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1. The Heritage of Modern Socialist Ideas

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1. The Heritage of Modern Socialist Ideas

Abstract

Of the total heritage which gave birth to modern socialism, brief attention may be given to certain of the predecessors of Karl Marx. Although some now are saved from obscurity only by the diligence of interested historians, others generated powerful ideas still not extinguished today. Together they created an amorphous body of thought from which Marx freely drew. Consequently, an understanding of the varieties of later socialism, and specifically of Marx, requires a brief survey of these men. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Socialism, Karl Marx, Marxism, Henri de Saint-Simon, Gracchus Babeuf, Lenin

Disciplines

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Comments

This is a part of [Section XVI: Developments in Socialism, \(1848-1914\)](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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Karl Marx. Although some now are saved from obscurity only by the diligence of interested historians, others generated powerful ideas still not extinguished today. Together they created an amorphous body of thought from which Marx freely drew. Consequently, an understanding of the varieties of later socialism, and specifically of Marx, requires a brief survey of these men.

While any such discussion necessarily involves arbitrary selection, it may not be amiss to begin with Francois Noel Babeuf (1760-1797), better known in French history as Gracchus Babeuf. He was at various times a surveyor, petty government official, and journalist. Despite the fact that he was not an original thinker, he came to occupy a distinctive position in the development of socialism. In brief, Babeuf sought to carry the rallying cry of equality, which played so potent a role in the French Revolution, into economic and social fields. He championed the abolition of private property and proposed a plan of public ownership and control of the instruments of production. Of particular importance was his conclusion that revolution would be necessary for the realization of his schemes, since the owners of property could be expected to offer stubborn and violent resistance. He aspired to the goal which Lenin was to achieve over a century later: the shaping of a revolutionary force which would capture power. Babeuf also foreshadowed Lenin's concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Although the conspiracy of his Society of Equals was successful in establishing secret cells in the army and the police, Babeuf was betrayed by an informer, arrested, and executed.

Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), a French social reformer and author, had a much wider impact on the development of socialism in the early nineteenth century. Of aristocratic origins, he took part in the American Revolution. During the French Revolution he was arrested and imprisoned for eleven months. Later, after successful speculations in confiscated church lands, he devoted himself to theoretical projects. The importance of Saint-Simon for the history of socialism lies in his conception of a new society to be dominated by the producing classes, both entrepreneurs and workers. The new society was to be managed along scientific lines for the promotion of the welfare of the many, rather than for the privileged. While not opposed to the principle of private property, he argued that property ownership carried with it social responsibilities, and insisted on the duty of all individuals to perform socially useful work. With these views, Saint-Simon presented a theory of history, of alternating periods of constructive development and criticism, resulting in progress. He saw himself living on the threshold of a time in which industrialism would be of prime importance and sought the blueprint for a society which would adjust to this new situation. As one of the first to realize the productive possibilities of industrialism, if properly organized, he was to have an influence far beyond socialism.

individuals gave man an opportunity to solve his problems.

Frequently mentioned with Saint-Simon as the classic "utopian socialists" is Robert Owen (1771-1858), a successful English industrialist who had an inclination for social experimentation. As a youth he worked in the cotton mills of Manchester and attracted

Utopian socialists - fooling around with paper socialism and not doing anything about it.
Technocracy - rule by an expert.

attention for his technical knowledge and ability as a manager. Entering into partnership with others, he bought a cotton mill in New Lanark, Scotland, which subsequently served as the basis for his material fortune, and the locale of much of his social engineering. Close to the center of Owen's system of thought was a recognition of the importance of environment in shaping personality. He was alarmed that society might become imprinted with a character produced by the least desirable aspects and effects of industrial capitalism. Consequently, in the operation of his mill, Owen introduced humane working conditions, furnished housing and schools for the workers and their families, and set up stores where they could buy goods at cost. At the same time, he exhibited the obverse, and less welcome, side of this paternalism, keeping records of the behavior of his employees, enforcing standards of cleanliness, eliminating drunkenness, and otherwise intervening in individual lives.

Partially to solve the problem of unemployment which arose after the Napoleonic Wars, Owen proposed the establishment of co-operative settlements in Great Britain. The inhabitants of these so-called "villages of cooperation" were to cultivate the land. A later version of his plan added limited industrial production to this agricultural base. While each village was to be self-sufficient surplus production was to be exchanged with other villages. Owen became discouraged by his failure to persuade private individuals and governmental authorities to adopt his proposals. Accordingly, he left Great Britain in 1824 and bought the village of New Harmony, Indiana. Here he endeavored to create a cooperative settlement, with community buildings and services: a granary, public eating houses, cook houses, meeting house, and sitting rooms, to name a few. When dissension arose over the conduct of communal affairs, Owen returned to Great Britain. He continued to hold faith in the possibility of establishing communities on the theoretical pattern of New Harmony, but his later efforts also were marked by failure. Owen's influence, however, was widespread. He affected the formative stages of British trade unionism and the consumers' co-operative movement, as well as socialist thought.

In France, ideas similar to Owen's found expression in the works of Charles Fourier (1772-1837). Certain details of his system, however, deserve independent mention. Thus, Fourier stressed the need for men to choose work of their own liking and avoid tedium by turning from one task to another. Viewing work as an expression of the personality of the individual, he sought to fit social institutions to human nature. Beyond this, Fourier envisaged a division of the proceeds of work according to different and unequal shares for capital, labor, and special talent, such as managerial services. The influence of his ideas was far reaching, for it was felt in the United States and Russia in addition to his native country, France.

proposed the established ^{modern} community system. eq. land + workshop. connected.

Another source of modern socialist thought stems from the works of the classical economists. The labor theory of value, developed many years before, won increasing acceptance in the early nineteenth

These never advocated class struggle or revolution. Tried to carry this out peacefully.

century. Espoused by several British economists in the 1820's, it later was incorporated into the thought of Karl Marx. The criticism of capitalism contained in the writings of some economists also contributed to the framework of socialist thought. In this connection, the work of Jean Charles Sismondi (1773-1842) was of prime importance. Like Malthus, Sismondi saw a tendency in the business system to promote recurring cycles of prosperity and depression. To explain this phenomenon, he proposed the doctrine of under consumption which became a prominent fixture in subsequent socialist theory. This doctrine held that working people, held to subsistence wages by their employers, did not possess enough purchasing power to absorb the production of industry. This condition was aggravated by the expansion of productive facilities through over investment. The result was periodic economic collapse, with unemployment and personal hardship for many people. To alleviate these effects, Sismondi called for the state to guarantee a living wage and minimum standards of social security.

caused by capitalism

Renewing the revolutionary tradition of Gracchus Babeuf were the outlook and activity of Louis Auguste Blanqui (1805-1881). Throughout most of his life Blanqui was involved in successive revolutionary societies and plots in France, suffering frequent imprisonment as a result. In all, his terms in prison amounted to a full thirty-three years. Rejecting the adequacy of change through reform, Blanqui insisted on the need for revolution. His significance in the history of socialism, indeed, lies in the theories he formulated concerning the ways of conducting a revolution. In theory and practice Blanqui stood for a militant party, small in size and limited to trained revolutionaries. Coming to power through a coup d'etat, it would organize a dictatorship on behalf of the working classes. Beyond this Blanqui showed little concern; he concentrated on the attainment of power. In general, the future society he sought was to consist of cooperative associations which, in time, were to obviate the need for a state.

If Blanqui reflected the persistence of the revolutionary tradition in socialism, Louis Blanc (1811-1882) was the first major advocate of state action to attain socialist goals. As such, he was a direct progenitor of the European social democrats of today. A lawyer and journalist by profession, Blanc became a member of the provisional government of France in 1848. Subsequently, charged with participation in a revolutionary movement, he lived in exile in Great Britain from 1852 to 1870. Returning to France, he was elected to Parliament in 1871, where he opposed the use of violence to achieve socialism. In his writings Blanc argued for the recognition of the right of all people to work. To give substance to this right, he proposed the establishment of national workshops by the state. The state was to furnish the productive facilities and materials which the private entrepreneur ordinarily provided. In time, the presumably more efficient national workshops would drive the capitalists out of business, forcing them to join the system of state-supported enterprise. Under the provisional French government of 1848, a token system of this sort was established. Its purpose was subverted by top-ranking administrators of the plan who were bent on discrediting the influence of Louis Blanc and socialism

Nevertheless, Blanc's emphasis on reform, on gradual and peaceful change, remained influential. Another aspect of his thought which bore continuing significance was related to his concept of the right to work and the rewards of labor. Giving expression to an old idea, Blanc championed the slogan: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

To illustrate the variety as well as to indicate another source of ideas in pre-Marxian socialism, one final figure may be noted. Pierre Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865), a French writer and onetime parliamentary deputy, was an anarchist by outlook. Strictly speaking, the anarchist aim of society without government does not fit in with those socialist conceptions postulating the state as an instrument of reform. The anarchist position, however, bears a similarity to other socialist theories which regard government as a tool for oppression by the dominant classes. Proudhon, moreover, shared a number of views held by other schools of socialism. Critical of the existing economic system, he held that "property is theft," espoused the labor theory of value, and opposed rent, profit, and interest. Marx, though ultimately disdainful of Proudhon, learned much from him concerning the "contradictions" of capitalism.

Altogether by 1848 a considerable heritage of socialist thought existed, the product of a host of writers representing different branches of a family of ideas. Along with the individuals already mentioned were many others whose contributions rate some acknowledgment in standard histories of socialism. By 1848, certain ideas were current, although not widely held or even known by many people. It was on this basis that the structure of modern socialism was erected, in theory and practice.