

Chapter 1

Socialist traditions

Some have traced the origins of socialist doctrine to Plato, others to Christianity, and many, with greater plausibility, to radical movements in the English Civil War in the 17th century. However, modern socialism, with its evolving and continuous set of ideas and movements, emerged in early 19th-century Europe. The reasons for this have long been debated, but it is widely agreed that very rapid economic and social changes, associated with urbanization and industrialization, were of particular importance. These not only undermined the rural economy, but also led to a breakdown of the norms and values that had underpinned the traditional order. Liberals of the era welcomed this transformation, regarding capitalist enterprise and the new individualism as the embodiment of progress and freedom. However, socialists dissented from two aspects of the liberals' outlook. First, rather than individualism, they tended to emphasize community, cooperation, and association – qualities that they believed to be jeopardized by contemporary developments. And, second, rather than celebrating the proclaimed progress arising from capitalist enterprise, they were preoccupied by the massive inequality that it was causing, as former peasants and artisans were herded into overcrowded towns and forced to work in new factories for pitifully low wages. It was in this context that the term 'socialist' was first used in the *London Co-operative Magazine* in 1827, which suggested that the great issue was whether it was more beneficial that capital should be owned individually or

held in common. Those who believed the latter were ‘the Communionists and Socialists’. This chapter will examine some of the distinct traditions that then emerged.

The utopians

The label ‘utopian’ was subsequently attached to some of the early socialists by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It was intended to convey negative attitudes towards them, suggesting naiveté and a failure to root their ideas in rigorous social, economic, and political analysis. More generally, the notion of ‘utopianism’ has often been used to dismiss projects regarded as unrealistic or fanciful. However, its usage here does not imply acceptance of these pejorative connotations. On the contrary, in my view, utopianism is an essential element in any project for social transformation, including socialism, and today’s utopia often becomes tomorrow’s reality.

The most obvious common feature in the utopian socialists’ transformative projects was the belief that a society based on harmony, association, and cooperation could be established through communal living and working. Such communities were set up in both Europe and America, and although they had mixed success, the most important contribution of the utopians as a whole was their delineation of projects for a new society that were actually put into practice. The utopians’ ideas and the communities that attempted to carry them out foreshadowed later forms of socialism. However, those who were the most influential at the time did not necessarily produce the most enduring ideas. In terms of contemporary support, Étienne Cabet was probably the most popular, but his notion of utopia now appears drab.

Cabet (1788–1856) was born in Dijon and, after working as a lawyer, he became a campaigner for workers’ rights. In 1834 he was prosecuted for writing an anti-monarchist article and was exiled to England for five years. While there he read Thomas More’s *Utopia*

(1516) and this inspired him to write his own utopian novel, *Voyage to Icaria* (1839). All Icarians were to form 'a society founded on the basis of the most perfect equality' with all aspects of life, including clothing, demonstrating these principles. While the degree of regulation and uniformity might now seem repellent, Cabet's Icaria was also highly democratic in terms of the popular participation it envisaged and, at a time when the French working class was suffering from extremes of destitution, it appeared to offer hope for a far better future. With between 100,000 and 200,000 adherents, this was also the most working class of all the utopian socialist movements, attracting fairly low-status artisans, fearful of their position with the development of modern factories. Icarian societies were established all over France, and a group also sailed to America in 1848, with one community remaining there until the end of the 19th century. However, while Cabet had considerable contemporary influence, the key utopians in terms of longer-term impact were Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen.

Henri Saint-Simon (1760–1825) was a French aristocrat who defied the conventions of his social class as a student. Imprisoned by his father for refusing to take communion, he escaped, joined the army, and fought against the British in the American War of Independence. Influenced by the relative absence of social privilege in America, he renounced his title at the beginning of the French Revolution and became convinced that science was the key to progress. His hope, expressed in his *Letters from an Inhabitant of Geneva* (1802–3), was that it would be possible to develop a society based on objective principles. His critique of existing society focused on the continuing semi-feudal power relationships in French society rather than on capitalism itself, but his belief in classes as the primary categories of analysis, and his emphasis on the possibility of providing a scientific understanding of historical development, had clear relevance for Marxist theory. However, unlike Marx, he did not see ownership as the most important issue. In his view, history was really based

on the rise and fall of different productive and unproductive classes in the various eras. In his own time, he grouped together the overwhelming majority of society – from factory workers to the owners of those factories – as ‘productive’, while the minority of ‘idlers’ (including the nobility and the clergy) were ‘unproductive’. Progress now depended upon the productive classes, the ‘industrial/scientific class’ becoming aware of their mission so that they could effect a transition to the new era. However, this was not simply a replacement of one class by another, as Saint-Simon argued that the industrialists and scientists had a wholly different set of relationships with one another from those between members of the feudal classes. The latter based their position on power, while the industrial/scientific class emphasized cooperation and peaceful competition. The fact that the feudal class still maintained its position was thus a barrier to economic progress and new forms of government.

During his lifetime, Saint-Simon’s ideas tended to appeal more to some sectors of the middle classes, who were attracted by the modernizing aspects of the theory, than to the working class, who were perhaps discouraged by his secular tone in a religious age. This was remedied to an extent in his later work, in which he proposed a ‘religion of Newton’, in recognition of Newton’s role as the founder of modern science; scientists and artists should head a new church, and he even sought to combine a secular morality with a regenerated form of Christianity, claiming that the main goals were to eradicate poverty and to ensure that all benefited from education and employment. This widened the appeal of his ideas, and immediately after his death Saint-Simonian communities were established in France and elsewhere. Made illegal in France in 1830, they nevertheless continued to have influence up to 1848, with approximately 40,000 adherents. The Saint-Simonian emphasis on industrialism and administrative efficiency as the key to progress and social justice influenced thinking in many other countries, including that of the writer Dostoevsky and other radicals in Russia.

Charles Fourier (1772–1837) also saw himself as a realist, who believed that he had discovered fundamental laws that needed to be implemented to create a new society. However, his ideas were totally different from those of Saint-Simon, and there was a vast gulf between the world he sought to create and his own life. Born in Besançon, the son of a cloth merchant, he lived humbly in boarding houses and probably never had a sexual relationship. But the utopia that he envisaged, which he called Harmony, was focused on feelings, passions, and sexuality, and perhaps had more points of contact with the movements of the 1960s than with the emerging working class of his own era. Believing that most problems arose from the mismatch between people's passions and the ways in which society functioned, he thought it possible to resolve this conflict through the establishment of so-called phalanxes, or communes. On the basis of a calculation of the number of personality types that he believed to exist, he concluded that just over 1,600 people would be the optimum size of each phalanx, for this would enable all passions to be satisfied and all necessary work to be carried out.

Fourier's basic belief was a conviction that people did not need to change: the problem was the stifling impact of current society, which was the primary cause of human misery. Fourier also condemned the oppression of women, believing this to reveal the malfunctioning of the social system. He did not emphasize the importance of social and economic inequality as a fundamental cause of conflict, assuming that this could be overcome if everybody had a basic minimum, an approach he thought compatible with private property. His comparative lack of interest in the issues of class and inequality meant that Fourierism was the least popular of the movements of early socialists, and there were few factory workers amongst his followers. But his belief that human unhappiness was caused by psychological and sexual problems and that the remedy lay in changes in society, rather than by treating the individual, certainly anticipated many later forms of socialism.

Like Fourier, Robert Owen (1771–1858) also believed that society, rather than the individual, was responsible for human misery and social ills. But unlike him, Owen believed that people could and should change. The son of a saddler and ironmonger in Wales, he soon revealed an exceptional flair for business, achieving great success in the cotton industry. In 1799 he bought some cotton mills in New Lanark in Scotland, and it was here that he put his ideas into practice.

If Saint-Simon's critique of existing society was based on a kind of class analysis, and Fourier's on the stifling of passions, Owen's owed far more to a condemnation of irrationalism. His enduring belief was in a form of environmental determinism that meant that people were not responsible for their own characters, which were moulded by the circumstances in which they lived. In his view, the dominant influences in current society were those of religious dogma and *laissez-faire* economics. He thought that people would act in superstitious and selfish ways because the whole environment promoted such behaviour.

In a *New View of Society* (1813–16) he claimed that, when he arrived at New Lanark, the population:

possessed almost all the vices and very few of the virtues of a social community. Theft and the receipt of stolen goods was their trade, idleness and drunkenness their habit, falsehood and deception their garb; . . . they united only in a zealous systematic opposition to their employers.

In order to change all this, his innovations included the upbringing of children, the approach to crime, the design and location of buildings and leisure facilities, the relationships between the sexes, and the way in which work was organized. His claim was that by introducing such changes, based on the principles of rationality and cooperation, behaviour would be transformed.

After 16 years, a complete change had indeed been brought about in

the general character of the village (of approximately 2,000 inhabitants) around the mills.

Furthermore, he was quite certain that his principles could be extended to a much wider community and that:

... the members of any community may by degrees be trained to live *without idleness, without poverty, without crime, and without punishment*; for each of these is the effect of error in the various systems prevalent throughout the world. They are all necessary consequences of ignorance.

Socialism

Viewed in one way, at this stage Owen was an enlightened business entrepreneur, who wanted to increase his own profits by generating more productivity from his workforce. Certainly, his approach was deeply paternalist, and even patronizing, as he talked of inducing good behaviour amongst the 'lower orders', and he would continue to reveal such attitudes in later life. But although he sought to convince other employers, the church, and the government of the benefits to be gained by adopting his principles, their response was one of deep hostility. The notion of the perfectability of human beings was held to undermine the Christian belief in original sin, and his emphasis on the social responsibility of employers to their workers was quite out of keeping with the *laissez-faire* approach of the capitalism of the era.

After failing to win support, his ideas became even more radical and he now attacked the system of private property and profit. In their place he advocated the establishment of new cooperative communities of between 500 and 1,500 people which would combine industrial and agricultural production. He also believed that it would be possible to abolish money and replace it with 'labour notes', which would represent the time spent in work and would be exchangeable for goods. By now he was seeking to extend his ideas far beyond Britain, undertaking a continental tour in 1818 and travelling to America, where he established the first of several communities in New Harmony, Indiana, in 1825.