

Past Manifestations of the Western World's Most Influential Religion: Technocracy

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Count Henri de Saint-Simon

What could be more bizarre than the career of Count Henri de Saint-Simon (Claude-Henri de Rouvroy, Comte de Saint-Simon), who was born in 1760 and died in 1825? He insisted he was descended from Charlemagne. He inherited a large fortune which he lost. But he nursed his dream of glory. His valet was instructed to wake him each morning with the admonition: „Arise, Monsieur le Comte. You have grand deeds to perform.“ He fought in the American Revolution and later, during the Commune in Paris, was thrown into jail as an aristocrat. In a dark and cold cell his ancestor Charlemagne, he informs us, appeared to him with an interesting challenge. The apparition called his attention to the fact that in all history no family had produced both a great hero and a great philosopher. Charlemagne reminded Saint-Simon that he, the dead emperor, had given the family its great hero. Now Saint-Simon must become its heroic philosopher.

Thus urged, Henri plunged into speculation and made a fortune. He then studied philosophy and, to enrich his knowledge of man, he lived successively as a profligate, a pauper, and a gentleman of fashion. After this he settled down to remake the world. He wrote three volumes, the *Industrial System*, the *Catechism of Industry* and the *New Christianity*. There must be a new order that would guarantee jobs for all under the direction of scientists. The striking fact about this scheme was that it attracted at once a whole swarm of professors, writers, poets, journalists, philosophers and some engineers, bankers, and politicians. The president of the Constituent Assembly of France became a member, as did De Lesseps, the builder of the Suez Canal. The Ecole Polytechnique became its stronghold.

Saint-Simon, a hopelessly muddled thinker, had a penchant for picking up ideas orally, at salons, instead of by systematic reading. In later life, Saint-Simon grew increasingly authoritarian and hostile to *laissez-faire* liberalism. Having imbibed libertarian class analysis from Comte and others, he characteristically got the concepts confused, and introduced the fateful and unacknowledged contradiction: between conflicting classes in the sense of those

who govern, or are governed by, the state *versus* employers *vis-a-vis* wage earners on the free market. The Marxian jumble was Saint-Simon's dubious contribution to social thought.

E. H. Carr characterizes the French Count as „the precursor of socialism, the precursor of the technocrats, and the precursor of totalitarianism“.¹ Saint-Simon's philosophy was pure scientism and his vision for a utopian society was premised entirely upon scientific precepts. In his view, a new unity based upon an all-encompassing ideology had to be forged. Only a belief in science and technology could replace the divisive ideologies prevalent at the time, particularly those of the church. In short, priests and politicians – the older rulers of Europe – had to be supplanted by scientists and technicians.

Saint-Simon's design of a technocratic society actually harkens back to an older esoteric tradition. Sir Francis Bacon was one of the first theoreticians to formulate the concept of a scientifically managed society. Bacon's *The New Atlantis*, posthumously published in 1627, was replete with masonic symbols. Frank Fischer provides a most elucidating description of the utopian concepts presented in *The New Atlantis*:

For Bacon, the defining feature of history was rapidly becoming the rise and growth of science and technology. Where Plato had envisioned a society governed by „philosopher kings,“ men who could perceive the „forms“ of social justice, Bacon sought a technical elite who would rule in the name of efficiency and technical order. Indeed, Bacon's purpose in *The New Atlantis* was to replace the philosopher with the research scientist as the ruler of the utopian future. *New Atlantis* was a pure technocratic society. ... Saint-Simon's work can be interpreted as a prescription for Bacon's prophecy.²

There is a conspicuous continuity of masonic thought running from Bacon to Saint-Simon, even though the Frenchman never joined the Lodge.

Two important facts need to be mentioned about the last phase of Saint-Simon's life. Early in 1823, a new financial crisis in his affairs threatened him again with starvation, and the old man, now really discouraged, tried to blow out his brains. He recovered, however, from the self-inflicted wound with the loss of one eye. Soon assistance came from a new, enthusiastic, and this time wealthy pupil. The young banker and former instructor at the Ecole Polytechnique, Olinde Rodrigues, not only provided for Saint-Simon's necessities during the last two years of his life, but also became the center of the little group which after his death developed into the Saint-Simonian movement.

¹ E. H. Carr, *Studies in Revolution* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964) 2.

² Ibid.,.

In 1825 appeared the last work of Saint-Simon, the „New Christianity” (Nouveau Christianisme). Already for some time Saint-Simon had shown an increasing tendency away from the narrowly „scientific“ and towards a more mystical and religious form of his doctrine. This had, indeed, been the final cause of the estrangement between him and his secretary Auguste Comte, who, however, was to undergo a similar change towards the end of his own career. In Saint-Simon’s case this development is partly a return to his first ideas.

Since the great schism at the time of the reformation, Saint-Simon argues, none of the Christian churches represents true Christianity. They have all neglected the fundamental precept that men should behave as brothers towards each other. The main object of true Christianity must be „the speediest improvement of the moral and the physical existence of the poorest class“, a phrase which appears on almost every page of the brochure and which became the watchword of the Saint-Simonian group. Since the churches have made no use of their opportunity to improve the lot of the poor by the teaching and encouragement of the arts and the organization of industry, the Lord is now addressing the people and the princes through His new prophet. He undertakes to reconstruct theology, which from time to time needs to be renewed, just as physics, chemistry and physiology must be periodically re-written. The new theology will pay more attention to the terrestrial interests of man. All that is required is an organization of industry that will assure a great amount of work of the kind which will secure the quickest advance of human intelligence. As Saint-Simon put it succinctly:

You can create such conditions; now that the extent of our planet is known, let the scholars, the artists and the industrialists draw up a general plan of the works which must be carried out in order that the terrestrial possessions of the human race be put to the most productive use and made the most agreeable to inhabit in all respects.

This scientific faith offered „morality without metaphysics“ and „technology without theology“.³ Saint-Simon hoped that his „New Christianity“ would divorce governance from politics, resulting in an apolitical system of „expertise.“ James H. Billington, the former Librarian of Congress, writes:

Political authority was to be replaced by social authority in his [Saint-Simon’s] technocratic utopia. It was to be administered by three chambers: Inventions run by engineers, Review run by scientists, and Execution run by industrialists. A Supreme college was to draw up physical and moral laws, and two even higher

³ James H. Billington, *Fire in the Minds of Men*, 214.

academies, Reasoning and Sentiment, were to be filled by a new breed of propagandistic writer and artist.⁴

The Saint-Simonian program entailed a strategy for the ritualistic enthronement of Technocracy. The „New Christianity“ was meant to be an outgrowth of religion’s eventual subsumption under science. Billington expands on the Saint-Simonian program of religious engineering:

In his commentary of 1802 Francois Dupis’s *The Origins of All the Cults of Universal Religion* de Tracy suggested that past religions were not simply senseless superstition, but rather a kind of scientific baby talk: the generalized expression in imprecise language of the scientific thought of the age. Religious ritual was, moreover, socially necessary to dramatize scientific principles for still-ignorant people. Saint-Simon viewed his New Christianity as just such a necessity for the masses. His death left it unclear whether this faith was designed to provide the moral basis for the new social order or merely an interim faith until the masses were educated to accept a totally scientific system.⁵

Saint-Simon was engaged in religious engineering projects years before sociology became formally institutionalized. His followers declared that „the world has been waiting for a Savior ... [and] Saint-Simon appeared.“

Saint-Simon survived the appearance of the “New Christianity” by only a few weeks. He died in May, 1825, at the age of 65, calmly expecting his death while discussing future projects with the group of pupils that now surrounded him. His life ended in peace, tolerable comfort and even in possession of a considerable reputation. He had been an example of the precepts laid down for all future sociologists, „passing through all classes of society, putting oneself personally in the greatest number of different social positions, and even creating for oneself and others relationships which have never existed before.“

After Saint-Simon’s death, his disciple Olinde Rodrigues, an engineer and son of a bureaucrat, joined by Enfantin and Bazard, founded the Saint-Simonian journal *Le Producteur* which, followed by conferences and tracts for the remainder of the 1820s, converted their deceased master’s confused social philosophy into a militant proposal for a totalitarian socialist system. This system was to be run by what the Saint-Simonians considered the true class representatives of industrialism: an alliance of engineers and other technocratic intellectuals with investment bankers, coordinated and led by a banker-dominated central bank.

⁴ Ibid., 215.

⁵ Ibid.

These men were not fools. Many were men of great intelligence and some were driven by generous dreams of a better world. But there is a little screw somewhere near the center of the intellect which holds all its functions together in harmony so that a man may dream, yet dream within reason. When that little screw gets loose, the imagination, the reason, the senses of order, balance and proportion, seemingly begin revolving in contrary and eccentric orbits with amazing results. These curious philosophic warriors might be described as „good brains, jangled out of tune.“

In short, in contrast to communist socialism, which was at least ostensibly egalitarian, Saint-Simonianism was frankly elitist, to be run by the ‘good’ and allegedly modern classes. Thus the Saint-Simonians, who were the first users of the word ‘socialism’, repudiated capitalists and entrepreneurs, on behalf of their favoured bankers and intellectual classes, representing the worker-producers. It is perhaps not coincidental that, of the two maximum co-leaders of Saint-Simonianism, Enfantin and Bazard, Barthelemy Prosper Enfantin was the son of a banker, was trained as a banker and engineer, and had been a mathematics student of Olinde Rodrigues. Nor is it surprising that Saint-Simonianism appealed hugely to the investment bankers, the *Producteur* being financed by the prominent banker, Jacques Laffitte. The Saint-Simonian culture reached the peak of its remarkable influence in France from 1830-32, after which the dual popes of this political-religious cult, Enfantin and Saint-Amand Bazard (1791-1832) had a fiery split. Enfantin, an erratic exhibitionist, abolished the institution of marriage in favor of free love, and required every disciple to take his side precipitating the ignominious end of the movement. Enfantin and two score leaders, some of them men of distinction, then decided to retire from the world to live an aesthetic life as a sort of monastic order, studying astrology and geology. But after a brief go at this, the order dissolved and Enfantin returned to everyday life and amassed a fortune.

Associated with Saint-Simon was a far greater intellect – that strange recluse, Auguste Comte who had served for a while as secretary to Saint-Simon, but in later life denounced him as a quack.

Auguste Comte

Known chiefly as the founder of sociology, Auguste Comte advanced the notion that philosophy must concern itself with knowledge based exclusively on experience. He called his system of thought “Positivism”. Subject to periods of dark melancholy, at the age of 30

Comte threw himself into the river Seine from which he was rescued. Intent on resuming his philosophical studies, Comte felt called on to venture upon the reconstruction of the work-a-day world of which he knew little and which, indeed, he despised, and from which he gradually withdrew. Almost all the data on which this work-a-day world is based lies outside the mind of the recluse and embraces a formidable array of forces including economics, law, the table of weights and measures, the laws of gravity, the science of management and, above all, a knowledge of mankind. Comte had a system of investigation which he called *Hygiene Cerebral*. His method was to retire into complete seclusion, avoid people, newspapers, scientific and economic reports and devote himself to reading religious and political tracts. For setting about the reconstruction of society this was hardly a method to be recommended. Yet, little informed of the play of human, economic and political forces, he withdrew into complete seclusion to prepare a blueprint for the reconstruction of society which he dubbed “Sociocracy”.

Sociocracy

Auguste Comte promoted a technocratic form of theocracy calling it „Sociocracy”. Its governing precepts were premised upon the religion of scientism and its priesthood was composed of social scientists. In *Technocracy and the Politics of Expertise*, Frank Fischer explains the concept of „sociocracy“ as follows:

... Comte advanced the concept of a „sociocracy,” defined as a new „religion of humanity.” Sociologists were to identify the principles of this new faith and to implement them through a „sociolatriy.” The sociolatriy was to entail a system of festivals, devotional practices, and rites designed to fix the new social ethics in the minds of the people. In the process, men and women would devote themselves not to God (deemed an outmoded concept) but to „Humanity“ as symbolized in the „Grand Being“ and rendered incarnate in the great men of history.⁶

If sociocracy was to be the „religion of humanity,” then Positivism was its theology. Positivism was vintage scientism, upholding the epistemological rigidity of radical empiricism and supplanting classical metaphysics with the scientific method. Ironically, radical empiricist claims, with their rejection of causality, required no less faith than mystical ones. Moreover, metaphysics was originally the province of religion. Positivism was but one more installment in an on-going series of secular religions birthed by the Enlightenment.

⁶ Frank Fischer, *Technocracy and the Politics of Expertise* (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, 1990) 71.

Comte attracted a following that would make a significant contribution toward turning sociology, in the broadest sense of the term, into a system of control. This is exactly how Comte intended it.

Aldous Huxley would call Comte's Positivism „Catholicism minus Christianity“. The French philosopher took what he found appealing in the Catholic Church and introduced it to a radically different context, and in the process changing its meaning completely. He took what were essentially mechanisms of self-control based on Catholicism's understanding of the moral order and turned them into essentially heteronomous instruments of social control whose goal was the betterment of „humanity“ and whose validating principle was „science.“

Comte was one of the chief proponents of the „Positive State,“ a societal model premised upon the „hegemony of science and industry“⁷. Essentially, this new society envisioned by Comte amounted to a scientific dictatorship where „ideals of liberty and equality would eventually be supplanted by the technocratic values of order and progress“⁸. This technocratic vision for society was a product of Comte's tutelage under Saint-Simon. Through Saint-Simon, Comte would be introduced to what Marx and Engels would later call utopian socialism or critical utopian socialism. Accompanying Saint-Simon's advocacy of socialism was the contention that science and industry held primacy, a hallmark of Comte's „Positive State“. It was from Saint-Simon that Comte got the idea that Industrialism was to be the new form of social order that would replace the old order which had been swept irrevocably away by the revolution. The new order was to be based on science, not the now discredited religion, because no one could argue with science which was based on fact, not hypothesis. Thus, Comte's „Positive State“ was a totally mechanized society and its citizenry was to be mechanized as well. After all, in a „totally scientific society,“ all things are subject to quantification. That included man himself. It stood to reason that, if man were a quantifiable entity, then his mental and social behaviors could be guided through the predictive control of science.

Rejecting religion, Auguste Comte felt he had to find a substitute for it. Following Saint-Simon's lead, Comte attempted to create a spiritual image called “Humanity”. His purpose was to replace God as the center of adoration. He sought to duplicate the images, sacrifices, rituals and external forms, including prayers, in his new church. There would be a hierarchy, an officialdom, and a priesthood. Comte's new scientific theocracy would

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

inculcate the people into its technocratic creed through a series of rituals and festivals to excite the devotion of the faithful. This litany of devotional practices venerated „Humanity,“ which Comte viewed as an emergent deity symbolized in the „Grand Being“. This „Grand Being“ assumed flesh and blood through the great men of history. This doctrine of emergent deity remained embedded within sociology, as is evidenced by the monistic theories of Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim. The doctrine of emergent deity inverts the traditional Biblical cosmology. God was not in the beginning, but emerged through the evolutionary ascent man in the end.

But running through his whole system was the central idea that the rule of the people belonged to the philosophers who would be the clergy, as well as rulers, in this new order. It is a significant fact whose influence cannot be ignored, that at the base of all these schemes of social reconstruction – from Plato to Marx – ran this idea of the “Soviet of the Intellectuals”.

In this scientific theocracy, questions of man’s purpose and his relationship with God would become the intellectual property of social scientists. Such a societal configuration is purely technocratic in character. It enthrones „policy professionals“ as the sole arbiters of truth. The attraction of this idea is nowhere more sharply illustrated than in the impression made by Comte's philosophy on John Stuart Mill. But in the end the pragmatic Mill had to repudiate Comte, and his comment on this morose philosopher is most revealing. Mill said frankly that he „agreed with him [Comte] that the moral and intellectual ascendancy, once exercised by priests, must in time pass into the hands of philosophers, and will naturally do so when they become sufficiently unanimous and in other respects worthy to possess it.“ But, added Mill, „when he exaggerated this line of thought into a practical system, in which philosophers were to be organized into a kind of corporate hierarchy“. Invested with that kind of spiritual superiority possessed by a religious hierarchy, Mill could follow him no longer. He saw in it a scheme which established a totalitarian system of State despotism. No part of society would be left untouched by the controlling reach of governmental agencies. This pinpoints sharply the curious evil in this strange theory. First, it contemplates a society fully planned in its operations by an organized body of philosophers and administered by them. Of course this proposal ignores the solid fact that such a society or any other, when set up, will be administered not by philosophers but by politicians who possess the special talent for getting and holding power.

In England, the reactionary romantic pantheist Thomas Carlyle took to Saint-Simonian socialism immediately, and became its leading spokesman in England, going so far as to

translate and attempting to publish the master's final work, *The New Christianity*, in which he foreshadowed the development of his movement into the cult of a new religion. Of more lasting importance was the deep influence that Saint-Simonianism had on John Stuart Mill. For it was the Saint-Simonians who were initially and largely responsible for Mill's quasi-conversion from his father's hard-core free market views to semi-socialism.

There is no country, however, that took to Saint-Simonianism with more gusto than Germany. In the early 1830s, Saint-Simonianism 'went like wildfire through the German literary world. Its enthusiastic adepts included the eminent political writer, Friedrich Buchholz and the famous poet Heinrich Heine, while the Young German school of poets became Saint-Simonian adepts. But the most important influence of Saint-Simonianism in Germany was on the Young Hegelians, young German poets such as T. Mundt and G. Kuehne were Hegelian university lecturers on philosophy. More directly, Saint-Simonianism exercised a formative influence on Karl Marx.

Historically, the social sciences find their proximate origins with technocratic theoreticians and socio-political Utopians of the late 18th and the 19th century, such as Henri Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte. These thinkers would develop several of the theoretical concepts upon which modern totalitarian systems are premised. Sociology was predisposed to such authoritarian applications from the very beginning. Ever-present throughout sociological theory is the theme of a scientifically managed society.