

Fire in *the Minds* *of Men*

Origins of
the Revolutionary Faith

JAMES H. BILLINGTON

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of the word. "Ideology is a part of zoology," he wrote with a certain polemic zest.¹⁵ Happiness is merely the free play of the organs. As his closest collaborator put it: "The brain digests impressions and secretes thought."¹⁶

Henri de Saint-Simon extended this radical empiricism into the altogether new field of social relations. Having spent eleven months in prison during the Reign of Terror, expecting death at any moment, Saint-Simon had a deep fear of revolution. He dreamed of founding a new science of man as a means both to overcome disorder and to remove the overgrowth of false political rhetoric which concealed the real, material questions of society.¹⁷ Thus, ironically, this aristocrat of the ancien régime seeking to provide (in the words of one of his titles) *the means for bringing an end to the revolution*,¹⁸ ended up popularizing the most revolutionary of all modern ideas: there can be a science of human relations.

Saint-Simon's ideas fell on receptive ears because the original "ideologists" around de Tracy¹⁹ popularized not just a method of analysis but also a vision of society. Among de Tracy's friends within the Second Section of the newly created Institute (devoted to moral and political science), there had grown up in the 1790s the heady belief that the development and application of a new science of humanity could be the supreme creation of the revolutionary era. The journal that popularized this belief in the practical power of science was the influential *Décade philosophique, littéraire et politique* founded in 1794, the year of the Thermidorean reaction. After five years of a tempestuous revolution, this journal and the newly created Second Section of the Institute had sought to focus attention on peaceful, pedagogic changes for the "philosophical decade" ahead.

The controlling group, which de Tracy and Cabanis called *idéologiste*, argued that the key to diagnosing and curing the ills of humanity lay in an objective understanding of the physiological realities that lay behind all thinking and feeling. They were encouraged by the rise of Napoleon; for he had assembled a kind of institute in exile during his campaign in Egypt, surrounding himself with scientists and asking de Tracy and others to join him there. On his return to France, Napoleon accepted membership in the First Section of the Institute, which dealt with the natural sciences. He visited Helvetius's widow, a kind of salon mother to the ideologists. De Tracy's group was led to believe that a "revolutionary academy" might replace popular sovereignty. The first outline of his *Elements of Ideology* in 1801 was designed for use in the new republican schools they expected from Napoleon.²⁰

Once securely in power, however, Napoleon became suspicious of the *idéologistes*, denouncing them as *idéologues*.²¹ He dissolved the Second Section of the Institute in 1803, forcing these original ideologists into a kind of party of opposition to the emperor. When the daughter of de Tracy married the son of Lafayette, the philosophical and political opposition were joined.

The struggle between Napoleon and the *idéologistes* deeply disturbed

both sides—perhaps because each secretly admired the other. Napoleon was a compulsive writer and a would-be intellectual who never had the time to develop these inclinations in himself. The *idéologistes* had a clear thirst for the power that Napoleon seemed to have denied them. Many of them had caught a glimpse in the revolutionary era of an exhilarating, active life in which they might simultaneously debate ideas and shape events. As imperial restriction descended on their academies and journals, the ideologists felt empty and deprived; and their distress was no less keen for being spiritual rather than material.

Saint-Simon provided a broad battle plan for the intellectual opposition. The combat leaders were to be the new politicized journalists whom he called *littérateurs* in his *Sketch* of 1804 and *publicistes* subsequently. Scientific indoctrination and intellectual unity were to be provided in a new "positive encyclopedia" on which he worked from 1809 to 1813.²² His *Essay on the Science of Man* in 1813 suggested that every field of knowledge moved successively from a conjectural to a "positive" stage, and that the sciences reached this stage in a definite order.²³ Physiology had now moved into a positive stage, just as astrology and alchemy had previously given way to astronomy and chemistry. Now the science of man must move towards the positive stage and completely reorganize all human institutions.

In a sense, Saint-Simon was only reviving the Enlightenment vision of humanity advancing through three successive stages to a scientific ordering of life (in Turgot's *Discourse on Universal History* of 1760); and of universal progress towards rational order (in Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, written in hiding shortly before his death in 1794).

But just as the revolutionary regime condemned Condorcet, so Napoleon shut the Second Section of the Institute. Saint-Simon was forced to publish his early proposals anonymously and usually outside the borders of the Napoleonic Empire. Thus, Napoleon, who had helped inspire the quest for a science of man, also began the process of driving it into social revolutionary paths.²⁴ Believing that the scientific method should be applied to the body of society as well as to the individual body, Saint-Simon proceeded to analyze society in terms of its physiological components: classes. He never conceived of economic classes in the Marxian sense, but his functional class analysis prepared the way for Marx.

The key problem at each stage in Saint-Simon's successive efforts at social analysis was to determine which social force was capable of applying science to society. During the Napoleonic period he divided society into property owners, workers, and savants, placing all his hope in the latter group's disinterested approach to human affairs. He thought that property owners could be persuaded to see that the savants were natural leaders able to steer humanity away from a revolutionary disruption of the social order.

During the restoration Saint-Simon divided society into two fundamental groups: industrials and idlers. Disillusioned with savants, the men

of learning who lacked drive, he turned to *industriels*, the "industrious" (not simply the industrialists), to take leadership away from unproductive priests and politicians. He idealized the *industriels* out of respect not for their ownership of property but for their powers of production. Work was liberative; the beaver and not the lion should be the king of beasts. In his *Letters to the Industriels* and other articles²⁵ during this period, he envisaged an end to revolution through a new religion with a single commandment: "All men must work." There were idlers (*oisifs*) and industrious ones (*industriels*) within all social groups. The new elite was thus to be drawn from whoever was industrious in agriculture, commerce, manufacturing, and banking regardless of social origins. Saint-Simon was the prophet of meritocracy, seeking to re-order society in the image of the new chessboard he had designed for revolutionary France, with a hierarchy in which the king was replaced by a figure called Talent.

Having failed, however, to win over the industrialists, Saint-Simon turned to one last force for revolutionary support in his last years, 1824-25: "the most numerous and poorest class." He addressed to the self-proclaimed spiritual leaders of the "holy alliance" his final plea for a "New Christianity" of morality without metaphysics, technology without theology. This alone could keep the urban poor from returning to the false god of revolution. "Listen to the voice of God speaking through my mouth," he proclaimed with characteristic lack of modesty in the final words of his last work addressed to the political heads of Europe:

Turn to true Christianity again, . . . Fulfill all the duties it imposes on the powerful. Remember that it commands them to devote all their strength to the swiftest possible amelioration of the lot of the poor.²⁶

Saint-Simon promised to elaborate fully the nature of the "New Christianity." But he died in 1825 and never had a chance to go beyond suggesting that it would resemble heretical Christian sects of the past and would reorganize society to benefit the poor.

Saint-Simon was a truly seminal intellectual force: a father of socialism as well as sociology, and a John the Baptist of revolutionary ideology, crying out in the wilderness of the Napoleonic and restoration eras for a new historicism and moral relativism.

Saint-Simon was one of the first to popularize the distinctive nineteenth-century belief that truth is not absolute but historical, and is realized not in individual thought but in social action. He was one of the first continental thinkers to contend that the Industrial Revolution was more important than the political revolution in France. The key factors in history for him were tools and technological revolutions. Archimedes was greater than Alexander; Newton than Napoleon. The real forces for change in modern society, the *industriels*, far from being aided by the political changes in France, were now burdened with a second group of nonproductive *oisifs*: new politicians alongside old priests.

The bourgeoisie was for Saint-Simon hardly less parasitical than the idle aristocrats of the ancien régime. He rejected liberalism (which soon won over some of his closest friends such as Augustin Thierry) as a negative and critical movement, incapable of reunifying mankind, incompatible with the new positive age of science. He accorded economics primacy over politics, physiology over metaphysics. Government was a social function appropriate to the metaphysical stage of history and was now to be replaced by a rational social organization suitable for the exploitation of nature. The rule of man over man was always oppressive; the rule of men over things, liberative. Even in his most political proposal, his *Reorganization of European Society* in 1814, he urged a clean break with past political systems in favor of a new Economic Parliament of Europe and a trans-national authority to unify Europe through vast public works such as a Danube-Rhine and Rhine-Baltic Canal.

Political authority was to be replaced by social authority in his 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 academies, Reasoning and Sentiment, were to be filled by a new breed of propagandistic writer and artist.

Saint-Simon's final call for a new religion represented the culmination of the *idéologue* attempt to supplant all religion by absorbing it into a progressive scheme of secular evolution. In his commentary of 1802 François Dupuis's *The Origin of All the Cults of Universal Religion*²⁷ 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.

Saint-Simon more than any other figure of his generation excited young Europeans about the liberative possibilities of industry and about reaching salvation through knowledge and mastery, not belief and mystery. After the failure of their conspiracies in the early 1820s, radical youth found both consolation and a new direction in Saint-Simonian ideology. They reassembled in small discussion groups, forming "a congress of philosophers charged with discussing everything that had been left out of the one at Vienna."²⁸ They were exhilarated both by the new sense of history filtering in from German philosophy and by the study of economics filtering in from England. These interests led to a new appreciation of Saint-Simon. Some directly transferred from Carbonari conspiracies to Saint-Simonian circles, leading one of the best memoirists of the period to characterize Saint-Simonianism as simply "religious carbonarism."²⁹