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XVI. Developments in Socialism, (1848-1914)

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XVI. Developments in Socialism, (1848-1914)

Abstract

The era between the revolutionary upheavals in Europe in 1848 and the opening of World War I was one of immense changes. Encompassing such developments as nationalism, the Industrial Revolution, the growth of political and economic liberalism, and the rise of the social sciences, this period contributed some of the most significant ideas and institutions which characterize contemporary Western Civilization. Their impact. Indeed, now challenges virtually the entire world.

In the same age there arose the phenomenon of socialism, a family name for a group of ideas which received increasing attention in the latter half of the nineteenth century as the Western World sought solutions to the political, economic, and social problems of the modern age. Socialism came into vogue earlier in the century as a descriptive term applied primarily to the doctrines of Robert Owen, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Charles Fourier. As a family of ideas, however, socialism has a lengthy and mixed ancestry, dating back to the first years of recorded history. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Socialism, Nationalism, Industrial Revolution, Economic Liberalism, Social Sciences, Political Liberalism, Modern Age

Disciplines

Political Science | Social History | Sociology

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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XVI. DEVELOPMENTS IN SOCIALISM, (1848-1914)

The era between the revolutionary upheavals in Europe in 1848 and the opening of World War I was one of immense changes. Encompassing such developments as nationalism, the Industrial Revolution, the growth of political and economic liberalism, and the rise of the social sciences, this period contributed some of the most significant ideas and institutions which characterize contemporary Western Civilization. Their impact, indeed, now challenges virtually the entire world.

In the same age there arose the phenomenon of socialism, a family name for a group of ideas which received increasing attention in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as the Western World sought solutions to the political, economic, and social problems of the modern age. Socialism came into vogue earlier in the century as a descriptive term applied primarily to the doctrines of Robert Owen, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Charles Fourier. As a family of ideas, however, socialism has a lengthy and mixed ancestry, dating back to the first years of recorded history. Thus, a study by Sir Alexander Gray bears the significant title: The Socialist Tradition: Moses to Lenin (1946).

Even if restricted to a purely modern context, such as the setting provided by the emergent industrial systems of nineteenth century Western Europe, socialism was neither the product of any one man nor did it come to acquire any single, universally accepted set of meanings. This is true despite the acknowledged contributions and impact of Karl Marx, who claimed to be the author of "scientific socialism" and condemned other writers as mere utopians. Marx sought to preempt title to what was in fact a common inheritance, for he had drawn heavily upon the ideas of other socialists. Ultimately, he was unsuccessful in preventing the growth of opposing sects.

The emergence of twentieth century movements laying claim to the socialist mantle has complicated further the problem of definition. In the U. S. S. R., official doctrine regards the present Soviet system as socialist, as an intermediate phase of social development in which the ultimate goal of Communism has not yet been achieved. In a different sense, a totalitarian regime in Germany during the Third Reich (1933-1945) masqueraded under the name of National Socialism. Soviet and Nazi claims to embody socialism, however, have been rejected as specious by West European socialist parties. In the present-day Western World, socialism has come to be identified with the ideas of these West

Hard to define socialism - society has some sort of prior claim over the individual. Less focus on the individual.

European parties. They seek community ownership or control of the basic means of production, distribution, and exchange. Unlike the Russians or the Nazis, however, they stress the democratic means and framework in which their goals are to be realized. They argue that socialism unchecked by popular control can only amount to authoritarian rule. Significantly, most of these West European groups call themselves social democratic parties.

The problem of definition, however, is not ended by the rule of common usage. Even among the West European socialists no uniform body of detailed theory is to be found, for party doctrines differ from country to country. Moreover, as will be seen, it is difficult to oust Communism from the family of socialism. Consequently, some leading writers have resorted to classifying distinct systems of thought in the main stream of socialism as anarchism, collectivism, communism, and syndicalism. Other writers, concurring in the difficulty of finding a single definition, note a characteristic approach common to socialist thought. According to this, socialism embraces the rejection of any other order of society and espouses a new (and presumably much better) system attainable through changes in certain institutions or in human nature.

While this last approach suffers from generality, it offers a unifying theme running through the long history of socialist ideas. It recalls, moreover, the vivid backdrop of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution which preceded the emergence of these ideas in modern Europe. From these movements nineteenth century socialists drew inspiration, revealing the faith they shared in the potentialities of human reason and the possibility of progress. This was at least partly true even for those socialists -- the Marxists, for example -- whose positions embodied the criticisms of the post-Enlightenment period. Some socialists saw hope in the extension of democracy; others posited a need for revolution. Their basic outlook rested on influences stemming from previous eras, principally a concern for human values; interest in achieving happiness in the here and now, rather than in a future world; and the desire to gain mastery over the social world similar to that which men believed had been won over the physical world.

From this perspective, it is plain that the socialism of the nineteenth century was more than simply a reaction to the nascent system of industrial capitalism. It was a compound of many ideas and forces.