Marx, Engels, and Some (Non-Foundational) Arguments against Utopian Socialism

(a)

This chapter is concerned with certain criticisms that Marx and Engels make of utopian socialism. Their hostility towards utopianism is widely recognised, but not, I think, well understood. My aim here is to illuminate one subset of these Marxian criticisms. (I use the term Marx*ian* here to refer to ideas shared by Marx and Engels, and not to ideas developed by later Marx*ists*.)

This Marxian hostility towards utopian socialism should not, of course, be exaggerated. It is important to appreciate that alongside this widely recognised but not well understood hostility, Marx and Engels also have many positive and complimentary things to say about utopian socialism. That Marxian enthusiasm has a structure, which tracks two distinctions: a 'chronological' distinction running between the original generation of utopian socialists on the one hand, and the second and subsequent generations of utopian socialists on the other; and a 'textual' distinction running between the critical dimension of utopian writings (identifying flaws in contemporary class-divided society) on the one hand, and their constructive dimension (their provision of what I will call 'plans and blueprints' of the future socialist society) on the other (see Leopold 2005). Simply put, Marx and Engels are more enthusiastic about the first generation than the second and subsequent generations, and they are more enthusiastic about the critical thread in utopian writings than the constructive thread in those same texts.

This structured enthusiasm still leaves plenty of room for criticisms of utopian socialism, and it is a subset of these which I focus on here; namely, non-foundational Marxian criticisms of utopian socialism. Both the target of that criticism (utopian socialism), and the kind of criticism it is (non-foundational), require some elucidation, and I begin with the former.

(b)

The target of this Marxian criticism is, in one sense, clear enough. The label 'utopian socialism' is one that Marx and Engels use explicitly, and it is easy to list the individuals that they typically classify and criticise under it. That catalogue is dominated by the three writers and activists that they plausibly portray as constituting the founding generation of utopian socialism, namely Charles Fourier (1772-1837), Robert Owen (1771-1858), and Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825). Not only do they form an age cohort of sorts (born within twelve years of each other), but also the mature form of their work emerged at around the same time, on the cusp of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Engels observes, the publication of Saint-Simon's Genevan letters, the 'groundwork' of Fourier's theory (his discovery of 'passionate attraction'), and Owen's appointment as manager of New Lanark, all occurred within a year or two of 1800 (Engels 1989: 289). Marx and Engels were, of course, much younger, and did not know any of these three personally.[1] To this original triumvirate, Marx and Engels add not only second and subsequent generation Fourierists, Owenites, and Saint-Simonians, but also some independent later authors, including Wilhelm Weitling (1808-1871) and Etienne Cabet (1788-1856). The 'utopian' label would have been unwelcome to most of these writers and activists, but it

has stuck fast, and – even if one wanted to – there is little chance of resisting, as distinct from clarifying, its application here.

Identifying the rationale behind the classification of this diverse group of writers and activists as utopian socialists is a little harder. In the present context, it seems unhelpful to worry too much about what makes the utopian socialists *socialist*. For the purposes of argument, just assume that these writers and activists have whatever characteristics are needed in order to be counted as socialists. Suppose, for instance, that socialists share a commitment to certain values (such as, equality and community), and to certain views about the kinds of institutions (such as common property and democratic decision-making) that would best embody and further those values. In that case, assume that these utopian socialists are committed to those values, and to those views about the institutions that would best realise them. The qualification here – 'for the purposes of argument' – is an important one, since it is not obvious that all of these utopian authors would rightly be classified as socialists. (It would certainly be easy enough to make a case against Saint-Simon's inclusion; given, for instance, his embrace of private property and his non-egalitarian views on distributive justice and political power.) However, given the focus of the present chapter, the socialist credentials of these writers – unlike their utopianism – is not an issue to linger over.

Of more importance here is what makes this group utopian. By *utopian* socialism I mean a socialism that embraces the need for institutional design, seeing the provision and promotion of the plans and blueprints of an ideal future society as an important and legitimate endeavour. This understanding of utopia seems to have a number of advantages. It echoes some common usage; descriptions of an ideal but not extant society are often said to constitute utopias. It also, and relatedly, reflects the neologism's etymological origins; Thomas More (1478-1535) famously combining connotations of 'good place' and 'no place' (1965: 21). In addition, it is broadly consistent with (some) Marxian usage; Engels, for example, often identifies utopianism with the provision of institutional and other detail in its account of how the flaws of existing society are to be overcome (See 1988: 485). And it maintains a distinction between Marxian and utopian socialism; Marx and Engels obviously have some broad vision of their ideal socialist society – however much they might have disliked that kind of language (talk of their having a 'vision' for instance) being used to describe what they so obviously have – but they never flesh out that vision with anything like the degree of institutional and other detail that is found in utopian literature. So understood, there seems no reason to resist the Marxian characterisation of this group of writers and activists – Fourier, Owen, Saint-Simon and others – as utopian. And certainly there is no need for the parallel qualification, 'for the sake of argument', at this point. Throughout their writings we find these various utopian authors treating the provision of plans and blueprints of the ideal society – whose arrival they sought to organise or hasten – as necessary, possible, and desirable.

Three further broadly definitional observations might help clarify the limits of this chapter. First, the remarks just offered are intended to clarify my own working understanding of 'utopia', and its cognates, here. I am perfectly happy to allow the coherence and utility of other definitions; alternatives which, for example, might not maintain that distinction (between utopian and Marxian socialism), and which might identify Marxian views as utopian in some alternative (and here unspecified) sense. Second, this working understanding is intended to be agnostic on the tricky question of just how 'ideal' an ideal description must be to constitute a 'utopia'; I take no stand here,

for example, on the thorny issue of whether utopias – even socialist utopias – should be constructed to reflect considerations of accessibility and feasibility in addition to those of desirability.[2] And third, it is the *detail* of utopian descriptions that I emphasise here, and seek to convey by my use of the expression 'plans and blueprints'. Note, in particular, that I do not intend that expression to presuppose any specific account of whether, and to what extent, we should think of these detailed descriptions of the ideal society of the future as having to be followed to the letter. The utopian socialists discussed here disagree about that issue, amongst others; for example, Fourier was famously stipulative (suggesting, for instance, that neglecting to include his preferred form of covered walkway between communal buildings would guarantee the failure of any trial community), whereas Owen was more open-minded (allowing that experience and experimentation might lead to certain as yet unpredictable improvements in future communal arrangements).

(c)

Having clarified the target of Marx and Engels' criticism, I now turn to the kind of criticism that they aim at it. Their many objections to utopian socialism can be divided into what I call foundational and non-foundational types. I assume that this is an exhaustive distinction; in that Marxian criticisms of utopian socialism will, on examination, all fall into one or other of these two categories.

Foundational criticisms of utopian socialism are those which, if sound, would provide us with a reason to reject utopianism as such. That is, these complaints give us a reason to refrain from describing in relevant detail the ideal (socialist) society of the future. (Of course, that reason might not be decisive, all things considered, but it would still count against utopianism per se.)

In contrast, *non*-foundational criticisms of utopian socialism are those which if sound would provide us with a reason to reject views which are characteristically held by utopian socialists, but which are not constitutive of their utopianism. That is, these complaints might give us a reason to abandon the relevant beliefs, or even criticise those who held them, but they do not give us cause to reject utopianism as such.

(d)

I have written about foundational Marxian arguments against utopianism elsewhere, and my comments here will be correspondingly brief (Leopold 2016). There are three points I would emphasize: that there are three main such arguments against utopianism in the writings of Marx and Engels; that none of them succeed qua foundational argument; and that, despite that, these foundational arguments against utopianism may have had a negative historical impact. I will elaborate these claims a little further, before turning to consider the non-foundational arguments in greater detail.

The three foundational Marxian arguments against utopianism can be characterised as normative, epistemological, and empirical, respectively. The first involves a *normative* claim that utopian plans and blueprints are undemocratic, because they regrettably foreclose the future, restricting the freedom of (future) individuals to determine for themselves the kind of society that they want to live in. The second rests on an

epistemological claim that utopian plans and blueprints are impossible, because they require accurate knowledge of the future of a kind which cannot be had. And the third relies on an *empirical* claim that utopian plans and blueprints are unnecessary, because satisfactory solutions to social problems emerge from the unfolding of the historical process without themselves needing to be designed.

However, none of these three lines of criticism is persuasive. Whilst they might have purchase against certain varieties of utopianism, they fail as foundational objections to the need for socialist design. The central reason for doubting the normative objection to utopianism as such, is that providing a detailed description of an ideal (socialist) society does not obviously undermine any plausible (subjective or objective) condition for the self-determination of our or future generations. The central reason for doubting the epistemological objection to utopianism as such, is that the impact of unforeseen events and circumstances does not give us a reason to abandon all kinds of plans; human limitations and certain facts about the social world might make wholly accurate plans impossible, but something less than completely accurate plans might still be of constructive use. And the central reason for doubting the empirical objection to utopianism as such, is that the claim that the basic structure of the ideal (socialist) society develops automatically within existing capitalist society, needing only to be delivered (and not designed) by human agency, is unsupported not only by Marxian argument, but also by subsequent historical experience. I conclude that we should reject the Marxian suggestion that utopian plans and blueprints are *necessarily* undemocratic, impossible, and redundant.

That said, unsatisfactory arguments can have meaningful empirical effects, and I fear that this foundational Marxian animus towards utopianism may have had a negative historical legacy. Marxian anti-utopianism embodies a dangerous combination of political radicalism and inattention to matters of socialist design; we are urged to change the social world dramatically, but not to waste time now thinking about the kind of social world that we want to bring about. Yet the determination to revolutionise society, when combined with a lack of interest in clarifying ends and the social and political arrangements that might best embody them, seems likely to generate deleterious practical consequences. Indeed, although I will not defend the suggestion here, it seems plausible to think that some of the more disastrous threads in twentieth century history reflect, in part, the malign influence, not, as so often suggested, of the *utopianism* of Marx and Engels, but rather of Marxian *anti*-utopianism, and the rejection of socialist design that it encourages.

(e)

My primary subject here is the second kind of criticism, the *non*-foundational complaints, that Marx and Engels marshal against utopian socialism. These non-foundational criticisms require independent assessment, because their coherence and persuasiveness is not impacted by the claimed failure of the foundational arguments in Marxian writings. Such an assessment is, of course, a central aim of the present chapter.

I take it that the object of these non-foundational complaints is not the utopianism *as such* of the utopian socialists, but rather other views that the latter are said to hold. However, this target should not be misunderstood. We are interested here not in just any other views that particular utopians might or might not happen to hold – Fourier's belief

in metempsychosis, for example – but rather in what I will call the characteristic, but not constitutive, views of utopian socialism. These views are not constitutive because subscribing to them is not what makes one a utopian; that is, they are not views the rejection of which would cast doubt on the desirability or possibility or necessity of utopian plans and blueprints. However, these views are characteristic in that, they are central to, and widely held by, successive generations of utopian socialists.

More precisely, the object of these non-foundational criticisms is the characteristic but not constitutive views of utopian socialism, as identified in certain canonical Marxian texts: the jointly-authored *Communist Manifesto* (1848); and Engels' *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880). The historical impact of the *Manifesto* is widely recognised, but Engels' later pamphlet quickly assumed a parallel status as an accessible and definitive statement of Marxian views.[3] Indeed, these two texts had an extraordinary popular impact, and were certainly the most read of all Marxian writings in the period between Marx's death and the October Revolution.[4] Their historical and continuing influence is part of the reason for focussing on them here.

Three characteristic, but not constitutive, utopian views receive particular emphasis in these Marxian texts. The utopians are criticised as 'paternalistic', 'ahistorical', and 'anti-political', respectively. The first complaint – that the utopians are 'paternalistic' – asserts that utopian socialists mistakenly view the proletariat as only a passive or suffering mass, failing to understand that socialism will only be brought about by the *self*-emancipation of the proletariat. The second complaint – that the utopians are 'ahistorical' – asserts that utopian socialists mistakenly think that the conditions for socialism are universal, failing to understand that they only appear at a particular stage in the historical development of humankind. And the third complaint – that the utopians are 'anti-political' – asserts that the utopian socialists mistakenly reject 'politics', failing to understand, in particular, that the transition to socialism will come about only as the result of violent conflict between classes.

In what follows, I seek to: elucidate these three main Marxian criticisms; confirm their non-foundational status; and assess their plausibility and purchase against the identified targets. However, my pursuit of the last of these tasks here is necessarily limited. A thorough inquiry into the plausibility and purchase of these Marxian criticisms would have to address three issues: 'attribution' (whether the utopians held the view in question); 'truth' (whether the view in question is false or misleading); and 'culpability' (whether the holder of those false or misleading views is, for that reason, open to praise or blame).

In the following discussion, I say very little about the *truth* of these various claims. Whether it really is a mistake, for example, to hold that the proletariat are only a passive or suffering mass, will receive little discussion here. The Marxian insistence that the relevant claims are false or misleading strikes me as plausible, however, a serious investigation of their plausibility, let alone truth, would require more space and expertise than is available here. It would also lead the discussion away from utopian socialism. Nor will I say much about *culpability*. I am sympathetic towards the Marxian suggestion that, even where the relevant views are mistaken, it would be unfair to hold the first generation of utopians culpable for holding them (Leopold 2005: 456-461). The thought is that the historical context in which they worked was sufficiently developed to have provoked socialist criticism, but not yet sufficiently developed for that socialist criticism to have escaped serious misunderstanding (Cohen 2000: 63). The culpable error here is

to maintain these false and misleading views into the more developed circumstances of the 1840s and later (as second and subsequent generations of utopians are accused of doing). However, nothing here requires the reader to share my sympathy for that Marxian suggestion of a historical exemption from responsibility for the original triumvirate. Instead, the following discussion focuses on the *attribution* claim; that is, the accuracy or otherwise of attributing the relevant view to the utopian socialists. The question of whether the utopians subscribe to 'paternalistic' views of the proletariat, 'ahistorical' understandings of socialism, and 'anti-political' strategies. In order to keep the discussion manageable, with each of these charges I examine one (different) member of the founding triumvirate. Single examples cannot establish fully the plausibility or otherwise of the characteristic part of the attribution claim, but the cumulative impression may still be suggestive.

(f)

I start with the non-foundational Marxian complaint that utopian socialism is 'paternalistic', in that it has a mistaken understanding of, and attitude towards, the proletariat as a class. That claim needs a little unpacking, having at least three constituent threads; two concerning the characterisation of the proletariat, and the third the strategic place of that class in the transition to socialism.

The first thread involves a feature present in the utopian socialists' characterisation of the proletariat. The utopians are said to portray the proletariat inaccurately as merely a suffering entity. 'Only from the point of view of being the most suffering class', Marx and Engels write of the utopian socialists, 'does the proletariat exist for them' (1976: 515). Or, as Engels later has it, the utopians saw the proletariat 'as an oppressed, suffering order' (1989: 289). I take it that Marx and Engels are not denying that the proletariat suffers, since they often – including elsewhere in these same texts– draw attention to that suffering. The point is rather that suffering is not their only characteristic. The utopian misunderstanding, we might say, involves a confusion of part and whole, as if its suffering exhausted all that there was to say about the proletariat.

The second thread involves a feature omitted from the utopian socialists' characterisation of the proletariat. The utopians are said also to be mistaken in failing to see a(nother) characteristic that the proletariat does have. In particular, they fail to see that the proletariat is, at least potentially, an active and powerful collective agent capable of understanding and changing the course of history. To the utopian socialists, the proletariat presents rather the 'spectacle' of a class 'without any historical initiative [*geschichtliche Selbsttätigkeit*] or any independent political movement' (Marx and Engels 1976: 515). In Engels' later words, the proletariat were seen by the utopians as 'quite incapable of independent political action' (1989: 289).

The third thread associates these failings – the one-sided emphasis on suffering and the failure to understand that the proletariat is a powerful collective agent – with a mistaken strategic orientation towards the only class that, on the Marxian account, can bring about socialism. Since the proletariat is viewed as a suffering and passive class, it is treated as the object rather than subject of utopian 'plans' for social change (Marx and Engels 1976: 515). In particular, the utopians treat the proletariat as an appropriate object of humanitarian concern from without (on the part of suitably-motivated non-proletarian others), and attribute it no particular constructive role in the transition to socialism. As

Engels has it, proletarian interests were to be promoted, but always 'from without, or down from above' (1989: 289-290). The utopians, we might say, understood that socialism would benefit the proletariat, amongst others, but did not envisage it as being brought about by that class. They failed to appreciate that it was the 'historical mission' of the proletariat to bring about socialism (Engels 1989: 325).

(I take it that Marx and Engels do not deny that there might be, in certain circumstances, good reasons to support humanitarian action, even 'from without', in support of proletarians. They simply insist that humanitarian action by non-proletarian others is not a mechanism which will bring about a socialist society. There is consequently no inconsistency, or hypocrisy, when – together with Professor Edmund Beesly (1831-1915) and others – Marx subsequently laboured to help Communard refugees by organising emergency relief, trying to find them work, and resisting demands for their extradition (Harrison 1959: 220-25). However, the mechanism that will bring about socialism remains proletarian self-emancipation.)

These three threads confirm the complexity of the Marxian claim about the 'paternalistic' view of the proletariat held by the utopians. Utopian socialism is charged with associating the proletariat wholly with suffering, failing to understand that the proletariat is potentially a powerful and suitably motivated collective agent, and, consequently, imagining that socialism will be brought to workers from above by non-proletarian others (and certainly not recognising that socialism will only come about as the result of the *self*-emancipation of the proletariat).[5]

It seems clear that this charge – that the utopians have a 'paternalistic' view of the proletariat – is a non-foundational one. That is, it is possible to accept that this paternalistic view of the proletariat is mistaken, and, indeed, that it was held by many utopian socialists, without thereby having a reason to abandon utopianism as such. A commitment to the necessity and desirability of socialist design does not require one to hold any particular view, either about the character of the class of immediate producers in capitalist society, or the role of that class in any transition to socialism. Nonetheless, it may be that the utopian socialists do typically share a particular view of the proletariat.

Because of the reference to the 'suffering' character of the proletariat, commentators have sometimes assumed that the *Manifesto* version of the 'paternalistic' complaint is implicitly aimed at Saint-Simon, who they associated with a view of the proletariat as the most numerous and most suffering class.[6] Consequently, Saint-Simon is the utopian socialist that I discuss here.[7]

Despite the inevitability of the new industrial order that he envisaged, Saint-Simon does see a role for human agency in hastening its arrival. (Bracketing the doubts mentioned earlier, I will treat Saint-Simon's industrial society as synonymous with socialism.) The scientists and industrials would take a leading role, and the resulting social world would be driven and directed, as Engels later puts it, by 'scholars' representing 'science' and 'the workers' representing 'industry' (1989: 291). Temporal power would be in the hands of the industrial class, which includes 'not only the wage-workers, but also the manufacturers, the merchants, the bankers' (1989: 291). Of course, it is the latter (manufacturers, merchants, and bankers) who usually play the leading role here – the concept of a directing elite was a central theme in Saint-Simon's work – but this still leaves the proletariat as forming a part of that collective agent, playing a supporting role in their own emancipation. Consequently, even on Engels' own account, matters are

more complicated than some formulations of the 'paternalistic' complaint might suggest. Moreover, there are some Saint-Simon texts which appear to go further. For instance, in the late fragment on the French Proletariat, in *De L'Organisation Sociale*, he describes 'the most numerous class' as now sufficiently mature and foresighted that they can and should be recognised as full members of the social organism, and 'no longer need to be supervised' (more literally no longer in need of 'particular supervision') (Saint-Simon 1839: 267). We remain some considerable distance from the idea of proletarian self-emancipation, but it seems misleading to suggest that Saint-Simon simply views the proletariat as a wholly passive object of improvement from outside. Immediate producers are capable of playing a supporting role in their own emancipation, and require no special supervision in the new industrial order.

Engels might be interpreted, in those remarks from *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, as implicitly recognising that some of the founding generation of utopians are imperfect targets of this 'paternalistic' criticism. In a somewhat hurried 'Preface' to the 1888 English edition of the *Manifesto*, he appears to recognise explicitly that the 'paternalistic' charge also sits ill with certain second and subsequent generation utopians. In his explanation of the adjective attached to the *Manifesto*, Engels remarks that by the end of the 1840s the terms 'socialism' and 'communism' had started to develop somewhat different connotations. In particular, he suggests that 'communism' was increasingly associated with: 'a working class movement' rather than 'a middle class movement'; and a movement persuaded of the necessity of 'a total social change' rather than 'mere political revolutions' (1990: 516). Engels adds that, although the communism of the 1840s was 'a crude, rough-hewn, purely instinctual sort' (by comparison with its later theoretical sophistication), it was already sufficiently powerful to have produced a working class variant of utopianism (1990: 516). This 'utopian communism' was represented by Étienne Cabet (1788-1856) in France, and Wilhelm Weitling (1808-1871) in Germany. These authors share a commitment to utopianism (insisting on the necessity and desirability of socialist plans and blueprints) alongside a less paternalistic attitude to the proletariat. Indeed, it is precisely their commitment to the working class movement that leads Engels to characterise them as utopian *communists*.

In short, the attribution claim turns out to be more complex than summary formulations of the Marxian complaint allow. There is no suggestion here that the original triumvirate endorse the idea of proletarian self-emancipation, but – as Engels implicitly recognises – it does not seem entirely accurate to portray even the first generation as viewing the proletariat only as a passive or suffering mass, and socialism as being brought to them wholly from outside. Moreover, subsequent utopians – including, on Engels' account, Cabet and Weitling – increasingly identified the workers' movement as a central part of the motive force that would bring about the new socialist society.

(g)

I turn now to the non-foundational Marxian charge that utopian socialism is 'ahistorical'; that is, that these utopian writers and activists imagine that a socialist society could have been built at any point in human history. On this account, the explanation for the non-appearance of a socialist society in the past – or, indeed, its imminent appearance in the present – rests on contingent factors that might easily have turned out otherwise.

In contrast, Marx and Engels insist that there are historical conditions for the establishment of a socialist society. These historical conditions have 'objective' and 'subjective' dimensions, both of which are happily fulfilled by the emergence and development of capitalism. Objectively, communism requires that the productive forces have reached a high level of productivity, and it is capitalism's historical vocation to bring the productive forces up to that level. Subjectively, communism requires that there exist some historical agent with both the power and the motivation to bring it about, and capitalism generates a class of immediate producers with exactly those characteristics.

The Marxian suggestion that the utopians share an 'ahistorical' understanding can be formulated in a negative and a positive manner. The negative formulations focus on what the utopians lack. What they are missing is a sense of historical development; that is, they fail to understand that the existence of socialism is dependent on conditions which can only emerge at a certain stage of historical development. The positive formulations allow that the utopians see that there are preconditions for socialism (for instance, they might hold that one needs the right plan and sufficient will to put the plans into practice), but stress that those preconditions (the relevant blueprints and motivations) might have appeared at any time.

In developing this 'ahistorical' charge in the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels offer a series of contrasts. In comparison with the authors of the *Manifesto*, the utopians are said to substitute 'personal inventive action' for '[h]istorical action', and to substitute 'fantastic' conditions for 'historically created conditions of emancipation' (1976: 515). The utopians are portrayed as envisaging socialism, not as a historical development, but rather as 'an organisation of society specially contrived by these inventors' whose emergence simply depends on the 'practical carrying out of their social plans' (1976: 515). In an article contemporaneous with the *Manifesto*, Marx describes 'German communism is the most determined opponent of all utopianism' in that 'far from excluding historical development' they base their understanding and strategy on it (1976: 538).

In *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Engels outlines the ahistorical content of the utopians' account of the preconditions for socialism in a little more detail. He associates utopianism with what we might now think of as a somewhat caricatured account of the Enlightenment, as French and cerebral. The utopians are linked with the view that, if 'pure reason and justice' have not hitherto 'ruled the world', then this was because of contingent and remediable failures of understanding (1989: 287). All that was needed for the achievement of socialism was an individual thinker who 'has now arisen, and who understands the truth', a 'man of genius', whose emergence, on this account, is 'a mere happy accident' rather than a part of 'the chain of historical development' (1989: 287-288). As far as the utopians are concerned, on this account, the relevant utopian theorist 'might just as well have been born 500 years earlier, and might then have spared humanity 500 years of error, strife, and suffering' (1989: 288).

It seems clear that this second charge – that the utopians have an 'ahistorical' understanding of socialism – is a non-foundational one. That is, it is possible to accept that there are historical conditions for the achievement of a socialist society, and that the utopian socialists fail to understand that, without thereby having a reason to abandon utopianism as such. One might, without incoherence, adopt a historical understanding of the conditions for socialism and yet remain a utopian as understood here. Nonetheless, it might be that the utopian socialists do share an ahistorical understanding of the conditions for socialism.

My example here, from the founding triumvirate of utopian authors, is Fourier. Perhaps the first point to note is that Fourier does have a theory of history. Despite the enormous diversity of human activities and arrangements, across time and across cultures, he maintains that some overarching story can be told. This historical narrative is structurally analogous to the cycle of an individual life, covering the past, present, and future, of humankind. The details vary, but in *The Theory of the Four Movements* (1808) he outlines thirty-two possible stages of human history, which can be grouped into the four phases: infancy, ascent, decline, and decrepitude (the last two mirroring the first two). The phase of infancy involves some 5000 years of suffering and chaos (composed of five stages), and it is followed by 35,000 years of *growing* happiness and rationality (composed of eleven stages). At this point, the process is reversed. Humankind then experiences 35,000 years of *declining* happiness and rationality (composed of eleven stages), followed by 5,000 years of suffering and chaos (composed of five stages). We are often told that nineteenth-century theories of history only offer more or less Whiggish versions of progress, but Fourier links the ascent of humankind to happiness with an account of its subsequent decline and final destruction. After 80,000 years, animal and vegetable life on earth would end and the planet would stop rotating. (Fourier's views on metempsychosis nuance, but do not displace that claim.) The contemporary world – which Fourier refers to, with satirical intent, as 'Civilisation' – is the fifth and final stage of the infancy of humankind, the last ascending period of suffering and chaos. The stage of future society usually identified as his account of socialism is called 'Harmony' (which, strictly speaking, forms a number of stages) and is first reached at the eighth stage, or, if you prefer, the third of the ascending stages of happiness and rationality. Notice that until the present historical point, there has been little scope for hastening the development of humankind. God had seemingly ensured that earlier generations, in order to be spared greater frustration and unhappiness, could not glimpse the future destiny of the species. Crucially that greater frustration and unhappiness – generated by comparing their own sorrows with the joys available to later generations – might have impacted on the willingness of those earlier generations to increase wealth and productivity. And that matters, not least, because 'there could be no possibility' of obtaining Harmony's arrangements 'before industry and luxury were raised to a much higher level' (Fourier 1996: 96). This considerable increase of wealth and productivity is a historical condition for the emergence of Harmony; as Fourier explicitly remarks '[m]any centuries were needed to create the abundance the combined order requires' (1996: 96). Only when we have reached Civilisation does the possibility of accelerating the development of humankind emerge. In particular, if we now listen to Fourier, and establish a full-blown trial community, we could move rapidly to Harmony, despatching the transitional periods of 'Guaranteeism' and the 'Simple Combined Series' within two years. (Given that possibility, Fourier's preoccupation with locating potential sponsors of an appropriate trial perhaps looks more understandable.)

This kind of summary of Fourier's theory of history is unlikely to generate many converts. However, the Marxian charge wasn't that utopians have improbable theories of history, it was that they lacked any such theory. Yet Fourier does not look guilty of possessing an 'ahistorical' view of socialism. Indeed, it turns out that he thought of socialism as having both subjective and objective preconditions. Subjectively, it is only at a certain level of historical development that we gain access to the kind of adequate understanding of the future prospects of humankind that might ground our will to bring it about. And objectively, only after lengthy and necessary historical travails do industry and luxury develop sufficiently to make a socialist society feasible. This latter insistence

on the historical necessity of 'abundance', in particular, will strike many as not unlike (the objective) aspects of the Marxian account (Fourier 1996: 96).

In short, one doesn't need to look very far to discover utopian socialists – including members of the founding triumvirate – who hold theories of historical development which identify 'objective' and 'subjective' preconditions for socialism, consequently exempting them from the full force of this Marxian objection.[8]

In this context, one might note that Marx and Engels occasionally say positive things about Fourier's understanding of history. In the *Grundrisse*, for instance, Marx credits Fourier with having implicitly recognised the importance of production in his characterisation of progressive historical stages (1987: 97). And in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Engels refers to Fourier's 'masterly' appreciation of dialectics; comparable, we are told, to that of Hegel himself (1989: 293). Dialectic is a slippery concept, but Engels appears to have in mind: first, that history, on Fourier's account is not a simple story of progress or decline but contains elements of both; and, second, that Fourier identifies each epoch as falling victim to internal problems – which Engels is inclined to call 'contradictions' – that it cannot itself resolve (1989: 293).

(h)

Which brings us to the last of these non-foundational Marxian criticisms of utopian socialists: that they are 'anti-political'. This complaint is complicated by an, often remarked, lack of wider consensus in our culture about the meaning of 'politics'. So, the first task here is to elucidate the Marxian criticism.

In the *Manifesto*, there are at least three different elements to the charge. Marx and Engels associate politics with various kinds of activity, and opposition to politics is associated with abstention from those activities. In particular, the utopian socialists are said to be 'anti-political' in that they are opposed to engaging with class struggle, government, and revolution.

The first thread identifies the utopians as unwilling to get involved in struggles between classes. They are said to stand apart from and 'consider themselves far superior to all class antagonisms' (Marx and Engels 1976: 515). Since it is class struggle that increasingly characterizes modern society, this 'fantastic standing apart from the contest' is no trivial matter (Marx and Engels 1976: 516). The explanation for this abstention is said to lie in the utopian commitment to 'improve the condition of every member of society, even that of the most favoured' from the very beginning, as a result of which they 'habitually appeal to society at large without distinction of class' (Marx and Engels 1976: 515).

The second thread identifies the utopians as unwilling to get involved in struggles involving the machinery of contemporary government. The suggestion seems to be that they seek social rather than political change, and so stand back from struggles to change the law or to put representatives in parliaments. Indeed, the utopians are portrayed as increasingly forming sects who position themselves apart from popular movements on the left; for instance, we are reminded that the 'Owenites in England … oppose the Chartists' and the 'Fourierists in France … oppose …the *Réformistes*' (Marx and Engels 1976: 517).[9]

The third thread identifies the utopians as unwilling to get involved in revolutionary activity. In particular, Marx and Engels associate utopian socialism with communitarian socialism, and communitarian socialism with non-violence. By 'communitarian socialism' I mean to designate a socialism which views the creation of intentional communities – small voluntary settlements of individuals living and working together for some common purpose – as both the means of transition to, and the final institutional form of, a socialist society. We are told, for instance, that the utopians 'reject all political, and especially all revolutionary action; they wish to attain their ends by peaceful means, and endeavour, by small experiments, necessarily doomed to failure, and by the force of example, to pave the way for the new social Gospel' (Marx and Engels 1976: 515).

In short, the complaint that the utopian socialists are 'anti-political' associates them with abstention of various kinds. Not least, they are said to be unwilling to engage with class struggle, government, and revolution. Since these three forms of activity are all, on the Marxian account, effective means to promoting or obtaining socialist ends, it is counterproductive and misguided for socialists to discourage workers and others from accessing them.

It seems clear that this third charge – that the utopians are 'anti-political' – is a non-foundational one. That is, it is possible to accept that socialists should participate in politics – understood here to include engagement with class struggle, government, and revolution – and to accept that the utopian socialists failed to understand that, without thereby having a reason to abandon utopianism as such. Nonetheless, it may be that the utopian socialists do typically share a hostility towards 'politics'.

My example here is Robert Owen, the remaining member of the original triumvirate. One might think that Owen is especially susceptible to the Marxian charge (in contrast say, to Saint-Simon who emphasises the distinction between 'workers' and 'idlers', who is not a communitarian socialist, and so on). However, it turns out that even here, matters are more complicated than the simple complaint suggests.

Owen's reluctance to engage in class struggle is partly determined by his more general reservations about conflict and violence. Marx and Engels sometimes suggest that it is the need to fund (expensive) communal experiments that makes the utopian socialists reluctant to challenge property owners. However, not all utopians are communitarian socialists, and those – like Owen – who are, have independent arguments against violence which would need addressing before one could conclude that their position was mistaken.

In his 'Preface' to *The Revolution in the Mind and Practice of the Human Race* (1849), written in the aftermath of the failure of 1848, Owen addresses some of his differences with the 'Red Republicans, Communists, and Socialists of Europe'. He describes himself as sharing the desire (of the Red Republicans and others) for social change, and identifies the issue between them as whether the relevant change can be 'the soonest effected by violence, or by reason and kindness?' (Owen 1849: xxii). Owen offers three lines of reasoning against the use of violence in this context. First, violence is based on an anger and ill-will towards other classes which is irrational. 'Irrational' because it presupposes what is – on Owen's account – false, namely that the 'higher classes' are responsible for the misery of the 'lower classes' (since on Owen's contestable account, no-one is responsible for their actions, because their character is formed for them and not by them). Second, violence is counterproductive; because it encourages misplaced, but

nonetheless real, resistance to change on the part of the 'higher classes'. And third, violence is ineffective for broadly pre-figurative reasons. A rational and humane society, Owen insists, could never be brought about 'by violence, or through feelings of anger and ill-will to any portion of mankind', but only though means embodying 'the spirit of peace, kindness, and charity' which characterise its goals (Owen 1849: vii).

One might think that acknowledging Owen's reservations about violence also confirms his rejection of revolution. However, the concept of 'revolution' has many connotations, which might usefully be distinguished. Change which is 'revolutionary' might, for instance, be variously extensive, rapid, non-constitutional, and violent.[10] That it is revolutionary in one of these senses does not make it revolutionary in any or all of the others. All of which is preamble to saying that although Owen was opposed to violence, the scale of the social change he envisaged was extraordinarily ambitious (the existing family, private property, and conventional religion, would all be early victims). Indeed, he sometimes characterised his own aim as a 'peaceful revolution'; a formulation which, for Owen, indicated the crucial advantage of the communitarian strategy – its combination of dramatic social transformation with the absence of injury to any part of existing society (Owen 1842: 133). That characterisation seems plausible, and fits with comments of Marx and Engels when, in other moods, they allow that the first generation of utopian socialists were 'in many respects, revolutionary' (1976: 516).

(This issue is also complicated from the other side, so to speak. Marx and Engels obviously do not seek to avoid class conflict, but they are cautious about violence. For instance, Marx seems to think of the use of violence to achieve social change as undesirable but sometimes necessary. That necessity, or otherwise, depends on a number of factors, including the institutional structures and culture of the state, and the motivations of the economically dominant class.)[11]

Owen's attitude towards the third thread here – engagement with government – is also complicated. He was famously uninterested in disputes over the form of the state; insisting that arguments about 'despotism, aristocracy, and democracy' were either irrelevant (insofar as the real cause of social problems was neither the number of rulers, nor the process by which they were selected, but rather their ignorance), or part of the problem (insofar as they reflected a kind of 'desolating conflict between parties whose real interests are the same') (Owen 1849: xix). However, it doesn't follow that Owen is indifferent to what governments (of whatever form) actually do, or that he never sought to influence their laws, policy, and behaviour. Nor is it accurate to portray Owen himself as a simple opponent of Chartism; not least, in 1842 he lobbied the Convention to support a 'Transition Charter' which would include, amongst other legislative measures, new divorce laws and a 'graduated property tax' (see Tsuzuki 1971: 17).

Again, this greater complexity is sometimes recognised by Marx and Engels. Indeed, without going further than *Socialism: Scientific and Utopian* we can see that Owen's relationship to class struggle and legislative initiatives is more complex than it looks from the *Manifesto.* In a veritable encomium to Owen – 'every real advance in England on behalf of the workers links itself on to the name of Robert Owen' – Engels notes that Owen was variously associated with: introducing retail and producers cooperatives as 'transition measures to the complete communistic organisation of society'; engineering, after five years of fighting; the unification of 'all the Trade Unions of England united in a single trade association'; and (crucially for this thread) forcing through 'the first law limiting the hours of labour of women and children in factories' in 1819 (1989: 296).

Some of these claims look over-simplified, but Engels' remarks do acknowledge some of the complications in portraying Owen as standing wholly apart from economic and political conflict.

(i)

These non-foundational Marxian criticisms of utopian socialism, as advanced in the two canonical texts under consideration, are interesting but problematic. Here I have raised some doubts, in particular, about the attribution claims that they involve.

Considered as fair-minded attempts to outline and assess certain characteristic but not constitutive utopian socialist commitments, these Marxian complaints fall short. In their canonical formulation, the attribution claims, for example, often fail to do justice to the complexity and variety of utopian socialisms. Thus Saint-Simon cannot really be said to view the proletariat as a wholly passive object of improvement from outside by non-proletarian others. And this 'paternalistic' charge applies even less to those, including Weitling and Cabet, that Engels will subsequently label 'utopian *communists*' precisely in order to emphasise their links with the workers' movement. It also seems inaccurate to suggest that Fourier denies that there are subjective and objective historical preconditions for socialism. Indeed, his account of the latter – the growth of industry and luxury – looks remarkably similar to the Marxian view that hard fought material abundance is a historical condition for the feasibility of socialism. Finally, Owen does not always stand apart from any engagement with class struggle, government, and revolution. He does have a considered opposition to violence, and is uninterested in constitutional forms, but it is a mistake to portray him as hostile to all legislative and revolutionary change. At the very least, there is more subtlety here than the brute Marxian objections allow. Of course, as I have also sought to show, there are places where Marx and Engels retreat from, or otherwise qualify, the canonical formulation of these non-foundational charges. On both accounts, it would be a mistake to treat these two texts as authoritative guides to this strand of non-Marxian socialism.

Some will think this is a rather dry and overly rationalist reaction, which misunderstands the status of these Marxian complaints about utopianism. After all, it might be said, Marx and Engels are engaging in class struggle, not contributing to a university seminar. The implication is presumably that what matters, in this class struggle context, is not who is right, but who emerges victoriously from the battle. I do not find this an entirely satisfactory response. Both theoretically and practically, I want to say that veracity counts for something. And the Marxian critique of the non-foundational views of utopian socialism is problematic because, and to the extent that, it rests on misrepresentations of its target.

However, that looks to be an unnecessarily negative note on which to conclude. Misrepresentation is not the only thing going on here. We might also think of this critical engagement with utopianism as a way of identifying and affirming what Marx and Engels thought of as distinctive and important about their own views. When I exaggeratedly accuse you of thinking the world is flat, this is sometimes because of the importance that its roundness has to me. On this account, the non-foundational critique of utopian socialism in these canonical texts is also significant because it reveals and reaffirms the importance of certain threads in Marx and Engels own political practice and self-understanding. Not least, it articulates the centrality of proletarian self-emancipation,

historical understanding, and political engagement, to Marxian socialism. Indeed, the point might be put more forcefully. These canonical non-foundational criticisms are more important for what they tell us about Marx and Engels, than for what they tell us about the utopian socialists themselves.

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[1] Marx did once hear Owen lecture. It was on the occasion of the latter's eightieth birthday, and Marx reported that 'despite his *idées fixes*, the old man was ironical and endearing'. Marx 1982: 360.

[2] Roughly speaking: by desirability, I mean whether the proposed arrangements are normatively preferable (not, for example, whether they are psychologically desired by anyone); by feasibility, I mean whether those arrangements are compatible with (what is known about) social design and human nature; and by accessibility, I mean whether

those arrangements are reachable by us from where we are currently situated. For adjacent distinctions, see Buchanan 2007: 38 fn. 44, and Wright 2010: 20-25.

[3] Engels pamphlet was based on three chapters of *Anti-Dühring*, and was first published in a French translation by Paul Lafargue. The authorised German edition appeared two years later under the more illuminating title *Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft*. Illuminating, not least, because it avoids the inaccurate suggestion that scientific and utopian constitute an exhaustive distinction for Marx and Engels; as if all socialisms had to be one or the other.

[4] For some substantiation of this claim, see Hobsbawm 2011: chapters 5 and 8.

[5] For discussion of the idea of self-emancipation, see Geras 1986.

[6] See, for example, the attribution in Draper 1994: 307.

[7] For a discussion of Owen which treats certain 'paternalistic' threads in his work, see Leopold 2017.

[8] As Engels, in some moods, recognized. See Engels 1989: 293.

[9] The original '*Reformisten*' taken to refer here to the political tendency around the Paris daily *La Réforme*, a collection of left liberals headed by Ledru-Rollin, with a socialistic wing attracted to Louis Blanc.

[10] See, for example, the remarks in Cohen 2000: 104.

[11] For some sense of the complexity here, see Hunt 1984: 200-208; 334; 339; 342; 349-351.