

Robert Owen

Robert Owen (1771–1858)

Early Life and Beliefs

Robert Owen began work as an apprentice to a clothier when he was ten years old. His employer had a good private library and allowed Owen access. In reading about conflicts and controversies over religion, Owen became skeptical about religion generally. He came to feel that people should focus on doing what is good. He eventually came to argue that people's characters are shaped by their environments. He believed that the way to make people good was to give them good conditions and influences from early in life.

The Mill in New Lanark

When Owen took over a mill in New Lanark, Scotland, he found harsh living conditions. Sanitation was lacking, housing was poor, and there was little in the way of education for the many children there. Crime was rampant in the community.

Improvements and Innovations

Owen improved workers' housing and opened a store that sold goods that were inexpensive, but of good quality. He also introduced strict regulation of the sale of alcohol. Owen encouraged the workers to develop habits that he felt formed the basis of a good life, such as order, cleanliness, and thrift.

The day-care center that Owen opened in New Lanark in 1816 was the first of its kind in Britain. In addition to providing care to very young children while their parents and older siblings worked, the day care functioned as a preschool. Children were taught music and dancing, and character development was emphasized. It did not use corporal punishment, which was a widespread practice at the time.

When the War of 1812 broke out between Britain and the United States, leading to an embargo that prevented trade, mills closed for several months. Owen paid the workers during this time, winning much loyalty and support.

Owen's mill was successful, but his partners wanted greater profits, feeling that Owen's methods were not in the owners' best interest. Owen eventually bought out the other partners, joining with other reformers who agreed with his philanthropic approach and were satisfied with a more modest profit.

The mill and community at New Lanark became well known as a successful business and a model community. The people were healthy and content, while the mill made money.

Ideas for Reform

Owen went on to propose reforms in the textile industry, including a proposal to limit the hours children could work. However, manufacturers did not support these proposals. Owen turned his attention to proposing social ideas for how to reduce poverty. This led to his idea for villages where people cooperated to work together, share responsibilities like cooking and child care, and support each other.

New Harmony

Owen found land to buy in Indiana, where he established the town of New Harmony. In the earliest days, the project seemed successful. However, residents began to disagree about the form of government the community should have. Questions about the role of religion were also divisive. Owen's rejection of religion was a difficult issue for many of his admirers. Owen returned to Britain, having lost most of his fortune. He later formed a new community in Queenwood, back in England. Other communities in Glasgow and Ireland were later formed based on Owen's model.

Socialism in the 1800s

Europeans and Americans of the 1800s were heirs of the Enlightenment. They were influenced by the many, often conflicting, ideas about government, human rights, and human nature explored by writers, such as Rousseau, Voltaire, David Hume, and Adam Smith, as well as by figures like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Ideas about liberty, freedom, democracy, and morality had been vociferously discussed for generations. In the 1800s, socialism developed as a political and social philosophy guided by the principle that society should function in ways that benefit all its members. Educated thinkers and many ordinary people in the 1700s and 1800s understood themselves to be living in a time of change. Many people recognized that mechanization and industry were going through a revolution, upending and dramatically reshaping the world. Socialists imagined a similar revolution in social and political structures and relationships. From the beginning, the term *socialism* was applied to a fairly wide spectrum of ideas, beliefs, and approaches. In the 1800s, socialism encompassed a number of different movements, connected by a few basic ideals. The overarching goals were greater equality, cooperation among members of society, democracy, and a reasonable level of prosperity at all levels of society.

Labor Unions

Groups of workers formed to protect and advance the interests of those in a certain profession in Europe during the Middle Ages. These guilds worked to regulate the production and sale of the particular craft the members made. However, these associations comprised both owners (those with the means to buy raw materials and hire workers) and laborers.

The 1800s saw the development of the concept of a labor union—a group of workers who organized in opposition to owners and bosses. During the 1830s in Britain, a movement emerged toward “general” unions, which sought to organize workers nationally, rather than at the community level. This movement was aware of and inspired by Robert Owen's thinking and efforts. Similar movements developed in the United States, France, and elsewhere.