

---

# The Rise of European Socialism

---

A short analysis of  
19th Century  
Socialist Thought

---

Bryan Goodrich

---

Europe was going through quickening stages of change following the period of enlightenment, the start of the industrial revolution and the proceeding political revolutions, e.g., the French revolution. What transpired in the 19th century was a further revolution of social identity and thought. This changing social environment brought about the awareness in some to the nature of theirs and their fellow citizen's welfare. Building from enlightened ideas, the class struggle became the centerpiece of a number of socialist thought which sought to not only understand why this dynamic system weighed down on many, but how to make it better. The purpose of this paper is to provide a cursory view of this changing time and why socialist thought developed with the themes it did. Following this understanding will be an attempt to define socialism in terms of its related system of capitalism. Lastly, I will evaluate a number of socialist thinkers from Saint Simon, Fourier and Robert Owen, to Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill.

Two major changes identify the nature of class struggle. The first of these is the changing means of production and efficiency of labor. Many nations, especially Britain, were developing an industrialized workforce, particularly in their mills and wool production, away from the rural agriculture. This pushed harder working conditions onto the labors that ranged to children and women in some cases. Furthermore, the technique of production became redundant and dangerous through mechanization. Incidentally, this led to the second change which was the social environment of the laborers. The living conditions of increased prostitution and illegitimate births are a sheer sign of the changing values, but the changing in the social structure goes even further. Urbanization and increased populations in cities grew which further caused increases in population and wage competition. With a rising price of work, the Malthusian fear

of a dismal living standard was looking true. Both of these factors led to a realization that the distribution of the wealth of a nation is what is important since the nation itself was not poor. This brought a growing identification that some were wealthy. But more than that, they identified that these people were rich at the expense of the poor. Income differentiation became an important measure of these differences, and the poor were suffering by not having enough or having it at the cost of much labor. In short, class identification grew from the changing social and working environments to build a class consciousness that needed to struggle against the dynamic system which kept them from being able to have anything different. This, however, did not explain why.

The result of these changing environments was that a number of brilliant minds worked over the political economic factors of its causes, and furthermore, to figure out how to change it. Socialist thought in this manner carried many similarities that aimed at reforming the laws behind property and distribution along democratic lines, e.g., the means of production were to be collectively (in some manner) controlled and owned, and distribution would be determined by some rules of the community under jurisdiction.<sup>1</sup> This kind of perspective grew in the class consciousness of the workers who began to identify their struggle as being contrasted to the interests of the employing class. In other words, the capitalists had no interest in an equitable or communal distribution or giving up the ownership of their production which was the crux of their wealth and power. The workers, on the other hand, countered this view in terms of their livelihood, and in terms of their life. This class consciousness led to the struggle for unionization to protect their interests and restructure the power relations. It also led to many protests and riots across Britain, France and Germany. Therefore, the causes of the problem were held in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Martin "An Attempt to Define Socialism," p. 349.

property and distribution structure (or rules) of the country. Furthermore, to improve these conditions would require a change in these rules to one that was not the product of the individual class with power, i.e., the capitalists, but to the community at large which was predominately enumerated by the working class.

To provide a more current definition of socialism in contrast to capitalism as we see it today requires an understanding of what the capitalist or capital market is. The structure of capitalism is one of free exchange of individuals who possess capital if even at the most rudimentary levels. The measure of capitalism is this free agency. It does not matter if one agent is poor, or the other not, they both possess some level of capital and have the freedom to choose what to do with it in their society to improve themselves through some medium of exchange; which, today, this medium of exchange is primarily the market mechanism. Consequently, a negative perspective of socialism is the complement to this free agency of the capitalist. Socialism is marked by the collective agency of the community at large which is affected by the resource, production and its distribution, i.e., the capital. I call this affected scope the jurisdiction, as was previously used. This definition of socialism implicitly encapsulates the class consciousness in regard to whether it is one of individual responsibility or communal responsibility. What follows then is to analyze some varying theories of classical socialist as they explain the political economic factors of their society and how to reform it to take responsibility for the welfare of that perspective. In this case, socialist follow largely a communal perspective, but not necessarily, i.e., these factors are not all inclusive.

*The Utopian Socialist: Saint Simon and Fourier*

Two prominent French socialist thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were Count Henri de Saint-Simon (1760—1825) and Charles Fourier (1772—1837). Simon’s theory of socialism contrasts the basic tenets of socialism on a number of superficial levels. His reaction was to the problems of economic liberalism, that free agency of capitalists, brought about the social ills. His solution lacked a communal aspect to it,<sup>2</sup> however. Instead, Saint-Simon viewed a social utopia as possible if human reason directed all aspects of it by an intellectual hierarchy.<sup>3</sup> This hierarchy was one generated by the most productive elite in industry who would use their efficient means and the advancements in material sciences to resolve all the ills of society that would be imposed upon by less interested people. This government would be comprised of the leading producers with the help of scholars, with their primary goal to administrate only,<sup>4</sup> leaving the activities of the society to industry as coordinated by “business morals.”<sup>5</sup> The main reason for this was his historical view that the past and current problems were because of disinterested unproductive elites, whether they were the monarchs of old, or nobles or landowners. Instead, a transition to a society that was productive, collectively coordinated in this goal and with improved means through intellectual and scientific advances, society would reach a state of utopia where everyone benefited. He lacked, however, a deeper understanding of the economics that would make this business model work and protect the poor’s interests or account for gaping holes in distribution. It was in contrast to mere capitalism and capital as the source of wealth since; he saw it could be unproductively utilized. Instead, he adopted a labor theory of value so the producers of real merit were the producers who actually worked in producing the goods, a rise of

---

<sup>2</sup> Kumar, “Utopian Thought and Communal Practice,” p. 28. See footnote 30.

<sup>3</sup> Davis, “Mill, Socialism and the English Romantics,” p. 347.

<sup>4</sup> Normano, “Saint-Simon and America,” p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Mason, “Saint-Simonism and the Rationalisation of Industry,” p. 683.

the working class in control of their future. Therefore, it was the redistribution of economic power that advanced the redistribution of social power that makes his theory of social organization a socialist theory in lieu of our definition.

An alternative perspective was the eccentric Charles Fourier. Contrasting the historical methodology of his French counterpart, Fourier utilized a Newtonian inductive-deductive method. In this view he saw society progressing in cycles and the one that would lead to the utopia he envisioned would comprise of, like Simon, a productive workforce. This productivity, however, would not come from business, which Fourier despised. Instead, it would happen naturally through the structure of society as channeled by their shared “passions.” In essence, it was an anarchic model where the harmony of these passions would bring together groups who operated with other groups characterized by divergent and varying interests.<sup>6</sup> In this way, everyone would live the life they wanted under the things that interested them in the most productive way possible. This construct he produced *a priori* off a principle of human nature as he devised it. He also had the curious notion of these groups organized into “phalanx” communities, i.e., tight nit communal structured fighting force. This model, however, failed to produce anything in reality. His communal structure at organization redistributed the social power to the people it predominately affected providing an equitable share of power in terms of it being provided in a way preferable by the people affected. It also afforded new property structures around the phalanx communities. For these reasons this theory, too, was a socialist theory geared at restructuring the social power issues he found under the capitalist system.

---

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed construction of this relationship see Mason, “Fourier and Anarchism.”

*Socialism in Theory: Karl Marx*

Counter to the utopian models of socialism, Karl Marx (1818—1883) devised the ultimate end of society under a communist system. He rejected the utopian theories and devised a political economic model that challenged the growing orthodox economics of the time (Smith, Ricardo and Malthus). This model utilized Hegel's dialectical stages of development to describe the historical changes of society. In essence, Marx saw the social structure as formed by its economic structure which was governed by the forces (means) of production and the relations of production, i.e., how the people who produced things related to each other through the forces of production. The forces, or means, are dynamic and changing which causes conflict with the static relations of production, which results in a revolution to a new relation and economic structure just as the thesis-antithesis-synthesis model operates. The ultimate end was one where class relations disappear altogether traveling from a capitalist to a socialist to a communist system. His communist model was simply this ultimate end of the class (relation) conflict. It required preconditions of intellectual and normative culture. The industrial processes of the contemporary capitalist system, he viewed, would lead to a socialist society, but these processes would not be the processes of production in the socialist or communist society.<sup>7</sup> Though Marx had an elaborate system of analysis that would escape the scope of this paper, he failed to produce the precise means of this transition. In fact, the protests and worker riots in France were, he thought, the beginning of his model. He was wrong. Nevertheless, his model provided a historical perspective of why changes occur in relation to social structure and economics. It also provided an attempt to explain why the capitalist system was wrong, inherently, and why the proletariat were living in such shoddy conditions. It predicted the outcome that would result in this change

---

<sup>7</sup> Leftwich, "is there a socialist path?" p. 27.

to an improvement, but as previously stated, it did not describe it or how it would transition, beyond it being bloody and revolutionary. Communism, in this sense, is nothing but an advanced socialist state and his model was just as reactionary and redistributive of power as all other socialist theories were. Therefore, no doubt, his model was a socialist model as well as a communist model.

### *Socialism in Practice: Robert Owen and Maclure*

A separation from mere socialist theory, Robert Owen (1771—1858) actually put his theories into practice. Robert Owen produced a number of “Owenite” communities. They all failed. Another wealthy associate, William Maclure, also financed these communities. The goal of Owen’s model of socialism was to produce a community that followed social (communal) morals, as opposed to individual morality or liberal morality, which would produce improved welfare for the commonwealth through co-operatives. Therefore, he wasn’t so much a social reformer as he was a social organizer. These failing communities, however, were not a loss, in Owen’s eyes. He was an empiricist and viewed them as merely experiments to identify different ways of trying to make a community work under socialist ideology. He lacked the analytical analysis that would make such experiments fruitful, i.e., collecting data and inferring improvements in subsequent experiments. Furthermore, his model failed to address the structural or practical problems such as the financing of these communities, since they relied heavily off Owen and Maclure’s financing. In terms of politics, Owen viewed a commonwealth administration of a benevolent governing attitude. Maclure, on the other hand, found a representative government of well-informed people the best solution.<sup>8</sup> The cooperative and communal aspects of this model of socialism follows the theme of redistributing social powers

---

<sup>8</sup> Kumar, “Utopian Thought and Communal Practice,” p. 30.

through the property rights and the economic functioning, i.e., through the commonwealth and joint-efforts of the cooperatives. It lacked economic strength and functional strength, but nevertheless was an attempt at expressing theory into application of a socialist model.

*A Modern Preview: John Stuart Mill*

The view of socialism in modern times is that capitalism uses the market and socialism does not, i.e., it is all planned. The definitions and theories presented here varied greatly and none had made any such factors explicit. In fact, today “market socialism” is the idea of socialist theories utilizing the market mechanism to achieve the best ends; i.e., the market itself is neither liberal nor communal but determined by how the actors operate it. John Stuart Mill, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, devised this style of socialism. He was heavily influenced by the French socialist and romantics. He was also a brilliant political economist. Throughout his writings in *The Principles of Political Economy*, he identifies government involvement, property rights and distribution as needing redress. All of this exhibits a distinct socialist influence to them. Mill, himself, claimed to be a socialist in his *Autobiography*, and wrote an essay on it titled *Socialism*. The distinct difference is that he conjoined the liberal free agency of the individual (ethically) with the joint efforts of the cooperative perspective of industry. Essentially, he was a market socialist well before the term existed. In an almost utopian perspective that he viewed his principles could produce were espoused under the chapter in *The Principles* on the stationary state. In it he details that production only produces a means to an end, and is not the end itself. When we reach a stationary state, that classical economics predicted, then we would be stuck facing how we want to live. Distribution and property rights would be the prevailing issues as well as character development. Therefore, Mill’s model was far more advanced in terms of not merely being a reaction to the ill effects of the rising and changing capitalist economy. His model and theories

were distinctly liberal but addressed the issues of where problems arise and how to rectify them. Furthermore, his model provided explanation as to what would improve the social problems the socialist identified through a theoretically (utilitarianism) and practical (economic) methodology. Thus, Mill was an often overlooked socialist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that provides practical perspectives even today.

The conclusion of this brief preview of socialist theories is that they all shared many key factors. The first was the communal view of property, save for Saint-Simon, or at least a joint-share of property. A second factor was the notion of distribution of wealth as recognized through the fruits of one's labor, i.e., a labor theory of value. Whether they were social reformers/revolutionists (e.g., Simon, Fourier, Marx, Mill) or simply organizers (e.g., Owen), they all viewed that society in large needed to protect itself from the interests of the individual with too much power. Socialism is not about taking the rights away from the individual, but empowering the individual through the collective works of society under cooperation. Each of these theorists has something to afford in different ways of managing these problems and how to resolve them. Whether one can consider any of them right or wrong will always have to do so in terms of context. These theories were a response, a reaction, to their time and their country. Today we live in a different time under a different social context, i.e., globalization. Nevertheless, socialist thought still finds its way into society today as that revolutionary turn to something better, if only as critiques on the market where capitalist liberalism fails, e.g., welfare concerns. Like Marx's methodology, it may not be the kind of synthesis he envisioned, but a synthesis has occurred in modern times where capitalist (liberalist economics) and socialist (the welfare state) ideas influence our society.

## References

- Bernard, Paul R., et al. 1988. Irreconcilable Opinions: The Social and Educational Theories of Robert Owen and William Maclure. *Journal of the Early Republic* 8 (1):21-44.
- Davis, Elynor G. 1985. Mill, Socialism and the English Romantics: An Interpretation. *Economica*, New Series 52 (207):345-358.
- Kumar, Krishan. 1990. Utopian Thought and Communal Practice: Robert Owen and the Owenite Communities. *Theory and Society* 19 (1):1-35.
- Leftwich, Adrian. 1992. Is There a Socialist Path to Socialism? *Third World Quarterly*, Rethinking Socialism 13 (1):27-42.
- Martin, John. 1911. An Attempt to Define Socialism. *The American Economic Review*, Papers and Discussions of the Twenty-third Annual Meeting 1 (2):347-354.
- Mason, E. S. 1928. Fourier and Anarchism. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 42 (2):228-262
- . 1931. Saint-Simonism and the Rationalisation of Industry. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 45 (4):640-683.
- Normano, J. F. 1932. Saint-Simon and America. *Social Forces* 11 (1):8-14.