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# Capitalism, war and internationalism in the thought of Richard Cobden<sup>1</sup>

PETER GAIN

## *Cobden and the liberal tradition*

Since twentieth century society has been so badly scarred by wars between the major industrial powers it is difficult to understand how it was that capitalist industry was once held to be the great material and moral force which would bring peace to the world. The idea was, nonetheless, firmly implanted in the minds of many men in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Richard Cobden, the English radical politician, was one of these and the eradication of international conflict became the central concern of his life.

The conventional picture of Cobden is often not very clearly defined. There is still a tendency to see him simply as one of the Bounderbys of Victorian England because of his association with the most materialist and Philistine of the British business class during the campaign to abolish the Corn Laws between 1838 and 1846. Standing in uneasy juxtaposition with this is the image of Cobden, the Utopian visionary, pursuing the impossible goal of international peace during the last twenty years of his life. These apparently conflicting impressions can only be properly reconciled if Cobden is treated not just as a political agitator but as an intellectual with a large capacity for systematic thought.<sup>2</sup> Throughout his adult life, he had in mind a picture of an ideal society based on a coherent system of thought within which Free Trade and international peace were indispensable, interlocking parts. Bagehot's obituary description of him as a "bold, original intellect, acting on a special experience, and striking out views and

1. I should like to thank Dr. J. R. B. Johnson and Prof. T. W. Hutchison for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft of the article.

2. Amongst modern writers, O. McDonagh in 'The Anti-Imperialism of Free Trade', *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, xiv (1961-2), pp. 489-501, treats Cobden as a serious thinker. J. R. Vincent alludes to Cobden's "coherent interpretation of the world and its history" but does not develop this far. *The Formation of the British Liberal Party 1857-68* (London, 1966), pp. 31-4. In this context, the best of the older accounts are by Sir Louis Mallet. See the essay in his book *Free Exchange* (London, 1891) and his introduction to the 1878 one volume edition of Cobden's *Political Writings*. I have also found extremely useful D. Read's *Cobden and Bright: A Victorian Political Partnership* (London, 1967), and H. D. Jordan 'The Case of Richard Cobden', *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 83 (1971), pp. 34-45.

principles not known to, or neglected by, ordinary men”<sup>1</sup> is no more than just.

Perhaps the simplest and most effective way of penetrating to the centre of Cobden’s thought is to look at the distinction between the two ideal types, “militant” societies and “industrial” societies, made later by Herbert Spencer.<sup>2</sup> Militant societies were those which, for reasons connected with the mode of production, were organized for war as their primary purpose. They were engaged continuously either in fighting for their existence or making predatory raids on others. Success as a fighting unit depended ultimately upon internal cohesion and the greater the cohesion the stronger the hierarchies and the discipline, and the greater the lack of real freedom for individuals. The eternal search for security meant also the need for material self-sufficiency implying protectionism and an aggressive foreign and colonial policy. Every aspect of life in these societies was tainted by the central pre-occupation with strife; goodness was equated with bravery and strength, love of one’s country with hatred of the enemy; and the highest tasks of the individual were unquestioning and unreasoning obedience to authority and the sacrifice of his life for the sake of the community. Industrial societies, on the other hand, were not simply those with a large amount of manufacturing enterprise – for a militant society might well contain a highly productive manufacturing sector dedicated to war – but were rather ones in which the aggressive instincts of men were sublimated in work. Here, the production of socially useful commodities became the chief end of the labour of mankind, and voluntary co-operative effort replaced the coercion of the state as the motivating force.

Underlying all of Cobden’s work both as politician and writer, was a vision of the creation of this kind of industrial world, which would bring freedom and happiness to the mass of men, evolving out of a feudal, military society which was in many ways its opposite. This new society appeared to be growing naturally around him. It prospered because it was founded upon the spontaneous needs of mankind and was the result of the equally spontaneous organization men created to meet these needs. Such a society if allowed to evolve freely would be regulated by a moral code implanted in men divinely and this would find expression in a system of natural justice – a system which turns out in the end to be a series of rules allowing everyone the maximum freedom of action compatible with the same boon for everyone else. These natural laws were to provide the framework within which individuals could co-operate with each other on equal terms and on the principle of division of labour.<sup>3</sup> They were, ideally, to be means towards the end of

1. N. St. John Stevas (ed.), *The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot* (London, 1968), iii, pp. 296–7. Bagehot also speaks of “an original stress of speculation, an innate energy of thought.”

2. H. Spencer, *Principles of Sociology*, ii (London, 1902. ed.), pp. 568–642.

3. The moral context within which classical economic thought took place is being increasingly stressed in modern scholarship as is apparent from the interest taken in Adam

equality of opportunity and the competition which they fostered was to act as a natural restraint upon the vaulting ambition or greed of individual men. Eventually there would be created a self-regulating society of small scale, independent producers.<sup>1</sup> It was not a society from which difference in status or wealth had been eliminated but one where these were based on differences in effort and enterprise, rather than privilege. It is important to recognize that the ideal was inspired by the growth of domestic or handicraft manufacture and trade before machinery and great concentrations of capital came to dominate the industrial scene and when

the technology of handicraft, as well as the market relations of petty trade pushed the individual workman into the foreground and led men to think of economic interests in terms of this workman and his work; the situation emphasised his creative relation to his product, as well as his responsibility for this product and for its serviceability to the common welfare. It was a situation in which the acquisition of property depended, in the main, on the workmanlike serviceability of the man who acquired it, and in which, on the whole, honesty was the best policy.<sup>2</sup>

Cobden's own attachment to this kind of small property owners' society can probably be traced to his origins as the son of a Sussex tenant farmer in a family with yeoman ancestry. The decline of his father's fortunes, and his own restless and energetic ambition eventually took him north to work in the textile industry.<sup>3</sup> But although the potential of Lancashire excited and stimulated him, his desire for a rural life and its attendant crafts remained. As a young man of 31, engaged in a highly successful business in Manchester, he wrote that had he the casting role of all the actors in the world's stage, "we do not think we should suffer a cotton mill or a manufactory to have a place in it."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, after the repeal of the Corn Laws he returned to live on a small property in his beloved Sussex, although still representing northern constituencies in Parliament.

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Smith's hitherto neglected work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* first published in 1759. For the relationship between this and the more famous *Wealth of Nations* see, for example, O. H. Taylor, *Economics and Liberalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), pp. 87–99; R. Anspach, 'The Implications of the Theory of Moral Sentiments for Adam Smith's Economic Thought', *History of Economic Thought* (1972) pp. 176–216; A. McFie, *The Individual in Society—Papers on Adam Smith* (London, 1967), Ch. 4. Smith was very much Cobden's intellectual mentor.

1. Theories of perfect competition in economics are based upon very similar assumptions.

2. T. Veblen, *Essays in Our Changing Order* (New York, 1954), p. 217. For the description of this ideal I am indebted to J. Y. D. Peel, *Herbert Spencer the Evolution of a Sociologist* (London, 1971), Ch. 8 esp. pp. 214–23, and K. Fielden, 'Samuel Smiles and Self-Help', in *Victorian Studies*, xxi (1968–9), pp. 155–76.

3. J. Morley, *The Life of Richard Cobden*, i (London, 1881), Chs. 1 & 2; R. McGilchrist, *Richard Cobden, The Apostle of Free Trade* (London, 1865), Ch. I.

4. *The Political Writings of Richard Cobden*, i (London, 1868), p. 139: There is a trace of nostalgia for the old domestic system in an Address of the Anti-Corn Law League of 1838 with which Cobden's name was associated and which asserted that "with a free untaxed

The notion of a commonwealth of voluntarily co-operating individuals could be extended to become a cosmopolitanism which promised perpetual peace. Trade among nations would bring about an international division of labour which would lead to harmonious relationships among them based upon mutual needs. Even Ricardo, the most sober of the classical economists, felt the excitement of this when he wrote:

Under a system of perfectly free commerce, each country naturally devotes its capital and labour to such employments as are most beneficial to each. This pursuit of individual advantage is admirably connected with the universal good of the whole. By stimulating industry, by rewarding ingenuity, and by using most efficaciously the peculiar powers bestowed by nature, it distributes labour most effectively and most economically; while by increasing the general mass of productions, it diffuses general benefits, and binds together by one common tie of interest and intercourse, the universal society of nations throughout the civilized world.<sup>1</sup>

In this view, international trade was basically a mutually beneficial relationship among nations fairly equal in wealth and power and it was assumed that the gains from trade were evenly distributed.

Cobden's own susceptibility to this cosmopolitanism was probably increased by his early business life: as a textile merchant, rather than a manufacturer, he mixed easily enough with the foreign traders who made up a sizeable portion of Manchester's population. He also travelled extensively in Europe and America both in pursuit of orders and out of youthful desire to see the world.

These notions of liberty, equality and international harmony were chiefly attractive to elements within the new business class, especially the smaller capitalists and some of the independent artisans. Their enemy was the politically dominant landed aristocracy, heirs of the older militant tradition, whose use of government to control land, trade, education, religion and the press was seen as the main obstacle to the natural growth of the individual in society, and whose propensity for warfare threatened to siphon away the wealth of the nation. In Cobden's case this was combined with a strong moral and religious feeling for the virtues of industrialism and the correspondingly unnatural wickedness of aristocracy and privilege. Such feelings were part of the atmosphere of the time but they may have been sharpened by Cobden's reading of George Combe, the phrenologist, through whom the social morality of Adam Smith and the Scottish enlightenment may also have been filtered. In *The Constitution of Man*, first published in 1828, it is made plain that those who followed this moral law here described, and

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trade in corn, the muslin, gingham and calico weavers may again ply his industry at home amid his own happy and contented family". E. W. Watkin, *Alderman Cobden of Manchester* (1891), pp. 63-4.

1. P. Sraffa (ed.), *The Works of David Ricardo* i (London, 1951), p. 133-134.

thereby live in harmony with nature, would find happiness whilst those who transgressed would be punished by Providence. It is noticeable that for Combe, as for Adam Smith and Spencer, immorality includes commercial and industrial greed and rapacity. The ideal society was not one in which men amassed wealth by any means they could – which was no better than the life of a decayed aristocracy – but one in which the new prosperity would be used to allow everyone to live a life of creative independence.<sup>1</sup>

As an inheritor of these traditions, Cobden dedicated himself to promoting industrialism and peace against ‘Old Corruption’. None of his views were novel but he had a gift for synthesising important ideas and producing a grand view of humanity’s progress which is well worth attention. The gift is apparent in the early pamphlets *England, Ireland and America* (1835) and *Russia* (1836) which showed that this “busy dealer in printed calicoes” was by the age of 30 “fully possessed of the philosophical gift of feeling about society as a whole and thinking about the problems of society in an ordered connection with one another.”<sup>2</sup>

### *Early writings*

Even a cursory reading of the pamphlets will show that the greatest menace Cobden saw to the emergence of industrial society was the dominant aristocracy and its warlike propensities. The language is reminiscent of Paine: “the battle plain is the harvest field of the aristocracy, watered with the blood of the people”.<sup>3</sup> International conflict, the intricacies of the Balance of Power system, constant interference in the affairs of other nations, extensive colonial conquest and colonial jealousies were, to Cobden, the natural effects of aristocratic government. The outcome was that a considerable portion of the country’s income was devoted to war, preparation for war and the bureaucratic and ideological apparatus which surrounded it. The income was largely drained away from industry through indirect taxation, cutting down savings and investment, slowing down growth and increasing poverty. The only beneficiaries of this redistribution of income were the existing land elite who monopolised the positions created in military, diplomatic, colonial and ecclesiastical life, its one tangible result a national debt of £800m. which hung like a millstone around the necks of the industrious. And, while war and rumours of

1. G. Combe, *The Constitution of Man* (8th ed., Edinburgh, 1847), esp. pp. 125–6, 302f. This book and the *Wealth of Nations* were probably the two biggest intellectual influences on Cobden in his youth. In a speech in 1844 Cobden claimed that there was “but one test for the future greatness of Manchester” and that was not the accumulation of wealth but “the development of wealth in mental resources” and “moral and intellectual development”, without which “the expanse of houses and mills will be to the odium rather than the honour of Manchester”. Watkin, p. 136. cf. Morley, *op. cit.* i, p. 119.

2. Morley, *op. cit.* i, p. 89.

3. *Pol. Writings, op. cit.* pp. 42–3.

war remained at the centre of political life, there was not likely to be much change for “while terror and bloodshed reign in the land, involving men’s minds in the extremities of hopes and fears, there can be no process of thought, no education going on, by which alone can a people be prepared for the enjoyment of rational liberty”.<sup>1</sup>

It was particularly galling to Cobden that a large part of the revenue to pay the interest on the national debt and to meet current military and colonial expenses should be defrayed through tariffs, especially the Corn Laws, which helped to maintain the income and therefore the position of the landed aristocracy and deprived industry of investible funds. Cobden claimed that because the policy was evil it was also politically disastrous. His argument had a brutal simplicity. To create the wealth necessary to pay off the burden of the national debt and to meet current expenses Britain needed to increase the number of her population productively employed in industry. This could only happen if there was a large increase in industrial exports. The Corn Laws stood in the way of this by increasing industry’s costs and by making it difficult for foreign countries to find sterling with which to buy British commodities.<sup>2</sup> Cobden believed that if the Corn Law of 1815 had never been imposed, the wealth and population of Britain would have been far greater than it actually was twenty years later, if only because the industry of the Continent and of America might never have flourished but for “the fostering bounties which the high-priced food of the British artisan has offered to the cheaper fed manufacturer of those countries.”<sup>3</sup>

Cobden had very little affection for the urban life which resulted from industrialism but he knew that “the factory system which sprang from the discoveries in machinery has been adopted in all the civilized nations of the world and it is in vain for us to think of discountenancing its application to the necessities of this country”.<sup>4</sup> Free trade in industrial products was, however, much more than “a gross pocket question”. Its most important service was to help in the ending of warfare. It did this, first, by undermining the income and position of the ruling landlord class. Secondly, by furthering the international division of labour, it helped to bring nations hitherto in conflict into a relationship of economic dependence. Cobden expected that the instinct for violence would be increasingly overlaid by a sense of the disasters which severing commercial relations would bring. Commerce, he said, was “binding us in abject dependence upon all the countries of the earth”, and he could hope that “freedom of commerce and exemption from warfare will be the inevitable fruits of the future growth of (their) mechanical and chemical improvement, the *germ* of which has only

1. *Ibid.* p. 45.

2. *Ibid.* pp. 139–51. At this time Cobden was still advocating a small fixed revenue duty on imported corn, an ‘error’ soon recanted.

3. *Ibid.* p. 150.

4. *Ibid.* p. 140.

been planted in our day".<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere he referred to commerce as "the grand panacea, which, like a beneficent medical discovery, will serve to inoculate with the healthy and saving taste for civilization all the nations of the world".<sup>2</sup> Industry flourished in peace and peace itself would eliminate the warlike forces by taking away their rationale.

In advocating this new approach to international relations Cobden was directly attacking some of the most fundamental assumptions of British foreign policy. The belief that our trade and empire had to be defended was firmly fixed in the minds of successive governments. A strong navy was felt to be necessary to the purpose, as was the policy of keeping a "balance" or "equilibrium" between the other great powers of Europe who might threaten our interests. The main fear of British statesmen was that one power might come to dominate the Continent and be in a position to threaten Britain's security in Europe and in the world at large and perhaps even launch an invasion. Hence, Britain was always ready to throw her diplomatic and military weight against any nation which seemed likely to acquire a taste for European hegemony and France and Russia took it in turn to play the villain in British eyes. When Cobden was writing his first pamphlets the great enemy was seen to be Russia who was suspected of plotting to overthrow the Turkish Empire as part of a plan to gain control of the Near East and the Mediterranean. Palmerston, as Foreign Secretary in Melbourne's Whig Government, opposed Russia and stood for the integrity of the Sultan's ailing empire in order to prevent Russia from stepping into a geographical position from which she could threaten British interests in the Levant and dominate shipping in the Mediterranean which was a vital part of the route to India and our eastern trading interests. Much of the hostility to Russia among Britons themselves stemmed from a vague fear of the supposed might of this huge, semi-barbarian land, which sometimes induced the nightmare of Russian dominance of Europe and even invasion of Britain herself.<sup>3</sup>

Cobden rejected the whole policy as both irrational and immoral. It appeared to him merely as a useful device for concealing the self-interest of the aristocracy and hiding the fact that the majority of people had no real interest in going to war or preparing for it. Cobden tried to prove this last contention by looking at the Russian problem of the day. Starting from the premise that "no government has the right to plunge its people into hostilities, except in defence of their own national honour or interests".<sup>4</sup> Cobden went on to argue that neither honour nor interest would be served by defending Turkey against Russia. Turkey "was a fierce unmitigated military despotism . . . allied with the fanaticism of a brutalizing religion" and the country reflected

1. *Ibid.* p. 190.

2. *Ibid.* p. 45.

3. See J. H. Gleason, *The Genesis of Russophobia in Great Britain* (Harvard, 1950).

4. *Pol. Writings, op. cit.* p. 9



the immorality of its rulers in its backwardness and in the pitiful smallness of its foreign trade.<sup>1</sup> Russia, on the other hand, was improving slowly in the scale of civilization and freedom and our trade with her was substantial and growing. Were Russia to conquer Turkey, Cobden felt that this would redound to our benefit in the long run for Russia would bring Christianity and its message of freedom to Turkey and with it “commerce and civilization” for the first time.<sup>2</sup>

Cobden dismissed the idea that Russian domination of Turkey could pose any threat to Britain’s interests or make her susceptible to invasion. Fears for the safety of the Empire were chimerical for Russia’s absorption of Turkey would preoccupy her for the foreseeable future. More fundamentally, Cobden argued that the practice of keeping colonies and dependencies was unnecessary. Britain’s industrial expansion depended upon increasing her trade with the whole world on the freest possible basis. In this circumstance, colonies could confer no special trading benefits; rather they absorbed large amounts of British income in administration and in defence and our preferential system based on them merely aggravated other nations, as well as our own colonial subjects, and provoked them into harmful retaliatory measures. Colonies were only “the costly appendages of aristocratic life”, provoking wars which “have ever been but another aristocratical mode for plundering and oppressing commerce”.<sup>3</sup>

What of the argument that Russian control of the Mediterranean and other strategic points could help them to disrupt or choke off Britain’s foreign trade? Cobden had no patience with this argument, fundamental though it seemed to be, because “it has over and over again been proved to the world, that violence and force can never prevail against the wants and wishes of mankind, in other words that despotic laws against freedom of trade can never be executed”.<sup>4</sup> This was proved for Cobden by the failure of the Napoleonic blockade, which, he claimed, only managed to reduce our exports by 8% in value between 1807 and 1809 at a time when two-thirds of our foreign trade was done with Europe. “Russian violence” he concluded, “cannot

1. *Ibid.* p. 170.

2. *Ibid.* pp. 33–34. Cobden’s feeling for the relationship between morality on the one hand and freedom and happiness on the other is clearly brought out in his attitude to the Polish question. He deplored the Russian conquest of Poland but he put the blame for it firmly at the door of the latter’s “wicked ill-governed and licentious militarism” which had weakened the country morally, and therefore, physically. He goes on to say that “the fate of Poland was but a triumph of justice, without which history would have conveyed no moral for the benefit of posterity”. *Ibid.* pp. 255–6. But it must be noted that his argument that Russian domination of Turkey and Poland would benefit the latter ran counter to his belief that England ought to abstain from interference in the affairs of others because she could not know what was good for them.

3. *Ibid.* p. 195.

4. *Ibid.* p. 13.

5. *Ibid.* pp. 12–14. W. D. Grampp in *The Manchester School of Economics* (London, 1960), pp. 22–3 argues that Ricardo may have been the source of this idea. It is however also argued in a very similar way to Cobden’s in James Mill, in *Commerce Defended*, (1808) Ch. 1.

destroy or even sensibly injure our trade".<sup>1</sup> The basis of our power was our competitiveness as an industrial nation:

If our readers should ask, as reasoning minds ought to do, to what are we indebted for this commerce? – we answer in the name of any manufacturer and merchant in this kingdom – The *cheapness* alone of our manufactures. Are we asked How is this trade protected, and by what means can it be enlarged? The reply still is By the *cheapness* of our manufactures. It is inquired how this mighty industry, upon which depends the comfort and existence of the whole empire, can be torn from us? – we rejoin, Only by the *greater cheapness* of the manufacturers of another country.<sup>2</sup>

The notion that Russia might have the strength and the will to invade us struck Cobden as absurd. Russia was vast in extent but weak nonetheless for the real source of power in the modern world was industrialism and Russia was only on the threshold of industrial transformation. Britain's power was altogether greater and could be mobilized at very short notice in cases of emergency. And, as Russia industrialized, she would of necessity become more and more a participant in the world economy and, in doing so, would be subject to the same tendencies towards peace as other developed and developing nations.<sup>3</sup>

England's best policy, therefore, was one of non-interference abroad and unfettered industrialism at home and the two aims were indivisible. If she avoided continental entanglements and reduced national expenditure in a short time she would "present a spectacle of prosperity, wealth and power, which invariably reward a period of peace". This would make it evident enough to other nations, impoverished by war, that it was in their best interests to adopt the same policy. "Can there be a doubt that the *example* of the advantages to be derived from labour and improvement, over those accruing from bloodshed and rapine . . . would determine the future of Russia in favour of industry and commerce? The mere instinct of self-love and self-preservation must decide".<sup>4</sup>

Cobden was aware that the irrational fear of other countries jostled for predominance in the minds of his countrymen with the very different assumption that British ways and institutions were incomparable and this often led to a desire to meddle in the affairs of others on the assumption that we knew what was best for them. Cobden objected to this because it made war a staple of policy, because he did not believe that we had sufficient knowledge and wisdom to help others in their particular circumstances and because, if the improving spirit were about, it had plenty to occupy it at home. He pointed out that while

1. *Ibid.* p. 16.

2. *Ibid.* p. 287. cf Josiah Tucker, *The Case for Going to War for the Sake of Trade . . .* (1764) p. 82, for a strikingly similar assertion.

3. *Ibid.* p. 180f.

4. *Ibid.* pp. 335–6.

we were condemning the Russians we were responsible for Ireland which presented "a grosser spectacle of moral and physical debasement than is to be met with in the whole civilized world".<sup>1</sup> Part of the blame was undoubtedly England's for she had stultified Irish trade with mercantilist policies and reinforced Catholicism, the religion most likely to retard secular progress, by insisting upon establishing a Protestant Church in Ireland. It was our duty to disestablish the church and give Ireland free trade which would encourage capital investment and put her on the path to civilization. As matters stood, the degraded Irish peasantry were flocking to England, becoming a "moral cancer" on industrial life, demoralizing the working class and showing that if "we neglect our obvious duty towards these our fellow countrymen, then will the sins and omissions of their fathers be visited upon the future generations of Englishmen".<sup>2</sup>

If England had a rival to fear it was from a quarter hitherto unsuspected. Cobden visited America for the first time in 1835 and was much impressed by its achievements and even more so by its possibilities.<sup>3</sup> He saw clearly that the United States was the country where industrialisation would have its most unimpeded progress because, besides its immense natural resources, the country was free from the trammels of a traditional aristocracy. The national debt had been liquidated and current military spending, reflecting a lack of interest in overseas concerns, was very low. And the equality of opportunity which Cobden felt essential to allow individuals to break away from privilege and tradition, was almost achieved in America for they had a free press and free universal education, both of which would be critical in helping them to achieve industrial eminence.<sup>4</sup> He was led to the conclusion that it was "not by the efforts of barbarian force that the power and greatness of England are in danger of being superseded; yes, by the successful rivalry of America shall we, in all probability, be placed second in the rank of nations."<sup>5</sup> England could only forestall the coming victory of American "cheapness" by imitating her policies, above all by adopting the American maxim, "as little intercourse as possible betwixt Governments as much connection as possible between the nations of the world".<sup>6</sup>

Cobden's views had a prime simplicity. The world was poised between industrialism which meant prosperity and international peace, and a feudal agricultural system which implied subordination for many and war. To further industrialism England's best policy was to

1. *Ibid.* p. 48.

2. *Ibid.* p. 75.

3. Cobden's admiration for the U.S.A. and his feeling for its latent strength remained throughout his life. See E. H. Cowley, *The American Diaries of Richard Cobden* (Princeton, 1952), esp. pp. 23, 33-34 and 70-4.

4. *Pol. Writings, op. cit.* p. 121f.

5. *Ibid.* p. 100. He argued, for example, that another war would give the Americans the opportunity to capture our carrying trade. *Ibid.* p. 327.

6. *Ibid.* pp. 282-3.

avoid international conflict at all costs, concentrating on freeing industry from its restrictions and on providing equality of opportunity. This virtuous policy would bring inviolable power and provide an example for the other nations of Europe to follow. On the other hand, if effective political power was left in the hands of the old aristocracy, then industrialism could founder in a world dedicated to war, protectionism, colonialism and national self-sufficiency.

The political programme which was to occupy him for the next thirty years can be found in these pamphlets and its unity is apparent. At the centre of it was the determination to eliminate the landed aristocracy and all its institutional and ideological surrounds. This required the ending of international warfare through free trade, the curtailing of military expenditure and a general policy of "No Foreign Politics".<sup>1</sup> This, in its turn, meant an earnest endeavour to rouse the "middle and industrious" classes through a free press and education (at public expense if necessary) so that the "moral force" of society could rationally assert itself, equality or opportunity be established and all interfering government be swept away.

#### *Cobden's principles and political practice*

As an active politician, Cobden was well aware that these reforms would only come piecemeal over a considerable period of time and it was by no means a foregone conclusion that, out of the large number of particular issues in which he was interested, Free Trade should be the one which would occupy most of his attention. Mallett claims, for example, that Cobden was thinking at one time of concentrating on the education question;<sup>2</sup> the agitation for the ballot also attracted him and he was enthusiastic for the penny post.<sup>3</sup> The reason why he became caught up on the campaign to repeal the Corn Laws was partly of course because of their intrinsic importance. The Corn Laws were not only a severe economic burden but also the outstanding symbol, in business-men's eyes, of the political dominance of the old order. "The Corn-law is the great tree of Monopoly, under whose baneful shadow every other restriction exists. Cut it down by the roots and it will destroy others in its fall."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the Repeal campaign attracted Cobden because, of all the reforms in which he was interested, it seemed the one most likely to attract mass support and be capable of rapid achievement.<sup>5</sup>

During eight years of activity for the Anti-Corn Law League between 1838 and 1846, Cobden was often in the thick of the bitter political

1. *Ibid.* p. 43.

2. Sir L. Mallett, *Free Exchange* (London, 1891), pp. 20f.

3. H. D. Jordan, 'Richard Cobden and Penny Postage: A Note on the Processes of Reform', *Victorian Studies*, viii (1965), pp. 355-60.

4. J. Bright and J. E. Thorold Rogers (eds.), *Speeches on Questions of Public Policy by Richard Cobden M.P.*, i (London, 1870), pp. 77-8, 115.

5. Morley, i, *op. cit.* p. 126.

infighting which it provoked and proved a tough and occasionally unscrupulous political opponent. Yet his fundamental idealism remained. He spoke of the Corn Law as evil, a deliberate attack on God's plan for a harmonious, prosperous world. "Free Trade" as he later put it, "is a Divine Law: if it were not, the world would have been differently created. One country has cotton, another wine, another coal, which is proof that, according to the Divine Order of things, men should fraternize and exchange their goods and thus further Peace and Goodwill on Earth".<sup>1</sup> He was sure, from the start, "that a moral and even a religious spirit may be infused into the topic". In 1842 in the midst of the repeal campaign he wrote to Henry Ashworth suggesting a merger between the Free Trade movement and the Quaker inspired Peace Movement:

. . . it would be well to try to engraft our Free Trade agitation upon the Peace Movement. They are one and the same cause. It has often been to me a matter of the greatest surprise, that the Friends have not taken up Free Trade as the means – and I believe the only human means – of effecting universal and permanent peace.<sup>2</sup>

His sense of the important contribution which Repeal would make towards creating a new world is present throughout his speeches during those years. As he put it, on the eve of his triumph in 1846, "I see in the Free-trade principle that which will act on the moral world as the principle of gravitation in the universe, drawing men together, thrusting aside and antagonism of race, and creed, and language, and uniting us in the bonds of eternal peace".<sup>3</sup> It was "God's Diplomacy"<sup>4</sup> helping on that free, creative, moral life which Cobden held to be so much more important than the accumulation of mere wealth.

In Cobden's view, the Repeal of the Corn Laws opened up a new era in the history of Britain and the world. In the past, nations had striven to dominate each other economically and politically while Free Trade pointed to a future of co-operation and equality. Free Trade would diffuse wealth liberally around the globe and make international peace and mutual acceptance the most obvious policy. But the fact that all this was both the logical and the moral implication of Free Trade was not enough in itself. People had to be educated to understand that war and its accountments were incompatible with the new economic interdependence which they had accepted implicitly when the Corn Laws were removed. Cobden approached this problem of finally undermining the remaining aristocratic institutions and their attendant ideology in two closely related ways.

The first and, in Cobden's eyes, the most important, step was to eliminate the chances of war by reducing the allocation to the army

1. S. Schwabe, *Reminiscences of Richard Cobden* (London, 1895), p. viii.

2. Morley, i, *op. cit.* p. 230.

3. *Speeches*, i, *op. cit.* pp. 362–3; Cf. pp. 79, 385, 391–2.

4. J. A. Hobson, *Richard Cobden, The International Man* (London, 1919; 1968), p. 246.

and the navy in the budget to the point where we were maintaining only an adequate defensive force.<sup>1</sup> In his 'National Budget', presented to Parliament in 1849, he urged that government expenditure could be cut back eventually to the low level attained in 1835. Besides the remission of defence costs, he looked to the removal of all import duties of a protective nature which still remained. He also argued for a general shift away from indirect to direct taxation, probably in the belief that this would make the populace more vigilant about government spending in the future.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time he made a great effort to educate the nation away from the idea that war, colonial acquisition and a spirited foreign policy were either necessary or desirable or unavoidable. To this end, through the Peace Society,<sup>3</sup> in pamphlets, speeches and friendly newspapers, he tried continuously to counteract the feelings of fear, insecurity, hostility and patriotic jingoism which constantly threatened conflict between the great powers.<sup>4</sup> More particularly he tried to persuade Parliament in 1849 to accept the principle of arbitration by neutrals in disputes involving Britain;<sup>5</sup> he consistently upheld the view that we should never interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, or get involved in their rivalries;<sup>6</sup> and he insisted that it was in our interests, and of all the world, to abandon naval practices such as commercial blockade and search of neutral vessels which jeopardized the international trade of nations innocent of a particular dispute.<sup>7</sup> In relation to the Empire, he opposed every act of aggression and every extension of its limits, arguing that our future lay in unrestricted commerce with all the world and that Free Trade had made colonialism redundant.<sup>8</sup> Here, as elsewhere, he firmly resisted the notion that we knew enough, either of ourselves or of others, to allow us to bring civilization to the benighted. In addition, Cobden's campaigns for universal secular education and for the Repeal of the Stamp Duty on newspapers should be seen as part of his attempts to enlighten the public about their interests in both domestic and foreign policy.

Cobden became more and more convinced that once free trade had been established his particular brand of foreign policy was essential.

1. Grampp calls Cobden a pacifist (*op. cit.* pp. 100-2), but Cobden always insisted that Britain had a right and a duty to defend herself against aggression. *Speeches*, ii, *op. cit.* pp. 433-4.

2. *Speeches*, i, *op. cit.* esp. pp. 473-514; W. N. Calkins, 'A Victorian Free Trade Lobby', *Economic History Review*, xiii (1960-1), pp. 90-104.

3. E. B. Henderson, 'The Pacifists of the Fifties', *Journal of Modern History*, 9 (1937), pp. 314-34.

4. Most of the Cobden's later writings are devoted to these themes. See especially '1793 and 1853 in Three Letters' and 'The Three Panics' both in Vol. ii of the *Political Writings*.

5. *Speeches*, i, *op. cit.* pp. 515-527.

6. Cobden's most famous statement of this position is in the Don Pacifico debate of 1850. *Speeches*, ii, *op. cit.* pp. 225-9.

7. 'A Letter to Henry Ashworth Esq', *Political Writings*, ii, *op. cit.* pp. 5-22.

8. McDonagh, 'The Anti-Imperialism of Free Trade', *passim*.

In the 1830s he had been inclined to disparage the idea that free trade would make us militarily vulnerable. By the 1850s he was more aware of the extent to which a free trade policy committed Britain to a far-reaching international division of labour. This, not only increased our dependence upon the rest of the world, but also made us more vulnerable to attack and underlined the extent to which we had to remain industrially competitive to survive as a great power. John Stuart Mill, the foremost economist of Cobden's day, was inclined to argue that whatever was produced in Britain could find a market there and that foreign trade was more useful as a civilizing agency than as a vital part of our economic life.<sup>1</sup> Cobden's acute sense of Britain's growing economic dependence on world markets on the other hand led him to the view that she above all had a vested interest in pursuing a policy of international peace and persuading others of its benefits. In 1862, when Lancashire was suffering from a drastic cut in its cotton supplies from the southern States of America because of the blockade of southern ports applied by the North in the Civil War, Cobden urged on the British government the necessity of accepting, through international agreement, that commercial blockades should, in future, be restricted. He argued that the use of commercial blockades was:

incompatible with the new commercial policy to which we have unreservedly committed ourselves. Free Trade, in the widest definition of the term, means only the division of labour by which the productive powers of the earth are brought into mutual co-operation. If this scheme of universal dependence is to be liable to sudden dislocation, whenever two governments choose to go to war, it converts a manufacturing industry into a lottery in which the lives and fortunes of multitudes of men are at stake. I do not comprehend how any British statesman who consults the interests of his country and understands the revolution which free trade is effecting in the relations of the world, can advocate the maintenance of commercial blockades. If I shared this view, I should shrink from promoting the indefinite growth of a population whose means of subsistence would be liable to be cut off at any moment by a belligerent power against whom we should have no right of resistance, or even of complaint.

And he went on to say that he regarded changes in international maritime practice, "as the necessary corollary to the repeal of the navigation laws, the abolition of the corn law and the abandonment of our colonial monopoly".<sup>2</sup> This is essentially the basis of all his foreign policy proposals.

The Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 was a great triumph for him but afterwards his policies were almost a complete failure. He even temporarily lost his seat in Parliament at the 1857 election because of his

1. J. S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy* (Ashleys Edition, 1909), pp. 574–582.

2. 'A Letter to Henry Ashworth, Esq.', *Political Writings*, ii, *op. cit.* pp. 17–18.

opposition to the government of the day's foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Cobden saw Free Trade as the beginning of a new moral world; most of the other people who supported him over Repeal, including the more liberal members of the Conservative Party, such as Peel, did so for more pragmatic or self-interested motives.<sup>2</sup> Palmerston's foreign policy of the 1850s reflected this in that the pursuit of international free trade was simply grafted onto the traditional policy. Given our clear superiority as a producer of the most advanced manufactured goods, Free Trade seemed to offer the possibility of creating a world in which everyone else would be reduced to dependence upon our industrial exports and our capital, increasing our dominance in international circles and giving greater wealth, power and security within the existing system of rivalry between nations.<sup>3</sup> Foreign policy was less overtly aggressive than in the past. A substantial degree of political independence could be given to white settlement countries within the old empire, and Britain often forbore to interfere in the internal affairs of extra-European countries of importance to her, provided they had sufficient internal stability to make a relationship of 'informal' economic dependence work. Businessmen often approved of this policy on grounds of economy in public expenditure. They did not, on the other hand, begrudge the expense of expeditions to 'force' Free Trade on some weaker nations who were thought to be of great commercial potential and who obstinately refused to conform to our ideas of international policy.<sup>4</sup> Nor did they complain about consolidating and extending our hold upon areas regarded as vital, like India, when it became clear that they would fit into our economic system only if coerced.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the newer 'Free Trade Imperialists' accepted the idea of our 'civilising mission' with an enthusiasm which outdid anything manifested before.

Another conspicuous feature of the foreign policy of the time, which

1. For a survey of Cobden's political fortunes after Repeal see N. McCord, 'Cobden and Bright in Politics 1846-47' in R. Robson (ed.), *Ideas and Institutions of Victorian Britain* (London 1967), pp. 87-114.

2. For example of this see A. E. Musson, 'The Manchester School and the Exportation of Machinery', *Business History*, xiv (1972).

3. R. Robinson and J. Gallagher, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', *Economic History Review*, vi (1953-54), pp. 1-15; B. Semmell, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism. Classical Political Economy, The Empire of Free Trade and Imperialism, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, 1970), esp. pp. 130-202. Those countries which were economically and militarily strong enough to resist our industrial and naval strength often adopted Protection as a means of preserving their advanced industrial sector from our competition and preventing dependence on us for commodities reckoned to be vital. Semmell argues (p. 160 f.) that, despite his cosmopolitanism, Cobden partook of this imperialism in some degree, especially before 1846, because he spoke of Free Trade as assuring British industrial predominance. Cobden did speak in this way occasionally but, it seems to me, largely as a means of attracting supporters to the Repeal campaign. His private writings, in which one would expect his most straightforward statements, do not contain this "imperialist" element. Cf. Cawley, *op. cit.* pp. 70-4, esp. for his private views on the United States.

4. Grampp, *op. cit.* p. 114; Semmell, *op. cit.* pp. 152-4.

5. For British economic policy in India see P. Harnetty, *Imperialism and Free Trade: Lancashire and India in the Mid-nineteenth Century* (Manchester, 1972).



gained widespread popular support, involved constant interference in the internal affairs of other European countries. Inspired by the liberalism of our institutions, Palmerston went out of his way to promote the same on the Continent. This policy received enormous support from businessmen and the mass of the industrial workforce who, for instance, saw the Crimean War, in which Cobden said we had “a despot for an enemy, a despot for an ally, and a despot for a client”,<sup>1</sup> as a moral crusade to throw the tyrannical Russians out of Europe and liberate her subject nationalities.<sup>2</sup>

From Cobden’s viewpoint, the policy was sadly misguided, a hopeless tangle of contradictions and moral ambiguities, Defending our interests and maintaining a balance of power meant supporting despotic, imperialist countries such as Turkey and Austria which hardly fitted in with our professed liberalism; this liberalism in action, though genuine in inspiration, often turned out to be merely a bombastic or misguided interference in the affairs of others which was self-defeating; and our crusades to bring enlightenment to backward nations ended in the creation of despotic military governments as in India. Cobden repeatedly pointed to these faults and to the drain of industrial wealth, the diversion of interest from domestic concerns, the irrational oscillation between arrogant self-assertion and self-congratulation at one moment and morbid and equally irrational fears about invasion or defeat at the next.

In the twenty years after Repeal Cobden lost his faith in the middle classes as the carriers of social progress. By the 1850s he could see quite clearly that concentrations of capital in the industrial sector had produced a new oligarchy as powerful as the old.<sup>3</sup> And he saw, too, that the wealthier amongst his erstwhile supporters, whom he had always half-despised as “toadies of a clod-pole aristocracy”<sup>4</sup> had joined the latter’s ranks. He now believed that “the middle class is to a large extent the accomplice of the privileged order, and eager to be admitted into its charmed circle”.<sup>5</sup> But he did not infer from this that the capitalist class might have a rational interest in war and colonialism, and continued to believe that Palmerston’s widespread support among the industrial classes rested on false arguments and irrational delusions.<sup>6</sup> The only new element in his theory of imperialism after Repeal was his argument that financial interests in the City of London – often attacked by Radicals as an appendage of the aristocratic élite – did have an interest in supporting international aggression and war. This is clear

1. Hobson, *op. cit.* p. 118. For an extended discussion of his views on the economic consequences of war at this time see *Pol. Writings*, ii, *op. cit.* pp. 191 ff.

2. O. Anderson, *A Liberal State at War. English Politics and Economics during the Crimean War* (New York, 1967), pp. 3–5, 20.

3. Hobson, *op. cit.* p. 194.

4. Morley, i, *op. cit.* p. 137. This was written in 1837.

5. Hobson, *op. cit.* p. 164; Morley, ii, *op. cit.* p. 145.

6. e.g. Hobson, *op. cit.* pp. 90, 115, 289.

from Cobden's reaction to the attempt by the aristocratic monarchies of Austria and Russia to raise loans on the London money market in 1849 and 1850.

Cobden saw these loans simply as a device to increase or replenish the military capability of both governments after the revolutions of 1848 and he believed that if people were made fully aware of this, and of its economic and political consequences, the loans would never be subscribed. Loans of this kind were immoral for they were used eventually "in obstructing industry, in devastating fair and fruitful lands, and in suppressing freedom"<sup>1</sup> and in the Russian case at least, the consequences of lending money to our supposed enemy the Tsar to allow him to increase his armaments would be that we would eventually feel the need to increase ours.

They who lend money for these purposes are destitute of any one excuse . . . these are times when it behoves them to remember that property has its duties as well as its rights; I exhort the friends of peace and advocates of disarmament throughout the civilized world, to exert themselves to spread a sounder morality on this question of war loans.<sup>2</sup>

Cobden did not expect that a plea for moral restraint would have much effect in itself but he went on to argue that because these loans were immoral they were also financially unsafe. Capital lent in this way could not fructify and the chances of its ever being repaid were remote. If people were properly informed they would see this. Unfortunately the people were ignorant of their best interest and were constantly misled by the press which was owned by those who had a vested interest in international conflict and "those agents and bankers who raise the money through their connections and customers" making large profits from the small investor's gullibility.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the unreformed press and the City were faithful representatives of the politically dominant aristocratic class. Cobden, while repudiating any intention of actually preventing this kind of transaction, felt it his duty "to try and warn the unwary against being deceived by those agents and moneymongers in the city of London who will endeavour to palm off their bad securities on us if they can".<sup>4</sup> He wanted to distinguish sharply between this kind of financial deal which was an abuse of the concept of Free Trade and the normal international flows of capital prompted by legitimate business.

Despite his disillusion with his own class as promoters of political change Cobden did not find it easy, as an alternative, to support the fight of the working man for political power through Parliamentary reform. Working class organizations like trades unions seemed to be a threat to his ideal world of capitalism and he objected to popular demands for the State's regulation of economic affairs through legislation

1. *Speeches*, ii, *op. cit.* p. 195.

3. *Ibid.* p. 183.

2. *Ibid.* p. 189.

4. *Ibid.* pp. 193-4.

like the Factory Acts.<sup>1</sup> Besides this, he had a deep-rooted fear of popular jingoism and irrationality. The extension of the franchise in the 1850s did not appeal to him because “we have been the most warlike and aggressive people that ever existed” and because “the aristocracy has converted the combativeness of the English race to its own sinister ends”.<sup>2</sup> In the 1860s, however, he began to move away from this position. He played a large part in the successful negotiation for a reciprocity treaty with France in 1860 which he naturally regarded as a belated triumph for his ideas.<sup>3</sup> The refusal of the British to enter the American Civil War, despite the provocation of a blockade of Southern ports, and the widespread clamour against any involvement in the Schleswig-Holstein question in 1863, helped to convince him that his principles were beginning to sink into the popular consciousness.<sup>4</sup> Just before his death in 1865 he came out in favour of universal male suffrage in the forlorn hope that the mass of the electorate would now use their political influence to establish the brand of liberalism which his colleagues of the 1830s and 1840s had so decisively rejected.

*Cobden's contribution to political thought*

Cobden's theory of foreign policy was intensely idealistic and, since there was a remarkable consistency between his intellectual views and his practice as a politician, it is not surprising that he should find himself isolated from the majority of his fellows after the Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. Even those who were sympathetic to Cobden's overall attack on war and colonialism found his non-interventionism hard to accept. For example, Goldwin Smith, whose admiration for Cobden was immense, and who was one of the most biting critics of British overseas policies in the latter half of nineteenth century, still felt that it was Britain's duty to use “the strength which Providence has given her to vindicate the violated rights of nations and to defend the oppressed against the oppressor”. Truth as every good liberal knew, was one and indivisible and it was our moral duty to repudiate non-interventionism if it meant “the tame sufferance of high handed wrong in the community of nations”.<sup>5</sup> J. S. Mill – whose influence upon the Liberal Party itself was large – Gladstone and Morley, Cobden's great biographer, had the same conviction:<sup>6</sup> and the faithful followers of a purer Cobdenism were to be found amongst less significant liberals

1. See Morley, i, *op. cit.* p. 464 f.

2. Hobson, *op. cit.* p. 90.

3. *Ibid.* esp. pp. 259, 266, 278–9. A. A. Iliasu, ‘The Cobden-Chevalier Commercial Treaty of 1860’, *Historical Journal*, xiv (1971), pp. 67–98.

4. *Speeches*, ii, *op. cit.* pp. 302, 340–8, 523–4.

5. Goldwin Smith, *The Empire* (London, 1863), p. ix. Cf. his obituary notice for Cobden in *MacMillans Magazine*, 12 (1865), pp. 90–2 and his article, ‘The Manchester School’, *Contemporary Review*, lxxvii (1895), p. 380.

6. F. R. Flournoy, ‘British Liberal Theories of International Relations (1848–1898)’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 7 (1945), pp. 195–217; K. E. Miller, ‘John Stuart Mill's Theory of International Relations’, *Ibid.* 22 (1961), pp. 493–514.

such as Henry Richard<sup>1</sup> and Sir Louis Mallett. Cobden himself occasionally found it impossible to adhere to the strict letter of his own interventionist teaching as his eventual open support for the North in the American Civil War indicates.<sup>2</sup>

Again, his almost totally negative approach to the question of the relationship between the white colonies and Britain and his lack of any policy in relation to India distanced him from liberals like Bright and Morley who otherwise applauded his anti-colonialism. Here, too, the temptation to take a line and influence policy sometimes proved impossible to resist. When in 1863 Bright was leading his campaign to persuade the British government in India to help develop supplies of Indian raw cotton, Cobden supported him. He excused himself on the somewhat specious ground that, although state interference with economic life was indeed foreign to the principles of Adam Smith, these principles had never been applied in India and, therefore, the state could be excused for interfering in the economic process.<sup>3</sup> This isolated example of pragmatic politics is the exception which proves the rule. Cobden could never usually bring himself to accept Mill's view that, in politics, theory must constantly be corrected by practice and experience.<sup>4</sup>

Cobden's direct influence on the course of British foreign policy after 1846 was extremely small but in less obvious ways his influence was extremely significant. As one reviewer of Morley's biography put it in 1882:

Cobden was one of the first statesmen who made the social and economic welfare of the whole people the primary object of his political career, one of the first to grasp clearly the great principle that the economic condition of a country is in large measure the key to its actual life.<sup>5</sup>

It is this grasp of the economic class basis of much domestic and foreign policy as early as the 1830s which justifies the modern description of Cobden as a "middle class Marxist".<sup>6</sup> He became the chief intellectual inspiration behind generations of radical complaints about the sinister economic forces which shaped our European and imperial policies. Despite his image as the hard, practical businessman, Cobden's importance was in providing future generations of radicals with a fertile set of ideas rather than in influencing the course of politics directly in his own time.<sup>7</sup>

1. C. S. Miall, *Henry Richard M.P. A Biography* (London, 1889).

2. Grampp, *op. cit.* pp. 121-6.

3. Hansard 3rd series, clxxii, c. 199-206, 224-8.

4. Miller, *op. cit.* p. 514.

5. William Clarke, 'Richard Cobden', *British Quarterly Review*, lxxv (1882), p. 148. For a similar point see Morley, ii, *op. cit.* pp. 483-4.

6. A. Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (London 1963), p. 124.

7. Cobden's theory of foreign policy was of great importance to J. A. Hobson when the latter was formulating his immensely influential theory of economic imperialism. See R. Koebner, 'The Concept of Economic Imperialism', *Economic History Review*, iii (1950-1), pp. 27-9 and P. J. Cain, 'J. A. Hobson, Cobdenism and the Development of the Theory of Economic Imperialism', *Economic History Review*, xxxi, (1978), pp. 565-584.