REDS

A GLOBAL HISTORY OF COMMUNISM

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PAUL MASON



An Apollo Book

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To the memory of my father, John, and my mother, Julia

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Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it "the way it really was". It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger…

Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History"[1]

When the Soviet empire fell apart, it was in the strange position of having been a superpower without incarnating a civilisation… Its rapid dissolution left nothing behind, neither principles nor laws nor institutions, nor even a history.

François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*[2]

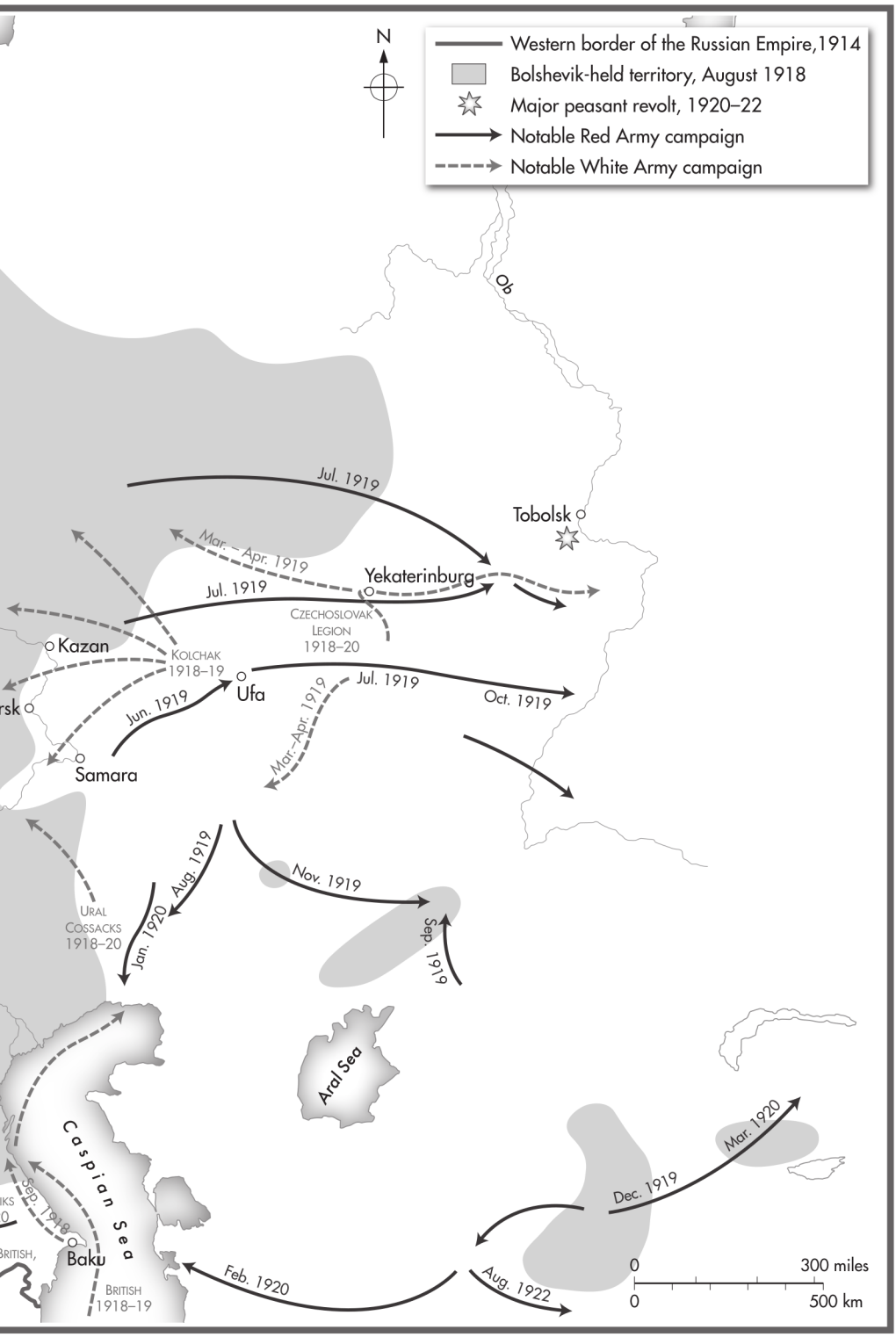
The history we write is always at bottom our own intellectual and political autobiography, an attempt to come to a genetic understanding of our own way of living, acting and feeling.

Eric Weil, "What Is a Breakthrough in History?"[3]


The Communist World in 1949
>10k
60k
<30k
17k
200k
27k
16k
34k
40k
~30k
850k
~10k
<5k
6k
Countries under Communist rule
10k Estimated memberships for significant Communist Parties in 1949
Warsaw Pact and Yugoslavia


55k
U S S R
MPR
2m
8.5k
2k
25k
P R C
DPRK
200k
90k
25k
DRV
2k
50k
400k
~5k
>20k
<10k
2k


The Soviet Civil War, 1918–1921
Poland and the Baltic States shown with dates of independence
White Sea
Archangelsk
French, British, Americans, Canadians, 1918–20
Mar. 1920
Jan. 1920
Helsinki
Tallinn
Kronstadt
Petrograd
Baltic Sea
ESTONIA
Feb. 24, 1918
Yudenich
Oct. 1919
Sukhona
Volga
Riga
LATVIA
Nov. 18, 1918
LITHUANIA
Feb. 16, 1918
Kovno
Vilna
Moscow
Tula
Simbi
Jul. 1920
Minsk
Poles
Aug. 1920
Warsaw
Brest-Litovsk
POLAND
Nov. 11, 1917
Poles
1920
Tambov
Penza
Oct. 1919
Kursk
Oct. 1919
Aug. 1920
Kyiv
Kharkiv
Nov. 1919
Don
Sep. 1919
Denikin
1919
Don Cossacks
1917–19
Tsaritsyn
Poles
1920
Dnieper
Budapest
Romanians
1918–19
Danube
Jun. 1919
Rostov
Nov. 1919
Nov. 1920
Sep. 1920
Odesa
Mar. 1920
Wrangel
1920
Sevastopol
Apr. 1920
Georgians
1919–20
Black Sea
German
British
Tiflis
May 1918
Mar. 1921
Turkish, German,


N
Western border of the Russian Empire,1914
Bolshevik-held territory, August 1918
Major peasant revolt, 1920–22
Notable Red Army campaign
Notable White Army campaign
Ob
Tobolsk
Yekaterinburg
Jul. 1919
Mar. – Apr. 1919
Jul. 1919
Czechoslovak Legion 1918–20
Kazan
Kolchak 1918–19
Ufa
Jul. 1919
Oct. 1919
Jun. 1919
Mar.–Apr. 1919
Samara
Aug. 1919
Nov. 1919
Ural Cossacks 1918–20
Jan. 1920
Sep. 1919
Aral Sea
Caspian Sea
Mar. 1920
Dec. 1919
Sep. 1918
Baku
British 1918–19
Feb. 1920
Aug. 1922
0
300 miles
0
500 km


China's Liberation War
Area controlled by PLA 1946
Additional area controlled by PLA June 1949
PLA guerrilla operations 1945–9
Additional area controlled by PRC 1950
Area controlled by Guomindang after 1950
Battle
Final PLA campaigns to expel Guomindang armies
0
400 miles
0
600 km
N
U S S R
MPR
Harbin
Sea of Japan
DPRK (1948)
ROK (1948)
Beijing
CHINA
Jinan
Yellow Sea
JAPAN
Lanzhou
Xi'an
Nanjing
Shanghai
Hankow
Hangzhou
Yushu
East China Sea
Nanchang
Chongqing
Changsha
Fuzhou
PACIFIC OCEAN
Canton
Macao (Portuguese)
Hong Kong (British)
DRV (1945)

Not Even the Dead Are Safe

Instead of an Introduction

The most successful economy in the world is communist. The most successful political party in the world – the Communist Party of China (CPC) – has 100 million members and aims to be running the strongest state on earth by 2049.[1] By then it may not matter whether you believe China is genuinely communist, or whether its ruling ideology is a gross distortion of the Marxist original. If its plans succeed, the CPC will get to write both the definitions and the history books. For that reason alone, we should stop treating the history of communism as a finished episode, without relevance to the choices facing us today.

A second reason to study the history of communism is obvious if you glance at the headlines: capitalism is in trouble and liberal democracy is imploding. Climate change is generating severe social stress; the Western economic model is producing extreme inequality; debt hangs like a millstone around the necks of once dynamic countries, and nuclear war – unthinkable for three generations – is a present danger.

Faced with a crisis on this scale in the 1930s, millions of people

put their faith in communism for a simple reason: every other alternative to fascism failed.

There is no guarantee this can't happen again. Join any left-wing protest march in the West – for human rights, climate justice or higher wages – and you will meet a minority of people who think China's system is better than ours. Worse, while communist parties during the Cold War denied the crimes of the Soviet regime, some of today's neo-Leninists openly defend them. On the far left, a new breed of activist is prepared to admit that Stalin and Mao killed millions of people, but to say "it was worth it" for the sake of economic development or "decolonisation".[2]

If, like me, you seek a different future – a sustainable, egalitarian, technologically rich and democratic society centred on universal values – then understanding what communism was, why millions of people embraced it and why it failed is more than an academic exercise. It is our best guarantee that it does not return.

Karl Marx declared the problem of communism "solved" on the day he saw an electric railway engine displayed in London's Regent Street.[3] If reincarnated and shown an iPhone, he might ask: what's stopping you from using this immense combination of knowledge and machine power to achieve a society without property or hierarchy? The answer I would give – in addition to the political power of billionaires and the atomisation of organised labour – is the fear of repeating an era during which his portrait was hung on the walls of torture chambers.

The idea of communism is much older than Marx. The great religious thinkers of Antiquity – from Gautama to Pythagoras to Jesus – taught that property should be renounced or held in common. Some, like the Essene sect within Judaism, actually created communal living arrangements within the slave-based economy surrounding them. Equally important, both Judaism and Christianity embedded into their theologies the idea of an "end of history" – a moment of redemption through destruction which, as we will see, became a guiding principle of communist movements in modernity. Then, from the sixteenth century onwards, Christian

philosophers and social reformers repeatedly engaged in thought experiments about classless Utopias.

As they did so, they summoned the creation myths of the great religions to advance the idea that human society had, at its origins, been egalitarian. But while modern anthropology shows that many surviving hunter-gatherer societies forbid private property and practise altruism, they also use coercion and peer pressure to maintain adherence to their norms.

The idea that the absence of private property and systematic inequality *automatically* removes coercion – which forms the core of the Marxist theory of history – is not proven. Yet the fact remains: capitalism is broken, chaotic, and spiralling towards authoritarianism, penury and war, no matter how fast our semiconductors become.

In these circumstances it is logical for a new generation to ask whether we can achieve a classless society, with abundance and human flourishing as its goal. The political purpose of this book is to answer: yes, but not like this.

It is a history of communism as an impulse, an idea, a political movement and a regime. It is not a history of Marxism. Nor can it be a history of the Soviet Union (USSR), the People's Republic of China (PRC) and their satellites. When it tells the story of revolutions it will focus on the role of communists within them, to the detriment of feminists, liberals, revolutionary nationalists and social democrats.

This is a narrative history, not an encyclopaedia: to tell the story of every communist party is impossible. Instead, I will focus on those that achieved mass memberships and were a factor in global events. And while the cultural output of communist states was interesting, it is of secondary importance to the central, political question: how did pursuit of a classless society create such a violent, hierarchical and monstrous reality, and why did the regimes created ultimately fail?

Marx believed that "history does nothing". It fights no battles, creates no wealth and stages no revolutions: it is only the activity of individual human beings pursuing their aims. What

he underestimated is the extent to which history is therefore susceptible to being shaped by people like the extraordinary figures in this book.

The "Reds" whose stories I tell here don't fit easily into narrative conventions. Many make a brief, vital contribution and then disappear – often through violent death. So do not get too attached to the young, heroic figures you will meet in these pages: some will be murdered; others will become murderers on a mass scale.

In writing this I've become convinced that, to understand cause and effect in the history of communism, *chronology is your friend*.[4] The thematic approach, justifiably dominant in academic writing, obscures the fact that by the 1920s communism was a global organism, its nervous system operating across borders in real time: an event in China could trigger a response in Moscow and an order to Berlin in the time it took to encode a radio message. The analytical payload is therefore delivered on the fly, as the camera jump-cuts between countries and continents, following events in the order that they happened.

When it comes to sources, there are vast asymmetries between those available to cover the USSR and the Comintern and those available from China. In the 1990s, researchers were finally able to read the confessions beaten out of Stalin's victims and to see the bloodstains on the paper. With China, by contrast, though official documents exist going back to 1921, they are a mask rather than a window onto reality.[5] As a result, while the Soviet experience can be grasped viscerally, that of the Mao era remains frustratingly pixellated.

In writing this, I have been inspired by the philosopher Walter Benjamin's instruction to historians: stop writing about the past as if we don't know its outcome. On the eve of the Nazi invasion of France in 1940, Benjamin urged us to write as if "taking control of a memory, as it flashes up in a moment of danger".[6] That is my intention here, because our moment of danger is tangible.

I do not want to "take control" of the memory of Marx, any more than the memory of the Russian Revolution or the Spanish

Civil War. But I do want to prevent the Communist Party of China taking control of them.

Because, as Benjamin reminds us: "not even the dead are safe from the enemy". Just as post-war fascism fought to expunge the facts about the Holocaust, we are now seeing – in Putin's Russia, Xi's China and political movements aligned to them in the global south – systematic distortions of the events described here. And it will get worse.

In occupied Ukraine, new statues of Lenin are being erected. In Russia, plaques commemorating victims of the Great Purge are being torn down and the last museum of the Gulag has been closed. In China, all critical writing about Mao is dismissed as "historical nihilism".

As the PRC assembles a new, global alliance of authoritarian states I have no doubt that, should this particular enemy triumph, the thinkers who have influenced me – the Western Marxists, post-Soviet historians and Benjamin himself – will be buried out of sight (together with myself).

As you read each chapter, I want you to imagine how it might be written in a future dominated by the brain-frozen clichés of Chinese communism. The Beijing propaganda machine has been busy eradicating the truth about the Tiananmen Square Massacre for nearly forty years. What might it achieve if given the unchallenged right to curate the facts about 1848, 1917 or indeed 1789?

Far from being yesterday's problem, the struggle for the truth about the history of communism may have only just begun. If so, Benjamin's words on the eve of its darkest and finest hours bear repeating:

> Every line we succeed in publishing today – no matter how uncertain the future to which we entrust it – is a victory wrested from the powers of darkness.[7]

CHAPTER ONE

In Search of Utopia

How Communism Became a Political Ideology

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, three revolutions changed the shape of the Western world. In 1776 America declared independence from Great Britain and became a republic. In 1789 the French people staged a revolution that led to the execution of the king, war with the crowned heads of Europe and terror against the aristocracy. In 1791 the black slaves of Saint-Domingue (today Haiti) rebelled against their French colonial masters, prompting Paris itself to abolish slavery three years later.

Though undertaken in the name of liberty, equality, fraternity and "self-evident" rights, these revolutions posed profound questions about social justice. What use is liberty to the poor? What use is equality before the law when inequalities of wealth are growing? What place would be found in the fraternity for women, colonial subjects and the urban poor? And if political rights are "self-evident", why aren't economic rights?

Communism as a political ideology emerged as an answer to these questions. It was, at its birth, a critique of the outcome of the French Revolution – both from the standpoint of the masses, and of the Enlightenment ideals that had inspired it. During the

second half of the 1790s, at the point of maximum disillusion, two ideas emerged that have formed the premise of revolutionary anti-capitalism ever since.

First, that history moves according to laws, which can be studied just as scientifically as those of nature; that human society has progressed through distinct economic phases; and that, as a result, the economy can be redesigned to meet human need, based on the principles of rationality and science.

Second, that democracy is not enough: that the political revolution should be followed by a social revolution – led, if necessary, by a small group of dedicated people – which will seize the property of the elite and make it communal.

We should note at the start that both ideas treat the revolution as an "engineering problem": the act and its outcome are the products of rational design. But they did not emerge in synthesis. Indeed, their progenitors were two vastly different men, with violently opposed objectives. Both were – by coincidence – born in the French region of Picardy in the year 1760 and grew up in the heyday of the Enlightenment. Apart from that, all they had in common was that both saw the inside of a jail during the revolution.

The author of the first idea was Henri de Saint-Simon. The author of the second was François-Noël Babeuf.

In this chapter I will trace the origins of these ideas and show how, after the French Revolution had been defeated, they were synthesised as a solution to working-class poverty and exploitation by thinkers known to history as the "Utopian Socialists".

Utopias – from Plato to Thomas More

The first design for a communal Utopia was written as a polemic against democracy. Around 360 BC, in a dialogue known as *Republic*, the Athenian philosopher Plato famously staged a debate on the ideal form of governance for a city state. Plato's fictional Kallipolis (Beautiful City) is governed by an elite class of Guardians

who share their property in common, policed and defended by a class of Auxiliaries, populated by a lower class of citizen farmers and, below them, slaves.

The Guardians are chosen from the most selfless people and possess "no private property beyond the barest essentials".[1] They are brought up communally and forbidden to form family households – having sex only as part of a state-run breeding programme, where partners are chosen by drawing lots. The Guardians eat together in communal kitchens and are forbidden to handle money. To prevent demands for social change, the Guardians are taught a "noble lie": that the system is eternal and that they were born to their social role, which is unchangeable. Only the farmers are allowed to own property – but the Guardians' job is to make sure that there are no extremes of wealth and poverty among them.

In Kallipolis women and men are equal – with the same rights to property, education and political leadership; children are raised in communal nurseries, while boys and girls are allowed to play sport together, naked. Since women in Ancient Greece were oppressed and segregated, this mixture of communal property and sexual equality was meant to sound outrageous. Plato was sceptical that such a society could survive, given the frailness of human reason – but said the best way of achieving it would be to teach philosophy to the Guardian class.

What is striking about Plato's *Republic* – and struck Cold War liberals with particular force – is its similarity to the USSR under Stalin. In the Soviet Union an inner-party elite governed through a bureaucratic class of technocrats and secret policemen; the industrial working class formed a third tier and – until they were liquidated through collectivisation – peasant smallholders formed the powerless mass. Underpinning the whole structure was, in addition, the slave labour of the *Gulag*.

In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, written in 1945 as liberalism reeled from the experience of the Holocaust, the philosopher Karl Popper accused Plato of infecting Western philosophy at its birth

with the desire for "Utopian social engineering", and claimed that both Nazism and Soviet communism were the results.[2]

Whatever its demerits, Plato's *Republic* became the reference point for all subsequent Western debates on the ideal form of governance, first in the Roman Empire, then in its Byzantine successor. During the Renaissance, the new Florentine elite of merchants and bankers were delighted to discover that Plato's book, brought to them by scholars fleeing Constantinople, supported their project of enlightened patrician rule.[3] Then, in the sixteenth century, the discovery of indigenous societies in the Americas where people held property in common gave Plato's work a whole new relevance.

In 1516 Thomas More – an Oxford-educated politician and expert in Greek literature – wrote *Utopia*, a response to the first accounts of indigenous societies emerging among the *conquistadors*. Its premise was that Plato's *Republic* might actually exist in the Americas, as described by the fictional explorer Raphael Hythloday.[4]

More's *Utopia* forms a landmark in the history of communism because, if Plato's was a critique of democracy, More's is a critique of early capitalism. He begins by asking: why are there so many thieves, when the punishment for theft is death? The answer is the enclosure of the land for sheep farming – the most tangible impact of the early commercialisation of agriculture – which is throwing peasants off their farms and into penury.[5]

After criticising kings who use authoritarian methods to maintain order, and lamenting the use of capital punishment for minor crimes, Hythloday tells More:

> Thus I am wholly convinced that unless private property is entirely abolished, there can be no fair or just distribution of goods, nor can the business of mortals be conducted happily. As long as private property remains, by far the largest and best part of the human race will be oppressed by a distressing and inescapable burden of poverty and anxieties.[6]

More's fictional land of Utopia is an autarky, cut off from the rest of the world by choice. It contains fifty-four identical cities, each surrounded by enough farmland to support their population. The urban workforce rotates regularly into communal farms. There is a strictly representative democracy, with an annually elected senate which appoints a governor for life.

The working day is limited to six hours, with a two-hour lunch break (a far cry from the reality of Tudor England, where farmers were required by law to work for thirteen hours a day).[7] As in Plato, More's Utopia employs slaves, but not many, and their children are always freed.

The establishment of democratic governance and the prioritisation of leisure over work are More's first two departures from Plato – and are a product of the technological optimism and rapid social change surrounding him. A third departure concerns the family. While Plato abolishes it, More makes it the granular basis of society, with families grouped together into larger communal units to eat their meals for free.

However, the price for this life of abundance is surveillance and control:

> Nowhere is there any chance to loaf or any pretext for evading work; there are no wine-bars, or ale-houses, or brothels; no chances for corruption; no hiding places; no spots for secret meetings. Because they live in the full view of all, they are bound to be either working at their usual trades or enjoying their leisure in a respectable way.[8]

For More, as for Plato, conformity is the precondition that the system works.

After Hythloday concludes with a diatribe against the inequality, private property and tyranny of early merchant capitalism, More responds that, while many of the Utopians' customs are absurd, "in the Utopian commonwealth there are very many features that in our own societies I would wish rather than expect to see".[9]

More then moved into frontline politics – whose complications led to his execution in 1535. But *Utopia* was to have a life of its own, becoming an international bestseller. Through its brilliant ambiguity, *Utopia* allowed a debate to begin at the very dawn of capitalism over whether there was an alternative, both to absolutist monarchy and to an economy based on commerce, finance, rural dispossession and slavery.[10]

For the next two centuries, the Utopian fiction genre became a repository for the dreams of educated men about alternative forms of government. In the seventeenth century, it produced republican, constitutional, sexual and even reactionary Utopias. But in the middle of the eighteenth century, with the Enlightenment at its zenith, something deeply subversive happened to Utopian communist fiction: it morphed from a thought experiment into a programme of action.

Morelly's *Code of Nature*

Étienne-Gabriel Morelly published his works anonymously. At the time they were attributed to the philosopher Denis Diderot, but nineteenth-century scholars proved they are the work of Morelly, a small-town schoolteacher from the Champagne region. His first effort was the novel *La Basiliade*, published in 1753, which describes a fictional foreign land where private property is outlawed, where housing and meals are communal, where there are no laws, but where people have a lot of sex: premarital, multi-partner and even incestuous.

After the French newspapers panned the novel, in 1755 Morelly published a long defence of it, together with a much weightier proposal: *The Code of Nature*. In it, reversing his previous assumption against laws, Morelly set out a 117-point legal code for a classless society. That brought the Utopian debate out of the realm of fiction and into the sphere of what was about to happen, which was a revolution.

Morelly attacks those who want to limit democratic change to the overthrow of kings and organised religions:

> Talk as much as you like about the best form of government; found the wisest republic… if you have not cut the roots of property, you have done nothing; your republic will one day fall into the most deplorable state.[11]

Morelly blames private property not only for inequality, but for every other social injustice. Consequently, he proposes as the first law of the new republic:

> Nothing in society will belong to anyone, either as a personal possession or as capital goods, except the things for which the person has immediate use, for either his needs, his pleasures, or his daily work.[12]

Every citizen will be a "public man", entitled to be fed and cared for at society's expense. In addition, he will contribute "according to his capacity, his talent and his age" and be compensated according to "distributive laws". That is the first iteration of what became a communist slogan in the early nineteenth century: "From each according to his capacity, to each according to his needs". Since this is now a serious proposal for government, and not a licentious fantasy, Morelly bans promiscuity and brings back marriage.

The key to Morelly's system – as it would be for all subsequent Utopian Socialists – is education. In place of Plato's "noble lie", children are taught the principles of rationality and altruism and told they have been ordained by a Supreme Being – and are thus unchallengeable. The government consists of an elected senate, but the laws Morelly prescribes are literally carved into stone and unalterable. Morelly warned that it would be almost impossible to form such a republic in his own era. But *The Code of Nature* is the first systematic presentation of an idea that – once in the hands of revolutionaries – would change the world.

1789–94: The Republic of Virtue

François-Noël Babeuf was born poor, but learned to live by his wits. After five years working as a farmhand in Picardy, he became apprenticed to a notary. His job was to help landowners squeeze rents out of their peasant smallholders by trawling through the details of their contracts. "Amid the dust of the feudal archives," he wrote later, "I found the terrible mysteries of noble usurpation."[13]

While working in the archives of a nearby chateau he devoured the books he found in its library by Voltaire, Plato and Rousseau and, in 1785, became a member of the Arras Academy – a local centre of debate and education frequented by liberal noblemen. It was here that he likely encountered the writings of Morelly.

In 1786, in his first political tract, Babeuf proposed that, as a solution to rural poverty, the land should be divided into equally sized "collective farms" – with several families living communally. Unlike Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who had proposed a similar idea in 1761, Babeuf's farm was to have no manager. The plan was too radical for the academy, whose chairman advised him not to publish it.

Count Henri de Saint-Simon came from the other end of the social spectrum. His father actually owned a chateau and, though not spectacularly rich, had money enough for servants. Saint-Simon, too, read Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot/Morelly – but at a much younger age than Babeuf – and received formal instruction in the principles of the Enlightenment.

Saint-Simon joined the French army at the age of seventeen and saw action during the American War of Independence. Taken prisoner by the British, on his release he travelled to Mexico, where he tried to persuade the Spanish viceroy to let him build a canal across Panama (canals, for reasons we will come to, were an obsession for the Utopian Socialists). The outbreak of the French Revolution found Saint-Simon in Madrid, working on another canal project. When the Parisian masses stormed the Bastille on 14 July 1789, he decided to return home and join them.

*

Since the French Revolution is the reference case for all subsequent revolutions and gave communism an entire lexicon – Jacobin, Terror, Thermidor – we need briefly to establish the main events.

With the country bankrupted by war, in May 1789 Louis XVI convened a meeting of the "Estates General" at Versailles. In June, deputies drawn from the commercial middle class walked out to form a separate National Assembly, which in July set to work writing a new constitution. As tensions mounted, Parisians stormed the Bastille prison and peasant revolts broke out across France. Babeuf was in Paris to witness the uprising of 14 July first hand.[14] One of his first acts on returning to Picardy was to burn the feudal archives he had spent his life curating.[15]

In August the Assembly adopted the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* and annulled the rights of the nobility. After women staged a protest march to his palace in Versailles, Louis was forced to move to Paris, reluctantly heading a constitutional monarchy. In November, the Assembly confiscated land from the church and issued bonds – known as *assignats* – which it promised to repay by selling the land.

For the next two years France was run by the moderate wing of the bourgeoisie, known as the Girondins, secure in the knowledge that – as the final article of the *Declaration* stated – the right to property is "inviolable".[16] Under the new regime cities were governed by elected "communes". But beneath the formal structures two new institutions flourished: political clubs, drawing in men from the professional classes, and "sections" – regular local assemblies that included the urban poor.

Saint-Simon became chairman of the commune in his home town and threw himself into the business of revolutionary administration. As a lucrative sideline he raised a massive bank loan and began buying up land seized from the church. Babeuf's contribution was to campaign against a hated local commodity tax and, in the spring of 1790, after riots broke out over the issue, he was briefly jailed.

The problem for the Girondin government was that, despite abolishing feudal privilege, they could not meet the demands of the urban poor, who were increasingly mobilised alongside the more radical, Jacobin faction of the middle class. Since "Jacobin" is a term that has become central to debates about communism, it's worth pausing to understand its original meaning.

The Jacobin Club was a political organisation set up in 1789 to host left-wing deputies to the National Assembly. As the revolution accelerated, it spawned a nationwide network with over 900 local branches.[17] The ideology of Jacobinism was rooted in three principles: revolutionary democracy, anti-clericalism and egalitarianism; and its political style was both emotive and fanatical.[18] And though the club's members were male, educated and middle class – often lawyers, civil servants or journalists – they allowed women and the poor into their galleries to observe. Indeed, much of what they said and wrote was aimed at the so-called *sans-culottes*, who would repeat their arguments in their section meetings.

On 10 August 1792 the Jacobins led the second mass uprising of the revolution. They installed a new commune in Paris and stormed the Tuileries Palace to depose the king. They then set up a National Convention, which proclaimed a republic on 21 September. Amid these events, Babeuf got himself elected to Picardy's regional government where – amid clashes with local monarchists – he was framed on a fraud charge. Fearing the worst, he fled to Paris and was sentenced *in absentia* to twenty years in jail.

As Babeuf arrived in Paris, political tensions were approaching breaking point. France was losing the wars it had begun against most of its neighbouring monarchies; the Convention was paralysed by moderates opposed to the execution of the king. Inevitably, on 31 May 1793 a third insurrection began, which swept the Girondins from power.

After that, a government dominated by the Jacobins enacted increasingly radical measures. The Committee of Public Safety – a revolutionary junta led by Maximilien Robespierre – declared a

mass call-up to the army, imposed a cap on the price of grain and drafted a new radical constitution, together with a new *Declaration of Rights*. Though it still enshrined property as inviolable, the *Declaration*'s first article stated: "The aim of society is the common welfare". And as the government was short of cash – and the masses had none – it requisitioned goods from the aristocracy, forced them into lending to the state and slashed the value of their *assignats*. Here, at last, was a chance to achieve the economic justice that men like Babeuf had dreamed of.

Fate conspired to throw both Babeuf and Saint-Simon into jail at the revolution's climax. Babeuf was hauled back to Picardy in November 1793, to face justice over the fraud charge. Saint-Simon, sensing his aristocratic title made him a target, had taken the name Henri Bonhomme. But in late 1793 he was seized by Robespierre's police on suspicion of counter-revolution.

As a result, both men were bystanders to Robespierre's reign of terror, which saw him lash out against the *sans-culottes*, the Jacobin left, the Jacobin moderates and the aristocracy in a spree of executions. Finally, on 27 July 1794 – or on 9 Thermidor according to the revolutionary calendar – Robespierre himself was overthrown, to be executed alongside his closest supporters the following day.

Both Babeuf and Saint-Simon emerged from jail relieved at Robespierre's demise: Saint-Simon because he abhorred revolutionary violence; Babeuf because, as a democrat, he hated the authoritarian chaos Robespierre had unleashed under the guise of a "Republic of Virtue". Because there was still a republic, an elected Convention and the "Constitution of 1793" – which had been suspended during the Terror – few people realised that 9 Thermidor was the start of a counter-revolution. It raged for more than a year, with gangs of aristocrats roaming the streets to attack both the *sans-culottes* and the Jacobin Club itself, which was dissolved in November 1794.

Amid the chaos, Saint-Simon resumed his career as a property speculator and was soon rich. Babeuf, meanwhile, became the first revolutionary communist.

The Conspiracy of Equals

A portrait of Babeuf in 1794 shows him in classic revolutionary garb: he wears a top hat with a tricolour cockade, framing sharp cheekbones, a high forehead and an earnest gaze. On his release from jail, Babeuf became the editor of a newspaper owned by supporters of the new, moderate government. Naively, he assumed that, with Robespierre gone, democracy and social justice were back on the agenda. But in October 1794, once the opposite became clear, he seized control of the paper, renaming it *The Tribune of the People.* He also began calling himself "Gracchus" – in memory of brothers famed for enacting land reforms under the Roman Empire.

For "Gracchus Babeuf", the role of a journalist was not just to report the truth but to organise "the perpetual war of the poor against the rich". But he had chosen exactly the worst moment to become a revolutionary. France was now ruled by a five-man Directory, dedicated to reversing the social measures enacted under the Jacobins. As the *Tribune* railed against the new government, its circulation grew – but it was soon banned and Babeuf was forced to print it in covert conditions, until February 1795 when he was, again, arrested.[19]

In jail Babeuf met the survivors of left-wing Jacobinism. He formed a tight-knit group of revolutionaries which soon expanded to include Filippo Buonarroti, a descendant of Michelangelo. Babeuf brought to their partnership his obsession with communal property; Buonarroti brought his expertise in clandestine organisation. The group were released in October 1795, in an amnesty declared after Napoleon put down a monarchist uprising.[20]

Babeuf relaunched the *Tribune*, which attacked the ruling Directory and – since he had now hooked up with Jacobin radicals – eulogised Robespierre. Its political programme was lifted straight from Morelly's *Code of Nature*: property should be outlawed; all should live on rations provided by the state, delivered to their homes free of charge.

Babeuf helped set up the Pantheon Society, which met in the crypt of a disused convent. In addition to Buonarroti it attracted the poet Sylvain Maréchal and several who had held government positions under Robespierre. At its height the society had around 1,500 members. But in February 1796 the Directory cracked down: the *Tribune* was again banned and Babeuf only narrowly escaped arrest. Two weeks later Bonaparte himself arrived at the convent, sealed the premises and declared the Pantheon Society dissolved. That was their cue to begin planning an insurrection in earnest.

France was now in dire economic straits. Many middle-class people had lost their savings because the value of the *assignats* had collapsed near to zero. The poor were starving, while speculators – including Saint-Simon – were flaunting their wealth. Amid the discontent, Babeuf realised that if he could strike quickly at the centres of power, the Directory would collapse.

Maréchal wrote a *Manifesto of the Equals*, warning:

> We aspire to live and die equal, the way we were born: we want *real* equality or death… The French Revolution is nothing but the precursor of another revolution, one that will be greater, more solemn, and which will be the last.[21]

Another writer, their identity unknown, authored a twelve-point programme, which Babeuf's followers plastered across the walls of Paris on 9 April 1796. It proclaimed:

> Nature has given every man an equal right to the enjoyment of all goods…
> Nature has imposed on everyone the obligation to work…
> The goal of the revolution is to destroy inequality and restore happiness to all…
> Education must be communal…
> The constitution of 1793 is the true law.[22]

The simplicity of the language, its mode of distribution and the direct linkage of democracy to the abolition of property qualify this poster as the founding document of revolutionary communism. It is the moment Utopian thinking crosses into the realm of action; a fusion that would reverberate throughout the next two centuries.

Just as influential would be the form of organisation Babeuf adopted. He set up a committee of four – himself, Maréchal and two others – and instructed his followers to form cells, in which only the leader could know the identity of the next-level commander. Key to the endeavour were twelve "revolutionary agents" – one for each *arrondissement* – who were tasked with organising the operation, collecting intelligence and stockpiling arms. They recruited agitators in the army, with instructions to foment unrest not over the principle of equality, but over poor pay and harsh discipline.

The group's draft decrees included the nationalisation of all schools, hospitals, public buildings and uncultivated land. Inheritance would be abolished – with the deceased's property handed over to the state – so that, over time, the whole economy would be owned communally. There would be a state monopoly of foreign trade, and the national debt would be wiped out. After that, the state would cease issuing money and people would be invited to surrender their property voluntarily.[23] Elections would be suspended, with a government formed by one Jacobin from each *département*. They would be presented to the people of Paris at a mass meeting on the day of the insurrection.

When two police battalions were dissolved after coming under Babeuf's influence, many signed up to take part in the rising. Years later, Buonarroti claimed they had 17,000 people ready to act, including 6,000 police mutineers.[24] But the whole endeavour had been penetrated by informers. On 10 May 1796 the army swooped on the final planning meeting, arresting the entire leadership, including Babeuf and Buonarroti.[25]

When the "Conspiracy of Equals" trial opened, on 20 February 1797, Babeuf's supporters packed the courtroom. The sixty-five

defendants made long speeches and sang the "Marseillaise". From the dock, Babeuf repeatedly invoked Rousseau, Morelly and other Enlightenment philosophers, quoting directly from the *Code of Nature*.

As a result of these tactics, only nine men were convicted. Seven, including Buonarroti, were sentenced to deportation and two to death, including Babeuf. On hearing the verdict, the pair produced knives and stabbed themselves. They spent the night bleeding in their cells and were guillotined on 27 May 1797.

Babeuf had originated the idea of a clandestine revolutionary party, fused it with the Utopian communism of Morelly and built a network of support for it among the Parisian masses. His failure might have consigned him to a niche in history had Buonarroti not preserved a large cache of their propaganda. By the time it was published, thirty years later, the *sans-culottes* had transformed into the proletariat.

Saint-Simon: World-Builder

For Saint-Simon, the counter-revolution was a lucrative business opportunity. By 1798, he was living in ostentatious luxury. But the failure of a commercial partnership plunged him back down the financial ladder, after which he decided to study science. In 1803, in *Letters from an Inhabitant of Geneva*, he declared that revolution and war were the scourge of modern society and could only be prevented by reorganising it based on scientific principles. Power should be vested in the top scientific thinkers and artists of the day, while Christianity should be replaced with a "Religion of Newton".

Saint-Simon wrote no Utopia and never used the word socialism. In fact, his ideas were a mixture of liberal internationalism and technocracy. So why is he seen as the founder of Utopian Socialism? The answer is that, towards the end of his life, he assembled a small group of followers who developed a more radical doctrine, which they tried to spread to the working class after his death.

Saint-Simon's first contribution to left-wing thought was to establish that history has laws. They can be discerned through scientific study and used both to predict and accelerate the future. Though this proposition had first been made by the Marquis de Condorcet at the height of the revolution, it was Saint-Simon's followers who transmitted the idea to the European left.

His second big idea was that the "government of people" should be replaced by "the administration of things". This slogan has proved so controversial over the past 200 years that it should be unpacked in its original meaning.

By 1822 Saint-Simon had seen power concentrated in the hands of four men: Louis XVI, Robespierre, Napoleon and the restored Bourbon king Louis XVIII. Each had used power to inflict arbitrary violence, yet the world had not improved. To stop the endless cycle of power grabs, said Saint-Simon, we should abolish "political" power altogether and replace it with a technocratic government of scientists and intellectuals. This had to be achieved through consensus, not revolution – indeed Saint-Simon's *oeuvre* includes numerous letters to the Bourbons advising them to govern technocratically.

But it was not Saint-Simon who penned the famous phrase about the "administration of things"; it was his twenty-four-year-old secretary, Auguste Comte. Scientific politics, wrote Comte, "radically excludes" arbitrary power. If you derive the logical course of action in economic policy through scientific observation, he wrote:

> The government of things replaces that of men. It is then that there is truly law in politics… this law excludes, with equal effectiveness, theological arbitrariness, or the divine right of kings, and metaphysical arbitrariness, or the sovereignty of the people.[26]

All forms of power over humans, including democracy, would be abolished once science was combined with technocratic decision-making. That is the essence of Comte's idea – and Saint-Simon

liked it so much that he wanted to put his name on it. But the two men quarrelled and went their separate ways – Comte to become the revered founder of social science.[27]

Saint-Simon's third bequest to communism was the idea that only a planned, industrialised economy can achieve social justice for the working class. All previous Utopias – Morelly's included – had been agricultural and technologically static; Saint-Simon's concern was to inject dynamism, through the purposeful expansion of infrastructure, which at the time meant paved roads, irrigation and canals.

In his *Sketch of the New Political System*, published in 1819, he describes a technocratic government consisting of three "chambers". The first includes 300 "inventors" – engineers, artists and musicians – and presents an annual economic plan for canal building and land clearance. A second chamber of "examiners", composed of 300 scientists, can amend or veto the plan. A third "chamber of execution" includes only rich industrialists with proven management skill. Once the plan has been formulated, they oversee its implementation.[28] If we fast-forward to the 1950s, we find these precise functions embedded in the architecture of Soviet governance. This blueprint for a planned economy is probably Saint-Simon's most unique and influential idea.

There is nothing egalitarian about Saint-Simon's planned economy. It is elitist; it assumes the retention of social hierarchies; it does nothing to abolish private property; and it is anti-democratic to its core. To understand how this vision became fused with the idea of a workers' revolution we need to backtrack.

The Birth of the Proletariat

Richard Arkwright invented the factory system in Cromford, Derbyshire, in 1771. By using a machine to spin cotton – the "spinning jenny" – he enabled his workers to produce it in industrial

volumes. Soon the factory system spread, first across Britain, then to northern France, Belgium and the Rhineland.

With the factory came the industrial working class. In this early period, they worked in conditions of torment: silence was obligatory; corporal punishment and sexual abuse were routine. So alienating was this new lifeworld – both to peasants and the craftsmen of the cities – that the easiest way to recruit was from orphanages.

But when the Napoleonic Wars ended, the first strikes by factory workers began. In Britain, leaping from economic grievance to political reform, in 1819 workers formed a mass movement for democracy, which culminated in the Peterloo Massacre, when the British army attacked a crowd of 60,000 striking workers in Manchester.

By putting men, women and machines into a regimented workplace, the factory owners had produced a self-disciplined and politicised social class: it was obvious to every worker that their toil was the source of the master's wealth. They developed an economic critique of industrial capitalism which soon produced, from among the ranks of self-educated workers, proposals for switching it off at source.

The appearance of the factory proletariat prompted two of Saint-Simon's contemporaries to devise schemes to alleviate its misery and placate its anger. They were the British industrialist Robert Owen and the French commercial traveller Charles Fourier. Though vastly different, each of them presented solutions to social injustice that were to influence the first working-class communists.

Robert Owen: Placating the Workers

> The change contemplated has no tendency, even in the slightest degree, to remove those who enjoy any supposed advantages, in eminent stations to which they have attained.[29]

That's how the British factory owner Robert Owen advertised his scheme to improve working-class life. In less convoluted English: it won't harm the bank balances of the rich. Born in 1771, Owen trained as a draper and became the manager of a mill in Manchester, at a time when the city was a place of extreme squalor. In 1799 he bought the biggest factory in Scotland and set about trying to humanise the industrial system.

He banned children under ten from working. He banned corporal punishment. He cut the working day to eight hours, coining the slogan: "Eight hours work, eight hours recreation, eight hours rest" – an ideal that would not be achieved in law until 1919. He stopped forcing workers to spend their wages at the company store. He built a school, which gave free lessons to the workers' children and functioned as a nursery for their infants.

Though he became world famous as a philanthropist, Owen's aim was to change the system, not just one factory. Between 1813 and 1817 he published *A New View of Society*, in which, after detailing his methods at New Lanark, he outlined the theory that would underpin Utopian Socialism: that bad conditions make bad people:

> Withdraw those circumstances which tend to create crime in the human character, and crime will not be created. Replace them with such as are calculated to form habits of order, regularity, temperance, industry; and these qualities will be formed. Adopt measures of fair equity and justice, and you will readily acquire the full and complete confidence of the lower orders.[30]

But his top-down concept of social justice made Owen a lifelong opponent of class struggle and democratic reform.

When *A New View* came out, the unrest that would culminate at Peterloo was ramping up, fed by a radical press that openly fantasised about violent revolt. In response, Owen told the workers to stop demanding the right to vote and to cease attending

demonstrations: "Those feelings of anger must be withdrawn before any being who has your real interest at heart can place power in your hands."[31]

In 1822 he presented a plan for state-funded "villages of co-operation" modelled on New Lanark. And in 1824 he set off to America to found one in reality – in New Harmony, Indiana – which almost bankrupted him within five years, leading to his return to Britain in 1829.

Charles Fourier and His *Phalanstère*

Born in 1772, Charles Fourier inherited a small fortune and was training to become a business manager in Lyon when the French Revolution broke out. In 1791 he was caught up in a monarchist insurrection there, narrowly escaping execution after the Jacobins retook the city – and losing most of his money.[32] After two years as a conscript in the French army, he was demobbed into the world of profiteering and chicanery that followed Thermidor, and took a lifelong dislike to "free competition".

In 1808 he published his design for a solution to the industrial squalor he'd encountered while working as a commercial traveller. Entitled *The Theory of the Four Movements*, it is the work of a man who, though well educated, has decided to discard all previous knowledge and figure things out for himself. Its 217 pages of speculation and whimsy can be summarised thus: all the problems generated by industrial capitalism can be solved by forming small, ideal communities where people's "passions" – i.e. their talents and needs – are satisfied by careful membership selection and strict rules. This goes way beyond Owen's idea of simply providing workers with humane factories and free education.

Fourier's proposed *phalanstère* was a Utopian community of between 500 and 2,000 people, including a precise mixture of talents and equal numbers of men and women. He was a strong advocate of women's rights – demanding they should be free to

choose their sex partners and allowed to sleep around in a way that was common for men.

The *phalanstère* would be the opposite of a factory: it would be a beautiful architectural space comprising living quarters, automated production facilities, cultural facilities and farmland. Workers would produce and consume collectively and… participate in group sex. Once the number of young people available for free love in the *phalanstère* was advertised, Fourier predicted, "immense industrial armies may be formed without the least compulsion".[33] Workers would flock to the *phalanstère* to take part in carefully ordered work, designed in such a way as to produce abundance and aesthetic joy.

Fourier despised Jews, black Americans and the Asiatic "horde", which he warned would soon overwhelm Europe. Indeed, the aim of the *phalanstères* was to prevent the working class from joining this "horde" and sweeping away civilisation. Like Owen, he had no intention of encouraging the workers to resist exploitation.

Unsurprisingly, *Four Movements* flopped. Fourier spent the next eight years writing *The New Amorous World*, which describes his plan to liberate human sexuality by turning the workplace into the venue for a giant orgy – with group sex sessions choreographed like a quadrille dance, and polyamory, BDSM and homosexuality also on the dance card.[34] This work was only published in 1967 and was a big hit with the student movement of May 1968. Indeed, with his proposal that workers wear badges indicating their sexual preferences, with a card index to pair people with their ideal lover, Fourier had imagined the dating app. But little of this was known in his lifetime.[35]

After a failed attempt to win Owen to his cause, Fourier launched a bitter critique of his British rival, declaring his movement a "sect" and the man himself a "moralist". In 1829 he published a comprehensive account of his doctrine, replete with diagrams, tables and a dictionary of the neologisms he had invented. Entitled *The New Industrial and Societal World*, it runs to 576 pages and gives detailed instructions for how to set up a *phalanstère*, including

the exact staffing arrangements for the perfumery and the flower garden.[36] But by now he had a bigger rival than Owen. Because while Fourier had accumulated only a handful of followers, in the second half of the 1820s "Saint-Simonianism" took off.

The Cult of Saint-Simon

Saint-Simon's final book was entitled *New Christianity*, in which – having no takers for a "Religion of Newton" – he urged his followers to reinvigorate the religion of Jesus. They were few but talented, and included people with money and influence, some of them engineers. After his death in 1825 they set up a newspaper to popularise their master's ideas. But as they did so, they sharpened them.

The context was the rising liberal opposition to the new Bourbon king, Charles X, who had pushed his government to the right just as the bourgeoisie were hoping for liberalisation. There was, in short, rising demand for radical ideas – and with all forms of republicanism and Bonapartism suppressed, the Saint-Simonians filled the gap.

Led by two charismatic men – Amand Bazard and Prosper Enfantin – in 1828 they held fortnightly lectures in Paris, which they published as *The Doctrine of Saint-Simon: An Exposition*. In its new iteration, Saint-Simon's theory of history becomes an explicit theory of class struggle. The goal of historical progress is no longer simply a technocratic paradise: it is a "universal association, which is to say, the association of all men on the entire surface of the globe in all spheres of their relationships".

Though they did not propose to abolish property, the Saint-Simonians wanted to tax inherited wealth out of existence.[37] As to the planned economy, it now had a goal:

> In the organization of the future, each one will be classified according to his ability and remunerated according to his work.

That is a far less radical aim than Babeuf and Morelly's "distribution according to need". But it would shape Marx's view of what the earliest stage of communism might look like. To achieve this goal, the Saint-Simonians advocated a totally organised society, in which the masses were (as in Plato) subject to the rule of an enlightened, self-appointed elite.

In 1829, after they encountered Fourier's ideas on free love, the Saint-Simonians incorporated feminism into their doctrine: God was androgynous, they declared. But the biggest change they made was to transform their movement into a religion.

Bazard and Enfantin appointed themselves high priests and held weekly religious services, which attracted the cream of the Parisian intelligentsia and were conducted in an atmosphere of high emotion. Though their rigmarole was ludicrous, it had a deadly serious intent: in the society they wanted to inaugurate, the new religion would be a *compulsory* belief system – just as in Plato's *Republic* – structuring the thoughts of everyone and forcing them to comply. If Saint-Simon had imagined the planned economy, his followers had now imagined the totalitarian state.[38]

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But if the Saint-Simonian craze was one symptom of rising tension under the Bourbon monarchy, another was the return of Buonarroti. On his release from jail in 1806 he had moved to Geneva to begin plotting the overthrow of Napoleon. When that failed, he expanded the goals of his movement – named the *Philadelphes* – to the overthrow of all monarchies in Europe. His supporters basically "occupied" radical Freemasonic lodges, forming an inner core dedicated to the overthrow of private property, which ordinary members knew nothing about, having signed up primarily to republican goals.

In 1828 a Brussels publisher issued Buonarroti's landmark book, *Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals*. In it, he introduced a whole new generation to Babeuf's politics, reprinting their original documents to prove that there had been an anti-capitalist tradition

aligned to Jacobinism. And, despite his age, Buonarroti was not done yet.[39]

What Was Utopian Socialism?

It was Engels who invented the label "Utopian Socialism", grouping Owen, Fourier and Saint-Simon together into a political movement that never really existed. Owen and Fourier favoured small-scale practical schemes. Saint-Simon was a theorist of history and a forerunner of technocratic planning. What they had in common was their abhorrence of revolutionary violence and the conviction that, before you can fix society, you have to fix what's in people's heads.

Marx and Engels created the "Utopian" label to justify their proposed alternative: "scientific" socialism. Instead of Owen's stricture – "change the circumstances, change the person" – Marx, as we will see, wanted to begin with human beings as they are, allowing workers to evolve their own design for a socialist society, and to educate themselves through struggle, not indoctrination.

But he missed the Utopians' main point. From Plato to More to Morelly, their writings were designed to show that societies without private property can only function in conditions of ideological uniformity. The writings of Marx and Engels are full of patronising praise for the quaint fantasies of Owen, Fourier and Saint-Simon. But they never seriously engaged with their totalitarian implications.

They explicitly excluded Babeuf from the Utopian tradition, since he was a man of action. Engels' one-line summary of the *Conspiracy*, written in 1843, states:

> [Babeuf's] plot did not succeed, because the then Communism itself was of a very rough and superficial kind; and because, on the other hand, the public mind was not yet far enough advanced.[40]

But nowhere in Marx and Engels do we find acknowledgement that Babeuf's programme was based on Morelly's Utopian legal code. In their refusal to contemplate the advance design of a classless society, they ignored what turned out to be the most fundamental question: how would it be governed?