

Saint Simon and UU Social Responsibility

The Roots of Unitarian Social Responsibility

A sermon by Steven Epperson

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For many people living in Western Europe and North America the decades between 1780 and 1840, were times of unprecedented upheavals in social, economic, political and cultural life. Revolutions, decades of war, the industrialization of work, mass migrations from the countryside to cities all contributed to unraveling and pulling down feudal, aristocratic orders based on brute manual labour in workshops and fields, and abject deference to rigid social and religious hierarchies. In the words of William Ellery Channing, a leader of the Unitarian faith in North America,

“One thing is plain, the past is gone,” (he wrote in 1840), “the feudal castle is dismantled. The distance between classes reduced...old spells are broken, old religions gone. Men can no longer be kept down by pageantry, state-ropes, forms and shows...The multitude will no longer be quiet when they are trodden under foot...” (from Channing, “On the Elevation of the Laboring Classes,” *The Works of William E. Channing, D.D.*..., p56. Hereafter Channing)

I will be returning later to Channing and other 19th century North American Unitarians; but before that, let’s focus on Fritz Durst’s sermon request that we take a look at Claude Henri Count de Saint-Simon—who is acknowledged as both the founder of the discipline of sociology and one of the first and most important socialist thinkers. First, however, Fritz was absolutely right when he said to me, that there were socialists before Karl Marx, many of whom have gone unacknowledged or who have been completely forgotten. Pamela Pilbeam, Professor of French History at University of London, recently observed that:

“Karl Marx showered the early socialists...with disdain; recent historians have gone further and have begun to deny that early socialism existed. Histories of socialism often start in 1871. It is habitually claimed that early socialism was too...diverse to be considered to have a collective identity...that it contributed little...and that it is misleading...to use the term socialism to describe any of the reformers of the first half of the nineteenth century.” (Pamela Pilbeam, *French Socialists Before Marx*...2000, p1. Hereafter Pilbeam)

Pilbeam then goes on to show just how wrong this view is by describing in fascinating detail how, before 1848, French women and men helped to lay the foundations of socialism, communism, and social democracy in their research, in journalism and politics, in workers' schools, communes, and on the shop floor and in the fields. To be sure, there was no one movement; it was nearly as diffuse as its participants. But early socialists shared an underlying goal: which was to solve the contemporary problem of work insecurity and poverty, and thus make society more fair, more just. To achieve this, they zeroed in on improving the legal status of women, establishing the value of education, and securing widespread access to various means—economic and political—of promoting social welfare.

They approached what they called “the social question” in four ways: a tiny number believed that the route to radical reform lay in revolution engineered by a vanguard group of convinced insurgents—these are the direct forerunners to Marx. The second and larger group developed existing artisan self-help/mutual aid institutions like co-ops, trade unions and workers insurance banks. A third, and colourful group, rejected piecemeal reform in favour of creating separate utopian communities that included such practices as communal living and dining, distinctive costumes, and seeing to it that people only did the kind of work they most enjoyed doing. A fourth approach was advocated by Claude Henri, Count de Saint-Simon who argued that the root of social problems was structural and political—problems so vast that they required close observation and analysis, state intervention, regulation of finance and industries in order to address and overcome the chronic problems of poverty and social inequality. (see Pilbeam, 7-8)

Claude-Henri de Rouvroy, comte de Saint-Simon, was born in 1760, the eldest son in an impoverished aristocratic family. At the age of seventeen, he joined the French Army and, like the Marquis de Lafayette, fought on the side of American colonists seeking independence from

Great Britain. On his return to Europe in 1783, and still in his early twenties, he devised bold plans for building canals to join the Pacific and Atlantic in Nicaragua and to link Madrid to the sea. Rejected as impractical, he then tried a series of bold commercial ventures and made a fortune in land speculation, which he then lavished on creating a salon for scientists, philosophers, industrialists and government leaders. In 1793-94, during the height of the French Revolution, he was imprisoned and nearly executed because of his aristocratic background and unorthodox political connections and thinking—an experience that left him deeply opposed to revolutionary, and indeed, military violence. After his release, he revived his salon, surrounded himself with tutors in history, and political and economic theory, and burned quickly through what was left of his fortune. He lived the rest of his life nearly penniless; at one time, he even became dependent on the charity of a former servant.

During the final two decades of his life, though poverty-stricken and prey to bouts of suicidal depression, he produced a steady stream of pamphlets, essays and books on politics, economics, and what he called “social physiology”—the study of human groups, practices and social organizations; an academic discipline which, over time, became known as sociology. (On

Saint Simon, his life and ideas, see Emile Durkheim, *Socialism and Saint-Simon*, 1958, pp. 82-204; *The Doctrine of Saint-Simon: An Exposition...*, 1958, xix-xxii; “Saint Simon,” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1967, pp. 275-77;

[http://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/personnage/Saint-Simon.](http://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/personnage/Saint-Simon))

Saint-Simon lived through the great upheavals of the 1780-1820s; he thought profoundly and in innovative ways about the consequences of those epochal decades.

I’m going to highlight some of his ideas, and then we’ll turn to developments in North America, and the rise of 19th century Unitarian approaches to addressing “the social question” in their day. Saint-Simon’s close reading of European history convinced him that the old feudal order was ending, and that a new age was breaking through: a time of industrialization, the

transformation of labour and class, the growth of cities, and the rise of a new spirituality based on ethical and moral teachings of Christianity that focused on “salvation”—the betterment of human life, in *this* world.

Great transitions from one era to the next are difficult, destabilizing, full of peril *and* promise. To enable this great movement to take place as effectively as possible, and with the least amount of violence, Saint-Simon proposed the following principles and ideas:

While human societies are comprised of individual persons, social groups and organizations are governed by distinctive, collective needs, laws and forms of association. He believed that human societies are evolving into increasingly complex, interdependent economic, political and cultural associations. Once one order of social formation outgrows its social utility, it should be replaced by another. The feudal/aristocratic era, where power, wealth, property and influence were concentrated in the hands of those who owed their positions to the accidents of birth or inheritance, was coming to an end; displaced by a new, more egalitarian era of industrial production. By industrial production, Saint-Simon meant any kind of labour guided by human intelligence—manual, intellectual, agricultural, industrial—whose purpose, he wrote: “is to obtain the greatest sum of well-being possible for those who work and produce.”

The supreme value of labour, of industry, is defined by its collective usefulness. Therefore, true ownership, real property, resides in the hands of those who help to achieve the collective good, whether it’s a captain of industry, a housewife, a school teacher, an artist, or a factory worker—useful work that contributes to the common wealth and happiness of others. As a consequence, all who labour—women and men, should have the right to vote and to freely participate in government and society. As well, the increasing complexity and interdependence of modern society—its industrialization, commerce, and booming urban growth absolutely

requires government oversight, planning and regulation based on the advice and expertise of people qualified by education, training and experience.

And finally, Saint-Simon asserted that “the goal of society must be the improvement of opportunity and outcomes for the poorest among us.” Ultimately, that is how our society will be judged to have failed or succeeded in its aspirations. Achieving this, he believed, would help to realize the enduring values and hopes of the French Revolution—liberty, equality and fraternity—men and women, equal in creative labour, would be free because they would cooperate in the work of the liberation of humanity. As well, commitment to the principle of the well-being of all would provide a crucial this-worldly spiritual counterweight to the competitive greed, violence and nihilism that dominated the laissez faire ideology of unrestrained markets and militant nationalism, and the piecemeal, ineffectual pieties of individual moral uplift, conventional Christian charity, other-worldly salvation.

I admit, that this recitation of principles and ideas may sound rather commonplace now; it may have even put you to sleep. But I can’t tell you how innovative, influential, and even prophetic they were when Saint-Simon shared them with his colleagues, and with what became an increasingly wider audience in Europe and North America in the first half of the 19th century. Their influence on the development of socialism, social democracy, liberal Christianity and the study of sociology have been enduring and profound....

In the twenty years following Saint-Simon’s death in 1825, Unitarian understanding and practice of social responsibility in North America underwent a stunning transformation. But first let’s set the stage. In 1819, William Ellery Channing publicly brought Unitarianism out of the closet after years of internal theological development and controversy, and described its foundational principles in a dramatic sermon preached at an ordination ceremony in Baltimore.

For the next twenty years, Unitarian ministers and congregants were mostly preoccupied in defining their distinctive liberal theology. They established congregations, principles of self-government, exercised a widening influence in universities and seminaries, and through journalism, arts and literature, they contributed in very significant ways to the development of an independent culture and identity along the Eastern seaboard of the United States.

The social and economic environment of Unitarians at that time was quite conservative economically and politically. If, and when, Unitarian ministers and public intellectuals like Emerson addressed social questions—issues of poverty, job insecurity, class divisions, urban squalor and violence, slavery, and the like, their attention, wrote George Ripley, a young dissident Unitarian minister, “is directed chiefly [at] individual evils...personal regeneration...and the improvement of private character” through self-culture and self-reliance. Ripley was convinced that the leading voices of Unitarianism were failing to attack the “social principles, [structures and practices] which obstruct all improvement.” What we need, Ripley concluded, is “a new order of ideas.” (see Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History*, 2007, pp. 141-44)

That “new order of ideas” came to the fore in the Unitarian world in response to a set of acute crises in the 1830s and 40s, and ended up profoundly changing how we were to understand and address social responsibility and social justice. The first change came about as a result of the work of women like Dorothy Dix and Margaret Fuller. For two decades, Dix studied first-hand the abysmal state of how the mentally ill were treated. She found it so appalling and systemic, that she concluded that half-measures, appeals to conscience, and local charity would never work. Travelling over thirty thousand miles, she collected data from field research of 18 state prisons, 300 county jails and more than 500 almshouses and hospitals, presented reports to state and federal governments, and lobbied successfully for the creation of modern state hospitals. At

the outbreak of the US Civil War in 1861, she was appointed superintendant of nursing for Union forces, making her the highest ranking woman in the federal government.

At the same time, the brilliant Margaret Fuller gave up her literary and cultural ideas salon in Boston which was influenced by Emerson's individualistic, self-improvement outlook on life, to become the first female professional journalist in North America. Working for the reform minded New York *Tribune*, she ended up writing scores of articles on the city's poor and incarcerated, on the lack of housing, sanitation and public works; was sent as the paper's foreign correspondent to cover revolutionary events taking place in Italy, where she enthusiastically championed their cause. As well, Fuller, who read the works of Saint-Simon and his followers, wrote a path-breaking work on women's rights, where she asserted: "that every woman deserved psychological and social independence—the ability to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded.... We would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down," she wrote, "and every path laid open to Women and freely as to Men." Fuller's work helped to lay the foundations for the women's movement and its struggle for equality and universal suffrage. (on Dix and Fuller, see James Henretta, et al, *America's History: Volume 1 to 1877*, 1993, pp. 357-360)

Meanwhile, an unprecedented massive economic crisis, beginning in 1837, plunged North America into a prolonged depression. The Unitarian minister Samuel Lothrop captured the shocking turn of events like this: We were in the midst of peace, apparent prosperity and progress when, after extensive failures of the economy, the astounding truth burst upon us like a thunderbolt...that we were a nation of bankrupts, and a bankrupt nation." The world looked upon a continent," wrote Henry Ward Beecher, "filled with lamentation, and its inhabitants wandering like bereaved citizens among the ruins of an earthquake, mourning for children, houses crushed, and property buried forever." (Lathrop quote from Gura, p.93; Beecher, see Henretta, p. 343)

How did this come about and what was to be done.? Some young Unitarian ministers again, like Dorothy Dix, concluded that half-measures, individual bootstrapping, appeals to conscience, and local charity would never work, and they turned to the writings of Saint Simon and his followers to analyze the root causes of the crisis and to propose radical solutions.

None were as radical as those asserted by Orestes Brownson. Brownson was born dirt poor and never attended college. He was a prodigious reader and political agitator, fluent in Latin, French and German, and an indefatigable essayist and publisher. In 1832, he became a Unitarian minister serving the working poor of Boston after reading Channing's sermons and Saint-Simon's writings, and he believed that true Christians of whatever stripe had to work for social justice and greater equality among all classes. In 1840, in the depths of the economic depression, Brownson published an incendiary article, deeply influenced by Saint-Simon, called "The Laboring Classes," which has been described by the American historian Phillip Gura as the most "powerful piece of economic and social analysis to have appeared" in North America in the 19th century. (on Brownson, see Gura, pp. 72-79, 137-141)

In this essay, Brownson asserted that the degradation, poverty, powerless and inequitable distribution of the goods produced by working women and men are evils contrary to that "equality between man and man which a just God has established." Therefore, he wrote, "it is our business to emancipate the proletariat...to do all in our power to elevate the laboring classes." "These evils," he contended, "are social evils, and the only way to get rid of them is to change the system." And he got down to brass tacks: calling for universal suffrage, abolishing the hereditary descent of property, and breaking up the power that the banking system and business monopolies had on government—all of which could only be achieved through legislation, by governments serving the just needs and rights of the governed.

This hard-hitting, wild essay provoked a firestorm of controversy. I'll end with one more story in the transformation of Unitarian ideas and practice of social justice; then sum things up, and bring these remarks to an end.

Winston Churchill famously said that "If you're not a liberal at twenty you have no heart, if you're not a conservative at forty you have no brain." William Ellery Channing, the widely acknowledged leader of the Unitarian movement in its first decades, turned Churchill's dictum on its head. Overtime, and prodded by young ministers like Theodore Parker, George Ripley and Brownson who were half his age, Channing's views of social responsibility became increasingly radical.

"It is plain," he wrote, in the year before his death, "that in the actual state of the world, nothing can avail us but a real improvement of the laboring mass of the people.....The evil doctrine that demands the depression of the mass of men must be rejected with horror and scorn....The true principles of Christianity...are the spirit of brotherhood, freedom, equality...and universal justice and universal love." And to give this concrete expression, he said that relief must come from "social institutions," and then Channing called for massive public works projects to provide adequate and affordable housing, safe drinking water, and municipal sanitation. (see Channing pp56-65.)

At almost the same time, though he believed slavery to be a great social evil, he was reluctant to speak out and become a militant abolitionist until confronted by the young ministers Theodore Parker and Samuel May. One evening, in conversation, May couldn't take it any more: Dr Channing...you acknowledge slavery to be an awful system of iniquity...but you complain of us" that we lack tact and are too violent. "We are not to blame sir, that you have not spoken....Why have you not taken this matter in hand yourself?"

He didn't have an answer; he accepted the prophetic rebuke of his junior colleague, and in the short years remaining became an ardent, influential spokesman for the immediate abolition of slavery. This supremely civil, articulate and well-mannered gentleman, conservative in most things by nature, shifted, in his final years, from emphasizing the primacy of spiritual regeneration and individual self-culture for social reform to a forthright, public denunciations of systemic poverty, violence, and slavery. The conservative lay leadership in his congregation turned against him, and was forced to resign as their minister after serving them for forty years.

(on this episode, see Richard S. Gilbert, *The Prophetic Imperative...*, 2000, pp. 37-9)

We are deeply indebted to these extraordinary people. While each of them recognized the essential role religious belief and practice play in promoting compassion, equity and a thirst for justice. These radical Unitarian reformers came to the realization that there are systemic social and economic needs whose remedy can only be achieved by analysis, planning, and widespread social and political intervention—that's Saint Simon's historic contribution to the development of Unitarian social justice work.

I think that religious communities, and the individuals who comprise them, play an essential function in the great demands of social responsibility: they must be true to themselves and the prophetic, social justice insights of their traditions; they offer crucial face-to-face, compassionate social service programs; and they, that is *we*, should continue to hold public officials ever accountable to their responsibility of service for the common good, the common wealth. Sometimes, it truly requires of us, those who belong to this religious faith, to act up and act out. May we continue to do so and to recognize that we are standing on the shoulders of giants, of the justice seeking, working Unitarian women and men who preceded us.