge and Co-operative Miscellany, 15 October 1830, pp.18-20.

<sup>2</sup> . William Thompson, Labor Rewarded, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> . For evidence of the esteem that Thompson's work was held in by Pare, see Pare's preface to William Thompson's Inquiry into the Distribution of Wealth (London, 1850).

constituted productive labour by posing two questions as the key criteria for determining productivity:

We are told...that the lawyer, and the banker, and the speculating trader, and the lounging shopman shaking forth silks and broadcloths and suing the passenger to buy what he does not want, are all earning their living by their labor. And so they are, and so is the pick-pocket and the mail-robber... **But the question is what is their labor worth? Does it add to the Nations' stock of wealth or comfort?** [my emphasis]<sup>1</sup>

The main difficulty with this formulation is that it is an untenable and circular basis for determining what constitutes productive labour. To determine whether someone is productively employed or not, one poses the question of what that labour is worth. However, one cannot ask the question of what that labour is worth (deferring the problematic issues of what constitutes the appropriate measures, standards etc. for deciding that worth), without having some clear and stable conception of what constitutes productive labour in the first place. Thus, in the above model, the labour of pickpockets et al. may be productive of some worth, as measured in a metallic or paper currency, for example, and yet still be considered unproductive because the (arbitrary) determination of their productivity comes (teleologically) before the determination of their 'worth'.

Similarly ill-conceived was a model of productivity provided by the First Salford Co-operative Society in 1831:

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<sup>1</sup> . The Free Enquirer, 16 October 1830, p.404.

Let them, [i.e. the 'non-productive, conning classes of society'] or any one who wants to know the title he has to food and raiment, ask himself what have I done for this? - Have I produced anything myself; or have I made any return to those who have fed and clothed me? If his soul answer nay, and there he cannot be deceived, then he is found a sleeping and a wanting member in the scale of God's creation.<sup>1</sup>

The major problem with this conception of productivity is the same as that facing William Thompson's formula for productivity in the previous period; namely, that the productivity of labour is determined in exchange, rather than reflected in exchange, ergo, labour is displaced as the unique site of value determination. Thus, Owenites and co-operators were evidently unable to establish a more generic formula for the determination of what constituted productive labour, a lack compounded by the problems surrounding the issue of work done by women.

Owenite and co-operative ambivalence concerning the productive or unproductive character of work done by women falls into two separate but interconnected spheres: in and outside the home. Such equivocation is important in this context because it illustrates, yet again, the inability of the socialists to provide a fixed definition of the essence of 'productivity' as a key element in their labour imperative of value. Within the home, work undertaken by women was often disparaged by Owenites and co-operators

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<sup>1</sup> . Principles...First Salford Co-operative Society, p.7. See also The Herald to the Trades' Advocate, and Co-operative Journal, 1 January 1831, p.226, which, in a manner suggestive of the problems facing the Owenites and co-operators in their attempts to provide a generic recipe for determining productivity, eschewed any attempt to locate productivity in any one formula, profession or activity. See also The People's Conservative and Trade Union Gazette, 15 February 1834, p.10, which problematically argued that the test of whether labour is productive, or not, depended on whether the death of an individual, group or profession would be accompanied by any 'good'. Owenite and co-operative attempts to define productive labour were hardly advanced by such arbitrary criteria.

as 'unproductive'. As Barbara Taylor has noted, 'The abolition of private housework...was a central concern of all Owenite community planners. Nine tenths of women's time, [William] Thompson calculated [in 1830], was taken up with this "unproductive and repulsive drudgery"'.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as William Thompson and others suggested, 'The strength of women is quite adequate to perform more than half the employments, now pursued exclusively by men'.<sup>2</sup> The implication was therefore clear: for women to be considered 'productive' by male Owenites, co-operators or socialists, they had to become employed in a productive, i.e. non-household, occupation.<sup>3</sup> Having accomplished this much, 'the industrious female' would then be 'well entitled to the same amount of remuneration as the industrious male', as The Pioneer put it in 1834.<sup>4</sup>

There are several major difficulties with the first part of this formulation which relates to the allegedly unproductive work done by

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1. Barbara Taylor, Eve, p.50. See also a letter from the co-operator James Tucker, The Weekly Free Press and Co-operative Journal, 16 January 1830, where he suggests that women's labour is 'very valuable' but that it must be 'abstracted from domestic duties'. Taylor avoids discussion of some of the more difficult issues surrounding the broader concept of 'productive labour', rather she describes some of the problematic Owenite definitions of 'unproductive labour defined as including capitalists, lawyers, priests, shopmen, clerks, household servants, workmen's wives'; see Eve, p.52.
  2. William Thompson, Practical Directions for the Speedy and Economical Establishment of Communities on the Principles of Mutual Co-operation, United Possessions and Equality of Exertions and of the Means of Enjoyments, (London, 1830), p.3; see also James Tucker's letter, The Weekly Free Press, 16 January 1830.
  3. Thus begins a long tradition in socialist discourse that equates the 'emancipation' of women with their entry into social production. See, for example, Friedrich Engels, The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State (London, 1985).
  4. The Pioneer, 12 April 1834, p.293.

women in the home.<sup>1</sup> This initial problem centres on Thompson's argument, or rather assertion, that nine tenths of the work done by women within the home is unproductive. Not only is the quantification of women's productivity arbitrary, but such a quantification suggests that the target for Thompson's criticism is not the unproductive nature of work done by women in the home, for clearly such work (which included child rearing etc.) had a utilitarian value for Thompson<sup>2</sup>, but its inefficiency. Moreover, Thompson's argument relies on an unproblematic definition of 'productivity' where, as this chapter has argued, none really existed.

More importantly, however, Thompson's argument appears to conflict implicitly with some of the criteria adopted by co-operative exchanges for determining what could legitimately constitute a basis for value in exchange. For example, the co-operator B. Warden, in his 1832 pamphlet entitled Rewards of Industry, asserted that 'Work may be done by painters, carpenters, coopers, builders, &c. and be paid in labour - notes'.<sup>3</sup> In other words, service industries as well industry productive of items for exchange were sanctioned as sources of productive value. In this way much of the work done by women in the home could be seen to have a potential exchange value, based on a utilitarian value, and could therefore be viewed as productive. Yet, this potential exchange value-cum-

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1 . The second part of this formulation, which relates to the work undertaken by women outside of the home, will be discussed in the third section of this chapter which deals with problems encountered by the Owenite, co-operative and socialist labour theory of value in exchange.

2 . See, for example, William Thompson, Appeal of One-Half the Human Race, women, Against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men, to Retain Them in Political , and Thence in Civil and Domestic Slavery (London, 1833), p. 177.

3 . B. Warden, Rewards of Industry: The Labour Exchange the only True Way to Wealth for the Working Classes (London, 1832), p.2; see also, The Crisis, 30 June 1832, p.61.



utilitarian value and productivity within the home remained dormant, or at least largely unacknowledged, within co-operative socialism. Indeed, even when women performed what male co-operators might regard as productive work within the home, this remained economically or financially unrecognised.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this ambiguity are complex<sup>2</sup>, but there can be little doubt that this sort of inconsistency weakened the claims of the Owenite and co-operative labour theory of value to any transcendental status. In other words, the theory that 'productive' labour is the unique source and measure of all value was clearly compromised when the productive or unproductive status of the quantitatively and qualitatively significant work done by women at home remained indeterminate?

#### The Owenite, Co-operative and Socialist Labour Theory of 'Real Wealth'

The constitution of the socialist concept of 'real wealth', as part of the socialist labour theory of value, was defined relatively rarely in this period, and invariably took the form of 'food, clothes, and houses principally'.<sup>3</sup> It was far more common for socialists to allude to 'real wealth', usually in the context of a critique of money, and its alleged failure to reflect 'real' wealth or value, as if its meaning was universally known and unproblematic, and therefore didn't require exegesis. For example, the co-

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<sup>1</sup>. See, for example, the dialogue that appeared in The Lancashire and Yorkshire Co-operator, No.3 (no date, but probably May) 1832, p.5, on the subject of 'the reduced state of wages amongst the labouring classes'. Here a weaver named George Trueman admitted that if his wife didn't wind the bobbins for free he would be even worse off than he was presently because then he 'should have to pay for that doing out of the price he received for his work'.

<sup>2</sup>. See generally, B. Taylor, Eve.

<sup>3</sup>. The Brighton Co-operator, 1 July 1828, p.2; see also, The Lancashire and Yorkshire Co-operator, No. 3 (May?) 1832, p.1; The Official Gazette of the Trade Unions, 26 July 1834, p.59; The Political Magazine, September 1830, p.21.

operator B. Warden was speaking for many socialists when he asserted in 1832 that the new 'just or proper medium of exchange' should have three properties, the first and second of which were that it should have 'the power of being increased [or conversely, 'decreased'] as **real wealth** is increased [or 'decreased']' (my emphasis).<sup>1</sup> Supplementing these criticisms were the odd, obscure, though not insignificant criticisms of money by Owenites and co-operators, as 'not real wealth', or 'the ghost' or 'the shadow' of (real) wealth.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the importance of the concept of 'real wealth' for the socialist labour theory of value, Owenites and co-operators were unable to define it unambiguously. The main reason for this was the erroneous assumption that 'real wealth' was a homogenous, unchanging, utilitarian concept which would be uniformly and universally recognised. This had been clearly recognised by William Thompson in 1824 when he had argued that:

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- <sup>1</sup> . B. Warden, Rewards of Industry, p.1; see also a report of a lecture given by Robert Owen in April 1830, William Pare's Robert Owen's Scrapbook, London University, MS. 578, p.19; The Crisis, 16 June 1832, p.60; ibid., 30 June 1832, p.50; ibid., 1 September 1832, title page; ibid., 15 September 1832, p.111; ibid., 8 December 1832, p.158; ibid., 14 September 1833, p.11; ibid., 21 September 1833, p.19.
- <sup>2</sup> . The Political Magazine, September 1830, p.21; The British Co-operator, September 1830, p.125; The Birmingham Labour Exchange Gazette, 26 January 1833, p.10, respectively.

The word, Wealth, signifies "that portion of the physical materials or means of enjoyment which is afforded by the labor and knowledge of man turning to use the animate or inanimate materials or production of nature".

[However] an article must be an object of desire to be an article of wealth, and...these desires and preferences are apt to vary with circumstances both physical and moral, particularly with the quantum of knowledge, (of science and art) of the means of converting to use the materials and energies of nature.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, because 'real wealth' was itself unstable, subject to individual and even capricious evaluations, it clearly could not function in any transcendental sense as a core value in the Owenite and co-operative labour theory of value. Indeed, for Owenites and co-operators to argue that money was 'not real', but a mere 'ghost' or 'shadow' of 'real wealth', was to miss the point to some extent. It was arguably only in the sphere of exchange that the meaning of such solipsistic or individual evaluations of 'use' or 'real' value could be determined, or at least translated into a universally recognised medium or language, such as that promised by Esperanto.<sup>2</sup> The co-operator George Mudie neatly summed up this dilemma in 1831 when he described labour, and by implication the use value produced by that labour, as 'inestimable'<sup>3</sup>, a word which might well serve as an appropriate epitaph for the invariable labour theory of value in this period. In other words, labour, and the products of labour, were of the

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- 1 . William Thompson, An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness; applied to the Newly Proposed System of Voluntary Equality Of Wealth (London, 1824), pp. 6, 15.
  - 2 . The analogy between value, language and meaning is arguably a useful one here, for as de Saussure has argued, the meaning or value (in one sense, it could be argued that value is a derivative of meaning), of an item or word is not inherent, but constituted as part of a system or structure, and when words or value are exchanged. See generally, F. de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, trans. W. Boskin (London, 1974). For a more specialised and more recent exploration of this theme, see J. Derrida, 'White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy', in Margins of Philosophy (London, 1982), pp. 209-271.
  - 3 . The Edinburgh Cornucopia, 19 November 1831, title page.

utmost value, yet that value was incapable of being measured, outside of the vicissitudes encountered in exchange.

The Owenite, Co-operative and Socialist Labour Theory of Value in Exchange

Owenite and co-operative concern at the failure of existing mediums of exchange to reflect the problematic concept of 'real wealth' adequately was based on the idea that such currencies as gold and silver had a dual value: the first reflecting their 'intrinsic' value as precious metals, and the other representing the value of the item for which they were being exchanged. The problem with such a duality was that the 'intrinsic' value of gold or silver, held to be an artificial or 'ideal value' by co-operators<sup>1</sup>, and subject to speculation, vitiated what socialists regarded as the properly exclusive function of a medium of exchange, namely to represent the 'real' labour value for which the medium was being exchanged. The case against gold etc. was put succinctly by The Pioneer in 1833:

Gold and silver have been made, but very improperly, the standard of value. They are of no standard: for their value alters as frequently as most other exchangeable commodities. Labour is the only natural standard of value, and it ought to be made by the producing classes their standard of value.<sup>2</sup>

To counteract or more properly overcome these problems, Owenites and co-operators proposed a new labour note medium of exchange which

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<sup>1</sup> . The Crisis, 28 December 1833, p.137.

<sup>2</sup> . The Pioneer, 7 September 1833, p.7; see also The Crisis, 28 December 1833, p.138, where it was argued that 'gold is valued on account of its rarity and its beauty, &c.; but labour is truly valuable: a note, then, which represents labour is the only true species of money, for labour only is truly valuable, all metals, more especially gold, being useless without it'. See also The British Co-operator, August 1830, p.98; *ibid.*, September 1830, p.122; William King, Is Money Beneficial or Injurious? (London, 1834), p.1.

would theoretically increase or decrease as 'real wealth' did, whilst remaining unchanged itself, i.e. unlike gold etc. the new medium of exchange would not be subject to external influences or changes to its value.<sup>1</sup>

The initial problem with this formulation is that the new labour note medium of exchange - representing 'real wealth' - can hardly remain unchanging itself, when the concept of 'real wealth' is itself not fixed or stable. Moreover, this formula for a new labour standard of value in exchange ignored the reality that it was not simply labour, but capital inputs of greater or lesser duration<sup>2</sup>, plus other 'concealed' factors like education, skill, work done by women within the home, and others which helped constitute the 'value' of a particular item in exchange. The new labour notes could not simply reflect 'real wealth' because the nature and extent of that value was not always immediately present. This was a point implicitly recognised by George Mudie in 1831:

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<sup>1</sup> . B. Warden, Rewards of Industry, p.1; see also William Pare's Robert Owen's Scrapbook, (Godsmith's Library, London, no date), p.19; The Crisis, 16 June 1832, p.60; ibid., 30 June 1832, p.50; ibid., 1 September 1832, title page; ibid., 15 September 1832, p.111; ibid., 8 December 1832, p.158; ibid., 14 September 1833, p.11; ibid., 21 September 1833, p.19.

<sup>2</sup> . The extent to which 'the greater or lesser durability of capital' inputs 'modified' labour inputs as the measure of exchangeable value had been recognised by Ricardo in 1818; see Ricardo to Mill, 28 December 1818, in The Works of David Ricardo, Vol. VII (Cambridge, 1973), p.377. In the same period Robert Owen and Abram Combe had also clearly recognised the extent to which capital inputs helped influence exchangeable value, see Robert Owen's 1820 'Report to the County of Lanark', in The Life of Robert Owen Vol. 1A (London, 1967), p.278; Abram Combe, The Sphere of Joint Stock Companies: or the Way to Increase the Value of Land, Capital and Labour (Edinburgh, 1825), p. 20.

Why restrict the constituencies of Wealth within limits so narrow [i.e. tangible and accumulable products]? Do fertility of soil, productiveness of mines or of fisheries, salubrity of climate [etc], [‘though some of them are not products of labour...(and) none of them may owe their origin or their existence to its productive agency’]...form no part of the Wealth of a nation or an individual?...Do the treasures of science possessed by individuals, - do the skill and aptitude of the mechanic, acquired during years of incessant toil, - of the patient and unremitting application of all his mental and physical powers...are they valueless, that they are not to be regarded as forming any portion of the Wealth of the possessors? Are the mere materials of science and of art, of industry and skill, of labour and experience, to be dignified and distinguished as treasures[?] The Wealth of a nation, in its aggregate, consists of all the valuable properties of the nation at large, or of its individual members.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, Owenite and co-operative labour notes were only ever representations of a partial, myopic form of 'real value' because, ice-berg like, only a portion of that 'real value' was ever visible.

One of the more significant means adopted by Owenites and co-operators to 'objectify' the palpably individual or personal process by which socialists determined both use value and value in exchange was to argue that the 'intrinsic' value of an item corresponded to the amount of time taken to produce it. In this way, a 'sound' foundation could be provided for the new labour notes to reflect real wealth based on actual labour time. For example, The Crisis asserted in 1832 that:

The intrinsic value of an article is the labour or time necessary to produce or obtain it - and, in order to have the value correctly represented, a circulating medium ought to be employed for the exchange of these productions; which will represent accurately the labour or time required to produce them. And such will be the properties of the New Note.<sup>2</sup>

It was argued that in this way human labour could be standardised, or homogenised. Hence the following comments from The Crisis in 1832:

<sup>1</sup> . The Cornucopia Britannica, 3 December 1831.

<sup>2</sup> . The Crisis, 30 June 1832, p.60.

It will be said by those who have taken a superficial or mere partial view of the question, that human labour or power is so unequal in individuals, that its average amount cannot be estimated. Already, however, the average physical power of men as well as of horses (equally varied in the individuals) has been calculated for scientific purposes, and both now serve to measure inanimate powers. On the same principle, the average of human labour or power may be ascertained; and as it forms the essence of all wealth, its value in every article of produce may also be ascertained, and its exchangeable value with all other values fixed accordingly; the whole to be permanent for a given period. Human labour would thus acquire **its natural or intrinsic value** which would increase as science advanced [my emphasis].<sup>1</sup>

The initial problem with this formulation has been well documented: Owenite and co-operative labour notes were never an independent currency which simply mirrored the labour time taken to produce an item for exchange.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the value of labour notes was based on a standard rate of sixpence per hour, thereby replicating the old, dual currency system, whose problems the new labour notes were designed to overcome. However, aside from this not inconsiderable difficulty facing the new medium of exchange, the quest to standardise human labour was itself highly problematic.

The crux of this problem centred on so-called 'works of art & genius'. For example, the co-operator William Hawkes Smith posed the question in 1832 of how such 'works of art & genius' were to 'valued'. He concluded that they must be 'estimated...on some ['circumstantial?'] scale', giving, by way of a justification for this conclusion, the example of an 'impression'? i.e painting, water colour etc.] of Chelsea Pensioners' which

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<sup>1</sup> . The Crisis, 8 September 1832, p.107.

<sup>2</sup> . See generally, J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen, p. 206; see also David McNally, Against the Market, p. 137; W. H. Oliver, 'The Labour Exchange Phase of the Co-operative Movement', Oxford Economic Papers, n.s., x (1958), 366-67.

'may only cost, in paper...from 2/6 - yet ['sell'?] for four guineas, because the talent of the Painter, ['their pain'?] is taken into account'.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, some co-operators in Leicester in 1832 argued that 'The weaver receive[s] three half-pence an hour for his labour, when in reality his hour's labour was worth as much intrinsically as the hour's labour of the sculptor who received six times the sum per hour'.<sup>2</sup>

In one sense works of art may seem to be peripheral items when compared to the arguably more uniform staples that comprised the bulk of Owenite and co-operative trade.<sup>3</sup> However, there is a sense in which the division between art and manufacture is an arbitrary one, at least in this context, for many items for exchange in socialist exchange Bazaars were to some extent works of individual 'art', and therefore subject to discrete, that is, particular evaluation. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Leicester co-operators should insist that the hourly rate for a weaver was of equal 'intrinsic' value to that of the sculptor. This was despite the fact that the products of their labour were unequally rewarded in favour of the sculptor, and that such an assessment appears to violate implicitly the co-operative mechanism for determining the value of an object in this period, whereby the value of an item was based on the number of hours it took to manufacture. Such (arbitrary, or) individual assessments of value therefore

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1. William Hawkes Smith to E. Nash, 23 October 1832, Manchester Co-operative Union Library, Letter No. 574.

2. The Lancashire and Yorkshire Co-operator, No.4, (June?) 1832, p.2.

3. See the list of suitable items for trade in 'Equitable Banks of Exchange' in The Crisis, 30 June 1832, p.61, e.g. agricultural products, baking, boot and shoes, and Cheese, amongst many others.



appear to precede rather than follow the assessment of how many hours an item took to manufacture.<sup>1</sup>

The foundation of Owenite and co-operative exchange, succinctly defined as 'labour for labour', and facilitated by labour notes, was a regular feature of socialist journalism in this period.<sup>2</sup> However, this formula underwent subtle modification at this time, a shift which compounded the significant difficulties surrounding such key concepts as 'productive labour', 'real wealth', 'labour time' and others, and which also actively undermined the 'transcendental' status of the labour theory of value in exchange. For example, one of the 'Principles of Exchange' adopted at the third Co-operative Congress in 1832 'proposed' that 'all our exchanges...[are] to be for **fair equivalents**, representing equal labour'. Similarly, at the fourth Co-operative Congress in 1832, Mr. Wigg, replying to the question of 'upon what principle the valuation of goods was fixed when received into the "Equitable Labour Exchange", in London', asserted that 'they were valued at their **fair** average cost price [my emphasis]'. Unfortunately, the basis for

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<sup>1</sup> . See, for example, The Poor Man's Guardian, 1 December 1832: 'A friend of mine, Mr. editor...took to the Exchange articles he had manufactured, and was allowed by the committee some few **shillings** less than his own valuation [my emphasis]'. See also the complaint about the evaluation process at the Equitable Labour Exchange from 'P.M.' in The Crisis, 13 October 1832, p.126; The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars, 20 October 1832, p.55.

<sup>2</sup> . See, for example, the letter from William King in The Weekly Free Press, 30 March 1830; The British Co-operator, July 1830, p.74; The Crisis, 21 July 1832, p.75, 25 August 1832, p.98; The Free Enquirer, 13 October 1832, p.405.

such 'fairness' was assumed, not specified.<sup>1</sup>

Such qualifications to the 'labour for labour' formula might suggest a desire on the part of Owenites and co-operators to avoid the type of unfairness or injustice in exchange which had characterised the competitive/capitalist system.<sup>2</sup> However, not only was the concept of 'fairness' an essentially arbitrary concept<sup>3</sup>, but the strategic positioning of that adjective as one which precedes, and which is, therefore, hierarchically superior to, the 'labour for labour' formula, actually invalidates that formula. In other words, fairness in exchange would be superfluous if 'labour' was actually exchanged for 'labour' with the mathematical precision implied by such an equation. That this is not the case is both reflected and provoked, at least in one sense, by the fact that fairness in exchange is an issue which occupies a position prior to, and superior to, labour in exchange.

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1. Proceedings of the Third Co-operative Congress, p. 114; 'Proceedings of the Fourth Co-operative Congress', in The Lancashire and Yorkshire Co-operator, No. 10, (December ?) 1832, p. 24. See also The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars, 29 September 1832, p. 10, which 'look[ed] to **fair equivalents** of labour for labour'; The Crisis, 13 October 1832, p.127, which would 'fix the **most just** value that is most practicable upon each portion of wealth' in exchange; *ibid.*, 12 January 1833, p.6, which suggested that the basis for socialist exchange was 'The price that is **fair** between' the producer and consumer [my emphasis]'.
  2. See, for example, The Lancashire and Yorkshire Co-operator, No.4 (June?) 1832, p.10, where it was suggested that 'The great difference that would exist between buying and selling as at present practised and the exchange of labour through a labour bank would be as follows; in the latter we should produce to consume....In the former we produce to sell...only in such a way as shall produce a profit on the capital of the money-mongers'.
  3. The experience of women providing items for exchange in Owenite and co-operative Exchanges, a topic which will be addressed in a later section of this chapter, is particularly illustrative of this point.

A further difficulty facing an already convoluted mode of exchange at Owenite and co-operative labour exchanges was the existence of three types of buyer and seller at Owen's Gray's Inn Road Bazaar.<sup>1</sup> As The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars noted in 1832:

The principles and practices in question are avowedly not favourable to the interests of small capitalists, dealers, and master tradesmen; for the Governor of the Bazaar [i.e. Robert Owen] has repeatedly explained, and it has been repeatedly confirmed by official publications authorized by him and the Directors, that the large Capitalist and the great Manufacturer can alone operate with advantage [at the Gray's Inn Road Bazaar], - that the second-rate Capitalists and Manufacturers come next in order as to the power of producing goods economically, and as to the power of disposing of them advantageously for themselves, - that the third-rate and lowest order of Capitalists and Manufacturers, and also Journeymen, produce goods the least economically, and always find it very difficult, if not impossible, to dispose of their goods with advantage to themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Robert Owen did not attempt to deny the existence of three classes of producer and consumer at his Gray's Inn Road Bazaar. However, he claimed that members of the third group, 'the producers at the highest rate of prime cost', would not be disadvantaged because, whilst they might sell cheap, they might also buy at the same price.<sup>3</sup> However, as the argument in an 1832 edition of The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars implied, Robert Owen's dismissal of these differences was essentially a sleight of hand:

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<sup>1</sup> . Gregory Claeys, in his discussion of Owen's labour exchange at Gray's Inn Road, and the criticisms made of the latter by George Mudie's The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars, has eschewed discussion of this particular topic. See G. Claeys, Machinery Money, pp. 54-56, 84-86; see also Claeys, 'George Mudie and the Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars', Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History, 42 (1981), 31, for a similar hiatus. J.F.C. Harrison has also not commented on this issue; see his Robert Owen, pp.201-7. Sidney Pollard only alludes to this problem; see his 'Robert Owen as an Economist', Co-operative College Papers, 14 (1971), 35.

<sup>2</sup> . The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars, 20 October 1832, p.51.

<sup>3</sup> . The Crisis, 13 October 1832, p.127.

The Governor of the Gray's Inn Road Bazaar...takes what he calls the "cost price" [i.e. 'the average prime cost'<sup>1</sup> ] of the second-rate capitalists and manufacturers as the standard by which he professes to measure the value of labour and of all commodities...the greatest advantage is given to the greatest capitalists and to the most extensive machinery, who are allowed more than their own "cost price", viz., the "cost price" of the class immediately below them. That second class, again, are allowed their own "cost price", so that they are neither benefited nor injured by the operation. All below them, however, are positively injured, while the lowest are altogether excluded, because they are told that they will not be allowed their own "cost prices", but only the cost price of the second class.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, there was not one standard of labour value at work in Owen's Gray's Inn Road Bazaar, but at least three, with price levels in proportional relation to the three classes, and variable on each item, the latter seemingly confirmed by The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars, which asserted in 1832 that:

All the goods in the [Gray's Inn Road] Bazaar are not valued on an equal principle. Some of them are valued at the retail prices-some are valued at the lowest wholesale prices, (which is the rate at which they are all professedly valued,) and some of them are valued at the cost of the materials alone, without anything having been allowed for the Labour of the Depositor, and some have been valued at less than that.<sup>3</sup>

The extent to which this diversity of views was a common feature of other co-operative exchanges is difficult to gauge, for as the author of the most extensive survey of co-operative labour exchanges, W.H. Oliver, has noted, 'only the scantiest records remain'<sup>4</sup>. However, the main difference between Owen's Gray's Inn Road Exchange and the form of exchange

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<sup>1</sup> . Robert Owen's formula in ibid.

<sup>2</sup> . The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars, 20 October 1832, pp. 54-55.

<sup>3</sup> . Ibid., 29 September 1832, p.21.

<sup>4</sup> . W.H. Oliver, 'The Labour Exchange Phase', 360. Unfortunately, Oliver fails to explore the unequal valuations of goods within the Gray's Inn Road bazaar or other co-operative exchanges. On the paucity of records left by co-operative exchanges, Associations etc. see also J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen, p.201.

institution advocated by The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars appears to be that the latter was supporting a percentage reduction in expense charges to customers as a means of raising a capital and facilitating the independence of the third class of producers.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it would appear that other Owenite and co-operative exchange institutions, to a greater or lesser extent, experienced a scaled system for producers and consumers, with the accompanying vicissitudes in the standard of value that that implied.

Despite male Owenites and co-operators asserting on more than one occasion that women's labour outside of the home was as productive of exchangeable value as the work done by men<sup>2</sup>, this usually amounted to little more than lip-service. In fact, the labour criterion of value wasn't even to apply to women, at least according to The Crisis in 1832:

Of course the above remark[s] [i.e. the idea of labour time as the 'standard or measure of wealth', with a temporary, money equivalent standard of value based on 'sixpence per hour'] only applies to the labour of men, and not to that of females and children, whose labours must be remunerated according to their utility.<sup>3</sup>

But, as this chapter has argued, arbitrary conceptions of utility underpinned and undermined all - i.e. both male and female - Owenite and co-operative notions of 'productive labour' and 'real wealth', the key components of their labour theory of value. Notwithstanding this irony, however, it is clear that the absence of even a flawed labour criterion for evaluating the work done by women helped facilitate the iniquitous undervaluing of women's labour,

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<sup>1</sup> . The Gazette of the Exchange Bazaars, 20 October 1832, pp.56-57.

<sup>2</sup> . See, for example, The Weekly Free Press and Co-operative Journal, 16 January 1830; The Pioneer, 5 April 1834, p.286; 12 April 1834, p.293.

<sup>3</sup> . The Crisis, 30 June 1832, p. 60.

not least when initially producing items for exchange at socialist Bazaars.<sup>1</sup> Vincent Geoghegan has also noted that 'Remuneration [at Ralahine, an Irish co-operative community - 1831-3] was not equal. Men received eightpence a day, women fivepence. Planned wage increase would have increased this gap by raising men's wages to tenpence a day but only raising women's wages to sixpence a day'.<sup>2</sup> What this clearly illustrates is that work undertaken by women at Ralahine was regarded as inherently inferior to that undertaken by men. Once again the extent to which this was a common feature of exchange Bazaars, co-operative communities etc. is difficult to measure given the relative lack of information on these institutions.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that The Crisis referred in 1833 to 'the still small voice of women [complaining of their 'slavery' and their 'oblig[ation] to toil from dawn to midnight for seven or eight shillings a-week'] which we [i.e. male Owenites and co-operators] **fear must be suppressed** for a season, **till man be served** [my emphasis]'.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Owenites and co-operators were either promoting a utilitarian standard of value, even if they ignored the possibility that this applied to their own work; or else, they were compromising their own value system, failing to sustain their argument that work done by women was equally productive of

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- 1 . On the initial underpayment of work undertaken by women for exchange at Owen's Gray's Inn Road Bazaar, see B. Taylor, Eve, p.313, footnote 68; Taylor also notes that 'there is no record of whether the price [paid to women] was eventually adjusted [to be on equal terms with men]'.  
 2 . Vincent Geoghegan, 'Ralahine: An Irish Owenite Community (1831-1833)', International Review of Social History, xxxvi (1991), 399.  
 3 . The Crisis, 14 December 1833, p.124; see also The Pioneer, 12 April 1834, p.293; The Pioneer, 8 February 1834, p.191.

exchange value. In either case, the Owenite/co-operative invariable labour theory of value was compromised.

A further problematic area for the Owenite and co-operative labour theory of value in exchange centred on the notion of 'cost', or more specifically 'prime cost', as the foundation stone for exchange. As The Crisis explained in 1832, 'Labour, or time, added to the cost of materials, constitutes the commercial value of an article for sale [in socialist exchanges]'.<sup>1</sup> However, as with Robert Owen's earlier utilisation of this formula, it proved impossible to maintain. The initial problem was outlined by The Crisis in 1832:

As it is not easy in practice to ascertain immediately the cost-price of raw materials in hours, or the time and labour that it has taken in passing through the various processes of growth and manufacture, **the market price** will for the present be the best by which to regulate [the] value [of an item].<sup>2</sup> [my emphasis]

Thus, not only were key elements of the 'prime cost' not 'immediately' accessible for evaluation, but this labour basis for exchange was 'corrupted' by capital elements (e.g. raw materials), and expressed in old money terms. Moreover, the question of when the value of these items might be 'ascertained' was seemingly deferred indefinitely, and the problem of not being able to determine all cost elements immediately would apply to more than just the 'raw material' component, e.g. mental labour. Finally, a major problem with prime cost as the basis for exchange was that it was a circular formulation, i.e. the value of labour cannot be signified by its 'prime

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<sup>1</sup> . The Crisis, 30 June 1832, p. 60; see also ibid., 8 September 1832, p.107, 13 October 1832, p.127; 'Proceedings of the Fourth Co-operative Congress', p.24; The Bee, 22 December 1832, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> . The Crisis, 30 June 1832, p. 60.

cost' because that is necessarily indefinite, dependent on the value of the 'labour' in it.

This chapter has argued that the Owenites and co-operators continued to espouse the labour theory of value from 1827. However, as in the preceding period, the Owenite, co-operators and socialists were simply unable to sustain an invariable theory of value. There were problems with the amorphous parameters of 'productive labour', similar imprecision with the concepts of 'real wealth' and 'labour time', and profound difficulties associated with the area of evaluation in the labour theory of exchange. The labour theory of value was clearly not able to function as the transcendental concept for the socialists which they required. Moreover, the labour theory of value had been the site of mutual, if parallel and contrasting problems on the part of Owenites, co-operators, socialists and their political economist opponents, at least until some time after Ricardo's death in 1823.

The inability of the Owenites, co-operators et al. to sustain the labour theory of value was mirrored in the political economy discourse. This confirmed, at least in some respects, the shared conceptual space between socialists and political economists, e.g. the market price orientation of the Owenite and co-operative labour notes - a market price orientation which represented a palpable convergence between socialism and political economy. Nonetheless, Owenites, co-operators and socialists continued to maintain that labour was the unique source and measure of all value, oblivious, or at least largely un-self-conscious, about the problems raised by their principle.



This clearly underlines their primary need for a transcendental and differentiating axiom, for without such a foundation socialism would lose a significant part of its *raison d'être*. In this eventuality life for many Owenites, co-operators and socialists would return to, or more accurately, remain, impossibly 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short', as one political commentator put it in the seventeenth century, like the social and economic situation that had given birth to 'socialism' in the first place.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan (London, 1985), p.186.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### OWENISM, CO-OPERATION AND THE MALTHUSIAN

#### POPULATION QUESTION, 1817 - 1835

The population theory of T.R. Malthus, (i.e. the idea that population increase outstrips the means of subsistence), was the source of several significant debates in the early nineteenth century. Malthus's population principle, considered by The Westminster Review in 1825 to be one of 'the most important principles in the science [of political economy]'<sup>1</sup>, clearly underpinned the iconoclastic 1834 Poor Law Reform Act, and was crucial to the discussions that took place over the condition, prospects and policy needs of agriculture.<sup>2</sup> For example, in 1822 Nassau Senior, one of the chief architects of the Poor Law Reform Act, declared that 'Perhaps the most valuable present which any living author has made to the world, is Mr. Malthus's work on population'.<sup>3</sup>

The major critics of Malthusian population theory and, more widely, 'classical political economy/ists' in this period included the British proto-socialists, the Owenites, and co-operators. Historians have been united in emphasising an explicit hostility on the part of the Owenites (and/or Ricardian Socialists, co-operators, etc.) toward Malthus's theory. For example, Esther Lowenthal, in her book The Ricardian Socialists, claimed that, 'Like the other socialists under review, [i.e. William Thompson, Thomas Hodgskin and John Francis Bray], [John] Gray attacks Malthus's

<sup>1</sup> . The Westminster Review, July 1825, p.89.

<sup>2</sup> . See generally, William Barber, History of Economic Thought (London, 1977), pp. 64-8, for a succinct analysis of Malthus's approach to the agriculture question.

<sup>3</sup> . Nassau Senior, cited in S. Leon Levy, Nassau W. Senior 1790-1864: Critical Essayist, Classical Economist and Adviser of Governments (Newton-Abbot, 1970), p. 227.

theory of population'.<sup>1</sup> J.E. King noted the ambivalence of some of the Ricardian critics, including William Thompson, toward Malthusianism, but also recognised the profound opposition toward Malthusianism of erstwhile co-operators John Gray and John Francis Bray.<sup>2</sup> Noel Thompson has argued that 'By 1834 the methodology, scope, aims and content of classical political economy [including Malthusianism presumably]...had been utterly condemned by writers in the working class press'.<sup>3</sup>

J.F.C. Harrison, one of the leading authorities on Owenism, has claimed that 'Owenite socialists' rejected Malthusianism because, for the Owenites, 'The potentiality of material abundance...showed that productive capacity (both industrial and agricultural) could rise faster than population'.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Gregory Claeys has argued that Robert Owen 'reject[ed]', and the socialists 'opposed', Malthusianism and 'the Benthamites and Ricardians [who] upheld the principle'.<sup>5</sup> Claeys is thus suggesting that Malthusianism was a locus for the larger opposition between Owenism and political economy. 'Against Malthus [Robert Owen] objected...that until "the whole earth shall become a highly-cultivated garden", there was no need to fear over-population'. Claeys also referred to Owen's view of the productive role that spade husbandry would have in facilitating a larger

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1 . Esther Lowenthal, The Ricardian Socialists (New York, 1911), p.57.

2 . J.E. King, 'Utopian or Scientific? A Reconsideration of the Ricardian Socialists', History of Political Economy, 15:3 (1983), 360-63.

3 . Noel Thompson, The People's Science: The Popular Political Economy of Exploitation and Crisis (Cambridge, 1984), p. 31.

4 . J.F.C. Harrison, Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America (London, 1969), pp. 75, 68.

5 . Gregory Claeys, Machinery, Money and the Millennium: From Moral Economy to Socialism, 1815-60 (Cambridge, 1987), p. 50; G. Claeys, 'Justice, Independence and Industrial Democracy: The Development of John Stuart Mill's Views on Socialism', Journal of Politics, 49:1 (1987), 124.

population.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, Claeys resurrected the case for Owen as both a pioneer of contraception in England, and a quasi-Malthusian.<sup>2</sup>

Given the dominant view in the secondary literature of a dichotomy between Owenism co-operation and Malthusianism, or more accurately, pro-Malthusian political economists and anti-Malthusian Owenites, co-operators et al., the first part of this chapter will examine the complex nature of this difference, including differences about the rates and prospects of population growth, the importance of diminishing returns in agriculture, appropriate agricultural technology, and the prospects of excessive population growth in Owenite communities. The second part of this chapter will test the oppositional model of the relationship between Owenism, co-operation and Malthusianism by a close examination of the dialogues between various Owenites and political economists over this

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<sup>1</sup> . G.Claeys, Machinery, Money, pp. 40-1, 46.

<sup>2</sup> . G. Claeys, Machinery, Money, p.41; see also G. Claeys, 'Introduction' to Robert Owen: A New View of Society and Other Writings (London, 1991), p. xiv; G. Claeys, 'After "Socialism": Mr Owen, Democracy, and the Future', in Chushichi Tsuzuki, ed., Robert Owen and the World of Co-operation (Tokyo, 1992), p.24 for similar arguments. These arguments seem to have been largely discredited by N.E. Himes, 'The Place of John Stuart Mill and Robert Owen in the History of English Neo-Malthusianism', Quarterly Journal of Economics, 42 (1928), 627-40. Himes also replicated the oppositional model of the relationship between Owenism and Malthusianism, see esp. 640.

Other historians who have adopted this oppositional model of the relationship between Owenism and Malthusianism include: J.H. Treble, 'The Social and Economic Thought of Robert Owen', in John Butt, ed., Robert Owen: Prince of Cotton Spinners (Newton Abbot, 1971), p. 28; D. Hardy, Alternative Communities in Nineteenth Century England (London, 1979), p. 28; R.G. Garnett, Co-operation and Owenite socialist communities in Britain 1825-45 (Manchester, 1972), p.28. F. H. Amphlett Micklewright, 'The Rise and Decline of English Neo-Malthusianism', Population Studies, 15 (1961-2), 32-51; esp.33, has made a case for Robert Owen's son, Robert Dale Owen, as a Neo-Malthusian.

period. This analysis reveals that the idea of a simple rejection of Malthusianism by the Owenites and co-operators, and a binary opposition between 'Owenism' and 'political economy' over the Malthusian issue, is too simplistic. The common response of the Owenites and co-operators toward population theory was an acceptance of the main thrust of the Malthusian argument concerning the potential for large population increase, whilst disagreeing with Malthusian pessimistic conclusions (i.e. national famine, or famine in co-operative communities).

Three less well canvassed themes also feature in the dialogues on the Malthusian issue, which undermine the notion of a binary opposition between Owenites et als., and non-Owenite political economists over the population issue. It was argued, firstly, by both Owenites, co-operators and John Stuart Mill, that discussion of the merits of Malthusianism were irrelevant to a debate about the merits of Owenism or co-operation. Secondly, Robert Owen, John Stuart Mill, and others claimed that their adversaries had deserted their position on the population issue for a 'contrasting' viewpoint, thereby constituting a new Owenite/co-operative, or conversely, non-Owenite, political economists' consensus. Finally, there is evidence of a desertion of Malthusian population theory by many 'classical' economists in the 1830s. Thus, the argument of Claeys et al. that a significant space separated Owenites from political economists over the Malthusian question is not only a misleadingly partial representation of the diverse nature of the Owenite and co-operative response to Malthusianism in the 1820s, but is increasingly more suspect in the 1830s, when many political economists came to share the anti-Malthusian sympathies of at least some Owenites and co-operators.

### The Malthusian - Owenite/Co-operative Dichotomy

Differences over the rates and prospects of population growth provided the initial locus for the opposition between pro-Malthusian political economists and the ostensibly anti-Malthusian Owenites. At a public meeting in 1817, reported by The Morning Herald, Robert Torrens claimed that 'Mr. Owen denies that population increases in a geometrical ratio...[which] is a manifest error, because the multiplication here begins necessarily with two, which produces four, which produces sixteen, and so on in an accelerating ratio'.<sup>1</sup> Torrens was essentially reiterating the Malthusian canon that unchecked population growth was likely to increase at a greater rate than the arithmetical increase of subsistence. The rather simplistic nature of Torrens' expression may be explained by the fact that he was being shouted down by a hostile audience, hence the need for emphasis on the relentless nature of the Malthusian geometrical principle.

Robert Owen profoundly objected to the idea of the inevitability of this Malthusian axiom. As he asserted in his 'Third letter published in the London newspapers of August 19th 1817', 'no position can be more fallacious than the one that states that "population has a tendency to increase geometrically, while food can be increased only arithmetically"'.<sup>2</sup> Unlike other Owenites who accepted at least some aspects of Malthusianism, Owen was apparently unprepared to accept any association with the views of Malthus in 1817. Owen confirmed this unequivocal approach to the population doctrine in an 1818 letter to the

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<sup>1</sup> . The Morning Herald, 15 August 1817.

<sup>2</sup> . Robert Owen, The Life of Robert Owen Written by Himself, Vol. 1A (London, 1967), p.106.

Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool:

I intend to take an early opportunity of showing that this dread of an excess of population has no better foundation than exists for the nursery terrors of ghosts and hobgoblins; that at this moment the earth is a comparative desert; that all its present inhabitants are suffering for the want of a much more extended population.<sup>1</sup>

Robert Owen developed his critique of Malthusianism throughout the 1830s. For example, at a public meeting held on 9 April 1830 at the London Tavern to discuss 'Mr. Owen's system', Owen ridiculed the idea that over-population could exist in the midst of an 'over-production, of the necessaries and comforts of life'.<sup>2</sup> In 1829 The Brighton Co-operator made a similar point:

OVER-POPULATION IS OCCASIONED BY OVER-PRODUCTION...This proposition may appear, at first sight, to be a contradiction...[However] what is now called over-population, is merely a misapplication and abuse of words - that there is an excess of population only in a particular mercantile, marketable sense, and not in a plain, straight forward, common sense. Over-population, in the abused sense of the word, must always exist in the common form of society: but a real overpopulation has never existed, except in famines and in the most barbarous state of society.<sup>3</sup>

The 'Law' of diminishing returns provided another key area of difference between Owenites and political economists over the Malthusian issue. Both Torrens in 1817, and John Stuart Mill in his 1825 dialogues with various Owenites and co-operators<sup>4</sup>, argued that the law of diminishing returns represented an incontrovertible argument against the

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1. Ibid., pp.192-3.

2. Robert Owen, 'Report of a Public Meeting - Mr. Owen's System - at the London Tavern Meeting, 9 April 1830', University of London MS. 578, f.18.

3. The Brighton Co-operator, 1 September 1829, p.115.

4. John Stuart Mill, 'Two Speeches on Population', Journal of Adult Education, 4 (1929), 40-44.

Owenite rejection of Malthus's geometrical ratio. In 1817 The Morning Herald noted Torrens argument that:

One of Mr. Owen's general principles is, that every person brings into the world power to raise ten times as much food as he can consume. But it is well established in Political Economy, that each succeeding portion of labour yields a less proportion in return than that which went before.<sup>1</sup>

The Owenites refused to capitulate to the Malthusian gloom. Many Owenites eschewed the notion of diminishing returns, arguing that undeveloped and underdeveloped agricultural land in Britain was capable of supporting a much larger population. Robert Owen claimed in 1817 that 'until such time as the whole earth shall become a highly-cultivated garden [the] fear...of any evil to arise from an excess of population...will, on due and accurate investigation, prove a mere phantom of the imagination'.<sup>2</sup>

This argument was encapsulated in an 1821 editorial in George Mudie's The Economist:

The power of reproducing a superabundance of all goods of life, is so great, even in this thickly populated country, that England is capable of sustaining several times the number of her present population, in security and comfort.<sup>3</sup>

The basis for this Owenite optimism in rejecting the law of diminishing returns was the belief in the productive superiority of spade husbandry, which facilitated a much greater agricultural output than the

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<sup>1</sup> . The Morning Herald, 15 August 1817.

<sup>2</sup> . Robert Owen, 'Letter. A further development of the plan for the relief of the poor...', in R. Owen, The Life, Vol. 1A, p. 75. For similar emphases see the following: The Mirror of Truth, 7 November 1817, p.60; Mr. Owen's Proposed Arrangements for the Distressed Working Classes, shown to be Consistent with sound Principles of Political Economy: in Three Letters addressed to David Ricardo, Esq. M.P. (London, 1819), p. 21; The Advocate of the Working Classes, 17 March 1827, p. 82; The Crisis, 2 June 1832, p.42.

<sup>3</sup> . The Economist, 27 January 1821, p. 5.



commonly used plough, thereby potentially supporting a much greater population than had hitherto been possible. These potential benefits were succinctly summed up by The New Harmony Gazette in 1826: 'Under spade cultivation, the produce will be greatly increased in quantity, and also in value, by raising plants, yielding a greater quantity of human food'.<sup>1</sup>

Robert Owen's promotion of spade husbandry garnered unlikely interest, if not support, from David Ricardo. Ricardo, who declared himself to be at war with the principles of Owen, nevertheless expressed an interest in the 1819 Parliamentary Committee examining whether 'the advantages which [Owen] expected from the use of spade husbandry could be realised'.<sup>2</sup> However, Ricardo's provisional convergence with Owen on the spade husbandry issue proved fleeting, for in a letter to McCulloch dated 28 February 1820 he declared that 'I was much pleased with Col. Torrens essay in the last Edinb[urgh] Review'.<sup>3</sup> In his 1819 article in the Edinburgh Review Torrens attacked both Owen's rejection of the law of diminishing returns, and his advocacy of spade husbandry:

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- <sup>1</sup> . The New Harmony Gazette, 19 April 1826, p.234; see also Robert Owen, 'Report to the County of Lanark', The Life, Vol. 1A, pp. 271-2, The Economist, 25 August 1821, pp.75, 79 for similar arguments.
  - <sup>2</sup> . David Ricardo, The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo, ed. Piero Sraffa, Vol. 5 (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 30, 35.
  - <sup>3</sup> . Ibid., Vol. 8 (Cambridge, 1973), p.159.

Mr. Owen, indeed, fancies he can overcome these difficulties [i.e. diminishing returns from the land] by the adoption of spade cultivation; but we will tell him, without fear of contradiction, that spade cultivation, so far from being capable of working the miracles he supposes, is less profitable than cultivation by the plough. Why, in the improved husbandry of this country, has the spade been in so great a degree supplanted by the plough? Only because experience has convinced the farmer that the plough is the cheapest instrument of production, and that, by employing it, he obtains a greater net produce—a larger surplus over and above expenditure.<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, given that the spade husbandry issue was the site of a key difference between the Owenites, co-operators and classical political economists, not all co-operators were as sanguine about the potential benefits of the spade in preventing diminishing returns. For example, George Mudie recalled in an 1848 letter to Robert Owen that, from a long-held position of 'idolatry' towards Owen, by 1821 Mudie had moved to a position of 'treason' against Owen's 'autocracy', manifest in Mudie's rejection of one of Owen's 'pet views...spade husbandry'.<sup>2</sup>

The final significant location for the differences separating Owenites from the political economists over the Malthusian question was the issue of possible excessive population growth in Owenite communities. T.R. Malthus had argued in the 1817 edition of his Essay on the Principle of Population that systems of greater equality, such as that proposed by the Owenites, reduced 'those stimulants to exertion which can alone overcome the indolence of man, and prompt him to the proper cultivation of the earth and the fabrication of those conveniences and comforts which are necessary to his happiness'. For Malthus, this axiom compounded the

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<sup>1</sup> . The Edinburgh Review, October 1819, p.465.

<sup>2</sup> . George Mudie to Robert Owen, 29 August 1848, National Library of Wales, transcript 14352C, ff.66-7; see also The Pioneer, 1 February 1834, 179.

'acknowledged tendency of the human race to increase faster than the means of subsistence'.<sup>1</sup>

Other classical economists concurred with Malthus's admonition. Torrens had argued in 1817 that because of the loss of the incentive to work as a result of communal rather than individual responsibility for subsistence, 'the former miseries of starvation...[would] return with tenfold horror, and the cravings of hunger...[would] destroy this beautiful [Owenite] system'.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, John Stuart Mill had argued in 1825 that 'Starvation must overspread the [Owenite] community, until the destruction of the surplus population had reduced it again to that number for which food can be provided, and food alone'.<sup>3</sup>

When asked in 1817: 'Will men in a community of mutual and combined interests be as industrious as when employed for the individual gain?', Robert Owen's response provided a strong contrast to the arguments of Malthus et al.:

The supposition that they will not, I apprehend to be a common prejudice, and not at all founded on fact. Whenever the experiment has been tried, the labour of each has been exerted cheerfully. It is found that when men work together for a common interest, each performs his part more advantageously for himself and for Society, than when employed for others at daily wages, or when working by the piece.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . Thomas Malthus, An Essay on the Principle of Population, ed. Patricia James, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1989), p. 335.

<sup>2</sup> . The Morning Herald, 15 August 1817.

<sup>3</sup> . John Stuart Mill, 'Two Speeches', 44.

<sup>4</sup> . Robert Owen, The Life, Vol. 1A, p.71.

Other Owenites, such as William Thompson, rejected on empirical grounds the idea that Owenite communities would engender a population explosion:

The principle of population, have been founded on [the] false position, that "increased comfort will necessarily lead to the increase of improvident breeding"...[Yet] in Ireland, there has been for the last fifty years an immense increase of population, in the midst of the absence of all the comforts of life.<sup>1</sup>

More guarded was the Owenite argument that, even if population should increase at an unacceptable pace, 'It [was] not poverty but luxury that [would] destroy the powers of procreation'; an argument which, as the Owenite supporter Joseph Weston reminded the non-Owenite economists in 1817, was supported by 'your great apostle Mr. Adam Smith'.<sup>2</sup> For the Owenites, therefore, it was the greater production of wealth and the equality of wealth produced by Owenite communities that had the best chance of restricting excessive population growth.<sup>3</sup> Added to this argument was William Thompson's contention that humans were quite able to practise abstinence but that:

The diffusion of knowledge and self-controul amongst the individuals of all communities, the only important part of the population question, has been altogether kept out of view by its supporters.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . William Thompson, An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness; applied to the Newly Proposed System of Voluntary Equality Of Wealth (London, 1824), pp. 426, 541.

<sup>2</sup> . The Morning Herald, 29 August 1817.

<sup>3</sup> . See, for example, W. Thompson, An Inquiry, p.539.

<sup>4</sup> . Ibid., p.538; for Thompson's views on the greater power of Co-operative communities to produce wealth, see ibid., p. 562.

### A Malthusian - Owenite/Co-operative Convergence?

In contrast with the often unequivocal rejection of population theory, a widely held Owenite response to Malthusianism recognised the dangerous potential for population expansion. In 1817 the Owenite Joseph Weston 'agree[d] with Major Torrens in the belief that population would rapidly increase under a better order of things'.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the anonymous author of Mr. Owen's Proposed Arrangements for the Distressed Working Classes... conceded in 1819 that:

It is undoubtedly true "that unless new arrangements are formed in society, crime and misery must increase with our increasing population". Indeed, it is to be dreaded lest the ratio of their increase very far outstrip the calculations of statesmen.<sup>2</sup>

Even Robert Owen in an 1835 issue of The New Moral World accepted that 'If Mr. Malthus had stated that the natural tendency of population was to increase more rapidly than the natural production of food, it might have been admitted as an abstract truth'. Owen qualified this acknowledgment, however, by claiming that it was 'a truth of no practical utility', i.e. Malthus's pessimistic scenario would not transpire.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> . The Morning Herald, 29 August 1817. Weston's argument appears rather contradictory here, since he had argued on the same occasion that only luxury, or an Owenite 'better order of things,' would destroy the powers of procreation. However, an appreciation of the sequence of Weston's argument appears to reconcile these apparently opposing positions. Weston did concede that under Robert Owen's plans population would increase, but he also argued that there was room for such an increase. Should that increase in population ever reach a critical mass, however, Weston argued that it was only the 'better order of things,' engendered by Owenite communities, that could halt the rapid increase of population. Paradoxically, therefore, in opposing the arguments of Torrens et al. on this topic, Weston had converged with an earlier form of political economy or œconomy, illustrated by Adam Smith.

<sup>2</sup> . Mr. Owen's Proposed Arrangements, pp. 20-1.

<sup>3</sup> . The New Moral World, 20 June 1835, p. 271.

William Thompson also recognised the importance of the population issue, and conceded the sinister implications of any population explosion:

There is a physical capability of increasing the numbers of the human species greater than any known physical capability of increasing the quantity of food necessary for human subsistence. It is also admitted, that nothing could be more useful in the present state of human knowledge, than to bring forward this important question for minute and uncompromising discussion.<sup>1</sup>

In an extended discussion of the population question in an 1826 issue of The Co-operative Magazine, a correspondent 'S.F.' conceded that co-operation, in removing 'two great evils, war and poverty would [also] be removing the two great checks, or rather destroyers of population'. Whilst S.F. subsequently came to the conclusion that Owenite communities did not, of themselves, produce excessive population, he or she was obviously not sufficiently confident in that conclusion, for they concluded that 'posterity' would be the ultimate judge of the population question.<sup>2</sup>

In support of his oppositional model of the relationship between Owenite and non-Owenites over the population question, Gregory Claeys has claimed that:

The choice of the population question for the first debates [i.e. in 1825] was an obvious one, since the Benthamites and Ricardians upheld the principle that the growth of population tended to outstrip the means of subsistence, while the socialists opposed it.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, as both non-Owenite political economists and some Owenites made clear, there was a sense in which discussion about the Malthusian population question was a separate issue from debate about the merits of Owenism. This was the case despite the considerable length to which, for

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<sup>1</sup> . W. Thompson, An Inquiry, p. 535.

<sup>2</sup> . The Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald, May 1826, pp. 158-9.

<sup>3</sup> . G. Claeys, 'Justice, Independence', 124.

example, John Stuart Mill went in criticising Owen's deficiencies in regard to the population issue.<sup>1</sup> The basis for Mill's argument was that, even if Owen's 'system' was considered deficient in not providing a 'check to population', 'the truth of the principle of population...[is not in] any degree dependent upon the goodness or badness of Mr. Owen's system'.<sup>2</sup> The co-operators concurred with this view in an 1826 issue of The London Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald, though for different reasons from Mill:

The chief argument urged against the [Owenite] System [in the 1825 debate], was the Malthusian doctrine....It is not assuming too much, when we assert that [the critics of Owenism] went away convinced, that whether this position be true or not, it proves nothing against the proposed arrangements; for should the period ever arrive when a really superabundant population need be apprehended, the numbers of mankind would be much more easily kept within their proper limits in the new state of society than in the old, since there would be less ignorance and improvidence...and consequently greater ability to guard against the dreaded evil.<sup>3</sup>

This is not to suggest that political economists and Owenites were converging at this point, however, for Owenites were arguing, in contrast to the political economists, that Owenite communities would prove more successful than the old state in keeping population increase under control. The point here is that both the economists and Owenites/co-operators were arguing that discussion of the merits of Malthusianism were irrelevant to debates about the virtues of Owenism/co-operation. In other words, Owenism/co-operation was seen, at least in one sense, as incommensurable with Malthusianism.

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1 . John Stuart Mill, 'Two Speeches', 42-6.

2 . Ibid., 38-9.

3 . The London Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald, February 1826, p.56.

The second, less prevalent theme to emerge from the dialogues on Malthusianism over this period again appears to dispel the notion of an oppositional relationship between Owenites and non-Owenites. Both Owen and Mill claimed that the 'opposition' had abandoned their position on the population question. For example, Robert Owen asserted in his autobiography that:

In my discussions with Mr. Malthus, [over a five year period, up to 1815], which were frequent...(my own impression was that at last he became very doubtful of the truth of principles which he had so ingeniously maintained,) Mrs. Malthus always took and defended my side of the argument.<sup>1</sup>

Owen also claimed that the majority of the 1817 Committee of the House of Commons on the Poor Law, who were 'influenced by the Malthusian irrational notions of over-population', 'knew that my evidence would go far to defeat their object'.<sup>2</sup> John Stuart Mill also 'observed' in 1825:

That some of the most intelligent members of this [Owenite] society have not denied, or rather have tacitly acknowledged, the principle of population, and have made it their chief object to prove that this principle is not in any respect at variance with the doctrines on which Mr. Owen's system is founded.<sup>3</sup>

Even if this mutual conversion of Owenites and Malthusians appears suspect, there is evidence, from some Owenites at least, of a belief that there was little to separate Owenism from Malthusianism. For example, the anonymous author of Mr. Owen's Proposed Arrangements claimed in 1819 that 'there does not appear to be any reasoning in Mr. Malthus's Essay on Population, at all at variance with increasing the means

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<sup>1</sup> . Robert Owen, The Life of Robert Owen Written by Himself, Vol. 1 (London, 1967), pp. 103-4.

<sup>2</sup> . Ibid., p.155.

<sup>3</sup> . John Stuart Mill, 'Two Speeches', 49.



of support and comfort of our population'.<sup>1</sup> One correspondent of the Owenite periodical, The Economist, asserted in 1821 that 'Mr. Malthus[']s... views on political economy are equated by Robert Owen with his own'.<sup>2</sup> While such an assessment appears precipitant, particularly in relation to the Malthusian population principle, it is true that Owen, some Owenites and Malthus shared at least a partially common political economy perspective. This was confirmed by Malthus in 1820:

The reader must already know, that I do not share in the apprehensions of Mr. Owen about the permanent effects of machinery. But I am decidedly of [the] opinion, that on this point he has the best of the argument with those who think that accumulation ensures effective demand.<sup>3</sup>

There is also some direct evidence of the adoption by some Owenites of inverted Malthusian arguments, for the purpose of effecting the maximum contrast between the two discourses. While this strategy still essentially entails rejection, it is revealing about the extent to which, at the point of supposed difference between two discourses, they came to share a common vocabulary, if not quite the same logic. For example, in 1829 The Brighton Co-operator claimed that:

It is possible that there may be an over-population of servants, managing people, head men, Stewards, bailiffs, double and triple establishments - but of producers, of working men, there cannot, in the nature of things, be an over-population for ages to come.<sup>4</sup>

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1 . Mr. Owen's Proposed Arrangements, p. 21.

2 . The Economist, 16 June 1821, p.327; see also the conciliatory tones of some co-operators toward Malthus in The London Co-operative Magazine and Monthly Herald, August 1827, inside page, next to page of contents.

3 . T.R. Malthus, An Essay, p.365.

4 . The Brighton Co-operator, 1 September 1829, p. 3.

Similarly, Robert Owen's ongoing assault on Malthusianism assumed a paradoxical Malthusian form in an 1833 issue of The Crisis:

The reverse of the Malthusian doctrine is true. Mankind are able to produce food in a geometrical ratio to their increase of number. There is no manufacturing town in the country but may maintain fifty times its present number of inhabitants. Such false notions, however, as those of Malthus are prevailing notions, and taught as wisdom in all our seminaries of learning.<sup>1</sup>

In one sense, Owen's argument here represents an unequivocal rejection of Malthusian fears of over-population, for if food could be increased in a geometrical ratio, then the danger of over-population could be removed permanently. Nevertheless, it is again revealing about the nature of the space separating Owen from Malthusianism, that at a point of ostensibly maximum divergence of the two discourses, Owen's argument should assume a similar form to precisely that which he was trying to refute. To concede that even the reverse of the geometrical ratio was true thus suggested that eponymous Owenism and Malthusianism were not simply incommensurable, but were actually arguing on the same Malthusian ground, albeit from opposite ends of the same axis.

A third factor contributing to the erosion of the idea of a marked opposition between pro-Malthusian political economists and anti-Malthusian Owenites was the loss of faith in Malthusian over-population theories amongst non-Owenite political economists. J.D. Poynter has noted that political economists like McCulloch in the 1820s, and Senior and the two Mills after 1832, had all modified their views on the Malthusian justification for the abolition of the old poor laws. For Poynter, the context for this change of attitude was a recognition of the theoretical crudity and

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<sup>1</sup> . The Crisis, 14 September 1833, p.11.

empirical inaccuracy of the 'Malthusian thesis', plus an empathy, or at least an acknowledgement of 'the agitation which developed in the late 1820s for a system of public relief in Ireland'.<sup>1</sup>

For Poynter, however, the changing attitudes of political economists toward Malthusianism did not represent a sharp break between the two discourses, at least in the period up to the early 1830s: 'If some [pro-Malthusian - old Poor Law] abolitionists modified their views few capitulated to the arguments of their traditional adversaries [e.g. 'M.T. Sadler, Robert Owen']'.<sup>2</sup> From the early 1830s, however, the rumours of the demise of Malthusianism, as a canon of classical political economy, were no longer greatly exaggerated. For example, in 1831 the economist Richard Jones expressed his:

distrust in those dismal systems [i.e. Malthusianism] which teach that the whole human race is under the resistless dominion of an impulse, forcing ever its aggregate numbers forward to the extreme limit of the subsistence they can procure.<sup>3</sup>

This was a view shared by the important writer Nassau Senior, who 'observed that the expansive power of population is such that it **necessarily and inevitably will be restrained**, by some check, positive or

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<sup>1</sup> . J.R. Poynter, Society and Pauperism: English Ideas on Poor Relief, 1795-1834 (Melbourne, 1969), pp. 302-6; see also G. Gilbert, 'The Morning Chronicle, Poor Laws, and Political Economy', History of Political Economy, 17:4 (1985), 507-21.

<sup>2</sup> . J. R. Poynter, Society and Pauperism, p. 308.

<sup>3</sup> . Richard Jones, An Essay on the distribution of Wealth and on the Sources of Taxation (London, 1831), pp. xvi-xvii.

preventative [my emphasis].<sup>1</sup>

Owenites like John Minter Morgan certainly recognised this trend, noting in 1834 that:

The work of Mr. Malthus on Population had fallen in general estimation; the last edition had crept forth in the shape of a thin pocket volume; and there was some reason to hope that this politico-economical sect were repudiating their errors, and that the world would no longer be alarmed by the fears of a redundant population.<sup>2</sup>

Even more compelling is the evidence that emerged from the Political Economy Club in 1835 concerning the demise of Malthusianism. On 5 February 1835 the Political Economy Club debated a question submitted by Thomas Tooke:

In the absence of disturbing causes, is it more likely that - in a given country - Population will increase more rapidly than subsistence, or subsistence more rapidly than population, and would either supposition be conveniently expressed by the word "tendency"?<sup>3</sup>

The results of that debate were recorded by J.L. Mallet in his diary entry for 6 February 1835:

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- 1 . Nassau W. Senior, Two Lectures on Population, Delivered Before The University of Oxford in Easter Term, 1828 - To which is Added, A Correspondence Between the Author and the Rev. T.R. Malthus (London, 1829), p. 23.
  - 2 . John Minter Morgan, Hampden in the Nineteenth Century, Vol. 2 (London, 1834), p. 162.
  - 3 . Political Economy Club, Vol. 6 (London, 1921), p. 43.

The next question was really a question as to the value and truth of the Principles of the Essay on Population, and *the whole artillery of the Club* [my italics] was, strange to say, directed against it. Far from population having a tendency to increase faster than subsistence, Senior and Tooke held that there were facts enough to prove that the reverse was the case, and as to McCulloch, who is always bitter against Malthus, the workings of an envious and mean disposition, he held that there was in human nature a principle of improvement and exertion that was at all times sufficient to counteract and overcome the principle of population, and therefore that Malthus' theory was altogether erroneous, or as he expressed it in his own happy language, false. Torrens likewise attacked the principle of the Essay, and said that if it were correct, no savage nations could have escaped from their barbarous state, and no more they do.<sup>1</sup>

It is too ambitious to equate the members of the Political Economy Club on this occasion with any uniform notion of 'classical political economy'. Nevertheless, these views provide an important window into the nature of political economists' opinions on Malthusianism in 1835. Moreover, the shift by political economists away from Malthusianism in this period was not a function of membership of the Political Economy Club. For example, the economist Richard Jones, who was evidently moving away from Malthusian orthodoxy in 1831, was never a member of the Political Economy Club.<sup>2</sup>

Confirmation of the shift by many classical political economists away from Malthusian orthodoxy toward the position adopted by many Owenites is contained in an 1829 letter from Malthus to Senior:

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1 . *Ibid.*, pp. 265-6.

2 . See the membership list in *ibid.*, pp.358-69.

We do not essentially differ as to facts...We are also quite agreed that in the capacity of reason and forethought, man is endowed with a power naturally calculated to mitigate the evils occasioned by the pressure of population against food. We are further agreed that, in the progress of society, as education and knowledge are extended, the probability is, that these evils will practically be mitigated, and the condition of the labouring classes be improved.<sup>1</sup>

Nassau Senior confirmed both his own and Malthus's departure from Malthusian 'orthodoxy' in an 1835 letter to his fellow Political Economy Club member, John Lewis Mallet:

If you will look at [Malthus's] correspondence with me you will find that he nearly abandoned or rather disavowed the doctrine that population has a uniform tendency (in the form of probability) to exceed subsistence. We do not maintain that subsistence has a uniform tendency to exceed population but that it has a tendency to do so in the absence of disturbing causes. We admit though subsistence increases faster than population, it is not the advance upon population that might be desired. If population has doubled, subsistence probably has more than doubled, but it would have been well if the ratio in favour of subsistence had been still greater.<sup>2</sup>

As J.R. Poynter and others have cogently argued, classical political economists' support for the blunt instrument of the Malthusian geometrical ratio had been atrophying for some time. By 1835, however, ( and in some cases some time before this, e.g. Richard Jones, Nassau Senior et al.) there appeared to be a significant shift by many political economists away from any crude endorsement of Malthusianism. The interesting question of whether 1835 constituted a watershed year for the abandonment of Malthusianism by political economists is a question that must be related to an analysis of the response of subsequent generations of political economists. Unfortunately, this topic lies outside the chronological parameters of this chapter. Nevertheless, it is clear that by 1835 the idea

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<sup>1</sup> . Malthus to Senior, 31 March 1829, in Nassau W. Senior, Two Lectures on Population, pp. 82-3; see also the letter from Malthus to Senior, 23 March 1829, in ibid., pp. 60-1, for a similar emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> . Political Economy Club, p.305.

of a sharp opposition dividing some Owenites, co-operators and classical political economists over the Malthusian question wasn't sustainable. Those Owenites and co-operators after 1835, who continued to berate political economists for their support for Malthusianism, and there were some<sup>1</sup>, were doing so in ignorance of the shift by many political economists away from the Malthusian canon.

This chapter has highlighted the inadequacy of the historiography that has characterised the relationship between Owenism/co-operation, and after 1827, socialism, and Malthusianism/political economy as simply one of mutual enmity. Certainly many Owenites and co-operators opposed Malthusianism over a range of issues raised by the political economists who supported Malthusianism. However, the nature of this opposition was quite complex. Conversely, several Owenites and co-operators did acknowledge aspects of the Malthusian argument, even if they rejected the relentless implications of aspects of it, such as the geometrical ratio. Gradually, however, there was a recognition by some of the protagonists that the rights and wrongs of Owenism/co-operation were not a function of any discussion of the merits of Malthusianism. Moreover, there were claims and counter-claims from some Owenites, co-operators and political economists through the 1820s and 30s of a loss of difference between the two discourses, claims of an abandonment of positions and a convergence on the Malthusianism issue. By 1835, this convergence appeared more tangible with the desertion of Malthusianism by many leading political

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<sup>1</sup> . See, for example, *The New Moral World*, 5 October 1839, p. 793: 'This principle of the incompetency of the earth to provide subsistence for its population as fast as the latter increases, lies at the root of all the schemes of the political economists. It is to them what the doctrine of original sin is to the clergy'.

economists. For some Owenites, co-operators and political economists therefore, though by no means all, 'Malthusianism' had ceased to be the site of important differences between the two discourses.



## CONCLUSION

The prime purpose of this thesis has been to reconsider the relationship between early British socialism and political economy from the perspective's of British socialism through an analysis of four of the main thematic interfaces between these meta-discourses: competitive capitalism, private property contra community of property, the labour theory of value, and Malthusianism. Historiographically this relationship has been invariably (if misleadingly) characterised as one of mutual enmity, except in the case of the labour theory of value, where several commentators have suggested that the socialists were indebted to political economists like David Ricardo. This thesis goes some way to correcting this deceptive, simplistic assessment of the relationship between early British socialism and political economy by recognising some of the complexities, nuances, and in some senses, the mutual dependence of socialism and political economy.

The justification for such a study and approach includes the ongoing significance of these two discourses<sup>1</sup>, the need to correct the binary opposition model of current historiography on this topic, and the correction of other weaknesses in previous studies and assessments. This thesis argued initially that the interrelated triumvirate of 'Scientific', 'Marxist', and 'Whig' perspectives, which dominate the historiography of early British

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<sup>1</sup> . In contrast to the precipitate judgement of such neo-conservatives as Francis Fukuyama, many would argue that the Berlin wall was synonymous with only one particular brand of 'socialism', and that its destruction did not therefore signal an end to either socialism or history. See, for example, Barry Hindess, 'Socialism and Democracy: Elaborations of the Idea of a Self-Governing Community', History of European Ideas, 19 (1994), 309-315. The pervasive ethos of 'economic rationalism' which haunts western countries today would suggest that 'economics', as well as socialism, requires serious analysis.

socialism and political economy, do not afford a privileged position from which to judge either Owenism, co-operation, socialism, or political economy in this period. The main reason for adopting a thematic approach, in contradistinction to the ubiquitous historiographical emphasis on key individuals like Robert Owen or David Ricardo, was that the biographical approach was theoretically dubious and historically insufficient. This thesis also eschewed the materialist approach to this subject, i.e. the emergence of British socialism and political economy, and the relationship between the two, as a function of socio-economic, that is, material origins. As the introduction to this thesis demonstrated, this is an inherently problematic historiographical perspective, a substantive exploration of which is beyond the scope of this study.

The first thematic topic analysed by this thesis was the relationship between Owenism and co-operation - in both the pre- and trading forms - and competitive capitalism, the latter clearly supported by the key opponents (on this issue) of the Owenites and co-operators, the political economists. This is an important area to explore because it was one of the initial sites for the emergence of Owenite and co-operative discourse, and was the basis for much debate about the ends and means of co-operation in the period when co-operation emerged from its relatively limited discursive beginnings.

The historiography on this topic and period suggests that Owenism, co-operation and socialism were uniformly hostile to the competitive, capitalist system and, therefore, the political economists who were its advocates. However, as this thesis argued, the binary opposition model of

the relationship between early British socialism and political economy is too simplistic. Certainly in the early, pre-trading period many, though not all leading Owenites and co-operators did attack such competitive, capitalistic imperatives as 'individual interest' and 'buying cheap and selling dear'. But the basis of that opposition was undermined by the inability of the Owenites and co-operators to escape from some of those very capitalistic ideas, including barter, competition and security of labour. Owenites were unable to throw off the yoke of competitive capitalism except via the resources of the system which they were attacking.

In the period after 1827 in which the significance of eponymous Owenism declined somewhat, and Owenism and co-operation diversified and proliferated into several different 'Trading' Owenite, co-operative and socialist voices, the response to competitive capitalism was similarly diverse. Owenites, co-operators and socialists were often split in this period over means and ends - means and ends which were often closely associated with such quasi-capitalist activities as 'buying cheap and selling dear', 'Joint-Stock Companies', 'labour exchanges' and 'profit making'. Some, like Robert Owen and the independent, non-Owenite co-operators associated with the British Association for the Promotion of Co-operative Knowledge (BAPCK), embraced such capitalistic means so as to promote their 'socialist' ends of co-operative communities. For other co-operators, however, such as the historiographically neglected co-operative author George Skene - a figure rehabilitated, at least to some extent, by this thesis - and others associated with the co-operative Journal The British Co-operator, such 'ends' were seen as hopelessly corrupted by the quasi-capitalist means. These co-operators sought to adopt both capitalist

means and ends, including 'Joint-Stock Companies' and 'selfishness', but as a means of promoting such immediate 'socialistic' ends of profit distribution and employment of co-operative members. The relationship between early British socialism, political economy and capitalism was therefore clearly a complex and inter-dependent one - a complexity which resists the simplistic historiographical conclusions hitherto applied to it.

The second thematic issue addressed by this thesis centred on the question of private property versus community of property. Historiographically, this key interface between Owenites, co-operators and political economists has usually been characterised as a polar opposition between the egalitarian Owenite, co-operative, and socialist adherents to the concept of community of property, and the non-egalitarian, pro-private property political economists. However, as this thesis argued, whilst some political economists were invariably pro-private property, with some important exceptions like Sismondi, Owenite, co-operative and socialist responses to the issue of community of property were far more complex than simple, unequivocal support for this complex concept.

The political economists' model of private property implied the security to dispose of one's property as one saw fit, plus a certain amount of inequality based on differences in effort, skill etc. Conversely, the Owenite, co-operative model of community of property, as worked out most thoroughly by William Thompson and others, implied secure possession by the co-operators of what they collectively produced, plus equality of distribution and/or possession of collective property. However, Owenites and co-operators were often unclear about whether their concept of

community of property might involve equality of distribution. Moreover, the idea of equality of possession of collective property in co-operative communities and associations was itself based on the necessarily unequal efforts and skills of individual co-operators within these communities. As for the secure possession of collective property, this arguably constituted insecurity as much as security. Certainly the collective property of co-operative communities was theoretically secure from the 'forcible seizure of others'<sup>1</sup>, but individual co-operators were not free to dispose of the property that they had helped to produce as they saw fit. However, such freedoms - usually associated with the political economists' perspective of security of private property - were important to many co-operators. Hence the schism, identified in chapter two, between the broader co-operative community which argued for collective security of property, and those like George Skene, The British Co-operator and others, who demanded, amongst other things, divisible capital in co-operative associations, i.e. the ability of individual co-operators to withdraw their (private) capital as they saw fit.

The main reason for the reluctance of important Owenites and co-operators like George Mudie to jettison private property and embrace equality of property was that he and many others were adherents of a labour theory of value which regarded labour as the only justification for property ownership. Therefore, they wanted to expand property rights for those who allegedly created all property - with all, or perhaps some of the concomitant emphasis on security of (private) property, and any inequality of skill and effort that that might imply - though by co-operative means. To

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<sup>1</sup> . William Thompson, Labor Rewarded (London, 1827), p.14.

the extent that some Owenites and co-operators embraced community of property, which might or might not imply 'equality' of distribution, they did so because they felt that the expansion of property rights for those who laboured to produce it was impossible under the competitive capitalist system.

The third theme explored by this thesis was a neglected aspect of the important relationship between early British socialism, political economy and the labour theory of value. Much of the previous historiography on this topic has emphasised either the debt incurred by socialists to David Ricardo et al. for the 'creation' or at least development of the labour theory of value; the labour theory of value as a site of mutual hostility between socialists and economists; or, the labour theory of value as 'superfluous metaphysics', the latter a major reason for the relative historiographical neglect. In contrast, and recognising the importance of the labour theory of value to both socialists and political economists in this period, my thesis focused on the parallel development of the labour theory of value as a transcendental organising principle by both socialists and key political economists, and their ensuing inability to sustain this principle.

The initial focus for this analysis was a review of the four main political economists who were proponents of the labour theory of value in this period: David Ricardo, James Mill, J.R. McCulloch, and T.R. Malthus. This review confirmed the transcendental role given the labour theory of value as the unique, unchanging source and measure of value by these economists. The subsequent inability of Ricardo et al. to sustain this labour theory of value model, and the gradual decline - after Ricardo's death in

1823 - amongst political economists of adherence to the labour theory of value was explored and documented.

The relationship between eponymous, pre-trading Owenism and co-operation and the labour theory of value was then examined. The Ricardian, Smithian et al. labels attached to certain key Owenites and co-operators were rejected, not least as the basis or origin of the latter's labour theory of value. There were two reasons for this: first, because of difficulties in authenticating the nature of the co-operative readership, and therefore the nature and extent of the support for these economists; second, because of the problematic inclusion under these epithets of pro- and anti-co-operators, e.g. the Tory, Thomas Hodgskin, and the co-operator, William Thompson, under the Ricardian socialist label. Like Ricardo et al., the Owenites and co-operators were supporters of the invariable labour theory of value, but were unable to maintain it. In contrast to Gregory Claeys' assertion that the concept of 'productive/unproductive' labour 'sharpened' the co-operative labour theory of value, my thesis argued that this concept was unstable, and actually undermined co-operative attempts to advance the labour theory of value. The labour theory of value espoused by co-operators was, in fact, sullied by a range of other non-labour components, e.g. capital, utility and land.

My thesis then focused on the relationship of Owenites, co-operators and socialists to the transcendental labour theory of value in the period in which socialist discourse burgeoned from 1827. The co-operators were unable to sustain their labour theory of value. The boundaries of key concepts like 'productive labour' and 'real wealth' were unclear. Labour

was only seen as the source and measure of all value when it was 'productive' labour which was productive of 'real wealth'. In addition, there were difficulties with the co-operative labour theory of value in the sphere of labour in exchange - areas previously overshadowed or neglected in the historiography on this topic. These included the non-labour valuations of work done by women and submitted for exchange at co-operative Bazaars; the hierarchical scale of buyers and sellers at co-operative exchanges, which undermined co-operative attempts to create a single labour currency; and Robert Owen's problematic concept of 'prime cost' as the most appropriate basis for exchanging labour for labour - a 'prime cost' which also included non-labour elements like capital.

The final thematic focus of this study - Malthusianism - has generally been regarded as an important locus of difference between early British socialism and political economy in the historiography on this subject. My thesis rejected this view. Some Owenites and co-operators were sharply antagonistic to the population theories of T. R. Malthus, the latter ostensibly supported by most political economists. However, other co-operators recognised the veracity of aspects of Malthusianism, though they rejected the argument that population would rise exponentially whilst food production would increase at a slower pace, i.e. the geometrical rather than the arithmetical ratio. This thesis also demonstrated that for some economists and co-operators the merits or otherwise of Malthusianism were irrelevant to any discussion of the rights and wrongs of Owenism, co-operation or socialism. There was a gradual decline in support for, or opposition to, Malthusianism over the latter part of the period covered by this study. By 1835, political economists' support for any crude form of



Malthusian population theory appeared to have effectively disappeared. Malthusianism was no longer the basis for significant difference between socialists and economists, if indeed it had ever been so.

The historiography of early British socialism and its relationship with early political economy has for too long been dominated by approaches which are either ideologically opposed, untenable and/or simplistic. This thesis has self-consciously attempted to eschew the allegedly privileged positions afforded by scientific, Marxist and Whig viewpoints, and to avoid the historically inaccurate and theoretically limited over-emphasis of the 'great men' in history thesis. Most importantly, by exploring some of the complexities of the relationship between early British socialism and political economy, my thesis has exposed as fallacious the historiographical characterisation of that relationship as simply one of binary opposition.

The socialists were still defined by their relationship to the economists, they shared the same vocabulary to some extent, and they even relied on central aspects of the system which were supported by the economists, and apparently rejected by the socialists, i.e. competitive capitalism. The interaction between early British socialism and political economy was the critical factor in the theoretical emergence of British socialism, which established the conceptual limits to its independent development. The later success of co-operative socialism in Britain was a realisation of the early socialist confinement within key elements of the political economy paradigm. The fundamental critique of political economy was to be developed from within German and French socialism in the

1840s, rather than from within the ambiguities and compromises of early British socialism.

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