SOCIETY AND HISTORY – THE REPUDIATION OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

It is commonly believed that the theories of nineteenth-century French socialism were in large part elaborations of the philosophy of the eighteenth-century *philosophes* and of the principles of the French Revolution applied to an emerging industrial society. This is only partly true. The main schools of French pre-Marxist socialist thought arose at a time when mechanical industry played a still relatively minor role in French economic life. Indeed the Saint-Simonian theory of society constituted a radical rejection of the revolutionary belief in liberty and equality and its replacement by a cult of authority. In its critique of the “philosophy of the eighteenth-century,” it rested heavily on the writings of the Catholic counter-revolutionary thinkers.

Instead of viewing the individual as a responsible agent and as a potential originator of social change, the Saint-Simonians subjected him to the collectivity. Their conception of society rested upon two basic assumptions which they accepted axiomatically: First, society by definition was a causally meaningful system of social relationships, possessing a center of direction. The coexistence of individuals did not yet constitute a society. Secondly, history was a meaningful process, comprehensible to man and tending continuously and inevitably toward the integration of all men in all their activities in a thoroughly organized society. Man by nature was a social being who withered in isolation from social direction in the three modes of his existence, the physical, the intellectual, and the moral. The human need for order was the driving force of history. In contrast to the egalitarian and libertarian conclusions of the revolutionary thinkers of the previous century, the Saint-Simonians saw the aim of history in the establishment of a hierarchy based upon the natural rather than the conventional inequalities among men.

G. G. Iggers, *The Cult of Authority*  
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The French Revolution had been the climax of a century which sought new answers to the fundamental problems of man and society. The belief in the Church and its doctrines, the divine monarchy, and the privileges of a feudal nobility as parts of an unalterable order of things, which though already shaken in 1700 was still deeply held by the majority of even educated Frenchmen, had been replaced by 1789 by a new social faith which found expression in the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" and the revolutionary constitutions and legislation. This change was the outcome of progressive questioning throughout the eighteenth century of the basic ideas and institutions of the old system in the light of reason and experience.

Fundamental to the changing social philosophy was its conception of man as a rational and responsible agent. In the background was the new scientific outlook of the seventeenth century which viewed the world as rational and comprehensible. Newton, culminating the line of scientific thought which had begun with Copernicus, had explained the material world in terms of natural laws of motion. The eighteenth century saw the extension of the philosophy of natural law to the study of man and of society. Descartes had already asserted that man, as a rational creature, could have clear ideas descriptive of reality provided he freed himself of prejudices and traditions and reasoned purely on the basis of self-evident deductions made from axiomatic premises. The mind consisted of two faculties, understanding and will, the first by its very nature being alike among all men so that there could not be significant differences in intelligence. Error, he held, arose "from this cause alone, that I do not restrain my will." Locke, while denying the existence of innate, self-evident ideas in the mind, thought that all knowledge came from sensations and reflections which would reveal the natural law governing the universe. For Cartesian rationalists as well as for the adherents, such as Voltaire, Condillac, Helvétius, of Locke's psychology, which was to dominate the mid- and late eighteenth century, there existed a harmony between rational inquiry and the attainment of truth. This harmony extended to the social realm, for reason, free of prejudice, would lead to social truth, and enlightened action would lead to individual and social welfare. Evil was hence error or ignorance; all social misfortunes