History J-400: Revolutionary Europe

Revolutionary Socialism: Marx and Engels
Socialism in the 1830s and 1840s

Romantic (or “Utopian”) Socialists advocated transforming social structures through peaceful, gradual means.

Unlike Liberals (Whigs), they did not think individuals could “pull themselves up” alone (by working harder, learning more, earning more, or attending church more regularly).

They did, however, believe that society could be transformed if a group of individuals set an example for others to follow. So, for instance, Saint Simon suggested “taking up a subscription” that would eventually shift social power to scientists, artists, and men of letters and he assumed that those opposed to such an idea (his “second class”) would one day see the error of their ways and contribute, as well. Fourier recommended the creation of a trial, or model, phalanstery (a sort of “show home”), which would attract millions in tourist revenue and be effective advertising for “harmonious” living.

Efforts were made to put these socialist ideals into practice (that is, unlike Thomas More’s Utopia, they were not texts alone). Many such attempts depended on taking people out of current “civilization” and placing them in a natural, more “harmonious,” setting. For instance, the Scottish social reformer, Robert Owen, and his son William, envisioned rural Indiana as the perfect location for their “new, moral world.”

New Harmony, Indiana as imagined by the Owens

reality of life in New Harmony
Socialism in the 1830s and 1840s

Experiments with “socialist” living (and/or with leaving existing society to start “all over again” and on a “moral… natural… or harmonious” basis continued for much of the nineteenth century. Many of these were in North or South America. These include:

Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education (West Roxbury, Massachusetts)—supported by Unitarian ministers, including George Ripley and William Henry Channing, and by leading figures in American literature, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Brook Farm was founded as an experiment in “plain living.” Bronson Alcott (the father of Louisa May Alcott, who wrote *Little Women*) lived here for six months, but he wanted something even more “plain” and so founded Fruitlands (a vegetarian, teetotal community with no artificial light).

“Shakers”—like many of the other most long-lived experiments in communal living, the Shakers (or United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Coming) were religious in inspiration. They rejected commercial society and were largely self-sufficient (though they did make goods to sell; compare Amish communities today). While many of their communities (where the celibate members lived in single-sex dormitory-style housing) were in New England, one of the largest was in Harrodsburg, Kentucky. The success of the restored “Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill” as a vacation and tourism site suggests that the “model home” idea was a very effective legacy of these movements (see [http://www.shakervillageky.org](http://www.shakervillageky.org))

The authors of this map (from a textbook published by Longman-Pearson) included Mormonism as a “utopian” movement. If we include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints under that heading, we would have to conclude that some of these movements were actually very successful!
Socialism in the 1830s and 1840s

Most European socialists imagined that actual experiments in socialist or communal living would have to be located far from existing “civilization”—over 100,000 individuals risked moving to the Americas with the goal of creating “harmony” on Earth. Others, such as the second generation of Saint-Simonians, led by Prosper Enfantin, made pilgrimages to North Africa and the Middle East (thinking that those places were closer to “nature” than was Europe).

In Europe itself, socialists were chiefly visible as writers. (Without journalism, the other -ism’s would have had very small audiences.) Saint Simon, for instance, edited newspapers called *L’Industrie (Industry)* (1816) and *L’Organisateur (The Organizer)* (1819-1820). Other socialist-inspired newspapers include:

*le Globe* (“The Globe”)

*le Ruche populaire* (“The People’s Hive”)

*la Voix des Femmes* (“The Women’s Voice”)

*Democratie pacifique* (“Peaceful Democracy”)

caricature of a Saint-Simonian woman
note her short dress; the paper on the table says “Saint Simon: The Free Woman”
When Marx and Engels wrote that the spectre of “communism” was haunting Europe, they therefore were referring much more to writing than to action. As it happened, however, they published the *Manifesto* in early 1848 and the year then witnessed attempted or short-lived revolutions in much of Europe. These revolutions were NOT inspired by or caused by *The Communist Manifesto* but they definitely had the effect of making social and political elites nervous about the possibility of future revolutions.

The 1840s had been a decade of pervasive economic crisis. Enthusiasm for new technologies, such as railroads, had fueled speculative booms (in which a few got rich and many others got no return on their investments). Disastrous crop failures in 1845-1846 (including the potato famine in Ireland) led to widespread depression. Why?

**Economic Depression in a “traditional” (agricultural) economy:**
crop failures —> rising food prices —> consumers spend more on food, have less to spend on other goods —> because consumers aren’t buying shoes, books, clothes, pottery, etc. etc. etc., producers in the non-foods sectors lay off workers —> because those consumers are out of work, they stop consuming, so demand falls even lower and more people lose their jobs….
Marx, Engels, and the *Communist Manifesto*

In writing the *Manifesto* Marx and Engels responded to and drew on:

- contemporary events—industrialization and its effects in the British Midlands; economic crises across Europe;
- the hope and fear of revolution left by the events of the 1790s (and to a lesser extent of 1830);
- existing socialist programs and republican political philosophies

**Friedrich Engels, 1820-1895**
- child of an Evangelical Christian industrialist; grew up in Barman (Wuppertal), Prussia
- spent a year in the army
- sent by father to oversee textile production in Manchester
- wrote *Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844)
- knew about Marx from his writing for newspapers; met him in Paris in late 1844

**Karl Marx, 1818-1883**
- from middle-class family of Jewish converts to Protestantism (both grandfathers were rabbis)
- grew up in the Rhineland (politically part of Prussia but physically distant and culturally very different)
- studied law and philosophy; wrote for a radical newspaper in Cologne
- went to Paris to co-edit the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbuche* (radical German-French collaboration)
- exiled from Paris in early 1845 (on the basis of a punning insult to the Prussian king), went to Brussels in Brussels, he and Engels organized migrant German workers and participated in Weitling’s “League of the Just” (sometimes had up to 100 people at a meeting)
Marx, Engels, and the *Communist Manifesto*

What are they trying to do in this book?

- Scare readers and/or stir up support.
- Establish that their version of socialism is different from Fourier, Saint Simon, etc. etc.
- Provide a “scientific” basis for socialism.

Key terms:

- *bourgeoisie*: this word existed long before Marx and Engels and it simply meant “those who live in a town or city” ([bourg](#) as in Edinburgh or lots of other place names)
  —Marx and Engels use it to mean “capitalists” (those who own the “means of production” in industrial society: factory owners, first and foremost)

- *proletariat*: those who have nothing to sell but their labor-power;

Key claims (we will discuss these in class; come prepared to explain how you understand them):

- *all* history is the history of class struggle

  “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the means of production…”

  “What the bourgeoisie produces above all is its own gravediggers”

  “political power, properly so called, is merely the organizing power of one class for oppressing another”