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How to Change the World: Claude-Henri de Rouvroy, comte de Saint-Simon

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European society is no longer made up of children whose interests require that they be subject to strong and active supervision; it is composed of men whose education has been completed, and who seek only instruction. Politics should no longer be anything other than the science of obtaining for the masses the greatest possible quantity of material goods and moral benefits [jouissances]. Leaders, though dominated by old prejudices and subject to the empire of illusions, by their conduct nonetheless pay homage to the power of opinion; they are beginning to show, if not by their acts, at least by the form in which they couch them, that they no longer hide from themselves that they are dealing with reasonable men, who do not wish to live to be governed, but who consent to be governed in order to live better. They favour, I know (insofar as they can in the present state of things), the arts, the sciences and industry; but why do these three great classes [capacités], who could survive unaided, and without whom nothing could survive, need to be favoured? Could they not say to the leaders: 'What is there in common between us and you? Why is it that we are at your mercy? To whom does the nation owe its wellbeing? Who upholds the throne, us or you? It is in our breasts, from the depths of our studies, our workshops, our factories, and not from your offices and dining rooms, that everything useful to society emerges. If we imagine a project useful to the common good, we are obliged to request that you take it into account. Since your talents [capacités] are inferior to ours, since the only talent you possess is for surveillance and policing, which must every day become less important, how is it that you are placed so much above us, that you wish to reduce us to your passive instruments – we, without whom you would find it impossible to accomplish the slightest act? Isn't your arrogance as inappropriate, as ridiculous as that of a coachman whose pride in being seated high on his box leads him to imagine he is above his master, who pays him and feeds his horses?'

Just imagine if one of us made such a speech to a leader, his response would be quite simple: 'I have nothing to say to you', he would reply. 'You are divided; we are united.'

*This reproach, gentlemen, would be justified. Unity, which is a virtue and safeguard of the weak, is also one of the duties of the strong. Yet far from harmony reigning amongst us, there is, between scientists, industrialists and artists, a sort of permanent hostility. I would not claim that the fault lies with one party; it is reciprocal.*¹

The words are those of an artist, opening up a vigorous dialogue with two other protagonists who, like him, are defined simply in terms of their occupations: a *savant* represents the scientific community, while an *industriel* speaks on behalf of the manufacturing interest. All, in turn, expound ideas that are rooted not only in their individual activities, but also in the personalities and preconceptions that ostensibly accord with their respective social roles. All three, and the artist above all, are animated by an impatience with the shortcomings of the post-Restoration (1815–30) political order; all three call for its replacement with a system of governance attuned to the needs of society at large and administered by individuals possessing real skills rather than inherited titles or honorific positions. The result, they agree, would be a world in which peace and progress flourish, and the material well-being of the masses enjoys unprecedented priority.

The *Dialogue* was published in December 1824 as the ‘Conclusion’ to a collection of essays ranging over questions of philosophy, physiology and social and industrial organization produced by Claude-Henri de Rouvroy, comte de Saint-Simon (1760–1825) and a group of young followers dedicated to promoting his ideas. The *Dialogue*’s authorship is subject to dispute:² although commonly attributed to Saint-Simon himself, working with his assistant Léon Halévy, it may be the work of another disciple, the mathematician and banker Olinde Rodrigues, an influential defender of the master’s doctrine in the turbulent years following his death. Whoever actually composed the text, it seems entirely consistent with the overall tenor of Saint-Simon’s thought on the eve of his death, and represents an important moment in the evolution of the doctrine for a number of reasons. As Saint-Simon’s ideas had developed since his emergence as a political thinker during the Empire, so his early commitment to guaranteeing social stability through intellectual reform had been eclipsed by an increasing interest in industry and particularly its capacity to advance popular well-being. With his last major work, *Le Nouveau Christianisme*, left incomplete at the time of his death, Saint-Simon sought to devise mechanisms for overcoming social division and the individualism that nurtured it, and for laying the foundations of a world in which brotherly love would promote altruism and mutuality. Religion, he believed, provided an effective means of strengthening the bonds between individuals and social classes by appealing not to rational interests in a dry, expository fashion, but to something more visceral that could be mobilized through an appeal to feeling and imagination. The belief that emotion and not reason held the key to fostering a desire for

change amongst people underlies the artist's promotion as a sort of secular equivalent to the priest in the *Dialogue*. It is he who takes the lead in addressing representatives of the two other productive classes, and it is he who most fully expounds the nature of far-reaching social reform and the means of achieving it.

The artist's remarks echo Saint-Simon's belief that a central goal of political change was to 'replace the government of men by the administration of things' – future societies, in other words, would consist of self-regulating groups of individuals united around a common goal of industrial production. As such, current notions of government as an essentially coercive directing body would become redundant, since individuals' commitment to collective well-being would eradicate the need for control. For the artist, a crucial distinction is to be drawn between an anachronistic ruling class of politicians, aristocrats and churchmen, whom he likens to prefects in a school charged with maintaining order, and the three classes who participate in the *Dialogue*. All bring to bear a skill essential for the prosperity of society and as such, he argues, are as vital to its effective functioning as teachers are to the operation of a school. Yet, as he concludes, divisions amongst this group have prevented them from assuming their pivotal role and ushering in a new era of equity and prosperity.

These divisions relate to Saint-Simon's understanding of the relationship between social groupings (*capacités*) and psycho-physiological difference. From his earliest published writings, Saint-Simon revealed a particular interest in physiological theory – indeed, his early work is predicated on a belief that once physiology matured into a positivist science, it would provide the epistemological foundations for a scientifically objective understanding of social phenomena. Saint-Simon followed contemporary medical theorists such as P.J.G. Cabanis and Xavier Bichat in emphasizing innate individual difference – a break with Enlightenment ideas, which had followed Locke in arguing that most of what rendered individuals distinct one from another could be attributed to the impact of sensory experience accumulated over the course of a lifetime. Cabanis, in his lectures to the Institut, broke with this dominant model, and in so doing stimulated considerable interest among liberal thinkers associated with the *Idéologue* group.³ His ideas were expanded with the publication in 1800 of Bichat's *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et sur la mort*, which argued that humans could be differentiated into three broad groups: 'sensory', 'cerebral' and 'motor'. It was this division that provided the basis for Saint-Simon's own tripartite division between artists, scientists and *industriels*.

Because of his reading of contemporary political theory, as well as through his understanding of physiology and his observations of post-Revolutionary France, Saint-Simon was acutely aware of the threat that individualism posed to social cohesion. His hostility to contemporary liberal theorists, and his

disdain for *oisifs* – wealthy idlers who exploited society for personal gain – led to increasing frustration at the obstacle that individual interest posed to social reform. As he argued in 1821: ‘The decadence of old general doctrines has allowed the development of egotism, which invades society every day and is firmly opposed to the formation of new doctrines.’⁴ The only solution, he maintained, was to oppose individualism with philanthropic altruism. And, as he quickly came to realize, the most effective means of achieving such change was by an appeal to the imagination, which would overcome the obstacle of self-interest erected by reason, and carry society forward on a wave of enthusiasm. Hence, later in the *Dialogue*, the artist famously (and controversially) proclaims:

It is we artists who will serve as your vanguard [avant-garde] since art’s power has greater immediacy and rapidity ... Since we speak to man’s imagination and sentiments, we must always exert the strongest and most decisive effect. If today we seem to have no role, or only a very minor one, this is because the arts lack what they must need for their energy and success: a common impulse and a ruling idea.⁵ (341)

The artist’s diagnosis of art’s failure to realize its social potential brings us back full circle. Its current impotence is itself the consequence of individualism: in his opening remarks, the artist recognizes that he and his kind have been too inclined to disdain reality and isolate themselves in an ‘ideal world ... that offers us the sweetest pleasures and the purest consolation’ (339). His confession encourages his interlocutors to engage in similar self-criticism: the scientist acknowledges that he too cuts himself off from society in ‘solitary meditation’, while the *industriel* recognizes that his class’s ‘love of money’ overcomes more general interests (371, 383). Each, then, suffers from a form of individualism that is intrinsic to the physiological types that they embody; their inclination is thus to isolate themselves in ways that their innate characteristics actively promote. It is for this reason that the artist observes the need for an act of will to bring them together in an alliance that will overcome their present isolation and the sense of frustration that it promotes (322).⁶ Such an alliance is thus conceived as advancing art, science and industry at the same time as it promises a radical re-ordering of society.

Divisions within the three *capacités* are symptomatic of a more pervasive individualism that the proposed alliance between the artist, the scientist and the *industriel* is intended to rectify. The objective is to institute a social system in which industrial production offers the means for promoting a more equitable distribution of wealth in a society which nonetheless remains hierarchized and, as the artist emphasizes, ‘is hostile only to idleness, and is essentially favourable to royalty, to religion, to the sciences, arts and industry – in a word, to everything that is useful to men’ (361). Despite these apparent concessions to the status quo, the three interlocutors regard their union as effecting a

fundamental change of values as science and the arts effectively become the new spiritual power and industry acquires supreme temporal authority (366).⁷ Thus, the scientist proposes that future responsibility for public education should be shared between his class and that of the artist in order to promote popular sympathy for industry and for peace. Such an educational alliance, he suggests, will enhance not only the popular intellect but also encourage the development of ‘social feeling [*sentiments sociaux*]’ (374) – altruistic impulses that foster cohesion and to which the artist is supremely able to appeal.

Achieving such a change had long seemed particularly challenging to Saint-Simon. Although he had taken a sympathetic stance towards the revolutionary upheaval of the 1790s, in many ways his early work was inspired by a desire to forestall any recurrence of civil unrest. As he became increasingly committed to fundamental social and political reform, he was confronted by the question of how best to effect radical change while avoiding internecine violence – a problem that had proved sufficiently intractable for him to propose a mass petition to the king in order to persuade the authorities to take up his ideas. Announcing in the *Dialogue*, with greater optimism than accuracy, that ‘[h]enceforth, insurrection is impossible in France’ (364), the artist offers to direct his talents towards this process of mass conversion. The power of imagination, he claims, will usher in far-reaching social transformation in a peaceful and comprehensive manner. According to the artist, past failure to appreciate the masses’ limited responsiveness to reasoned argument has handicapped the ability of innovators to win popular enthusiasm for their ideas. As he points out to the scientist: ‘reasoning merely convinces, whilst feelings [*les sensations*] persuade and excite’ (337–8). The artist himself is described, in a footnote at the beginning of the *Dialogue*, as ‘a man of imagination’, whose field of action covers ‘everything that has sensation as its object’ (331, note). In a way that sets the tone for subsequent Saint-Simonian discourse, the artist is thus identified not with a specific medium but with a particular means of address, an ability to transcend reason and appeal to more instinctual aspects of human response. Yet the artist qualifies his claim to appeal to this impulsive, visceral and potentially wayward side of the personality by arguing that in the future his creative talents will be directed to useful ends, as opposed to ‘retrograde’ work that appeals to ‘imagination without an object’ (343).

Saint-Simon’s rehabilitation of imagination as a transformative social force finds its roots in the eighteenth century, when theorists such as Diderot emphasized the value of emotion both as a source of aesthetic pleasure and as a powerful moral catalyst.⁸ The revolutionary era’s recourse to popular festivals drew upon an analogous sense of the arts’ capacity to enthuse spectators who would otherwise be resistant to the reasoned exposition of civic virtues that dramatic spectacle was able vividly to bring to life.⁹ Such initiatives offered a recent precedent for the way in which, in the *Dialogue*, the artist presents imagination as an infallible spur, propelling society towards a glorious future

of concord and solidarity. Yet, for all his inspiring words, the *Dialogue* ends on a rather anti-climactic note. As the three protagonists agree on the need to join forces to relieve society of its currently dysfunctional form of government, the only proposal that the artist can come up with is the production of an encyclopaedia, drawing on the celebrated eighteenth-century example that he argues precipitated the 1789 revolution, and a journal, in which the three *capacités* will set out their ideas for change (386).¹⁰ Such modest ambitions suggest the extent to which, at this point, Saint-Simon and his circle remain tied to a predominantly rationalist perspective and have only a limited sense of how the imagination's potential as a transformational force might actually be mobilized.

The artist's proposal is inspired by his contention that society itself is on the brink of an epochal change: 'the great work of Christianity is coming to fruition [*s'accomplit*]', 'fraternity reigns amongst men and nations', 'society is becoming increasingly positivist' (342). No evidence is offered to support these assertions, and it is clear that Saint-Simon was unsure as to how to promote his ideas for social reform in a climate that, in actuality, showed only limited potential for change. For many post-Revolutionary commentators, including Saint-Simon himself, one of the most conspicuous features of national life was a pervasive sense of uncertainty, articulated in 1825 in Théodore Jouffroy's assertion that '[a] new generation is growing up, born in the midst of scepticism'¹¹. It was in response to this sense of doubt and drift that a band of young intellectuals, many of whom had been trained in the elite Parisian engineering school, the *Ecole polytechnique*, congregated around Saint-Simon in his later years, and developed his legacy in the school that they established in France before leaving on mission to Egypt in 1833.

With the emergence of Prosper Enfantin as the dominant force within the group in the late 1820s, the positivist element of Saint-Simonian doctrine was steadily overshadowed by the emphasis on religiosity that Saint-Simon himself had begun to sketch out in his later writings. The emergence of a *Religion saint-simonienne* in 1828 and the adoption of a quasi-monastic group existence in the Parisian suburb of Ménilmontant in 1832,¹² indicate a growing commitment to sentiment, as opposed to reason, as the bedrock of the new doctrine. Yet, just as the *Dialogue's* artist remained hidebound by the authority of the written text in his allegiance to the journal and the encyclopaedia, so the Saint-Simonians of the July Monarchy tended to favour purely discursive means of propaganda that privileged the cognitive power of the word. The group's celebrated *prédications* – doctrinal lectures that seem to have relied on verbal histrionics to underscore their effect – and quasi-liturgical ceremonies during the Ménilmontant retreat seem relatively timid in their recourse to traditional discursive formats. Yet, behind closed doors, the group allowed their imaginations to run riot in ways that the *Dialogue's* artist could scarcely imagine. As the figure of the priest increasingly usurped the artist's

role as principal minister to the popular imagination, so members of the group confected a new gospel, *Le Livre nouveau*, in which they speculated about the affective power of language, sound and colour, and envisioned a cathedral of the future which would enthrall the faithful through a panoply of sensual effects.¹³ Although social solidarity and industrial progress remain central to these speculative excursions, under Enfantin emotion takes on an ecstatic force that, rather than surpassing the power of reason, seems altogether to suppress its restraining power in the interests of spontaneous allegiance. As Enfantin remarks in 1831, in a chilling echo of future totalitarian sloganeering: 'Man is FREE when he loves what he MUST DO'.¹⁴

If such an assertion compromises the value of sentiment by envisaging its implicit regulation, it points to an authoritarian current in Saint-Simonian thought that seems to contrast most markedly with the ostensibly libertarian perspective of the Saint-Simonians' main rival, Charles Fourier. Fourier's indictment of modern *civilisation* for repressing the free-play of sentiment, and thus bringing about crime, deviation and misery, envisions a *nouveau monde industriel et sociétaire* in which individual feeling would be in perfect harmony with collective interest. Here again, however, freedom is more apparent than real, as Fourier's obsessively detailed, baroque vision of future happiness gradually expels any sense of spontaneity or idiosyncrasy from a world where even the most eccentric impulse has been anticipated, and catered for, by a social vision of suffocating inclusiveness. In common with the communist paradise sketched out during the same years in Etienne Cabet's *Voyage en Icarie* of 1842, the utopian vision of these early nineteenth-century theorists is ultimately rooted in a highly qualified understanding of individual liberty.