

**SOCIALIST  
THOUGHT  
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THE  
FORERUNNERS**

**1789-1850**

**G. D. H. COLE**







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SOCIALIST THOUGHT:  
THE FORERUNNERS  
1789-1850



A HISTORY OF SOCIALIST THOUGHT : Volume I

SOCIALIST THOUGHT  
THE FORERUNNERS  
1789-1850

BY  
G. D. H. COLE

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## PREFACE

THIS book, although it stands by itself, is designed to be the first of a series forming together a general history of Socialist thought. It covers, roughly, the years from 1789 to the middle of the nineteenth century; but even within the limits of space which I have set myself, it obviously leaves out some things which belong to that period. The biggest of these omissions is that of Russian Socialism — from Pestel's projects of land nationalisation in the 1820s to Belinsky, Herzen, and Bakunin, who were all active well before 1850. This omission is deliberate, and will be made good in the second volume. I found it more convenient to postpone discussion of Herzen and Bakunin in order to be able to link them directly with later developments — Herzen with Chernishevsky and the Narodniks, and Bakunin with the struggles which split the First International and with the development of Anarchism. As against these omissions, I have carried the story of a number of thinkers with whom I have dealt in the present volume a long way beyond 1850. Blanqui and Proudhon are outstanding instances. In the case of Marx and Engels, on the other hand, I have tried to deal only with the earlier phases, leaving the later development of their thought to be discussed in connection with the movements which they created or influenced in the second half of the century. Thus, no full exposition of Marxism is attempted in this volume, which stops short, not quite at the *Communist Manifesto*, but at the dissolution of the Communist League after the eclipse of the European revolutionary movement at the beginning of the 1850s.

I wish to make it clear that this book is not meant to be a history of Socialism, but only of Socialist *thought*, with such references to actual movements as are necessary to explain the thought. Indeed, the writing of a comprehensive history of Socialism would be an impossible task for any single author, and would have to be on a much bigger scale than anything

v

1421937

I have in mind to write — or should have, even if I possessed the requisite knowledge. Even within the more modest limits of what I am attempting I am very conscious of my shortcomings. I have no Russian, almost no Spanish, very little Italian, and not much German; and I hate reading German, and avoid it whenever I can. I tend therefore to use English or French translations of works in these languages where they exist, and to refer to German originals of translated works only when I want to be sure a passage has not been wrongly rendered. I also tend to take my German material much more at second hand, where translations do not exist, than either English or French writings; and I expect my more expert readers will easily discover this for themselves, though I hope I have not allowed myself to be led badly astray.

The second volume of this work is already half in draft. Besides picking up the omitted Russian pioneers, it deals mainly with the later phases of Marxism up to the rise of the various Social Democratic Parties in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, with the First International, the Paris Commune, and the split between Marxists, Anarchists, and those, such as the British Fabians and Independent Labourites, who were neither, and also with the continental developments of Christian Social doctrine after 1850 and with the peculiarly German movement often called 'Academic Socialism', or 'Socialism of the Chair'. I mention these facts because they help to explain the omission from the present volume of a number of non-Russian Socialists who had begun to be active well before 1850 — for example, Rodbertus, Lassalle, and von Ketteler in Germany, Colins, Kats, and de Kayser in Belgium, and some of the Italian and Spanish pioneers.

In connection with the present volume, I have a number of obligations to acknowledge. The greatest of all is to my colleague, Isaiah Berlin, who has read the whole book in proof and has helped me to improve it greatly in accordance with his admirably sagacious criticisms. I also owe valuable suggestions to my colleagues, Dr. H. G. Schenk and John Plamenatz, who read a number of chapters and put me right in not a few places where I had gone wrong. I am also most grateful to my brother-in-law, Raymond Postgate, and to my friend, H. L. Beales, for the loan of books which I should

PREFACE

have not found it easy to obtain elsewhere ; and, as always, I owe a great deal to the untiring help of my secretary, Rosamund Broadley, who, by a miracle, can read my writing and forgive me for it.

My wife I am in debt to so often that I usually end by not thanking her at all.

G. D. H. COLE

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*July 1952*



## CONTENTS

		PAGE
	PREFACE	v
	THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS	vi
CHAP. I	INTRODUCTORY	1
II.	THE GREAT FRENCH REVOLUTION AND THE CONSPIRACY OF GRACCHUS BABEUF	11
III.	GODWIN, PAINE, AND CHARLES HALL	23
IV.	SAINT-SIMON	37
V.	THE SAINT-SIMONIANS	51
VI.	FOURIER AND FOURIERISM	62
VII.	CABET AND THE ICARIAN COMMUNISTS	75
VIII.	SISMONDI	80
IX.	OWEN AND OWENISM — EARLIER PHASES	86
X.	SOCIALIST ECONOMICS IN THE 1820S	102
XI.	OWEN AND THE TRADE UNIONS — THE END OF OWENISM	120
XII.	JOHN FRANCIS BRAY	132
XIII.	THE PEOPLE'S CHARTER	140
XIV.	BLANQUI AND BLANQUIISM	158
XV.	LOUIS BLANC AND THE ORGANISATION OF LABOUR	168
XVI.	BUCHEZ — PECQUEUR	177
XVII.	FLORA TRISTAN	183
XVIII.	LAMENNAIS	189
XIX.	PROUDHON	201
XX.	GERMAN SOCIALISM — THE BEGINNINGS	219
XXI.	BRUNO BAUER, HESS, AND GRÜN — THE 'TRUE SOCIALISTS'	234

---

SOCIALIST THOUGHT	
CHAP.	PAGE
XXII. THE <i>COMMUNIST MANIFESTO</i>	247
XXIII. MARX AND ENGELS — MARXISM TO 1850	263
XXIV. MAZZINI — THE EUROPEAN REVOLUTIONS OF 1848	281
XXV. THE CHRISTIAN SOCIALISTS	290
XXVI. A SUMMING UP	302
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	317
INDEX OF NAMES	333
INDEX	337

## THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

	CHAP. REF.		CHAP. REF.
PAINÉ, 1737-1809	3	FLORA TRISTAN, 1803-1844	17
HALL, <i>c.</i> 1740- <i>c.</i> 1820	3	FEUERBACH, 1804-1872	23
SPENCE, 1750-1814	3	O'BRIEN, 1805-1864	13
GODWIN, 1756-1836	3	MAZZINI, 1805-1872	24
BABEUF, 1760-1797	2	MAURICE, 1805-1872	25
SAINT-SIMON, 1760-1825	4	BLANQUI, 1805-1881	14
BUONARROTI, 1761-1837	2	J. S. MILL, 1806-1873	26
FICHTE, 1762-1814	20	LEDRU-ROLLIN, 1807-1874	24
OWEN, 1771-1859	9, 11	WEITLING, 1808-1871	20
FOURIER, 1772-1837	6	CONSIDÉRANT, 1808-1893	6
SISMONDI, 1773-1842	8	PROUDHON, 1809-1865	19
LAMENNAIS, 1782-1854	18	BARBÈS, 1809-1870	14
MINTER MORGAN, 1782-1854	10	B. BAUER, 1809-1882	21
THOMPSON, 1783-1833	10	J. F. BRAY, 1809-1895	12
HODGSKIN, 1783-1869	10	NEALE, 1810-1892	25
KING, 1786-1865	11	BLANC, 1811-1882	15
CABET, 1788-1856	7	LLOYD JONES, 1811-1886	25
BAZARD, 1791-1832	5	[HERZEN, 1812-1870] <sup>1</sup>	—
HETHERINGTON, 1792-1849	13	HESS, 1812-1875	21
ENFANTIN, 1796-1864	5	[BAKUNIN, 1814-1876] <sup>1</sup>	—
BUCHEZ, 1796-1865	16	GRÜN, 1817-1887	21
LEROUX, 1797-1871	5	HARNEY, 1817-1897	13
GRAY, 1799-1850	10	MARX, 1818-1883	22, 23
HUBER, 1800-1869	25	ERNEST JONES, 1819-1869	13
LOVETT, 1800-1877	11	KINGSLEY, 1819-1875	25
J. E. SMITH, 1801-1857	11	ENGELS, 1820-1895	22, 23
PECQUEUR, 1801-1887	16	LUDLOW, 1821-1911	25

<sup>1</sup> Not discussed in the present volume.





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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

THE impossibility of defining Socialism has often been emphasised, and sometimes regarded as a reproach. But neither in Politics nor in Morals is any important idea or system ever capable of being exactly defined. Who can satisfactorily define democracy, or liberty, or virtue, or happiness, or the State, or, for that matter, individualism any more than Socialism? The most that can be attempted in such cases as these, with any prospect of success, is the discovery of some central core of meaning, present with varying additions in all or most of the manifold uses of the words in question, but in all probability never found alone, without any addition. The discovery of this central core will not enable us to understand these words; for the added significances form no less essential parts of their acquired meanings. A word means what it is used to mean, or, for practical purposes, at least what it is commonly used to mean, or has been commonly used to mean by persons to whose utterances we need to pay any attention. Nevertheless, if we can find a central core of meaning, we are better placed for understanding the varieties of usage; and in the search for this core it is a valuable first step to find out how a word first came into use.

It is not known who first used the words 'Socialism' and 'socialist'. So far as is known, they first appeared in print in Italian in 1803, but in a sense entirely unconnected with any of their later meanings. Thereafter there has, so far, been found no trace of them until 1827, when the word 'socialist' was used in the Owenite *Co-operative Magazine* to designate the followers of Owen's Co-operative doctrines. The word '*socialisme*' made its first known appearance in print in a French periodical — *Le Globe* — in 1832. This paper was then edited by Pierre Leroux, who had made it the principal organ of the Saint-Simonians; and the word '*socialisme*' was

used as a characterisation of the Saint-Simonian doctrine. The word was freely used by Leroux and Reynaud during the 1830s in their *Nouvelle Encyclopédie* and in other writings, and soon came to be employed in a wider sense to include a number of groups aiming at some kind of new social order resting on an economic and social conception of human rights. Thereafter, both 'Socialism' and 'socialist' were used quite frequently both in France and in Great Britain; and they soon spread to Germany and to other European countries and also to the United States. In all probability they had been used in speech before they came to be written down: the earliest known uses of them do not suggest that they were conscious new coinages, though they may have been. They were convenient and quite natural terms for describing certain attitudes and projects of social reorganisation for which, by the third decade of the nineteenth century, a broadly identifying label had come to be needed in everyday speech.

It is easy enough to see, in a general way, what those who used these labelling words intended to convey by them. They were formed from the word 'social', and were applied to persons advocating doctrines which were felt to merit the label 'social', and to the doctrines such persons professed. The word 'social' was in this connection contrasted with the word 'individual'. The 'socialists' were those who, in opposition to the prevailing stress on the claims of the individual, emphasised the social element in human relations and sought to bring the social question to the front in the great debate about the rights of man let loose on the world by the French Revolution and by the accompanying revolution in the economic field. Before the word Socialism came into use men had spoken of 'Social Systems', meaning much the same thing. The word 'Socialists' denoted those who advocated one or another of the many 'Social Systems' that were at once contending one with another and united in hostility to the prevailing individualist order in economics, and to the pre-eminence accorded to political over social and economic questions in contemporary views and attitudes about human relations and the right ordering of public affairs.

The groups thus originally dubbed 'socialist' were principally three, though there were many lesser groups representing

## INTRODUCTORY

broadly similar tendencies. These three were, in France, the Saint-Simonians and the Fourierists, and in Great Britain the Owenites, who, in 1841, officially adopted the name of Socialists. Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Robert Owen had in common, despite their many differences, an essentially social approach. This was true in at least three different, though related, senses. In the first place, all three regarded the 'social question' as by far the most important of all, and insisted that it was, above all else, the task of good men to promote the general happiness and well-being. Secondly, all three regarded this task as wholly incompatible with the continuance of any social order which rested on, or set out to encourage, a competitive struggle between man and man for the means of living. Thirdly, all three were deeply distrustful of 'politics' and of politicians, and believed that the future control of social affairs should lie mainly, not with parliaments or ministers, but with 'the producers', and that, if the economic and social sides of men's affairs could be properly organised, the traditional forms of government and political organisation would soon be superseded, and a new world of international peace and collaboration would replace the old world of dynastic and imperialist conflicts. This distrust of 'politics' and this belief that the 'political' order was destined soon to be replaced by a new and better management of men's affairs were of course shared by many thinkers of the early nineteenth century who were not Socialists in any precise sense — for example, Victor Hugo. The contrast between the 'political' and the 'social' attitude to the problems of mankind runs through much of the thought of the period after the Napoleonic Wars.

Within this common agreement there were wide diversities. The Fourierists and the Owenites were community-makers; they set out to supersede the old societies by covering the earth with a network of local communities founded on a truly social basis, and believed that these new foundations could, without violence or revolution, supersede the existing structures by the sheer effect of their evident superiority in terms of the promotion of human welfare. The Saint-Simonians, on the other hand, were strong believers in the virtues of large-scale organisation and scientific planning, and aimed at transforming national States into great productive corporations

dominated by the men of science and high technical capacity, and at linking these regenerated States together by means of master-plans of world-wide economic and social development. The Owenites and the Fourierists for the most part eschewed political activity, in the ordinary sense of the term ; whereas the Saint-Simonians were bent on capturing States and Governments and on transforming them to suit their new purposes.

Again, whereas Fourier's disciples thought mainly in terms of intensive cultivation of the land and relegated industry and commerce to quite minor positions, the Owenites were well aware of the significance of the Industrial Revolution and thought in terms of a new society resting on a balance of agricultural and industrial production ; while the Saint-Simonians' attention was given mainly to great engineering feats — canal-cutting, irrigation, road- and railway-building — and to the organisation of banking and finance as the instruments of large-scale economic planning.

These were big differences ; but the common element in the three doctrines was, none the less, enough to endow them, in popular parlance, with a common name. They were all enemies of individualism, of the competitive economic system, and of the idea of a natural economic law which would work out for the general good if only the politicians would, while enforcing the rights of property, keep their hands off the further regulation of economic affairs. They all stood, against *laissez-faire*, for the view that economic and social affairs needed collective organisation of a positive kind for the promotion of welfare, and that this organisation should rest, in some sort, on a co-operative, and not on a competitive, principle. In 1839, the economist, Jérôme Blanqui, in his pioneer *History of Political Economy*, characterised them all as 'Utopian Socialists' — a name which was to become lastingly attached to them through its adoption by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*.

Thus, Socialism, as the word was first used, meant collective regulation of men's affairs on a co-operative basis, with the happiness and welfare of all as the end in view, and with the emphasis not on 'politics' but on the production and distribution of wealth and on the strengthening of 'socialising' influences in the lifelong education of the citizens in co-

operative, as against competitive, patterns of behaviour and social attitudes and beliefs. It follows that all the 'Socialists' were deeply interested in education, and regarded a good social education as a fundamental 'right of man'.

It will be observed that in this description of the common characteristics of early 'Socialist' doctrine there is not a word about the proletariat or the class-struggle between it and the capitalist or employing class. There is nothing about these concepts because, save quite incidentally, they found hardly any place among the ideas of these Socialist schools, though they had, of course, been prominent in Babeuf's movement and were soon to become so again in the social struggles of the 1830s and 1840s. Neither Saint-Simon nor Fourier nor Robert Owen thought at all in terms of a class-struggle between capitalists and workers as rival economic classes, or envisaged the putting of their schemes into effect as involving a grand contest between the proletariat and the *bourgeoisie*. They all agreed that, as things were, the workers were victims of exploitation; they all stood forth as advocates of the claims of what Saint-Simon termed '*la classe la plus nombreuse et la plus pauvre*'; they all attacked the undue inequality of property and income and demanded the regulation and limitation of property rights. But they thought of the abuses of the property system as arising rather from the overweening claims of *les oisifs* — again Saint-Simon's phrase — than from the exploitation of the worker by his direct employer; which latter they regarded as in the main a secondary consequence of the system of oligarchical privilege. Nor must it be forgotten that '*la classe la plus nombreuse et la plus pauvre*' still consisted, in every country, mainly of peasants and not of industrial workers. Saint-Simon expected *les industriels*, employers and workers together, to join hands in the struggle against the old privileged classes and the old States which upheld their power. He wished men to be rewarded strictly in accordance with their real services — a doctrine from which his followers drew the logical deduction that inheritance should be done away with. He was quite prepared for *les grands industriels* to draw large incomes in return for large services to the public. Fourier wished to limit the shares of capital-providers and managers to fixed proportions

of the total product, and also, in effect, to impose a steeply graduated tax on incomes from property; but he did not propose to take away the rights of property or to impose equality of incomes. Owen wanted capital to receive only a fixed or maximum dividend, all surplus profit being devoted to the development of social services for the general benefit; and he also believed that, in course of time, as the institutions of the new society developed, the desire to be richer than others would die out and the capital-owners would voluntarily renounce their share. Neither he nor Fourier, any more than Saint-Simon, conceived their plans as calling for a massed struggle between the employing and the working classes.

Thus, Fourier sat, day after day and year after year, waiting in vain for responses to his advertisements for capitalists who would be prepared to finance his proposed communities; while Owen threw his own and his friends' money into his 'Villages of Co-operation', and was always looking for rich men capable of understanding the beauty of his ideas. Saint-Simon too dreamed of rich backers; and his successors sometimes found them. Indeed, his best-known disciple, Enfantin, became a railway director, and other Saint-Simonians, such as the Pereire brothers, came to play leading parts in the financial world. Socialism, in its early days and as the term was then understood, was emphatically *not* a doctrine of class-war between Capital and Labour.

The class-war doctrine, however, not only existed long before the word 'socialist' came into use, but had its own schools and variations of opinion, which were regarded as distinct from those of 'Socialism'. The principal exponents of the class-war in the 1820s and 1830s were those on the extreme left of Radicalism who looked back for their inspiration to Gracchus Babeuf and the *Conspiration des Égaux* of 1796. The words '*babouvisme*' and '*babouviste*' were in frequent use in France, especially after the Revolution of 1830; and the word '*prolétarien*' was particularly associated with the *babouviste* tradition. The followers of Babeuf, fully as much as the Owenites, the Fourierists, and the Saint-Simonians, gave prominence to '*la question sociale*'; and they were sometimes lumped in with these groups under the general name of 'Socialists'. But until well after 1830 it was more usual to draw a distinction,

## INTRODUCTORY

the more so because, whereas the Saint-Simonians and the Fourierists were organised and recognised groups (as were the Owenites in Great Britain), *babouvisme* was rather a tendency than a sect, and its exponents were found among the members of democratic and revolutionary clubs and societies which did not collectively profess it as a doctrine, but treated it rather as an outstanding expression of left-wing Jacobinism, and as a first attempt to carry the Revolution of 1789 right through to its logical conclusion.

'Communism' was another word which came into use in France during the social ferment that followed the Revolution of 1830. How and when it originated cannot be exactly said; but we hear of it first in connection with some of the secret revolutionary societies of Paris during the 'thirties, and we know that it came into common use in the 1840s mainly as a designation of the theories of Étienne Cabet. It seems to have carried with it, right from the beginning, something of a *double entendre*. As used by Frenchmen, it conjured up the idea of the *commune*, as the basic unit of neighbourhood and self-government, and suggested a form of social organisation resting on a federation of free communes. But at the same time it suggested the notion of *communauté* — of having things in common and of common ownership; and it was in this aspect that it was developed by Cabet and his followers, whereas the other element connected it rather with the underground clubs of the extreme left, and, through them, with the clubs of exiled revolutionaries through which it passed on to be employed in the name of the Communist League of 1847 and of the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848. In Great Britain the word 'communist' seems to have been first used in 1840 — imported from France by the Owenite John Goodwyn Barnby, in his letters from Paris published in *The New Moral World*. He used it chiefly with reference to the followers of Cabet, who had been much influenced by Owenism. In the 1840s it was often used in connection with 'Socialism', but usually as distinct from it, and as carrying a more militant implication. It was chosen deliberately by the group for which Marx and Engels prepared the *Communist Manifesto* because it carried with it more than 'Socialist' the idea of revolutionary struggle, and had, at the same time, a clearer

connection with the notion of common ownership and enjoyment. It was, Engels has explained, less 'utopian': it lent itself better to association with the idea of the class-struggle and with the Materialist Conception of History.

So far, we have been speaking in terms of words and of the ideas and schools of thought and action they were first used to designate. But, of course, many of the ideas had existed long before the schools in question came into being. There was nothing novel in stressing the claims of society as against those of the individual; nothing new in denouncing social inequalities or in accusing the rich of exploiting the poor; nothing new in asserting the need for an education of all citizens in the principles of social morality; nothing new in proposing community of goods. Assuredly, there was nothing new in writing social utopias, or in claiming for all men economic as well as civil and political rights. Accordingly it was quite natural that the words which had come into use to denote the Fourierists, the Saint-Simonians, the Owenites, the Icarians (followers of Cabet), and the other sects of the early nineteenth century should be applied before long to earlier thinkers and projectors whose ideas in some measure seemed to resemble theirs. The labels 'socialist', 'communist' (and, later, 'anarchist') came to be used with reference to all manner of past doctrines in which emphasis had been put on living in common, on collective ownership, on education in social morality, or on collective social planning and control of the environment of habits and institutions which shaped men's lives.

In France, where so much of Socialist theory had its birth, men's thoughts naturally turned back first of all to the immediate precursors of Saint-Simon and of Fourier — to those who, as *philosophes* of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, had put forward, often in the form of utopias, the most trenchant criticisms of contemporary society. They found anticipations of Socialism and of Communism in the works of Morelly (*Code de la nature*, 1755, at one time attributed to Diderot), of the Abbé Bonnot de Mably (*Entretiens de Phocion sur les rapports de la morale avec la politique*, 1763, and other works), and, earlier still, in the *Testament* of the Curé Meslier (died c. 1730), then known only in an incomplete version edited by Voltaire. They found elements of Socialist doctrine in



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