

GUIDE TO THE ANALYSIS OF THE SPANISH TRANSLATION OF ROBERT OWEN'S "A NEW VIEW OF SOCIETY, ESSAYS ON THE FORMATION OF HUMAN CHARACTER", 1813

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1. INTRODUCTION

The next guide focuses in the leading figure of Robert Owen, one of most fundamental member of the utopist socialism. Its main objective is to provide to the students a well developed instrument for the analysis of the author and its work "A new vision of society", as well as to the Spanish translation, in order to reach a greater understanding of his life and ideas in the context of the economic thought, especially in the fields of the human behavior, the industrial management and the economic development studies.

2. THE AUTHOR: ROBERT OWEN

2.1. BIOGRAPHY

Owen, Robert (1771–1858), socialist and philanthropist, was born on 14 May 1771 at Newtown, Montgomeryshire, the son of Robert Owen (1741–1804), a saddler and ironmonger as well as the local postmaster, and his wife, Anne Williams (c.1735–1803), a farmer's daughter. He was the youngest, but one, of seven children, and his childhood seems to have been a happy one. Intellectually precocious, he devoured a book per day, including novels, histories, and travel books, and became the schoolmaster's assistant. As a producer of pious sermons, he was known as 'the little parson' (*Selected Works*, 4.54). At the age of ten, however, as he later claimed in his somewhat teleological autobiography, *The Life of Robert Owen*, he underwent a religious crisis, concluding that 'there must be something fundamentally wrong in all religions, as they had been taught up to that period' (*Selected Works*, 4.54). Religious skepticism was to become a dominant theme in his later life.





Anxious to leave home, Owen was permitted in 1781 to become apprenticed to James McGuffog, a cloth merchant in Stamford, Lincolnshire, who specialized in well-to-do ladies' wear. Having learned much about fabric and the trade, in 1784 Owen joined a London retailer, working twelve hours daily for £25 p.a., and then moved to a similar position at £40 p.a. under John Satterfield in Manchester. Here Owen soon became curious about the new machinery being applied to cotton spinning. Borrowing £100 from his brother William, he entered into a partnership with a machine-maker named Jones constructing 'mules' for making thread, and soon the firm of Jones and Owen had forty employees. When he was bought out in 1789–90, his old master, McGuffog, offered him half the profits in his shop. Owen chose instead in April 1792— not in 1790, as the *Lifestates* (*Life*, 1.32)—to manage a mill with 500 employees owned by Peter Drinkwater, who had first applied the Boulton and Watt engine to cotton spinning in Manchester.

Despite his inexperience, Owen applied himself rigorously, spending six weeks studying the factory, and proposing many refinements to the manufacturing process. Soon the quality of his thread was renowned. For further information go to the [Dictionary of National Biography- Robert Owen](#).

In short, Robert Owen was a man ahead of his time. During his lifetime, he endeavored to improve the health, education, well-being and rights of the working class. This driving ambition to create a better society for all took him around the world, from a small mill village in Lanarkshire in Scotland to New Harmony, Indiana in America with varied success. Although, he encountered much criticism and opposition in his lifetime, he influenced reformers who came after him and many of his views are as relevant and resonate today in their [modernity and progressive nature](#).

Another great source for understanding his life is his own bibliography book: [The Life of Robert Owen Written by Himself](#).

And the R. Davies's free online book: [Robert Owen, Socialist](#).

2.2. LIFE PROJECTS

New Lanark – Beginnings

The story of New Lanark begins with the River Clyde. In 1784, an enterprising and far-sighted Scot, David Dale embarked on an ambitious plan to found cotton mills powered by the natural energy of the powerful Falls of Clyde in Lanarkshire. Dale was already a very successful businessman and a member of Glasgow's entrepreneurial elite. At New Lanark, he built 4 large mills and solid stone housing for his mill-workers. It was to become the largest cotton- manufacturing establishment in Scotland with a living and working community of 2500 at its height, with many early workers coming from the Highlands and later, Ireland. Cotton was spun there for almost two hundred years.

David Dale was, for his time, considered an enlightened employer and although he employed pauper apprentices, the education and welfare of his workers were important to him. When Dale sold New Lanark Mills to his new son-in-law Robert Owen in 1799, little did he know that this would become "*the most important experiment for the happiness of the human race that has yet been instituted in any part of the world.*" Robert Owen.



A Model Community

Under Robert Owen's management from 1800 to 1825, the cotton mills and village of New Lanark became a model community, in which the drive towards progress and prosperity through new technology of the Industrial Revolution was tempered by a caring and humane regime. This gained New Lanark an international reputation for the social and educational reforms Owen implemented. New Lanark had the first Infant School in the world, a creche for working mothers, free medical care, and a comprehensive education system for children, including evening classes for adults. Children under 10 were not allowed to work in the Mill.

Leisure and recreation were not forgotten; there were concerts, dancing, music-making and pleasant landscaped areas for the benefit of the community.

When Owen opened the Institute for the Formation of Character, which was effectively a community education centre for his workers, he outlined his visionary plans for an astonishingly progressive and enlightened system of education which he believed was the key to a happier society, and universal harmony.

New Harmony

In the second half of the 1820s Owen's energies focused on the prospect of building a community in America. In 1825 he purchased from a Pietist German émigré sect, the Rappites, a ready-built township set on 20,000 acres at New Harmony in southern Indiana. Unfortunately the establishment soon became an enormous drain on his resources. In a short time Owen spent about £40,000, or four-fifths of his New Lanark fortune (his interest in the mills was finally sold in 1828), in a fruitless effort to organize the disparate group of 800 radicals, freethinkers, backwoodsmen, and scientists who had no desire to be 'governed' like mill hands. In early 1825 he addressed the president, senate, and Supreme Court at the House of Representatives in Washington DC.

New Harmony was briefly the most vibrant and sophisticated cultural outpost on the American frontier. But centrifugal tendencies tore at the community from the beginning, and by late 1827 the experiment was in the final stages of dissolution, with its half-dozen projected imitators elsewhere following close behind. In 1828 the opportunity arose of securing a very substantial land grant from the Mexican government to settle the Texan frontier with the United States. Owen first paused at Cincinnati for an eight-day public debate about religion to an audience of a thousand. Then he sailed to Vera Cruz via Jamaica, but failed ultimately to secure a grant of land.

On his return to Britain, Owen found that a consumer co-operative society indebted to his ideas had been started in Edinburgh by an inspired tanner named Abram Combe (1785–1827), who had also begun plans for a community modelled on Owen's ideals, at Orbiston, south of Glasgow. By 1830, moreover, some 300 co-operative societies had sprung up across the country. Owen found his ideas developed by economists like William Thompson (1775–1833) and John Gray (1799–1883). Cast once again into relative obscurity when he began to lecture in London in 1830, Owen found that his secularism was the main appeal to his small audiences. In 1830–32 he continued to oppose radical political reform, as insufficient to meet the economic evils of society. By 1832–3, however, he had emerged as the leader of several 'labour exchanges', notably at Gray's Inn Road, London, and at Birmingham, where artisans could exchange goods directly without the intercession of middlemen. The culmination of his efforts in the early 1830s came with the formation of the first attempt to create a general union of all trades, the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, which Owen helped to lead in 1833–4, with the chief aim of achieving the eight-hour working day.

Inspiring a Modern Approach

While at New Lanark, Robert Owen demonstrated management policies that are now widely recognized as precursors of modern theories relating to human resource management, as well as skilful and ethical business practice. His work inspired infant education, humane working practices, the Co-operative Movement, trade unionism, and garden cities.

2.3. INTERPRETATION

Robert Owen's contributions to the progress of theory and practices in education are widely acknowledged in the handbooks of history of education. But these contributions, even if they are one of his main achievements, are not alone. With his curiousness and impelling energy, Owen explored other aspects of society which, in his opinion, deserved attention and analysis. It is in this context where one should consider his projects to establish an enlightened model of industrial organization, with the aim of redressing many of the problems caused by the industrial revolution; his experiments of communitarian organization as the basis for an international generation and his plans to organize the British labour movement, with a big and unified national trade union. Many of his ideas were adopted and transformed by his followers, the "[owenites](#)", who believed that economic and social structure might be modified according to the laws of social sciences.

The sources mentioned in the previous section can also provide an introduction to the interpretation of Robert Owen thought and works.

There are other introductory works which provide a guide to the interpretation of Owen. One is the [Arthur Bestor](#), *Backwoods Utopias*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950, second edition, 1970).

Another interesting review is [Utopian Thought and Communal Practice: Robert Owen and the owenite communities](#), by Krishan Kumar. [Also available in Spanish.](#)

3. THE SOURCE TEXT: *A NEW VIEW OF SOCIETY, ESSAYS ON THE FORMATION OF HUMAN CHARACTER, 1813*

The next article includes a brief, though explicative, section about one of his main works.

http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/archive/publications/ThinkersPdf/owene.PDF

http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/archive/publications/ThinkersPdf/owens.pdf

(Spanish version)

The following text is a compilation highlighted paragraphs from the article:

In a "*A new view of society, or essays on the principle of the formation of the human character, and the application of the principle to practice*" Owen outlined his proposals for reform at New Lanark. The first two *Essays* dealt with the need to consider rationally forming the character 'of that immense mass of population which is now allowed to be so formed as to fill the world with crimes'. The third *Essay* was an account of the progress made at New Lanark for the further improvement of its inhabitants. It is here that Owen expounds his view of the importance of education.

Owen had earlier, as has been seen, been an admirer of the Lancasterian monitorial system of education, and the first two *Essays*, written in 1812 and 1813, reflect these principles of obedience, order, regularity,



industry and constant attention rather than the need to read, write and calculate. Now in the third and fourth *Essays*, written in 1814, his views had changed considerably.

In this way, Owen criticized their pedagogical approaches. Reading and writing are merely instruments by which knowledge may be imparted: they are of little value unless children are taught to make proper use of them. 'The *manner* of giving instruction is one thing, the *instruction itself* another; and no two objects can more distinct.' It is therefore, important to adopt the best manner of instruction whereby a child can understand the objects and characters around him.

Although some of Owen's ideas on education are at times idiosyncratic and exaggerated, they are basically sound and far-sighted. For example in his second *Essay*, he explained that 'children are, without exception, passive and wonderfully contrived compounds, which by due preparation and accurate attention, founded on a correct knowledge of the subject, may be formed collectively into any human character'. This passage clearly shows that Owen was not simply a believer in environment as the main determinant of character, but that training, in the form of education, was equally important. On the other hand, as character is formed in infancy, before the child's second year, no general reformation of character is possible unless the foundations of a system of moral education had already been laid.

For the development of a well-balanced child, schooling should not begin too early, and when it did begin there should be a large element of recreation and amusement. It was for this reason that children at New Lanark did not start school below the age of 5.

As we shall later see, Owen's views on community colored his social and economic philosophy and activity. In *A new view of society*, he advanced the view that each individual is not simply a product of his training and environment, but that societies collectively are the product of the forms of training and of social environment in which their members are brought up to adulthood. Society as a whole can inspire in its members a common basis for moral belief (G.D.H. Cole, 1965).

Another aspect of Owen's novel approach to education was that it should be a common right of all children, though his advocacy was in favour of the poorest people in the community. It was for this reason that he refused to employ children in his mills under the age of 10 and reduced the hours of older children in order that they could benefit from the evening classes that he also provided.

Owen did not take a wholly detached view of the benefits, which could accrue, from his enlightened approach. One result of his beneficence at New Lanark, he wrote in this third *Essay*, was that 'the time and money so spent, even while such improvements are in progress only, and but half their beneficial results attained, are now producing a return exceeding 50 per cent, and will shortly create profits equal to 100 per cent on the original capital expended in these mental improvements.' He overstated the case when he declared that 'man's character is made for, and not by him' and perhaps understated the importance of nurture in the educational process.

Nevertheless, *A new view of society* represents a manifesto for a reappraisal of the function and consequences of child education. The emphasis on the moral basis of education is one that is widely accepted by current educational thought. His explanation of the formation of character is of interest and the need for healthy recreation and happiness for young children, with the provision of playgrounds for this purpose, has long been accepted during the early years of primary education.

4. ROBERT METTINI'S TRANSLATION

In Spain, the ideas of Robert Owen did not have very much diffusion as they had in France or Germany. One prove of that is the existence of one unique translation; the one made by Robert Mettini, published by Hacer DL, in Barcelona, in 1982. This edition is available at the [university libraries](#).

Furthermore, there is a [free english version](#) to read the book online, in case the student wants to get to the original work.