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Father Enfantin, the Saint-Simonians and the 'Call to Woman' (1831)

Daniel Laqua

Woman is still enslaved; we need to liberate her. Before she passes to the state of equality with man, she needs to have her liberty. We must therefore realize, for the Saint-Simonian women, this state of liberty, by destroying the hierarchy that has hitherto existed for both them and for the men, and by making them [the Saint-Simonian women] return to the state of equality among themselves. THERE ARE NO MORE WOMEN IN THE DIFFERENT DEGREES OF THE HIERARCHY [OF OUR CHURCH]. Our apostolate, which is the call to woman, is an apostolate of men. Man can today be classified because he has had for a long time his complete liberty in relation to woman; but woman cannot be classified because she has not yet revealed herself.

Thus goes our new position with regard to women ... This state of confused equality will undoubtedly present some great inconveniences; but it will have an immense advantage over the faulty hierarchy that we have erected until now, because without woman having revealed herself as free, each classification of her was done by man's law and badly done.

Women will no longer appear on the podium, at the sermon. Women will no longer ... be part of the Saint-Simonian family; they will ... be in the state of the call, like all women of the world around us. [Points at the empty armchair next to him.] This is the symbol of the call ...

Woman lacks a doctrine, she has not revealed herself, she is still in the state of slavery, she will enter into the state of confused equality; she needs to exit from it, we will wait for her, she needs to speak; she will speak, because she has been called upon.¹

By the late 1820s, Saint-Simonism had emerged as ‘the most striking social movement of the day’.² The extract above is taken from the record of two Saint-Simonian meetings in November 1831, marking a crisis in which issues of sex, gender, morality and personality intersected. The statement’s central premise certainly invites bafflement. The speaker advocates the liberation of women from the ‘state of slavery’ and yet announces their exclusion from his organization. The source of these paradoxical remarks was no peripheral figure: Prosper Enfantin (1796–1864) was worshipped as the ‘Father’ of a movement that cast itself both as a family and a church. Pamela Pilbeam has described him as a man full of ‘magnetic, hypnotic charm and irrepressible confidence’, with an appeal that derived from ‘his intelligence, his seductively compelling personality and his handsome presence’.³

If Enfantin stood at the head of Saint-Simonism, his remarks demonstrate the place of women at the very heart of Saint-Simonian debates. In the above speech, Enfantin redefined Saint-Simonism as an all-male movement – ‘an apostolate of man’ – that was preoccupied with one central quest: to find the maternal figure who would heed ‘the call’. Yet, even prior to this episode, Saint-Simonians had engaged with issues of gender as part of their commitment to social and moral change. It is therefore necessary to start by outlining the origins of Saint-Simonism and the role of women within the movement. This chapter subsequently summarizes the events of November 1831 and considers the aftermath of women’s exclusion from the Saint-Simonian hierarchy. As the discussion will show, Saint-Simonism was both patriarchal and anti-patriarchal – and while this may sound contradictory, such contradictions were intrinsic to the movement itself.

The Saint-Simonians were named after Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825), a French aristocrat whom some praised as a genius and others dismissed as an eccentric. He was undoubtedly a prolific writer, drawing up plans on a variety of questions – from economic progress to the future peace of Europe. His ideas did not amount to a uniform system of thought: it was only after his death that his followers developed them into a doctrine, both through their editorial work and their practical efforts. In doing so, they not only created Saint-Simonism but also shaped the posthumous image of Saint-Simon himself. According to Christophe Prochasson, ‘the Saint-Simonians did not altogether invent Saint-Simon, but they did much to make him exist’.⁴

Three overarching ideas connected the work of the Saint-Simonians to their late master. The first was his critique of those who lived idly off their landed property. Saint-Simon viewed *les oisifs* (the idlers) as obstacles to cooperation

and industry, the forces to which he accorded prime importance. The Saint-Simonians sought to live by these principles, launching cooperative ventures and developing considerable business acumen. The second major aspect was Saint-Simon's belief in the rule of experts. He argued that the social machinery should be designed and administered by well-trained individuals. Such ideas appealed to his highly educated disciples: many of them had attended the *École Polytechnique*, the Parisian élite institution for aspiring engineers. The third strand was his call for a new religion that would cure the social and moral ills that Saint-Simon had diagnosed. He outlined the features of this religion in his last major work, *Le Nouveau Christianisme* (1825). This line of thought explains why the Saint-Simonians came to describe themselves as members of a 'church' – even if this step also had a practical advantage, as it circumvented restrictions on the formation of political associations. The Saint-Simonians strove to build on Saint-Simon's ideas, even when venturing far beyond them. Robert Carlisle has therefore criticized accounts that interpret the 'later developments of the doctrine as an Enfantinian revolution, a Saint-Simonian heresy', deeming such views 'simply astigmatic'.⁵

Olinde Rodrigues (1795–1851) embodied the personal connection between Saint-Simon and the Saint-Simonians. A gifted mathematician whose Jewish background had limited his academic career opportunities, he became the director of a mortgage bank, the *Caisse Hypothécaire*, in 1823.⁶ In the final two years of Saint-Simon's life, Rodrigues was his closet associate and was even present at his master's deathbed. He was also responsible for bringing his former tutee Enfantin into the fold. From 1825, Rodrigues and Enfantin cooperated with like-minded individuals to preserve Saint-Simon's legacy. Saint-Amand Bazard (1791–1832) was a key figure in this undertaking. He represented the political wing of Saint-Simonism, having previously co-founded the *Charbonnerie*, a republican underground society. In December 1828, the development of Saint-Simonian doctrine culminated in its proclamation as a religion, initially led by the trinity of Enfantin, Bazard and Rodrigues.

The Saint-Simonians undertook extensive publishing activities, from print editions of their master's writings to the periodicals *Le Producteur* (1825–6) and *L'Organisateur* (1829–31). In 1830, *Le Globe* – a well-established liberal newspaper – converted to the Saint-Simonian cause. Shortly before this, the Saint-Simonians had moved into premises that hosted its editorial offices. Located near the Palais Royal, the building became a home for the family and served as a venue for ceremonies, assemblies and public events. Because of their efforts on behalf of workers and artisans, the Saint-Simonians usually feature in accounts

of early socialism. Although the Saint-Simonian family was numerically small – a few hundred faithful in Paris – it reached out to wider segments of society. Its Parisian district sections educated artisans, organized cooperative workshops, dispensed charity and ran two hostels whose services extended to non-residents. The Saint-Simonians also ventured beyond Paris, as exemplified by their active section in Lyon and large audiences for public lectures in several cities.⁷

The Saint-Simonian concern for artisans and workers extended to working women. Many of them were recipients of practical aid, yet some also joined the family. Claire Moses has noted that around 110 women from working-class backgrounds were registered as ‘faithful’, with a similar number of female followers in Lyon.⁸ As Naomi Anderson has argued, women’s and workers’ rights were treated as interrelated issues during the 1830s, with constructions of the social having ‘a distinctly gendered connotation.’⁹ Enfantin himself stressed the need for the joint emancipation of women and workers (4–5). The focus on such connections was not confined to the Saint-Simonians, as the writings of Charles Fourier and Flora Tristan testify.

At a practical level, women made significant contributions to the family’s activities. Indeed, Enfantin’s proclamation that there would be ‘no more women in the hierarchy’ (55) implicitly acknowledges the role that they had hitherto played. Female involvement covered a range of Saint-Simonian efforts, from their workshops and hostels to their educational work. Each of the twelve district sections in Paris was jointly headed by a ‘father’ and a ‘mother’, with Claire Bazard (1794–1883), wife of Saint-Amand, being tasked with proselytizing among women. Another leading activist, Eugénie Niboyet (1796–1883), made around fifty visits per week to dispense charity to families in need.¹⁰

In one respect, the role of women within Saint-Simonism may seem striking: Saint-Simon himself had barely mentioned them. Even *Le Nouveau Christianisme*, his ambitious blueprint for a moral and spiritual reorganization of society, did not address gender relations explicitly. This silence evidently contrasted with Enfantin’s ‘call to woman’. How are we to make sense of this development? A key element was the Saint-Simonians’ belief that God was androgynous – an idea that they embraced from 1828 onwards. Based on this conviction, they championed the collaboration between man and woman. This principle manifested itself in the Saint-Simonians’ practical work, yet it did not extend to the church hierarchy. Despite theoretically being open to both sexes, no woman was appointed to a Saint-Simonian priesthood, and women were mostly excluded from the elaboration of Saint-Simonian

doctrine. In claiming that woman had not yet 'revealed herself as free' (56), Enfantin suggested that no female Saint-Simonian had gained the level of understanding that he attributed to himself. This conclusion was a particular blow to Claire Bazard, who had been expected to take up a role as spiritual leader. In the autumn of 1831, she was pushed aside shortly before the two meetings from which the extract is taken.

The opening extract highlights the centrality of women for Saint-Simonian doctrine. Yet, it also relates to specific events, namely a major rift within the movement – far from the only one in its history, but certainly the most dramatic. In the Saint-Simonian assemblies of 19 and 21 November, Enfantin denounced the 'hostile passions' (3) of the absent Saint-Amand Bazard. In turn, he met with protests from followers of the man who had served as the church's Supreme Father alongside him. Both meetings featured long speeches by Enfantin as well as emotional, quasi-confessional statements by members of the Saint-Simonian family. Jeremy Jennings has claimed that 'it is hard not to conclude that many of the meetings held by the Saint-Simonians were characterized by collective hysteria'.¹¹ While the term 'hysteria' may not entirely capture the atmosphere of the November discussions, their highly personal tone revealed how far the private, religious and social worlds of the Saint-Simonians had merged into one another. As a result of their disagreements, Bazard's followers left the Saint-Simonian fold. Their departure contrasted with the stance of Rodrigues who had remained a key member despite his resignation as one of the Supreme Fathers nearly two years earlier. At the close of the meeting on 21 November, he lauded Enfantin as 'the most moral man of my time' (58).

The rupture was not simply due to a clash of personalities: it reflected wildly diverging views on morality. On 17 October 1831, Rodrigues had presented a 'note on marriage and divorce' that outlined Enfantin's new moral doctrine. The statement formed part of wider French debates about legalizing divorce, which had been prohibited in 1816. To Enfantin, divorce was not a political issue: it was one element in the recasting of gender relations. In a new society, man and woman would enter into 'successive unions' (12), with divorce allowing them to pass from one state to the next. To many people, such views smacked of sexual libertinism. They were also rejected by Bazard, who deemed them a distraction from Saint-Simonism's political and social objectives.

How did Enfantin come to adopt this controversial stance? Seen from one angle, the attack on conventional marriage built upon Saint-Simon's dislike of 'idlers' who lived off their inherited wealth. By challenging traditional family relations, the Saint-Simonians targeted the institution through which property

was passed on. Yet, during the November meetings, Enfantin went further. He suggested that the new doctrine reflected an attempt to overcome fundamental binaries. On the one side, he claimed, stood the flesh, which, by itself, bore the threat of violence. On the other side was the spirit whose Christian manifestation had sought to control the flesh but gave rise to dishonesty. The law of love would help to overcome this dichotomy and result in the 'rehabilitation of the flesh' (7–9). Thus, marriage and divorce were part of a wider desire for harmony: the union between flesh and spirit, between woman and man, between father and mother.

As the extract indicates, Enfantin did not believe the time to be ripe for such unions: woman first needed to 'reveal herself as free' (56). Until woman had become truly liberated, any attempt to include men and women within the same organization would produce a 'faulty hierarchy' (55) in which man would remain dominant. The exclusion of women from the Saint-Simonian church exposed its underlying patriarchal features. At the same time, it inaugurated a peculiar form of patriarchy: an apostolate characterized by the absence of women. Yet, how exactly was woman to overcome the state of 'confused equality' (55)? On this question, Enfantin ventured into the sphere of the mythical: his 'call to woman' was based on the anticipation of a female messiah who would join him as pope of the Saint-Simonian church. As shown by the extract, an empty chair symbolized this quest. Thus, the search for the Woman turned into the overarching concern of the Saint-Simonians.

These ideas cannot be detached from Enfantin's patriarchal role. Many Saint-Simonians lived in a state of close emotional dependency on Father Enfantin – a situation that he fostered by taking (and breaching) confession and by inviting professions of love. These interpersonal bonds extended to Enfantin's relationships with Saint-Simonian women. Alongside various other liaisons, the unmarried pontiff of the Saint-Simonian church had a longstanding mistress who gave birth to his son Arthur in 1828. The latter's existence was only acknowledged in 1832, when Enfantin made him the focus of an elaborate ceremony. These blurred boundaries between life and doctrine meant that private matters were far from peripheral to Saint-Simonism.

After the departure of Bazard's followers and the removal of women, Enfantin continued to elaborate his doctrine. In April 1832, he retreated to his family estate in Ménilmontant, taking forty disciples with him. The group members adopted a celibate communal lifestyle in an all-male environment, attracting curiosity and ridicule for their extravagant ceremonies, their lavish costumes

and their pursuit of domestic activities. In the meantime, Rodrigues too had left the fold: while affirming his support for the liberation of women, he questioned Enfantin's moral pronouncements, instead making 'radical claims concerning women's political and social rights'.¹²

The most serious problem, however, was the fact that the Saint-Simonians had become a target of the public authorities. An initial police raid in January 1832 was followed by charges of running a political organization and of being a threat to public morality. The subsequent trial gave Enfantin further opportunities to challenge convention, for instance when he unsuccessfully insisted on being represented by female legal counsels. In the end, Enfantin and his close associate Michel Chevalier received prison sentences, while Rodrigues – despite his break with the organization – was ordered to pay a fine.

Enfantin resumed the quest for the Woman after his release in 1833. He gathered his declining band of followers in the *Compagnonnage de la Femme*, which looked for the female Messiah in Egypt. The pilgrimage implied that the union between man and woman would be paralleled by the union between Occident and Orient. Yet, alongside this quixotic mission, Saint-Simonians addressed more practical concerns. During the 1830s and 1840s, they developed various infrastructural schemes, remaining faithful to Saint-Simon's focus on industry. The most eye-catching project was their contribution to plans for the Suez Canal, promoted by Enfantin's *Société d'Études du Canal de Suez* (1846).

What, however, did the events of November 1831 mean for Saint-Simonian women? Some of them sought to live according to Enfantin's new moral law, in several cases with unhappy outcomes. Even for those who rejected Enfantin's ideas, his controversial pronouncements caused problems: by association, female Saint-Simonians had been tainted with the brush of immorality. Several of them abandoned the movement, embarking on other forms of activism. For instance, Jeanne Deroin (1805–94), a former Saint-Simonian seamstress, moved towards Fourierism and emerged as a pioneering figure in the history of French feminism.

More generally, their exclusion from the Saint-Simonian church forced the Saint-Simonian women to launch alternative projects. One tangible outcome was their foundation of the *Tribune des Femmes* (1832), the first feminist newspaper in France. Edited by Jeanne-Désirée Veret (1810–91), Marie-Reine Guindorf (1812–37) and Suzanne Voilquin (1801–77), the periodical initially debated Enfantin's moral doctrine. However, as Claire Moses had noted, 'radical

sexual opinion' soon disappeared from its pages, and its authors concentrated on the legal and economic position of women.¹³ Such examples illustrate how Saint-Simonism could provide an inspiration to women – even if their response to the 'call' differed from Enfantin's ideas.

On the whole, Saint-Simonism provides us with an ambivalent picture. Seen from one angle, it involved a challenge to patriarchy. Enfantin placed a maternal figure at the centre of his church's spiritual quest. He also acknowledged that the existing moral order prevented genuine equality between the sexes. In this respect, the exclusion of women from the Saint-Simonian hierarchy went hand in hand with a critique of existing social relations. At the same time, the patriarchal elements of his church were self-evident. In November 1831, Enfantin asserted his authority as father of the Saint-Simonian family and pontiff of the Saint-Simonian church. Even before these events, the movement had been hierarchically organized and led by Supreme Fathers. Women could engage in practical activities, but had little power to shape the doctrine.

As Claire Moses' work has shown, Saint-Simonism rose to prominence shortly before the emergence of a separate women's movement in France. These two phenomena were interconnected. Both the Saint-Simonians and the followers of Charles Fourier (1772–1837) sought to address the position of women in society and the moral issues that underpinned it. These movements provided stimuli for further activism. They thus did not only form part of the history of early socialism, but also of feminism – even if the events of November 1831 ultimately highlighted the persistence of patriarchal discourses and structures.