

Know Thine Enemy: A History of the Left, Vol. I*

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The Political Forum

Previous civilizations have been overthrown from without by the incursion of barbarian hordes; ours has dreamed up its own dissolution in the minds of its own intellectual elite. Not Bolshevism, which Stalin liquidated along with the old Bolsheviks; not Nazism, which perished with Hitler in his Berlin bunker; not Fascism, which was left hanging upside down from a lamppost along with Mussolini and his mistress – none of these, history will record, was responsible for bringing down the darkness on our civilization, but Liberalism: a solvent rather than a precipitate, a sedative rather than a stimulant, a slough rather than a precipice; blurring the edges of truth, the definition of virtue, the shape of beauty; a cracked bell, a mist, a death wish.

Malcolm Muggeridge, "The Great Liberal Death Wish," 1979

Philosophy, Revolution, and the Birth of the Left

The Enlightenment is rightly considered one of the greatest philosophical and cultural phenomena in the entirety of human activity. Such inimitable intellects as René Descartes, Sir Francis Bacon, John Locke, Sir Isaac Newton, Adam Smith, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, and Denis Diderot plied their trades during the era, and collectively produced much of what we love and appreciate in our civilization today.

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At the same time, however, the discoveries and observations that these men made raised grave questions about the existence of God. Bacon set the stage for this debate in 1620 when he developed what became known as the “scientific method,” which involved seeking the truth by applying rigorous skepticism to the process of experimentation, data gathering, and the testing of hypotheses. In 1637, Descartes turned the discussion over scientific method toward the question of God’s existence when he began the debate over reason versus revelation. He was also the first to call for a new “mathematical” method of establishing a moral scheme that would “purge the mind of all opinions and beliefs that depend on ‘appetites and preceptors.’”¹ Newton reluctantly entered the fray in 1687 when he offered scientifically derived proof that the physical universe is governed by rational and universal principles, rather than by an interventionist God.



This skepticism surfaced publicly in 1749, in a paper published by Diderot for which he was imprisoned for three months on the charge of atheism. His friend Voltaire continued to claim that he was a deist not an atheist; however, in 1767 he stated in a letter to Frederick the Great that Christianity “is assuredly the most ridiculous, the most absurd and the most bloody religion which has ever infected this world.”² Finally, in 1781, Kant pounded the first nail into God’s coffin. He didn’t actually declare that God was dead but said that his existence could not be proved by reason, which was interpreted as the same thing by the authorities.

This was a big deal—discussions of God’s existence back then were not viewed as innocent coffee klatsch talk. They were

¹ Richard Kennington, “Rene Descartes,” in *History of Political Philosophy*, 3rd ed., edited by Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 425-438.

² *Letters of Voltaire and Frederick the Great*, selected and translated by Richard Aldington (New York: Brentano’s, 1927), 285.

treasonous. They directly threatened the social order of every nation in Europe; their monarchs, who ruled by divine right; their laws, which were based unapologetically on the Decalogue as given directly by God to Moses on Mount Sinai; their moral system, which was based on the principles outlined in the New and Old Testaments; and virtually all of the shared traditions, customs, mores, and myths that make a nation a nation rather than simply a group of people who share a piece of ground.

In 1789, the debate over God's existence moved from the drawing rooms to the streets when French Revolutionaries overthrew the monarchy, confiscated the assets of the Church, and executed the King and the Queen along with thousands of members of the aristocracy, the clergy, and the citizenry. Georges Danton, one of the leaders of the revolution explained the mass murder as follows: "These priests, these nobles are not guilty, but they must die, because they are out of place, interfere with the movement of things, and will stand in the way of the future."³



³ François-René de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe*, Book IX, chapter 4 (Paris: Penaud Frères, 1850). English translation by A.S. Kline available at [archive.org](https://archive.org/details/MEMOIRESDOUTRETOMBE)

They promised to deliver a new and glorious society, a veritable utopia marked by liberty, equality, and fraternity, free from the superstitions and myths of Christianity. But, not surprisingly, the government they formed didn't quite measure up to these standards, which became apparent when its grand Pooh-Bahs began to cut the heads off each other.

The Revolution came to a formal end in November 1799 when Napoleon came to power and started a 12-year long war that eventually involved all of Europe and took somewhere in the range of three to six million lives. Naturally then, when he "met his Waterloo" in 1815, Europe was in shambles. The historian Will Durant described the situation thusly:

All Europe lay prostrate. Millions of strong men had perished; millions of acres of land had been neglected or laid waste; everywhere on the Continent life had to begin again at the bottom, to recover painfully and slowly the civilizing economic surplus that had been swallowed up in war. ... The passage of the Napoleonic and counter-Napoleonic armies had left scars of ravage on the face of every country. Moscow was in ashes. In England, proud victor in the strife, the farmers were ruined by the fall in the price of wheat; and the industrial workers were tasting all the horrors of the nascent and uncontrolled factory system. Demobilization added to unemployment.... Never had life seemed so meaningless, or so mean. Yes, the Revolution was dead; and with it the life seemed to have gone out of the soul of Europe. The new heaven, called Utopia, whose glamour had relieved the twilight of the gods, had receded into a dim future where only young eyes could see it; the older ones had followed that lure enough and turned away from it now as mockery of men's hopes.⁴

At the Congress of Vienna, November 1814-June 1815, the leaders of the victorious nations adopted a plan that placed political power back in the hands of Europe's old ruling families and charged them with using all means to suppress the liberal ideals that the revolutions in America and France had nurtured. This created some

⁴ Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), 227.

degree of political order. However, it did not keep the Left at bay. Whether the royalists at the Congress of Vienna liked it or not, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the French Revolution had relegated the age of kings to the dustbin of history, which created an entirely new set of problems.

European Visions of a New Social Order

Among the most important of these was the emergence of a new social class with distinct complaints and demands. Known as the proletariat, they were the men, women, and children who labored for wages under the worst conditions imaginable in the factories owned by the capitalists. They were poor, hungry, sick, tired, and powerless. They lived in squalid makeshift housing, in crowded, smoke-filled cities where epidemics of cholera and typhoid raged, and worked 14-to-16-hour shifts around dangerous machines in unhealthy conditions.

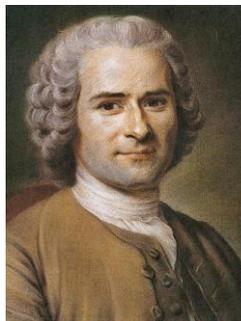
The result was that Europe became a playground for a new generation of radicals who had been born during the Napoleonic wars and raised on stories about the heroes of a great revolution that the monarchists, rich capitalists, and corrupt politicians had stolen from them. Secret revolutionary and nationalistic organizations sprung up in France, Italy, Russia, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Poland, and Switzerland. France had the Society of Avengers, the Friends of the People, the Society of the Rights of Man, the Society of the Families, and the League of the Just. Italy had the Carbonari, which rapidly spread its influence into France, Spain, and Portugal. German revolutionaries united in Paris and formed the League of Outlaws. Revolutions, revolts, uprisings, and insurrections by gangs of radicals and even army officers were commonplace.

They raised hell, were arrested, and went to prison. But their efforts were for naught. The elite retained their stranglehold on power and kept it with heavy police repression. Yet, it was during this difficult period that the Left matured from a ragtag revolutionary movement, whose primary object was the destruction of the ruling class, to a visionary ideology with the Cartesian goal of replacing the Judeo-Christian social order with one based on reason and science.

It should be noted that the creation of a new social order was not a novel idea. Indeed, a century earlier, the founding fathers of the United States had developed a perfectly good working model for a

new type of government based largely on the wisdom of such Enlightenment figures as John Locke and Montesquieu. Unfortunately for future of mankind and Western Civilization, the European revolutionaries wanted no part of a Constitution that was, as John Adams had stated, “made only for a moral and religious people.”⁵

Instead, they looked to the beliefs and ideas of Rousseau, a contemporary of Voltaire and Diderot who was known as the “spiritual father of the French Revolution.” The first among Rousseau’s many notions that appealed to the embryonic Left was his contention that the great, foundational, Christian concept of original sin is bogus, that man in his natural state is noble, that vice and error are not natural to mankind but introduced from without, caused mostly by bad institutions. Rousseau put it this way in the opening line of his classic *Emile*: “Everything is good as it comes from the hands of the creator; everything degenerates in the hands of man.”⁶



[Jean Jacques Rousseau](#):

Man in his natural state is noble; private property is the source of all crime; and governance must be by the will of the people, enforced by a sovereign.

Lord Acton described this idea as “the strongest political theory that had appeared amongst men.”⁷ The poet W. H. Auden elaborated on the political importance of this concept beautifully in his once well-known 1941 essay, “Criticism in a Mass Society.” To wit:

The statement, “Man is a fallen creature with a natural bias to do evil,” and the statement, “Men are good by nature and

⁵ “From John Adams to Massachusetts Militia, 11 October 1798,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-3102>.

⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* (New York: Barron’s Educational Series, Inc., 1964), 55.

⁷ Lord Acton, *Lectures on the French Revolution* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2000), 14.

made bad by society,” are both presuppositions, but it is not an academic question to which one we give assent. If, as I do, you assent to the first, your art and politics will be very different from what they will be if you assent, like Rousseau or Whitman, to the second.”⁸

How different will they be? Well, as Auden said, very different, indeed. Whether one believes in the poetic truth, to borrow a phrase from Auden, or subscribes to the historical accuracy of the story behind original sin, one’s expectations of what government can do to make the world a better place are going to be somewhat limited. If, however, one believes that man is naturally good and made bad by his institutions, it becomes not just possible for man to create a utopia on earth but imperative that he attempt to do so.

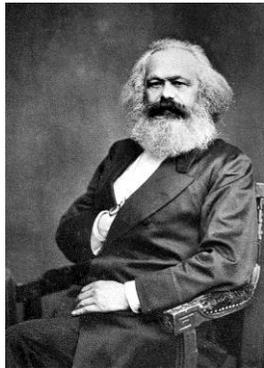
But that was not Rousseau’s only contribution to the Left’s manifesto. Another was that private property is the source of all crime. And finally, he proposed that this new society should be managed by what he called the “general will” of the people, which would be determined and enforced by the “sovereign” who would be empowered to put to death anyone who didn’t abide by this general will. Naturally, this idea proved to be a big hit with Hitler, Lenin, and Stalin.

It was during this period that the words “socialism” and “communism” emerged, the difference being that communism was a working-class movement dedicated to destroying and replacing the existing system by violence, while socialist models were generally “respectable,” designed by individuals who hoped to bring about change from within the system.

Needless to say, there was no shortage of individuals who wished to promote socialism. Indeed, in the midst of this turmoil a parlor game of sorts sprang up across Europe, which would become known to history as the Enlightenment Project. Its purpose was to produce a workable blueprint for a Godless society that would bring peace, prosperity, and freedom to the world. Prominent among the early figures in this effort were the so-called “utopian socialists.”

⁸ Edward Mendelson, ed., *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden, Volume II, Prose: 1939-1948* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 94.

Comte de Saint-Simon, who is known as the “father of French socialism” and Robert Owen, who is known as the “father of English socialism” were among the best known of these “visionaries.”



[Karl Marx](#) peddled a seductive ideology that failed in practice, prompting many subsequent revisions.

Then, in mid-century, another came in his own name: Karl Marx. He had something for everyone. For the intellectuals, he offered a “scientific” analysis of the economics of capitalism and a theory of history borrowed from the great philosopher Georg Hegel. For the revolutionaries, he proposed a bloody revolution to destroy the existing order. For the oppressed proletariat and dispirited Christians, he promised a secularized version of the end times in the form of a veritable heaven on earth, a workers’ paradise where everyone owned everything, where there were no social classes, no oppression, and no government.

The problem, as it turned out, was that Marxism didn’t work in practice. It was hopelessly naïve about both human nature and economics. And this prompted a seemingly endless array of revisions in both the blueprint itself and in how it was to be implemented.

Marx’s erstwhile comrade Ferdinand Lassalle started the ball rolling in the 1860s when he entered into a partnership of sorts with German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. It is important to understand that Lassalle was not “selling out.” He had concluded after the failed European-wide Revolution of 1848 that Marx’s expectation of a workers’ revolution was not going to happen and began to contemplate the notion of “monarchical socialism,” made by possible by the implementation of universal suffrage. He noted that 96% of the population of Prussia was dirt poor. If they could vote, he said, then the state would belong to them, not to the well-to-do.⁹ This would be

⁹ Roman I. Zuboff, “Ferdinand Lassalle,” *The Nationalist*, Vol. 1, edited by Henry Willard Austin and John Storer Cobb, May 1889, 261.

a revolution, one that takes place “when an entirely new principle is made to take the place of the existing state of things.”¹⁰

In January 1899, Eduard Bernstein, a Lassallian socialist, attempted to settle the debate once and for all with a book entitled *Evolutionary Socialism*. Among other things, he boldly stated that it was time to drop the pretense of Marx’s intellectual omnipotence, that capitalism was not going to collapse on its own, that the workers were not going to start a revolution since they were becoming richer rather than poorer, and that there wasn’t going to be a utopia.

In 1903, Lenin jumped on the “reform” bandwagon when he declared that the solution to the problem of the “reluctant proletariat” was the formation of a “vanguard party” of professional revolutionaries to lead the way. He really had no choice in the matter. The Industrial Revolution had not advanced far enough in Russia to create a proletarian class that was large enough to stage an uprising. Lenin justified his deviation from orthodoxy with the spurious promise that once the revolution was successful, the proletariat would, as Marx had predicted, assume control of the state’s functions, and the state would become obsolete.



[Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov \(Lenin\)](#): A vanguard of professionals must lead the revolution.

By early in the 20th century, the internecine fight between the socialists and the Marxists, the increased economic health of the proletariat, and Lenin’s apostasy had put the European left in very deep trouble. And to make matters worse, a new social force had gained strength and taken to the field. Its name was nationalism. It was an outgrowth of Imperialism, which was an outgrowth of the overwhelming success of the Industrial Revolution, which created

¹⁰ Ibid., 258.

more products than could be consumed and more capital than could be invested profitably within the country or origin. W. H. B. Court gave this example in *British Economic History 1870-1914*:

Germany is at the present time suffering severely from what is called a glut of capital and of manufacturing power: she must have new markets; her Consuls all over the world are “hustling” for trade; trading settlements are forced upon Asia Minor; in East and West Africa, in China and elsewhere the German Empire is impelled to a policy of colonisation and protectorates as outlets for German commercial energy.¹¹

This gave rise to an intense competition between the industrialists of England, Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, and the United States over access to markets and investment opportunities in underdeveloped areas of the world. Over time, these foreign investments became crucial to the economic health of the home nations. And at this point, governments were forced to become full partners with their capitalist speculators by making loans so large that the private sector could no longer afford them; and extensive military support, up to and including world war. Here’s Court:

As one nation after another enters the machine economy and adopts advanced industrial methods, it becomes more difficult for its manufacturers, merchants, and financiers to dispose profitably of their economic resources, and they are tempted more and more to use their governments in order to secure for their particular use some distant undeveloped country by annexation and protection.¹²

England’s famous imperialist, Cecil Rhodes, drove this point home when he told his fellow Englishmen to “wake up to the fact that you cannot live unless to have the trade of the world...that your trade is the world and your life is the world, and not England.”¹³

¹¹ W.H.B. Court, *British Economic History, 1870-1914: Commentary and Documents* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 444.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 132.



[Charles Maurras](#)' concept of nationalism paved the way for fascism in Italy and German National Socialism.

The French author, political agitator, quasi-monarchist, and nationalist Charles Maurras, was the first to recognize that the on-going competition between the nations of the world for markets proved that Marx's claim that the "history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" was nonsense; that the history of the world was a history of wars between nations, not classes; that the workers in France did not give a hoot about the workers in Germany; that the German workers felt the same

way about their French counterparts; and that Marx's democratic notion that the proletariat should lead the fight was wishful thinking. His proposal was to drop the ridiculous belief in the existence of an "international brotherhood" of the workers and substitute something called "*nationalisme intégral*." Yes, nationalism.

This was a clear break from Marxism's cosmopolitan attachment to the "workers of the world." But it was not a break from the left's search for a utopian secular social order. Maurras put it this way:

A socialism liberated from the democratic and cosmopolitan element, could go with nationalism as a well-made glove fits a beautiful hand.¹⁴

In company with Lassalle's "monarchical socialism," Maurras' nationalism further paved the way for Mussolini's fascism and Hitler's

¹⁴ François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 164.

National Socialism, which would be the most radical revision of Marxism yet. According to Furet:

The idea of nationalistic socialism was not new in 1918 or 1920, but when the guns fell silent, it had shed its sophisticated intellectual robe and appeared in certain popular versions, as an instrument fit to galvanize the masses. Before the war, the socialist-nationalist mix was but an esoteric cocktail for intellectuals, afterward it became a widely consumed beverage.... Like Bolshevism, it served to mobilize modern revolutionary passions, the brotherhood of veterans, hatred of the bourgeoisie and money, human equality, and aspirations of a new world.¹⁵

Emergence of the Left in America

Leftist ideas made significant inroads into American politics in two very different configurations, both of which were largely the result of the nation's transformation from a largely agrarian society to an industrial one following the end of the Civil War. The first of these was brought to the United States by some of the 25 million or so European immigrants who flooded into the country between the years 1866 and 1915, many of whom had strong ties to the communist and anarchist movements back home.

The second was a homegrown form of Christian-based socialism. It grew out of the turn-of-the-century Social Gospel movement and would eventually become another entry into the competition to develop a workable Marxist formula. Recall that Lassalle came up with the idea of a revolution from within, Hitler and Mussolini replaced the "brotherhood of workers" with nationalism, and Lenin sought to replace the proletariat with a vanguard of professional revolutionaries. This American iteration abandoned Marx's hostility toward Christianity but held on to Hegel's view that history advances through a dialectic process toward an eschatological fulfillment, and Rousseau's contention that mankind's behavior could be radically transformed by social engineering.

¹⁵ Ibid.

The leader of this movement was Richard Ely, the founder of the Christian Social Union of the Episcopal Church and economics professor at Johns Hopkins and the University of Wisconsin. He described the group's ideological framework this way: "God works through the states to carry out his purposes more universally than through any other institution."¹⁶ His long-time friend Teddy Roosevelt and his student at Hopkins, Woodrow Wilson, were among the many notables who bought into his malarkey.

Wilson was especially enthusiastic. In an address in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, at a celebration of the Y.M.C.A. on October 24, 1914, he said: "when you think of the accumulated moral forces that have made one age better than another age in the progress of mankind, then you can see that age by age, though with a blind struggle in the dust of the road, though often mistaking the path and losing its way in the mire, mankind is yet—sometimes with bloody hands and battered knees—nevertheless struggling step after step up the slow stages to the day when he shall live in the full light which shines upon the uplands, where all the light that illumines mankind shines direct from the face of God."¹⁷



[Woodrow Wilson](#) – a confirmed socialist who believed that God had selected him to lead the nation.

Marx believed that this predetermined march to nirvana would happen naturally. But he argued that Marxism could abbreviate and reduce the "birth pains" involved in the process. Wilson too

¹⁶ Sidney Fine, *Laissez Faire and the General Welfare State: A study of conflict in American thought, 1865-1901* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), 180.

¹⁷ "The Young Men's Christian Association (October 24, 1914)," in Albert Bushnell Hart, ed., *Selected Addresses and Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Boni and Liveright, Inc., 1918), 55.

thought that it was predetermined, but he subscribed to Nietzsche's view that a *Übermensch* would lead the way. And who better than himself, Woodrow Wilson, who had once reminded a friend: "God ordained that I should be the next President of the United States. Neither you nor any mortal or mortals could have prevented that!"¹⁸

¹⁸ William Frank McCombs, *Making Woodrow Wilson President* (New York: Fairview Publishing Company, 1921), 207-208.