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Over some two centuries those who have contributed to the corpus of British socialist political economy have wrestled with the ideological challenge of accommodating the consumer and the business of private consumption within their political economies. For many, the act of consumption has been seen as quintessentially individualistic and self-regarding; as socially divisive in terms of the consumption of positional goods; as utilising resources for private rather than socially beneficial public purposes; as having destructive environmental consequences and as inflicting psychologically or physically harmful labour on producers and moral and other damage on the unthinkingly sybaritic consumer. Such consumption has also been seen as reinforcing the boundaries of social class while, paradoxically, engendering false aspirations that threaten to occlude class consciousness. In this latter respect, consumption has frequently been viewed by socialist writers as having deflected the working class from its historic transformational mission.

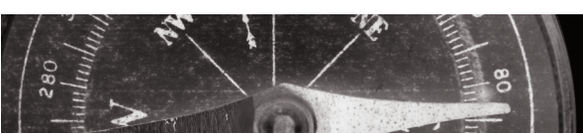
Working-class consumers in particular have all too often been seen by socialist political economists as disappointingly malleable beings: easily induced to ill-advised and irrational consumption; consumed by and consuming distinctively capitalist values along with the system's products; unable to distinguish between real and false needs; incapable, or unwilling to consider, the moral and social implications of their purchases and failing, in consequence, to effect a socially optimal allocation of resources. In these respects the consumer has been regarded as falling well short of the neoclassical ideal of the sovereign, rational utility maximiser.
In this context capitalism has been seen by many as moulding and corrupting tastes with advertising. While the repetitive, mindless and intellectually atrophying labour demanded by capitalist methods of production have been viewed as creating what John Burns, the late-nineteenth, early twentieth century socialist and trade union leader, termed a `poverty of desire'; something which manifested itself in a craving for any relief – be it through drink, gambling or shoddy entertainment - from the anomie and alienation which such labour induced. [i]

Integral to the socialist consideration of consumption has been its discussion of luxury. Luxury consumption has been seen as a cause of scarcity, a driver of exploitation, as producing a misallocation of resources, corrupting the nature of labour by directing it to the satisfaction of the frivolous, as confirming social division, corrupting taste, as instrumental in creating false aspirations and desires and as, a distraction from the critical objective of self-realization through creative labour.

Further, socialist writers have seen the whole business of purchase and sale as characterized by buying cheap and selling dear and therefore integral to the act of consumption. Like Cicero, many doubted whether anything honourable could come out of a shop. In this regard, buying and selling were often seen as a zero sum game, with those involved in it, by definition, unproductive; securing their profits and other gains by subterfuge, blandishment and misrepresentation. Indeed the whole system of distributing goods by means of monetary exchange was seen as characterized by a complexity designed to obfuscate the nature of transactions; as wasteful in terms of the unnecessary multiplication of retail outlets and as based on a medium of exchange – money – monopolized and manipulated in ways that manifestly disadvantaged the working-class consumer in particular.

Whether for reasons of electoral advantage or from real ideological commitment, or a combination of the two, there was, after 1945, a greater willingness to embrace, or at least accommodate, individual consumers and their aspirations. Crosland's The Future of Socialism, 1956, articulated a more consumer-friendly position. For Crosland there was no necessary incompatibility between social democracy and hedonism; indeed without some accommodation of the latter, the former would assume that lacklustre and monochrome character which its critics frequently attributed to it.

More radically, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, writers such as Paul Hirst in Britain, Charles Sable and Michael Piore, in the United States, and John Mathews in Australia, saw in what they termed Post-Fordism the emergence of an economic order where consumption had acquired a character and a potential to take forward the socialist project.[ii] As they saw it, Fordism (the term derived from the achievements of Henry Ford) had been an organization of production, dominant within twentieth-century western capitalism, which permitted long runs of standardized products aimed at a mass market and had laid the basis for many of the material gains of the twentieth century. However, these gains went pari passu with an alienated,



"Perhaps neither the Left, nor anyone else, should be excessively exercised by all this; perhaps after two centuries it is time for good, and even not so good, social democrats to shelve the critiques and concerns of their ideological forebears and make their peace with the consumer and his or her aspirations. Let's just go with the remorseless, materialistic flow of contemporary history because, at the end of the day, we know we're worth it."

robotic and exploited workforce. And, by the last quarter of the twentieth century, the Post Fordists believed the productivity gains derived from Fordism had been well-nigh exhausted.

But this crisis of Fordism had paved the way for a reconfigured and rejuvenated social democracy. These writers saw that with ever-increasing affluence came a more differentiated demand and a desire for more customized consumption. In turn, this had made necessary a new, Post-Fordist mode of production, characterized by what they termed 'flexible specialization'. This was an organization of production based on flexible, multi-use equipment, delivering short production runs; it aimed at competing through product quality, not the paring of labour costs. It was further argued, flexible specialisation made for high-skill, high value-added, almost craft forms of production. In turn it demanded a workforce with greater task versatility, skills and decision-making abilities, creating the possibility of greater worker autonomy. Furthermore, it facilitated the introduction of team-working involving task rotation and, more generally, where skill and flexibility were at a premium, it required more democratically determined work practices.

Differentiated demand brought the possibility of realizing recognizably socialist objectives. Post-Fordist socialists could therefore portray contemporary discriminating consumers of customized, high-value-added, quality products as driving the socialist project. For such writers it was, therefore, the discriminating, hedonistic, utility-maximizing consumer, not the horny-handed son or daughter of toil, who would effect profound changes in the social model of production. The workers of the world need no longer unite, they could go shopping instead, and the revolution would follow swiftly in the wake of their credit cards.

Parallel with this, of course, the 1990s also saw the increasingly warm embrace, by key figures within the Labour Party, of a comparable apotheosis of the consumer; though one more focused on the provision of public services. The service user was now re-conceptualized as a service consumer; no longer a supplicant but a bearer of consumer sovereignty and customer rights. The provision of public services should therefore be made to dance to a different tune. Where public provision had not been privatized, its ethos and delivery were to be marketised; a view of things that continues to enjoy cross-party support – not least in relation to educational provision in the HE sector.

Perhaps neither the Left, nor anyone else, should be excessively exercised by all this; perhaps after two centuries it is time for good, and even not so good, social democrats to shelve the critiques and concerns of their ideological forebears and make their peace with the consumer and his or her aspirations. Let's just go with the remorseless, materialistic flow of contemporary history because, at the end of the day, we know we're worth it.

However, given our recent discontents, with significant numbers in summer 2011 carrying the idea and exuberance of a shopping spree just a little too far - a contemporary consumerism red in tooth and claw - it could just be that past thinkers on the Left, continue to have something of worth to offer. For a profound indictment of consumer acquisitiveness perhaps a re-

reading of R. H. Tawney; for a sense of the human costs of a restless and puissant consumerism, William Morris and John Ruskin; for an appreciation of the diseconomies of an untrammeled and unregulated consumer-driven capitalism, the Fabian Essays of 1889.

But in particular I think Robert Owen and the early-nineteenth-century Owenites may have something useful to contribute. For these writers too addressed the issue of consumption and its multifarious consequences. Moreover like many of their contemporaries, they considered the period in which they lived as a profoundly transformational one that was creating the possibility of an abundance that could form the basis of a consumption that materially altered people's lives for the better. As one writer put it in the Cooperative Magazine for October 1827, Britain had, by that date, 'passed a boundary never before reached in the history of man: passed the regions of poverty arising from necessity and entered a realm of material abundance'.[iii]

So how did early-nineteenth-century socialist writers like Owen react to their own age of affluence and what relevance does their reaction have to our present discontents? First of all it is important to be clear that, for most of these early nineteenth-century socialists, the arrival of abundance, or a potential abundance, and the possibilities it opened up, was something to be celebrated. As one writer put it, 'in wealth itself, however superabundant, there is nothing injurious.'[iv] The mechanization of industrial processes and the general expansion of productive activity had created, as Robert Owen in particular recognized, the opportunity to add significantly to the sum total of human happiness.

However, what one does not have from Owen, and other early nineteenth-century socialists, is an uncritical celebration of the joys and virtues of private consumption. It was recognized, for example, that much contemporary consumption established, or rather confirmed, social distinctions. Alternatively, as one writer put it, it was designed to 'draw a line of distinction between possessors and their fellow creatures'. Such consumption created 'a circle of false pride and antipathy, within which sympathy is chilled and friendship destroyed'. Its objective, such writers believed, was to provoke envy, to confirm social division and to indulge in self advertisement. In this way, to quote another writer, 'time and talent are sacrificed for . . . unsocial objects; objects disgraceful to humanity'.[vi]

Such concerns generally related to the motives for consumption rather than, specifically, the objects consumed. However, in early nineteenth-century socialist writing, there was that of a critical nature, which related to the latter. In particular, there was a belief in the moral, social and political degeneracy induced by luxury goods; a belief that had its roots in the civic republican tradition of the eighteenth century. Luxury 'bred oppressive and disturbing vices'; it was productive of 'infirmity of body and mind';[vii] it was the cause and consequence of idleness and it induced an intellectual apathy both in the sybaritic rich and in those who, impoverished by the luxury consumption of others, were denied the means of educating themselves and their children. As one writer put it, 'the mental power of mankind is destroyed in one case by luxury and frivolous pursuits and in the other by want'; the two, of course, enjoying a symbiotic relationship.[viii]

For that reason, and others, the artificial stimulation of a desire for luxury was also something to be eschewed. William Godwin, regarding the proliferation of what he termed 'adventitious wants', wrote in The Enquirer, 1797, that,

`every man who invents a new luxury adds so much to the quantity of labour entailed on the lower orders of society . . . If a rich man employs the poor . . .in erecting palaces . . . in laying out his parks, and modelling his pleasure grounds, he will be found, when rightly considered, their enemy. He is adding to the weight of oppression and the vast accumulation of labour by which they are already sunk beneath the level of brutes.' [ix]

Many early nineteenth-century socialist writers saw things in a similar manner and were acutely sensitive to the social disutilities and human costs that multiplying material (and in particular luxury) demands could impose.

Moreover as Owen, and many socialist political economists saw it, market-mediated consumption in the old, 'immoral' world was also attended by social, moral and what could be termed psychological diseconomies. Thus the interaction of buyer and seller, consumer and producer in a competitive context engendered and rewarded unethical behaviour and discouraged and penalized those who acted, or tried to act, in a virtuous fashion. As Owen saw it,

`The necessity which the present system inflicts on all, to endeavour to sell their own labour dear, and to buy the labour of others cheap, contaminates and debases the character throughout all the departments of life. In fact, no one who has studied human nature, will ever expect to find a pure mind, or real virtue in society, as long as the business of life is one continued attempt to buy cheap and sell dear, by the intervention of money, which is daily altering in value.'[x]

Commerce, in the words of socialist writers, 'produce[d] falsehood [and] cunning'; it made `hypocrites of buyers and sellers'; it involved humanity in a 'universal traffic of deception'. In these respects, 'the individual system of buying and selling' 'train[ed] the human race to acquire the inferior mind of a pedlar and a dealer'.[xi] In consequence, buying and selling under existing economic and social arrangements made for social antagonism between the buyers and sellers of labour and, more generally, between the buyers and sellers of commodities. In Owen's view it served to 'engender a perpetual covetous warfare among the whole of the human race, each one seeking to take advantage of the ignorance or weakness of others'.[xii]

Such a system of private consumption, of buying and selling was also an inherently wasteful one. Addressing merchants and

retailers Owen pulled no punches when he wrote that, 'it is evident to every one that you do not create a particle of wealth for society; but that, without any adequate compensation to it, or real benefit to yourselves, you consume, in support of useless, showy establishments a large portion of that wealth which others produce'.[xiii] This gave a view of private retailers and retail establishments which was to echo down through subsequent decades of socialist literature. Such individuals were 'a dead weight upon society' who 'by the fanciful expensive establishments [they] have thought it beneficial to form' render '[you] useless and extravagant consumers of wealth'.[xiv]

For Owen and the Owenites buying and selling should therefore take place on the 'basis of labour for labour'. This would ensure fairness and end the scramble for advantage that characterized existing arrangements. Owen sought to operationalize such a system of exchange through the creation of labour exchanges, such as those established in London and Birmingham in the early 1830s. Ideally, however, goods should be distributed, unmediated by exchange, on the basis of need. Therein lay one of the great attractions of the cooperative communities favoured and indeed established by Owen and others. The creation of such communities would render exchanges and their attendant infrastructure and diseconomies defunct.

But more generally, how was consumption to be dealt with in the context of a socialist community or socialist commonwealth? How would and could the dangers attached to consumption, which socialists had so clearly identified within the existing scheme of things, be eliminated or elided? There was, in some of the socialist literature of the early nineteenth-century period, a distinctly ascetic response to these questions; one that saw a solution in frugality and the strict limitation of desire. Such a view is apparent, for example, in a pamphlet of the Ham Common Concordists who sought to establish a cooperative community on Ham Common, in Surrey, in the early 1840s. As their prospectus put it,

`custom, having burthened us with a multitude of artificial wants, it will be the business of the members to divest themselves of all those to which they have been subject. Economy, no less than the conditions for the development of man's highest nature, calls for the utmost simplicity in food, raiment, furniture, dwellings and other outward means and so inmates on all occasions must endeavour assiduously to reduce the number of their adventitious wants. Their drink will be water and their food vegetables and fruits, and they will eat their food chiefly uncooked by fire . . . their clothing will be that best adapted to man, without reference to fashion and caprice: and of one common texture.'[xv]

Communitarians should 'sleep on mattresses without down or feathers, and they will rise and retire early'. As to 'personal ablutions', these would 'be done completely, healthfully, and joyously by means of a shower or plunging bath direct from a pure spring'. As to food, all would 'eat from one board, spread with due regard to simplicity and purity'. Concordists would, in the words of the prospectus also 'enjoy simple meals to leave the intellect clear'.[xvi]

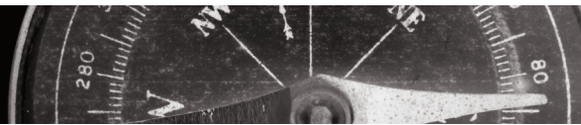
However, most early nineteenth-century socialist writers would have eschewed such extremes of frugality and self-denial. Rather, while accepting that consumption should serve 'the development of man's highest nature', they believed that the potential for material abundance should be fully realized and embraced. So, for Robert Owen, communities should produce, 'a full supply of those things which are necessary and the most beneficial for human nature. That which is best for human nature [being] agreed upon at the formation of the establishment;'[xvii] namely at the formation of the cooperative community.

Individual consumption would therefore be mediated by social or, more accurately, communitarian, judgments as to its utility. These would be reflected in the way in which the productive capacity of communities would be organized and the manner in which they, and that capacity, would develop. As Owen put it in his Proposals for a Change of System in the British Empire, published in 1834, *'the articles of the greatest necessity and utility . . . [will] be first made, afterwards the less useful or merely ornamental.'*[xviii] *What was to be avoided, at all costs, was the production and thence the consumption of the 'frivolous' and the 'fantastical'. There was to be 'no waste of labor, materials or skill attending to or producing what is useless or pernicious. All things will be estimated by their intrinsic worth, nothing will be esteemed merely for its cost and scarcity, and fashions of any kind will have no existence.'* [xix]

Consumption was to be rational consumption. Communitarians would enjoy 'healthy, enlightened, superior . . . pleasures'. Communities would 'minister to the comfort and gratification of rational beings'. They would make available 'every thing that can contribute to the improvement of men'. As to the consumption of leisure time this would be given over to 'rational recreation and social enjoyment' with communities furnishing 'ample leisure for intellectual improvement and social intercourse'[xx]

It would be communities, as communities, that would determine the pattern of individual consumption. They would judge what it was acceptable and what it was less, or unacceptable to consume. The criteria they applied would be essentially utilitarian; that is the maximization of social utility from available scarce resources. However, it was believed that the favourable effect of inhabiting a community would ensure that individual consumer choice could increasingly be relied on to be both rational and socially enlightened. Consumer sovereignty, within cooperative communities, was therefore predicated on the socialization, and therefore moralization, of individual choice.

The objective of most early nineteenth-century communitarian socialists was not so much to constrain as to educate desire through the formation of human character. For Owen, 'no one can doubt that it is for



the interest of mankind that abundance of the most useful and intrinsically valuable products should be created with the least labor and the greatest benefit to the producers and consumers'.[xxi] At the same time, however, he wrote, 'every individual should be trained to be capable of enjoying in the highest degree the use of these productions'. In part the actual occupations of communitarians by being 'greatly more favourable to health and intelligence' would militate against a desire for the 'frivolous', the 'fantastical' and the 'pernicious'.[xxii]

But the pervasive influence of a communitarian ethos would also be critical. And of course, with the education of desire, with the elimination or atrophy of demand for 'unsocial objects' and with the superior arrangements for production which would characterize co-operative communities, would come an end to unnecessary labour. And with that would emerge an expanded opportunity and appetite for the consumption of leisure time.

Indeed, for many early nineteenth-century socialists, increased consumption would, effectively, assume this form. Rational recreation would become one of the most important ways individuals would engage in what one writer termed, 'the right enjoyment of riches'.[xxiii] For Owen, 'the operatives, or actual producers of wealth', would 'be employed a reasonable time per day in producing wealth for society, and afterwards in . . . rejuvenating their health and spirits by rational recreation and social enjoyment'; these two things being seen as integrally related.[xxiv] Consistently with this, the education department within an Owenite community would be given the responsibility for devising and making available the best means of recreation; while the community itself would invest in social infrastructure favourable to rational pursuits, designed also to enlighten and to furnish opportunities for 'intellectual improvement and social intercourse'.[xxv] A commitment to rational recreation was to be integral to the physical infrastructure and even the topography of communities. A Description of an Architectural Model for a Community, published in 1830, mentioned its 'quadrangle . . . [being] laid out in shrubberies, flower gardens and pleasure grounds, scientifically arranged so that the gratifications of the gardens may be combined with new accessions of information, and the means of inculcating precepts of order at every step'. In John Thimbelby's Monadelphia, 1832, there would be 'a colonnade where the astronomer can display to his audience the wonders of the heavens; the naturalist, those of the earth; and the composer delight the sense with the effects of music'.[xxvi] As to Owen, his imagined community would have 'Assembly and Concert Rooms, Libraries and Reading Rooms, Museums, Laboratories, Artists Rooms [and] Lecture Rooms'.[xxvii]

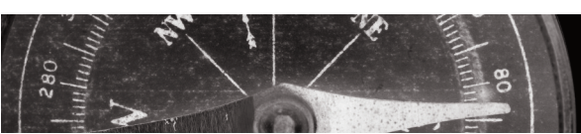
With its social infrastructure, we have expenditure that would facilitate and promote a consumption of leisure time that involved self-development not self-indulgence, self-understanding not self-advertisement, and a use of resources that would encourage the cerebral and the social. If such pleasures were about fun, they were also about serious fun through the realization and expression of the community's purpose and values.

One might also add here, if all this was to be predicated upon a personal consumption subjected to rational restraint, it would be complemented by, and indeed lay the basis for, a celebration of social opulence. Thus a visitor to the cooperative community imaginatively constructed by John Minter Morgan in his 1831 work, The Revolt of the Bees, remarks upon 'the full supply of everything essential, not only to the comfortable but even luxurious subsistence' of its inhabitants. The visitor noted too 'the beauty of your walks, the fertility of your gardens and parks; the convenient and elegant accommodations of every description; and, above all, the extent and magnificence of your buildings, notwithstanding the very temperate labour, or rather employment, of the inhabitants'. In like manner the visitor described the rooms of the community as:

`lofty with circular ceilings. In each [are] suspended two magnificent chandeliers of exquisitely cut glass, which in winter [are] lighted with gas, producing a splendid effect; the panels of the rooms [are] fawn colour with gold beading and the curtains of a rich crimson, tastefully disposed in festoons with a deep fringe. The roof [is] entirely oak, and carved in imitation of the richest Gothic fretwork. There are wines and liqueurs of various kinds . . . though they [are] but seldom asked for . . . the earthenware [is] brought to such perfection as to be superior to that of the Chinese . . . Between the windows [are] slabs of the finest marble, supported by bronze figures: upon these marbles [are] placed large vessels of gold, filled with spring water and at every corner of the room [is] a marble figure holding a Roman lamp suspended by a chain.' [xxviii]

So: no physically and morally bracing asceticism here: no featherless mattresses and ice-cold plunges. One senses that the Ham Common Concordists might have felt a little out of place in such an establishment. What Minter Morgan imaginatively conjures for us here is something that resembles more nearly the elegance and luxury of an English country house, than the austere Concordist regime which approximates more closely to that of an English public school. Not only do we have the celebration of material abundance but, crucially, there is a celebration of social not individual consumption. Private restraint lays the basis for social opulence. If there is a culture of contentment here it is a social and not an individual one. By definition, therefore, it does not involve the consumption of unsocial objects of individual desire.

In this context too, labour is not driven by the market-mediated imperatives unleashed by private consumers intent on the satisfaction of adventitious wants. Rather the pattern and purpose of labour is determined and sanctioned by the community as a whole. They are a consequence of a communal estimation of the social utility of consumption against the



social and individual disutility of the labour involved in furnishing what is to be consumed. Consumption ceases to be the expression and result of an individual's buying power. It ceases to be a personal statement of desire. It is stripped of its potential to divide. Rather, consumption of this kind expresses the social objectives and thence the social solidarity of the community. As envisaged here, consumption also becomes an expression of that community's artistic, intellectual, architectural, in short its creative achievements. It becomes an articulation and a celebration of its values in both an economic and, more profoundly, in a moral sense. The community produces for consumption what it deems to be of worth. Its consumption reflects its ethical raison d'être; what it is and what it aspires to be.

Returning to the earlier question of what, given our current discontents, early nineteenth-century socialist political economy could offer us. We have a vision that not only eschews the potentially alienating asceticism of the Concordists, but also the consumer-driven discourse and aspirations of Post-Fordist socialists and New Labour. It is prescriptive, didactic and, on occasion, paternalistic in character; it will undoubtedly grate on some modern, `liberal' sensibilities. It also implies, if it does not commit, the modern heresy of circumscribing consumer sovereignty, questioning the notion of the individual consumer as the rational arbiter of how a society's resources can best be used. It can therefore be seen as anathema to those whose primary objective is to win elections rather than transform society. It is, for all that, a vision that might lead its adherents to challenge a hegemonic culture of personal contentment that has surely played some part in recent events.

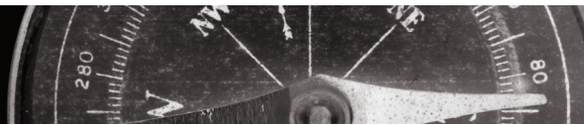
Moreover, it forces us to think about the distinction between social and unsocial objects of desire. It raises the possibility of educating material wants not simply conniving at them. In particular, it is a vision that embraces the notion that social consumption can have virtue, or virtues, to which private consumption cannot pretend. It also reminds us that the nature and magnitude of our social consumption says much about the society of which we are a part: its values, its priorities, its aspirations. Above all it is a vision that argues consumption can be, indeed should be, rather more about the democratic identification and satisfaction of needs and rather less about their determination by the magnitude of an individual's purchasing power.

Those who advance such ideas must run the risk of being termed intrusive, patronizing and elitist. After all, this was the tone of Crosland's rejection of Fabian socialism, in the 1950s, accusing it of elevating abstinence and a good filing system above the kind of consumption that mitigated or eliminated drudgery and opened up the possibility of `liberty and gaiety in private life'. Those who would make a bonfire of contemporary vanities, if they need no longer fear the fate of Savonarola, must needs tread carefully and have the considerable moral courage necessary to rebut the accusation of propounding a killjoy paternalism.

In the aftermath of the 1930s and postwar austerity, Crosland may well have been right to trumpet the liberating potential of what a new material affluence could offer. It was certainly politically expedient for him to do so. But for many, in the industrialized West and East, we have now surely passed well beyond this point to one where it is necessary to recognize what personal consumption has become and what it costs. Like Godwin, Owen and the Owenites, we must understand the kind of damage it can inflict on ourselves, on others and on the environment. We must recognize that it has become, for many, less about satisfaction and much more about power; that it all too often underpins the creation, or recreation and strengthening, of social stratification; that its prioritization is one of the key drivers of the consensus on tax cuts and curbs on public expenditure with all that follows for a decaying social infrastructure.

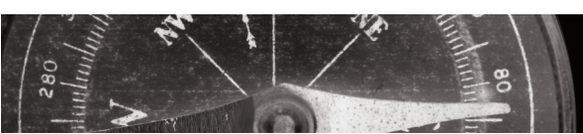
It is in this last regard that Owen and the Owenites surely have something important to teach us, or to remind us of: namely, that private restraint may be a necessary precondition for social opulence. For some, perhaps for many, such a statement may be unpalatable. For others it will surely resonate with our present predicament where an aggressive acquisitiveness and the untrammelled venting of desire have shown us the costs and consequences of a possessive individualism uninformed by any sense that there is such a thing as society.

Since the emergence of the New Right, and its political and ideological triumphs in the last quarter of the twentieth century, public-expenditure-funded social consumption has had a bad press except perhaps, at least until recently, when it has assumed the form of PFI-funded infrastructural investment. There is no need to rehearse the provenance, theoretical underpinnings and assiduous and well-finance proselytization that has brought this about. It suffices to say that such a view has impressed itself sufficiently on popular consciousness to influence profoundly the parameters of political debates on public finance and macroeconomic management and thence perceptions of what is seen as politically, or more accurately electorally, possible.
In this regard a concept of social opulence and the attendant notion of social consumption may have some utility. Against the idea that public expenditure represents austerity and private satisfactions denied, these concepts carry with them the notion of both social and individual utilities. Indeed the former suggests the notion of pleasurable enjoyment and conspicuous display; though conspicuous consumption of a non-Veblenesque kind as it involves neither emulation nor social competition but rather a public celebration of social values, social worth and aesthetic achievement.
What is meant by social opulence? To begin with, it can be seen as characteristic of a society rich in opportunities for collective and individual creativity; with cities and towns characterised by the beauty of their



built environment; a vibrant civil society rich in possibilities for participation and social interaction; a society enriched by the diversity of its cultures and identities and the opportunities for their expression; one distinguished by the quality of its natural environment and one investing heavily in the health and mental/physical well-being of its population. This is a tentative and not an exhaustive list of characteristics but, as with opulence more generally, social opulence requires `lavish' expenditure and, therefore, the commitment and consumption of considerable resource. Put more conventionally, a prioritisation of, and substantial increase in, social expenditure; though such opulence need not necessarily be entirely a product of the public purse. Expenditure that adds to social opulence could have a private sector origin or come from a combination of the two: for example the legacy of the Olympics and Paralympics with stadia and sports facilities and sports infrastructure which, at least in theory, and hopefully in practice, can lay the basis for the health and well-being that is integral to social opulence as it has been defined. Beautifully designed, if privately financed, buildings could fall into this category. Heritage sites and coastal paths, the Angel of the North, nature reserves and areas of outstanding natural beauty, expenditure on culture and the arts, museums, art galleries, concert halls, the creation of public spaces: the potential list is long and justice to it cannot be done in a piece such as this; though social opulence is, of course, most heavily dependent on conventional areas of public expenditure: education, health, social welfare and the environment and ilt is here that its positive connotations can, perhaps, be most effectively exploited.

So given that in straitened economic times the language of austerity is focused on the public purse and given that, as has been argued, an increase in social consumption is predicated upon private restraint, such consumption, and what it can achieve, will require a justification articulated in terms of a radically different conception of wealth and what it means to be wealthy, from that which is conventionally deployed. It is in this context, and to meet this challenge that the Owenite notion of social opulence might be deployed to greatest and most beneficial effect .



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[i] J. Burns, Brains better than bets or beer, London, 1912, p. 13

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[xvii] Owen, Proposal, p. 246, my emphasis.

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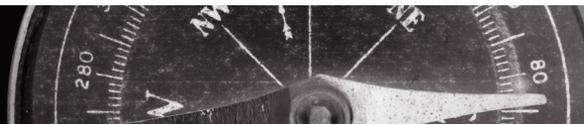
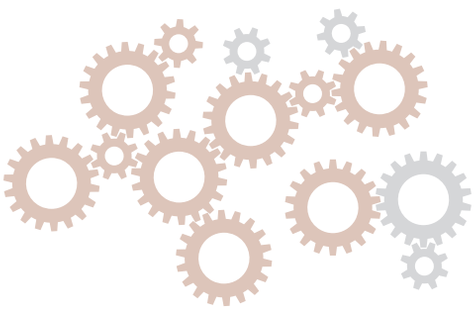
[xxvi] S. Whitwell, Description of an Architectural Model for a Community, London, 1830, p. 16 – the organizing principle, as it happens, of the walled garden in the National Botanical Gardens of Wales; John Thimbleby, Monadelphia: or, The Formation of a New System of Society, Barnet, 1832, pp. 20–1.

[xxvii] Owen, A development of the principles and plans, Claeys, Selected works, p. 375.

[xxviii] John Minter Morgan, The Revolt of the Bees, 5th edition, London, 1831, p. 397. One wonders if this is the first example of that socialist flirtation with the Gothic that is more fully developed later in the century in the work, amongst others, of William Morris.





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