

# Preface 12

*Ecclesiastes 12:12*

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## James H. Billington's FIRE IN THE MINDS OF MEN

(Part 2)

by David Chilton

The nineteenth-century revolutionary movements were dominated by a new class which came to be known as the *intelligentsia*—young, often lonely students driven by a vision of themselves as an intellectual elite directing and transforming all of culture. In terms of this vision they developed a new form of religious faith: *ideologies*. The nineteenth century was, of course, rife with ideologies of various kinds, but the really modern varieties were genuinely, consistently, and self-consciously secular religions, “all-inclusive in scope, universal in application, historical in focus” (p. 209). As such they provided a definite philosophy of history: a clear idea of how history works, what forces are shaping it, where it is going, how to discover one’s own place in the cosmic unfolding of the great Plan, and what practical steps to take at every point.

### Saint-Simonians and Young Hegelians

One of the most important of these new young intellectuals, and a primary source of modern revolutionary ideology, was Henri de Saint-Simon, an aristocrat of the *ancien regime* who had spent close to a year in prison during the Reign of Terror. The experience left him with a lifelong fear of revolutions, and the consuming passion of his life became the attempt to create a completely rational order for society. He aligned himself with a *scientistic* group of scholars who worked for the development of a new science of humanity as a means of social control. For *these* ideologues, “all thinking and feeling were physical sensations, in the strictest sense of the word.” As some of his associates put it, “ideology is a part of zoology”; “The brain digests Impressions and secretes thought” (pp. 211f.). Saint-Simon even became married, for a time, in order to increase his opportunities for “studying mankind.” On the basis of this thoroughgoing materialism—in order to bring an end to all revolution, it should be remembered—Saint-Simon and his colleagues authored and popularized the most revolutionary concept of modern times: the idea of a scientific understanding and control of human behavior which would bring about perfectibility through rational, secular progress. His Science of Man had a vast influence on sociology (the historical function of which has been to lay the theoretical groundwork for *totalitarianism*); and, as Engels was later to point out, he developed the embryonic class analysis which prepared the way for Marx—indeed, for “almost all the ideas of later socialists.”

The primary attraction of Saint-Simonianism (styled for a time as “the new Christianity”) was the bright promise it held out for its followers—the hope that the intellectuals would

provide an elite leadership for the social transformation of the entire world. Saint-Simonian futurism was always vague, however, and tended to degenerate into an Irrational, psycho-sexual cult. What changed it was its fusion with the ideology of the leftist adherents of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the Berlin philosopher hailed by university students as “the new Christ bringing the word of truth to men” (p. 225). In many ways, Berlin was the natural place for the student religion of “Left Hegelianism” to develop, for Berlin boasted the first really modern university: an institution created by the state, commissioned with the self-conscious ideal of training an elite for the service of the state. In the heady atmosphere of a university which was breaking with tradition and giving students and their professors the freedom to discover “new truths,” the young intellectuals were captivated with the notion of the dialectical nature of history, the revolutionary direction of its flow, and its “inevitable” outcome. In all this, of course, it was assumed that the philosopher’s mind has the absolute capacity to comprehend the entire scope of human history. This is strong stuff, calculated to produce in any believer’s mind and heart feelings of grandeur, of sheer awe and joy in the blissful contemplation of his own omniscience—which, with intellectuals, translates very easily into omnipotence as well.

Under the influence of Hegelian dialectics, conflict was seen more and more as the engine of historical change. The term *intelligentsia* came into use to describe the lonely intellectual elite, suffering from “alienation,” cut off from tradition, and dedicated to worldwide revolution, proclaiming that all things from the past must be torn down. “The joy of destruction is a creative joy,” enthused radical Hegelians Bakunin and Proudhon (p. 233). This was not just youthful indulgence in graphic metaphors. They knew they were calling for violence, that their much-lauded “flow of history” was to be a river of blood. It is just this doctrine of *creative destruction* which is at the core of the modern revolutionary faith.

### The Rise of the Social Revolutionaries

While the national revolutionaries had an essentially romantic vision of their cause and issued an emotional appeal to join a brotherhood of love, the social revolutionaries preached the more abstract, rationalistic gospel of the restructuring of society. What thus came to be known as *communism* originated, not with the workers, but with intellectuals. It is a fact that *not one* of the communist theorists, including Marx and Engels, was from the proletariat. All were from the bourgeoisie, and few ever even visited a factory in their lives, much less did any hard work.

The first communists, taking their cue from Saint-Simon,

developed three major pillars in their worldview: first, that the French Revolution originated from the inescapable opposition of *classes*; second, that the purpose of education should be universal social engineering (to be overseen by the intellectual elite); and, third, that ideological purity and discipline were of central importance in the revolution. **Radical** unity and simplicity were required. No deviations could be allowed, for communism was “unitary,” and there would ultimately be one language, one universal nation, and even one form of labor. **Real** communists, **those** who were true to the faith, could never disagree. Dispossessing **Christianity**, communism would become “the egalitarian church, *outside of which there can be no salvation*” (p. 252).

An important but forgotten apostle of this “holy communist church” was John Goodwyn Barmby, the man who first popularized the term *communism* in England. Barmby set out to capitalize on the pseudo-Christian undercurrents running through socialism, declaring in his revised Creed: “I believe . . . that the **divine** is communism, that the demoniac is individualism. . . .” Calling himself “Pontifarch,” he announced that he had joined Judaism and “Christianism” to produce the synthesis of the Communist Church. He devised a four-staged baptismal rite (to symbolize the four stages of history leading to the paradise of universal communism), followed by an **anointing** with oil. The subtitle of his journal is indicative of his general approach: *The Apostle of the Communist Church and the Communitive Life: Communion with God, Communion of the Saints, Communion of Suffrages, Communion of Works and Communion of Goods* (pp. 255 ff.).

Barmby’s explicit infusion of Christian terminology with socialist ideology was adopted by communist propagandists throughout Europe. Communism was touted as the means of bringing to fruition the Christian call for brotherly love. Christ was portrayed trampling the serpent of “egoism” beneath His feet, surrounded by an army of angels sporting the red caps of the French Revolution. It was under the Christian banner that communism was successfully sold to the masses of France, Poland, and Germany; as Billington points out, “communism probably would not have attracted such instant attention without this initial admixture of Christian ideas” (p. 258). Soon, however, came the replacement of Christianity for the more pliable and politically amenable religion of democracy. In fact, the more authoritarian the leaders’ pronouncements became, the more use they made of the word *democratic*. As William E. H. Lecky pointed out in his monumental study of *Democracy and Liberty* (2 vols., 1896 [1981]), nothing is more characteristic of a democracy than its toleration of, and positive demand for, coercive governmental interference in every area of life. There is nothing even slightly inconsistent about the “authoritarian democracy” of communism.

### Karl Marx

The one whose name we all associate with the rise of social revolutionary thought, of course, is Marx. But Marx probably would have sunk into obscurity as just another abstract intellectual had it not been for the collaboration (and lifelong financial subsidizing) of the wealthy, bourgeois radical Frederick Engels. The two were introduced by one of the more shadowy figures in revolutionary history, Moses Hess, who can be credited with inventing two of the most effective movements of modern times—Communism (**Engels** called him “the first Communist in the party”) and Zionism (cf. pp. 263-65)—a fascinating connection which **Billington** does not develop further. Marx’s ideological contribution to communism—his ideology to end ideology—was based on three attitudes which had characterized the Young **Hegelians**: *negativism* (the doctrine of “creative destruction”), *materialism* (the view that history was determined or predestined by material

forces), and *atheism* (rationalistic, “scientific” socialism, as opposed to mystical, quasi-Christian socialism). For Marx and **Engels**, Communism was “the developmental stage which makes all existing religions superfluous and abolishes them” (p. 271)—a backhanded way of acknowledging that Communism is, after all, as much a religion as any other opiate.

There were significant differences emerging in the 1840s between the old socialism and the new communism, although this did not become official doctrine until the Communist International of 1928. Communism was more clearly totalitarian than socialism, **demanding** a greater degree of social control. Partly in justification of this demand, communism professed to be more “scientific” than the older, more romantic socialists had been. The idea of “scientific socialism” was not entirely new with Marx, having been championed previously by Charles Fourier, who held that the planets are living beings which regularly engage in copulation (the northern lights are actually nocturnal **emissions!**), and that the seas and oceans will taste like lemonade in the socialist millennium. Marx’s “science” was not always as harebrained as Fourier’s; but, as an eminent Russian mathematician has observed: “With almost perverse consistency, most of the projections of Marxism have proved to be incorrect. A better percentage of correct predictions could probably have been achieved by making random guesses” (Igor Shafarevich, *The Socialist Phenomenon*, 1980, p. 206; see Preface 3). Nevertheless, the idea of “scientific” communism made for good public relations in an age captivated by the cult of scientism. The notion that communism was “objective,” that it harmonized with universal laws, not only lent it an aura of respectability but made its future victory absolutely inevitable. And the communist doctrine of inevitability (which is now often believed by Marxists and non-Marxists alike), in turn, both encouraged and legitimized the use of violence—the “final” act of revolutionary violence in order to end the “violence” of capitalism.

One of the most important of the new communist dogmas was Marx’s myth of the Proletariat as the new force of salvation in history. Allied with his slogan-as-history, that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle,” the myth of the Proletariat provided both a simple program and a messianic calling. It was not, however, the **real** proletarians who were divinely called, but the communist party, the group which *represents* the proletariat “as a whole” (although none of its members are necessarily **proles** themselves).

This led to another significant insight by Marx, one which became apparent to him after the revolutions of 1848. All of Europe erupted in violent revolutions that year, none of them successful. If the revolutions can be said to have had any result at all, it was merely the strengthening of **reactionary** and conservative forces. Various **theories** were spun to account for the failure of the revolutions; Marx’s explanation centered on the lack of strong leadership. His counsel for future actions was that “every provisional state set up after a revolution requires a dictatorship, and an energetic dictatorship at that” (p. 282). Marxist regimes have ever since followed his advice, with minor modifications: dictatorships are less “provisional” and more “energetic.” The “dictatorship of the proletariat” (which, again, has nothing whatever to do with control of anything by real proletarians) was originally pitched as a transitional phase leading to the perfect, classless society. But, as Uncle Joe Stalin observed in his classic *Foundations of Leninism* (1939), these transitional phases are tricky; they can take a long, long time.

Marx did not go unchallenged by other socialists. In particular, he became engaged in a lengthy feud with Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the anarchist who made a career out of

his gift for creating snappy aphorisms: "Property is Theft," "God is Evil," and (my favorite) "All ideas are false" —eminently balanced by his solemn assertion that "All ideas are true." Marx derided much of Proudhon's rhetoric as just so much sentimentality, which of course it was, but the rub was the fact that Proudhon, and many who agreed with him, were real, live proletarians, the non-hypothetical workers of the world, who were emphatically *not* uniting behind Marx. The Proudhonist revolution was largely apolitical and nonideological, a working-class movement based on union organization and cooperatives. Proudhon was always deeply suspicious of abstract theorizing, and his suspicions were confirmed when he met Marx. Each considered the other a hopeless utopian, and both were correct: Proudhon was the mystic speaking to the emotions, Marx the rationalist speaking to the intellect. In the end, Marx won, his "(scientific socialism)" appealing to the scientific spirit of the age, and finding a ready audience in the rising generation of intellectuals, "the first generation ever to experience near universal primary education in secular state schools" (p. 304). Proudhonism made a brief comeback in the New Left agitations of the late 1960s, that revival of anti-intellectual, anti-technological, pro-"natural" mysticism, much of which seems to have been based on the subtle recognition that the social studies and liberal arts majors were facing a job glut of mammoth proportions, while the fuddy-duddy engineering students were going to get away with all the (microchips. Two ways were open to the 60s radicals: either smash the machines, or find a cushy government job where you can regulate the technocrats. The latter option eventually proved more profitable, especially when the radicals considered that Life As We Know It just isn't possible without *some* technology. Not everyone can be a Gandhi (not, apparently, even Gandhi: see Richard Grenier's *The Gandhi Nobody Knows*, 1983).

### Journalism: The Revolutionary Vocation

We have already seen something of the importance of journalism in the activities of those who brought about the French Revolution (see *Preface* 77). Its significance did not end there, as Billington demonstrates: "Journalism was the most important single professional activity for revolutionary Saint-Simonians and Hegelians" (p. 308). The power of the press became so central for revolutionaries, in fact, that just as Christians look forward to the millennial day when "everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree" (Mic. 4:4), the revolutionaries pined for "the day when every citizen shall be able to have a press in his home" (p. 311).

Both Marx and Engels, like many other revolutionary leaders, began their careers as journalists. Revolutionary writers tended to see themselves as an ideological apostolate, detached from the past, free from traditional loyalties. They were possessed by a religious fascination for their art: "Editing my daily article became my daily sacrament," one wrote. Another enthused that the printing press had replaced Christ as the locus of authority, as journalism increasingly took on a priestly, as well as prophetic, function. Marx wrote that journalists had the responsibility, not to express the thoughts of the people, but to "create them or rather impute them to the people. You create party spirit" (p. 318). (For the story of how a revolutionary organization of somewhat different stripe exerted its influence by creating public attitudes through control of powerful newspapers, see Carroll Quigley, *Tragedy and Hope: A History of the World in Our Time*, 1966, and *The Anglo-American Establishment*, 1981.)

Journalists became—in their own minds at least—the vanguard of the revolution; the staff was seen as the prototype for the truly communal revolutionary society of the future, in which artisan and intellectual worked together har-

moniously. The early vision of the journal staff as one unitary community did not last long, but journalism has remained the most typical profession of the revolutionary, down to this day.

Ironically, "journalism produced by working people has almost always been non-ideological, and only rarely revolutionary" (p. 335). Real proles tend not to be interested in the theories spun about them by bourgeois ideologues writing in Op-Ed columns (or pontificating on *Nightline* or 60 *Minutes*). The working-class journals constituted a major and effective rival to the ideologically oriented radical papers, and the revolutionary press was outdone by the competition. In addition to the nonrevolutionary press, the *antirevolutionary*, chauvinistic and patriotic press made important advances during the later decades of the 19th century. An outstanding example cited by Billington is William Randolph Hearst's creation and manipulation of the Spanish-American War in order to expand his newspaper empire (p. 345). Thus, just as it was waning as a revolutionary ideal in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, nationalism was co-opted by the reactionary Right and transfigured into imperialism. The nationalist revolutionary slogan of *fraternity* came into disrepute, as it became more and more obvious that nationalism was too often simply the repression of one people by another. True, all men were brothers — "but some are Abels and some are Cains," as one socialist revolutionary crisply put it in a blistering attack on nationalism.

### From National to Social Revolution

The last of the great nationalist uprisings was the so-called Paris Commune, a revolutionary "alternative government" set up in Paris and lasting for two months in the Spring of 1871. It was a watershed in many ways, providing heroic myths and radical examples for revolutionaries for decades to come. While at first the revolution was nationalist and patriotic in nature (as a protest against the French government's surrender in the Franco-Prussian War), it soon acquired a leftist, socialist character; Engels and Lenin looked back to it as the model for a dictatorship of the proletariat. When the Commune was finally crushed by regular French forces, the reprisal was the most severe of the century: about 20,000 people, including women and children, were slaughtered; 13,000 more were sent to prison or into exile. Nationalism had been defeated, first in the Prussian victory over France, and then in the repression of the revolution by France itself. The ideals of liberty and fraternity were gone, and all that remained was the socialist goal of equality. The Paris Commune marks the turning point, the definitive transition from revolutionary nationalism to revolutionary socialism.

With the destruction of the nationalist mentality the romantic, heroic mentality died as well. Revolutionaries, reeling from the shock of the Paris Commune's bloody demise, abandoned their emotionalism and became much more prosaic, even businesslike, in their attitude toward the struggle. They became disciplined and militaristic, adopting a hardened, grim, and more pragmatic attitude toward violence.

At the same time, music was undergoing a change, moving away from romance and revolution. Where operas had once stirred mobs to attack representatives of wealth, authority, and nobility, music increasingly was created for the service of the state, preaching a message conducive to the aims of reactionary Imperialism. It was the age of Offenbach, of Gilbert and Sullivan, of light operas for the amusement of the ruling class and the diversion of the masses.

Another deathblow to the romantic woddwew was the rise of Industry. It looked like the whole world was becoming mechanized; indeed, the "alienation" spoken of by Marx had much to do with the perceived inequities brought about by the machine and the factory system. Mechanization ended

the romantic dream of a paradisaical, pristine natural order to be revived by revolution. Ironically, the model for revolutionary organization and activity—especially in the German Social Democratic movement, the first significant political expression of Marxism, and the primary means of spreading Marxist ideology in the nineteenth century—changed from the structure of the Masonic orders to the machine and the factory. Communism, in many ways, is simply the substitution of bureaucrats for owners and managers, except that the “factory” is now more brutal and dehumanizing than ever. And it doesn’t produce.

### Revolutionary Violence

Billington begins his major discussion of violence with a close look at the Russian tradition, observing that just as “the machine symbolized the German revolutionary movement, the bomb symbolized the Russian” (p. 387). The bomb served the revolutionary goal in several ways: it was more “democratic” (access to explosives was relatively easy) and more terrifying than other methods. Chemicals became the new object of worship in the revolutionary religion; the assembling of bombs was the new activity which unified the revolutionary community.

Billington characterizes the Russian revolutionaries in terms of a cluster of words which emerged, in popular usage, in the nineteenth-century revolutionary tradition. The term *intelligentsia* was revived, again with its connotations of a young, intellectual elite which would be the moving force of history to bring about *pravda* (a word meaning both *truth* and *justice*). The intelligentsia saw themselves also as *populists*, the educated advocates of the common people, particularly the peasants. The Russian peasant, with his agrarian lifestyle, simple values, and close familial relationships acquired a romantic aura about him, becoming both the symbol and the mystic source of social regeneration. “So intense was the intellectuals’ desire to establish identity with the peasantry that Jewish students accepted baptism—not out of conversion to Christianity but out of a desire to share this part of the peasant experience” (p. 404). If this had been all there was to Russian revolutionary activity, it would have been harmless and even silly. But there were deadlier elements in the brew, which combined to create the most violent tradition in revolutionary history.

The most significant aspect of the Russian revolutionary tradition was *nihilism*. The Russian revolutionaries were captivated by negativism, the rejection of tradition, and the idealization of violence. By a curious twist, negativism was not merely an expression of disillusionment, but of a positive goal. One influential student activist wrote:

Everything is false, everything is stupid, from religion to the family. . . . a revolution, a bloody and pitiless revolution must change everything down to the very roots . . . we know that rivers of blood will flow and that perhaps even innocent victims will perish. . . (p. 395).

Perhaps the most striking example of revolutionary nihilism discussed by Billington was the secret organization called, appropriately, *Hell*. Members were sworn to celibacy, secrecy, an utter separation from family and friends—and the twin goals of assassination and suicide. “Immediately prior to the deed, he was to disfigure his face beyond recognition; immediately after, he was to take poison—leaving behind only a manifesto from ‘the organization,’ which would be assured thereby an impact that peaceful propaganda could never have” (p. 396f.).

Terrorism soon began to dominate the revolutionary movement. Numerous secret societies sprang up, modeling themselves after the late-eighteenth-century hierarchical conspiracies. The bomb became the ultimate in radical

simplification, the completely final and satisfactory instrument of justice. Terrorism served another important function, as a “baptism in blood” for the intellectual. For baptism marks the point of no return. Once the educated, bourgeois, inhibited intellectual threw his first bomb, there was no turning back. He had made a lifelong commitment to violence.

Billington goes on to discuss the role of women in the revolution, and the different parts they played within the differing revolutionary traditions. At first, in the French Revolution’s antifeminist period, the duty of women was to “stay home and knit trousers for the *sans-culottes*.” Later, the mystical Saint-Simonians held that the coming social revolution would be led by a “feminine messiah” from the East, and several pilgrimages were organized to find her (one highly successful revolutionary leader claimed that he actually *did*). The search for the revolutionary feminine messiah is one of the primary sources of another modern tradition: *feminism* (a term invented by the mad socialist Charles Fourier).

The women of the French revolutionary tradition brought to it a passion for pacifism and nonviolence. But their counterparts in Russia, in marked contrast, were the *most* violent and bloodthirsty in the movement. The Russians created a mythology of the female bombthrowers, whose violent actions, like their virginal bodies, were pure and saintly. It was the women who took the lead in the terrorist tradition, generally sealing their act, and thereby confirming their moral authority as martyrs, by committing suicide.

### Demons in the Library

Lengthy as this review has been, I have merely skimmed the surface of Billington’s vastly important work. While preparing it, I came across another review of the book in the latest issue of a conservative magazine. Written by a professor under the apparent direction of the National Institute of Co-ordinated Experiments, it archly dismisses the book as a rehash of the old Wagner-led-to-Hitler argument, breaking no new ground, a hefty but irrelevant antiquarian study. The real message of the review is subtle, but clear: *Please, don’t read this book!* (The reviewer at least seems to have taken his own advice.)

You must understand, particularly if you are a university student grappling with these issues, that Billington’s book *officially does not exist*, any more than do the works of Nesta Webster, Carroll Quigley, Otto Scott, or R. J. Rushdoony—to cite an admittedly diverse group, but a group which, nonetheless, has exposed the religious roots of the modern revolutionary worldview—and of the “establishment” worldview as well. Gary North pointed it out in another officially unknown work, *Marx’s Religion of Revolution: The Doctrine of Creative Destruction* (1968; now out of print, but to be republished soon): “Unquestionably, there is a religious element in Marxism. But to classify him as an Old Testament prophetic figure is to miss the essential nature of the Marxist message. *What Marxism represents is a secular throwback to the chaos cults of the ancient world*, and not a modern school of the prophets” (p. 84).

It can be fairly demonstrated that numerous scholars have used these works in their own research. But you will search in vain for the footnotes. (There is some small degree of justice here. Billington, who conceals his considerable debt to Webster, has now himself joined the ranks of the Great Unfootnoted.) A major cause of the official hostility to the findings of these scholars is that, with more or less clarity, they point to the religious nature, not only of revolution, but of all history, of life itself. *Life is covenantal*. Our thoughts and actions exist in terms of our relationship to God—or our attempt to flee from Him. Nothing frightens the modern rationalist more than the reminder that he is not his own, that he has sold himself into bondage (to the *losing* side, no less), and that something—or *someone*—is lurking in the shadows just ahead smacking its lips.