

Utopian Dreams at the End of Early America, 1663-1860

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America may be, as the historian Daniel Boorstin once argued, the shoals that splintered Europe's utopias.¹ Yet in the first half of the nineteenth century, the young United States became the most dynamic playground of utopian projects in the Atlantic World. American followers of European social reformers Robert Owen and Charles Fourier planned, promoted, and practiced "utopian socialism" in hundreds of cooperative living colonies across North America in the 1820s and 1840s. Not since New England puritans had any group in North America so explicitly tried to make an ideal ethical system into a worldly reality.

My dissertation traces the history of Robert Owen's "New Moral World" in the United States – both its aspirations and its ultimate failures, successes, and transfigurations. American followers of Owen sought to put Owen's ideas into practice in the vastly expanding United States, where they challenged the driving assumptions and values of Northern culture: they shunned competitive economies, rebuked formal evangelical religion, questioned traditional gender inequalities, and rejected radical individualism. More than purely critique, they believed that a worldwide reformation in social organization depended on constructing small scale communities in the United States – "utopias" – where a model social order could be demonstrated and then copied the world over. In creating these communities in the Northeast and the Midwest in the 1820s and 1840s, they supplied the rancorous American antebellum reform atmosphere with alternatives to the system of values that was solidifying around both slave and free labor, individualism, and early capitalism – values that later triumphed in the United States but were not preordained. By reconstructing the early modern origins of utopian socialism in North America and focusing on "Owenite" reformers beginning in the 1820s, I explore history that has not received comprehensive historical attention in more than 70 years. I then follow Owenite reformers to show their engagement with and shaping of crucial themes in nineteenth century U.S. history, including settler colonialism, antislavery, capitalist development, social reform, and the origins of the U.S. Civil War. Utopian socialists embodied and foreshadowed two major styles – and tensions – of American democratic reform still alive today: pragmatic experimentation and compromise on the one hand, uncompromising adherence to moral conviction on the other.

My dissertation reexamines a long history of the U.S. Owenite movement with special attention to utopian socialism's influence on economic and social thought and with the intention of pursuing relatively neglected bodies of such thought in the history of American economics, labor, and capitalism.² Existing historical literature on the topic is sorely outdated. Not since the 1950s has Owenism in America or the early modern roots of utopian socialism been treated comprehensively.³ Too often, I propose, utopian socialism is assumed to be a radically new body

¹ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (Vintage, 1958), 1.

² For a call for such an approach generally, and attention to utopian socialism in particular, see Seth Rockman, "The Contours of Class in the Early Republic City," *Labor* 1:4 (2004): 91–108.

³ The standard text remains Arthur Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias: The Sectarian Origins and the Owenite Phase of Communitarian Socialism in American, 1663-1829* (Philadelphia, 1950). Important newer work on post-Owen U.S.

of ideas generated in reaction to the industrial revolution, when in fact these were very old ideas that seemed radical when espoused in a modern setting. Traditional historiography emphasizes the short-term failure of utopian colonies themselves, which miss the intellectual influence that migrated out of those communities and exerted a wide influence across the nineteenth century. Taking a longer view, my dissertation considers how these transnational ideas drew upon and shaped American thinking about economic and social organization. I also propose that utopian socialism was not solely a European import to North America but rather a co-creation of many peoples – Indigenous, African, and European – on a vast continent. Lastly, much historiography has recently emphasized the rapaciousness and reach of capitalist modernity in early nineteenth-century North America.⁴ Yet I seek to show a world in which capitalism was a weak and only just emerging set of practices, nestled in a buzzing wealth of intellectual and social phenomenon that saw diverse possibilities for the future.

Funding from the History of Economics Society would offset costs of a multi-archive research trip to Ohio, including the Ohio Historical Society, Cincinnati Historical Society, Western Reserve Historical Society, Oberlin College Libraries, as well as smaller manuscript repositories such as the Massillon Museum and Green County Library. Part of the promise of this project is a research design that involves exploration of local and state archives across the Northeast and Midwest, many of which are outside usual major centers of historical research. I have already completed a similar trip to Indiana, generously funded by a fellowship from my home institution, though I am currently in need of further resources to conduct work in Ohio. No other funding application has yet been submitted for this research trip. To offset the costs of airfare (\$300), rental car (\$500), and lodging (\$700) during this trip, I would be grateful for any amount the OAH may deem appropriate should I have the opportunity to receive it.

Fourierism includes Carl J. Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cornell, 1991). Owenism also continues to make an appearance in newer narrative histories of American reformers, but not treated in full or in an early-modern framework. See Holly Jackson, *American Radicals: How Nineteenth-Century Protest Shaped the Nation* (Crown, 2019).

⁴ See, for example, Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton* (Vintage, 2014); for a review of the literature by way of critique, see Stephanie McCurry, “The Plunder of Black Life,” *TLS* (May 17, 2017).