

# Anachronistic Visions of Socialism and Colonial Endeavor: The Influence of Saint-Simonian Thought on Émile Zola's Novels

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## RÉSUMÉ

*L'idéalisme des derniers romans de Zola est bien documenté et plusieurs chercheurs ont noté les inspirations fouriéristes de Travail. Nous nous proposons toutefois dans cet article de revoir les rapports de Zola avec le socialisme utopique du début du dix-neuvième siècle en examinant l'influence de la pensée de Saint-Simon sur la fiction zolienne. Des saint-simoniens comme Comte, Enfantin et Pelletan ont été des penseurs et des ingénieurs qui se sont faits les chantres de la justice économique et du progrès scientifique de la Restauration à la fin du Second Empire. Ils ont également joué un rôle d'importance dans la politique coloniale de Napoléon III. En combinant une lecture minutieuse de la fiction zolienne qui prend en compte une contextualisation historique basée sur les travaux d'historiens comme Pamela Pilbeam et Ceri Crossley, je montrerai que les thèmes utopiques des Quatre Évangiles de Zola – parmi eux la fondation de villes prolétaires, le peuplement de terres rurales dites vierges, et la création de nouvelles religions pour unir les hommes et réformer la société – côtoient de près les idées saint-simoniennes et trouvent déjà des antécédents dans des romans comme Le Ventre de Paris et Son Excellence Eugène Rougon. J'examinerai la progression de ces idées, de leur mise au point à leur application, au cours de la carrière littéraire de Zola, en arguant que le socialisme utopique de l'écrivain n'est pas seulement ancré dans les débats politiques de l'époque mais repose également sur des idéaux saints-simoniens remontant à plusieurs décennies.*

## ABSTRACT

*The idealism of Zola's last novels is well-documented, and several scholars have noted the Fourierist inspirations of Travail. In this article, however, I revisit Zola's engagement with early nineteenth-century utopian socialism, examining the influence of Saint-Simonian thought on Zola's fiction. Saint-Simoniens like Comte, Enfantin, and Pelletan were thinkers and engineers who promoted economic justice and scientific progress from the Bourbon Restoration to the end of the Second Empire. They also played a significant role in Napoleon III's colonial policy. Combining close readings of Zola's fiction with historical contextualization based on the work of historians like Pamela Pilbeam and Ceri Crossley, I show that the utopian themes of Zola's Quatre Évangiles – including the founding of proletarian cities, the settling of rural, so-called virgin lands, and the creation of new religions to unite people and reform society – closely track Saint-Simonian ideas and have antecedents in Zola's early novels like Le Ventre de Paris and Son Excellence Eugène Rougon. I examine the progression from ideation to application over the course of Zola's writing career, arguing that his utopian socialism is rooted not in the political debates of his time but in the Saint-Simonian ideals of decades prior.*

Saint-Simonians had a massive influence on the social, economic, intellectual and political history of nineteenth-century France, yet most people have only a vague idea what the movement signified. This is partly because the Saint-Simonians have been endlessly re-invented, each chameleon-like transformation reflecting contemporary concerns. They have been depicted as social reformers, socialists, capitalists, feminists, colonialists, not to mention occasionally liberals and even proto-fascists.<sup>1</sup>

Spanning at least three generations, the *Saint-Simoniens* were eclectic thinkers and engineers who furthered the ideas of economic justice and scientific progress from the Bourbon Restoration to the end of the Second Empire. Despite their widespread impact on the zeitgeist of nineteenth-century France, *Saint-Simonisme* has nevertheless been misunderstood, even broadly forgotten, in recent decades. As historian Pamela Pilbeam points out in the passage above, it is a puzzling movement, its contours often blurry. Over time, it became synonymous with free love (including through popular practices like the dance “*la Saint-Simoniennne*”); but, at its core, Saint-Simonianism was a religion and an ideology, and some of its colonial undercurrents were crucial to Napoleon III’s politics. Considering Zola’s scientific fascination for the Second Empire, it seems natural that Saint-Simonianism would be prominent in his novels. Yet the movement is represented only cryptically and sporadically, even in his *Rougon-Macquart*. The early novels seem anchored in the historical context of the Third Republic, at a time when Saint-Simonianism had fallen out of fashion. Both religiously and politically, republicans cut ties with their Saint-Simonian precursors, and new ideas – based on the tension between a reformed Catholicism and scientific atheism, and on the debates between Marxism and a Darwinistic capitalism – outcompeted the bygone visions of these quirky early socialists.

Ironically, it is in Zola’s later sagas, *Trois Villes* and *Quatre Évangiles*, that he embraces and fully explores the Saint-Simonian themes which had been in his mind since the early stages of his writing career. For many readers of Zola, *Travail* is the obvious starting point of his interest in utopian socialism. However, many of Zola’s Saint-Simonian ideas had been germinating for decades by the time he wrote *Travail*, and we can find important references to Saint-Simonianism in his early novels.

Showing how Zola comes to harness this anachronistic school of political and social thought in his fiction, I contend that Saint-Simonianism was a discreet yet important thematic thread running through most of Zola’s work. In other words, it was more than one of the early “socialist sects” which inspired *Paris* and *Travail*. The Saint-Simonian traces in Zola’s early novels are abstract and brief, but over time, they resolve into clear tableaux. To map out this evolution, I will read across multiple Zolian novels – *Son Excellence Eugene Rougon*, *Le Ventre de Paris*, *L’Argent*, *Rome*, *Fécondité*, and *Travail* –, alternating between historical contextualization and moments of close reading.<sup>2</sup> This trend from ideation to application, which manifests itself in multiple ways, including social, economic, and religious reform, can best be examined according to three themes: class and the urban proletariat; rural utopias and settler colonialism; and finally, religion as the glue binding these visions together.

Whether he was writing in the 1870s or the 1890s and beyond, Zola’s depiction of the movement is anachronistic. This explains the quaint idealism of his last novels, from the ending

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<sup>1</sup> Pamela M. Pilbeam, *Saint-Simoniens in Nineteenth-Century France: From Free Love to Algeria* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 1.

<sup>2</sup> A complete reference to an edition of each of Zola’s novels will be given in a footnote, when it is cited, and then the title only, with page number.

of *Paris* to his last published novel, *Vérité*; in many ways, this optimism seems out of place, belonging to the hopes and dreams of the early decades of the nineteenth century. As I argue in this article, Zola's utopian socialism is rooted not in the political debates of his time but in the Saint-Simonian ideals of earlier decades. After finishing his *Rougon-Macquart*, the naturalist felt increasingly disillusioned in the dark mood of the *fin de siècle* – including its anarchist and Malthusian currents. He looked to the past for new inspiration, and a refreshed appreciation for Saint-Simonianism drove him to complete two new cycles of novels. The core Saint-Simonian theme animating this optimism was the utopian yet practical vision of improving society through technological ingenuity.<sup>3</sup>

The central tenets of Saint-Simonianism included the following: an “emphasis on the intrinsic value of work;<sup>4</sup> the beneficial impact of industry; the progressive and pacific consequences of commerce; the inexorable unification of European peoples; the emancipation of women; and [...] the absolute necessity of a spiritual dimension to public and private life.”<sup>5</sup> The spiritual facet of the movement is perhaps the most misunderstood today. Saint-Simonianism became a secular religion after the death of its eponymous founder. At the time, it was not uncommon to see new religions established and, in the minds of Saint-Simonians, “[o]nly religion could bind humanity together and thus serve as the basis for a collective public morality.”<sup>6</sup> While this romantic search for spirituality may seem alien to Zola's scientific goals, the quest for a “primitive” social cohesion is something Zola's Pierre Froment, fictitious author of *La Rome nouvelle*, would share with Saint-Simonian Eugène Pelletan:

In the same way as Saint-Simon had attacked Christianity for perverting the religious ideal and had called for the elaboration of a new religion to replace it, Pelletan devoted his final work to a full-scale assault on dogmatic Catholicism [...]. But Pelletan stressed that this spiritual revolution did not need to rely on novelty; all that was required was a return to the primitive beauty and mystery of religion in its original form.<sup>7</sup>

*Saint-simonisme* might be said to tie together the spiritual side of romanticism with the scientific rise of positivism, a double trend embodied in Zola's *Trois Villes* series. After Henri de Saint-Simon died in 1825, Prosper Enfantin and Amand Bazard became the leaders of a movement committed to sharing their “[m]aster's prophecy of ‘the golden age for humanity lying ahead.’”<sup>8</sup> Transposed into Zola's fiction several decades later, this prophecy crystallized around the vision of a glorious, dawning twentieth century.

When Zola was still a young man in the 1860s, the center of gravity of Saint-Simonianism had moved from Paris to North Africa where technocrats of Napoleon III, like Ismaÿl Urbain,

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<sup>3</sup> Most Saint-Simonians of the time would have rejected the label “utopian.” They saw themselves as realists, as the first to offer practical solutions to the problems of ‘the poorest and most numerous’ sections of society” (Pilbeam 190). However, they were still part of a tradition we can retrospectively call “utopian socialism.”

<sup>4</sup> The importance of work is best exemplified by the 1830 proposal to rewrite *La Marseillaise* “in which the themes of work and industry replaced the warlike spirit. The most elaborate, by Vidal and Bertu, opened with: ‘Allons, enfants de l'industrie / Voici venir des temps nouveaux’” (Crossley 133).

<sup>5</sup> Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Intellectual Founders of the Republic: Five Studies in Nineteenth-Century French Republican Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001) 219.

<sup>6</sup> Hazareesingh 218.

<sup>7</sup> Hazareesingh 218.

<sup>8</sup> Osama Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity: Saint-Simonians and the Civilizing Mission in Algeria* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2010) 90.

carried out the mission of “cultural association” – a policy often opposed to the “cultural assimilation” promoted by the French Republic in Algeria.

Interestingly, Zola’s early life predisposed him to a certain interest in the movement. The novelist must have been curious when the Suez Canal was finally completed by Saint-Simonian engineers in 1869. After all, not only had Zola been an excellent student of sciences and math but his father, François Zola, had been an engineer who had worked on the construction of dams and irrigation systems in Provence and established the Zola Canal Company in 1846. In addition, having grown up marginalized – Zola was a cultural hybrid who was not naturalized as a French citizen until his *majorité* in 1861 – he may have felt a further affinity with Saint-Simonians for they were misfits. They were flamboyant personalities who longed for the cultural unification of East and West, of arts and sciences, of mind and body, and many of them belonged to secret societies or felt otherwise side-lined. Moreover, many of the adherents were Jewish; perhaps there is some further link with Zola’s interest in Fourierism and his insistence on taking up the banner for an unjustly accused Jewish Captain in the French army, in the now famous Dreyfus Affair.

### **Enacting social reform: A Saint-Simonian view of classes and proletarian cities**

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, one of Saint-Simon’s original and most memorable analyses took the form of a description of society as a two-class system populated by workers and idlers. This vision did not yet resemble the later theories by Marx about the exploitation of the proletariat. Instead, it emerged as a response to the failed promises of the French Revolution and opposed the unearned wealth of aristocrats and the indolence of the rent-seekers:

Saint-Simon valued work and despised idleness. He considered that all who were involved in productive work of some kind – bankers, artisans, workers, manufacturers – formed a single class, that of the “industriels” against whom were pitted the idle members of society, the nobility, the sluggardly rentiers who obtained profit without effort.<sup>9</sup>

This dichotomy between “oisifs” and “travailleurs” continued in later Saint-Simonian writings like Michel Chevalier’s *Politique industrielle et système de la Méditerranée* from 1832. In this work, Chevalier argued in favor of a progressive tax system to unburden the working class and fund “la prospérité publique,” with an overarching goal: “chercher l’amélioration du sort du *travailleur* dans l’abaissement direct des privilèges de *l’oisif*.”<sup>10</sup> Chevalier and Saint-Simon included as “travailleurs” or “industriels” any productive members of society, contrasting them with priests and politicians – the so-called elite of savants.<sup>11</sup> They agreed that “les oisifs” and “les industriels” existed in every profession and social group, and thus imagined a society where the new elites would be the most productive in every sector, including in intellectual professions.<sup>12</sup> This reshuffling of society regardless of social origin was firmly meritocratic, especially during the

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<sup>9</sup> Ceri Crossley, *French Historians and Romanticism: Thierry, Guizot, the Saint-Simonians, Quinet, Michelet* [1993] (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2014) 113.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Chevalier, *Politique industrielle et système de la Méditerranée* (Paris: Impr. D’Éverat, 1832) 29–30. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>11</sup> James H. Billington, *Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith* (New York: Basic Books, 1980) 214.

<sup>12</sup> Billington 214.

Bourbon Restoration, when only the wealthiest one percent had the right to vote.<sup>13</sup> The society Saint-Simon envisioned was not egalitarian, however, since it promoted as rulers whoever possessed “talent” with a capital “T.”<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, Saint-Simonians saw the bourgeoisie as “hardly less parasitical than the idle aristocrats of the *ancien régime*.”<sup>15</sup> Many of these economic dogmas were presented during the years 1816–1817 in the journal *L’Industrie*, and two of Saint-Simon’s secretaries, Auguste Comte and Augustin Thierry, later led the movement towards greater liberalism.<sup>16</sup>

In his 1873 novel *Le Ventre de Paris*, Zola similarly dissects the wealth gap under the Second Empire and the rise of political tensions in the capital city. Like Saint-Simon and Chevalier, Zola’s working-class character Claude believes society is made up of two classes: “les Gras” and “les Maigres” – a thinly-veiled reference to the idea of “les oisifs” and “les industriels.” In making such an allusion, Zola mimics Saint-Simon’s analysis, turning it into a memorable image based on the theme of the novel – food. The “Gras” and the “Maigres” are described as “deux groupes hostiles dont l’un dévore l’autre, s’arrondit le ventre et jouit.”<sup>17</sup> The naturalist therefore builds upon the notion of a two-class society, identifying the rich as predatory and cannibalistic, threatening lower-class citizens like Claude – a street vendor of the *Halles*. As Zola sets the stage for the eventual conflict, *Le Ventre de Paris* can be read as a prequel to *Germinal* and ultimately to *Travail*. In *Germinal*, the battle between “les Gras” and “les Maigres” takes place and is lost by the latter; in *Travail*, the productive “industriels” finally manage to reform society and establish their own city of justice and prosperity.

Published three years after *Le Ventre de Paris*, Zola’s novel *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon* also sets the stage for the later utopia of *Travail* – this time spatially. As the eponymous civil servant dreams of starting fresh in the Landes region of southwestern France, a fictionalized Napoleon III himself advises Eugène to establish proletarian cities there:

[L’Empereur], très-séduit, lui demandait maintenant s’il ne comptait pas établir là-bas de vastes cités ouvrières; il serait aisé d’accorder à chaque famille un bout de terrain, une petite concession d’eau, des outils; et il promettait même de lui communiquer des plans, le projet d’une de ces cités qu’il avait jeté lui-même sur le papier, avec des maisons uniformes, où tous les besoins étaient prévus.<sup>18</sup>

In these proletarian cities, Zola’s narrator claims, “l’extinction du paupérisme serait tentée en grand.”<sup>19</sup> Foreshadowing *Travail*, this optimistic vision of the “cité ouvrière” is reminiscent of the *phalanstère* as conceptualized by Charles Fourier in the first decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> Fourier was a contemporary of Saint-Simon, and some of his ideas were put into practice after his

<sup>13</sup> François Furet. *Revolutionary France 1770-1880*, tr. Antonia Nevill (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1995) 272.

<sup>14</sup> Billington 214.

<sup>15</sup> Billington 215.

<sup>16</sup> Saint-Simon was in favor of public intervention by a state composed of the “scientific, intellectual and spiritual elite” (Pilbeam 20). Other Saint-Simonian social philosophers, like Charles Dupont-White, later advocated for a median position between state action and liberalism (Hazareesingh 110).

<sup>17</sup> Émile Zola, *Le Ventre de Paris* (Paris: Charpentier, 1873) 247.

<sup>18</sup> Émile Zola, *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon* (Paris: Charpentier, 1878) 208.

<sup>19</sup> *Son Excellence* 213.

<sup>20</sup> While *Saint-Simonisme* permeated the epicenter of power during the Second Empire, *Fouriérisme* and its *École sociétaire* became more marginal in the second half of the nineteenth century (Desmars 5, 11).

death by engineers like Victor Considerant.<sup>21</sup> In this brief passage of *Son Excellence*, and even more so in *Travail*, the concept of a utopian proletarian city has shifted; by the time Zola authored his novels in the 1870s, it had become clear that most working-class cities were sites of poverty and hardship in undesirable parts of towns or next to polluted environments like the coal mine in *Germinal*.<sup>22</sup> Yet, through his inspiration from Fourier and Saint-Simon, Zola reinserts optimism and even utopianism into his vision of the “*cit  ouvri re*.” This relative anachronism can be explained in *Travail* by Zola’s disillusionment with the violent rhetoric of Marx and Proudhon. To channel a peaceful alternative of progress and communal living, the naturalist therefore draws from the blueprints of early nineteenth-century socialists, rather than from contemporary or recent sources. As Julia Przybos writes in her chapter “Zola’s Utopias”:

The discussions between the characters of *Travail* reflect ideas of Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte, Proudhon, anarchists, and collectivists. “Beaming with charity, faith and hope,” the novel’s hero, the young engineer Luc Froment, rejects quick and violent revolution in favour of slow and peaceful evolution, his belief in the ultimate triumph of science having taught him patience and resolve.<sup>23</sup>

In *Travail*, Zola indeed draws from multiple left-wing and libertarian ideologies of the nineteenth century, not just Saint-Simonianism. Robert McCormick takes issue with Clive Thomson, who, in his dissertation titled “* mile Zola et la Troisi me R publique*,” minimizes the influence of Fourier on Zola. In his article, McCormick argues instead for a distinct influence of Fourierism on the novel *Paris* and the development of the character Luc Froment – an angle, he claims, that has seldom been explored by scholars.<sup>24</sup> Taking a step back from this debate, I would situate the Zolian brand of Fourierism in the broader, more eclectic constellation of Saint-Simonian thought which had inspired Zola for decades. As Pilbeam explains, Fourierism can be described as a schism of Saint-Simonianism.<sup>25</sup> Unlike Fourier, however, who imagined his *phalanst re* buildings as microcosms of society where the rich and the poor would coexist on different floors,<sup>26</sup> Zola’s interpretation of Saint-Simon envisions a more universal and classless society.

An important aspect of these urban proletarian utopias for both Saint-Simon and Fourier, one which translates into Zola’s fiction, is the importance of free love. After the utopia emerges, the rise to power of a new industrial class and the fall of the patriarchal elites lead to a sexual liberation. Already in the early parts of *Travail*, members of the new society notice “*les couples se prenant et se quittant au hasard, pour la d bauche d’une heure*.”<sup>27</sup> However, the journey towards gender equality remains long, and working characters like Josine embody the struggle of women in the early years of the city. “*Tant que la femme souffrirait, le monde ne serait pas sauv *,” explains

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<sup>21</sup> Pilbeam 69.

<sup>22</sup> Utopia was not a thing of the past by the time Zola wrote his last novels. Other proletarian projects like Godin’s cooperative *familist res*, in Guise and in Brussels, continued to function until the 1960s. However, within the context of the nineteenth century, most of the urban utopias which had been designed failed to materialize or, when erected, failed to improve the quality of life for workers.

<sup>23</sup> Julia Przybos, “Zola’s Utopias: Zola and the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Zola*, ed. Brian Nelson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007) 169–87. 182.

<sup>24</sup> Robert H. McCormick, “Fourier, ‘le vrai Messie’ du *Paris* de Zola,” *Les Cahiers naturalistes* 72 (1998): 247–62. 248

<sup>25</sup> Pilbeam 69.

<sup>26</sup> Bernard Desmars, *Militants de l’utopie? Les Fourieristes dans la seconde moiti  du XIX  si cle* (Dijon: Les presses du r el, 2010) 7–8.

<sup>27</sup>  mile Zola, *Travail* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1901) 275.

Zola's narrator.<sup>28</sup> "C'était par la femme et pour la femme que la Cité nouvelle devait être fondée," he adds, as Luc is advised by strong women partners (Suzanne, Josine, and Sœurrette) who support him. In the final chapters of the utopia, the legal institution of marriage disappears as monogamy and polyamory coexist and flourish: "Les couples défilaient sans cesse, des fiancés du libre amour";<sup>29</sup> in fact, "[l]'union était devenue libre."<sup>30</sup>

In Zola's last utopia, *Vérité*, similar situations occur at the conclusion of the story. Women are freed from the influence of Catholicism, equal public education for girls and boys forms the basis of a new cooperation between genders, and "la femme libérée [est] remise en son rôle d'égale et de compagne de l'homme."<sup>31</sup> Historically in the Saint-Simonian movement, men and women indeed "openly accepted and practised 'free love,'" but the legal and social environment of the time often made the situation difficult for their families.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, Pilbeam argues in her book that this Saint-Simonian practice of free love among working-class women can be read as proto-feminism.<sup>33</sup> Although the Froments are small-scale patriarchy at the head of their respective families, levels of freedom and equality which were unheard of at the time (especially for working-class women) do materialize at the end of *Travail* and *Vérité*. This is an overlooked aspect of Zola's writings, and this proto-feminism was an intrinsic part of Saint-Simon's and Fourier's proletarian utopias in the early nineteenth century.

### **Rural utopias and settler colonialism: Looking to the South and the East**

As seen in *Le Ventre de Paris* and *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*, Zola sowed the seeds of utopianism in his early novels, and these germinated into full-scale Saint-Simonian utopias near the end of his life. Often, Zola did not imagine these utopias as urban and proletarian, but rather rural and agricultural. The countryside, and more specifically the Midi, reminded Zola of his upbringing in Aix-en-Provence; and the idea of starting afresh, especially in the South, was an enduring dream for his character Eugène. The Midi, broadly understood, appears as a space of both nostalgia and longing for the future. In *Son Excellence*, Zola's narrator describes the aforementioned Landes project as such:

[C]'était un vaste plan de vie nouvelle, un exil volontaire dans les Landes, le défrichement de plusieurs lieues carrées de terrain, la fondation d'une ville au milieu de la contrée conquise. [...] Il desséchait des marais, combattait avec des machines puissantes l'empierrement du sol, arrêtait la marche des dunes par des plantations de pins, dotait la France d'un coin de fertilité miraculeux. [...] Un après-midi, [Clorinde] ne put voir [Eugène], il était en conférence avec deux ingénieurs. Alors, elle commença à éprouver une peur véritable. Allait-il donc la planter là, pour bâtir sa ville, au fond d'un désert?<sup>34</sup>

This idea of technological dominion over nature is a classic trope of Saint-Simonianism for, unlike the romantics, the Saint-Simonians did not view nature as a pristine Garden of Eden away from

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<sup>28</sup> *Travail* 288.

<sup>29</sup> *Travail* 596.

<sup>30</sup> *Travail* 648.

<sup>31</sup> Émile Zola, *Vérité* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1903) 610.

<sup>32</sup> Pilbeam 64.

<sup>33</sup> Pilbeam 68.

<sup>34</sup> *Son Excellence* 179–80.

the tumult of modernity; they wanted to deploy machines for the advancement of human prosperity. In the excerpt above, as in the thinking of the Saint-Simonians, the reference to lands in the “South” can be read as a metaphor for a fertile woman receiving the so-called masculine, civilizing force of the North. This socialist utopia meant to solve urban poverty by building new settlements in the far corners of the empire, “au fond d’un désert,” echoes the early attempts at settler-colonialism in Algeria under the Second Empire. There, as in metropolitan France, the Saint-Simonians promoted natalism, individual effort, and the sharing of resources, somewhat similarly to later projects of shared agricultural settlements like the Israeli *kibbutzim* in the twentieth century.

This excerpt also foreshadows the plot of *Fécondité*, written more than twenty years later. In this later novel, Zola puts Eugène’s earlier plan of cultivating and taming the land into practice, exploring other “coin[s] de fertilité miraculeux” both in the countryside of France and overseas in Sahelian Africa. In both cases, the generative capacity of the land increases as humans and machines work together to domesticate it. As new social anxieties emerged in the fin de siècle, such as the fear of depopulation – especially in mature economies like France –, the need to create these fertile rural utopias appeared more urgent. Two decades after the brief episode in *Son Excellence*, it appears that Zola is ready to put his vision to the test, fictionally speaking. Over the course of his writing career, we notice these translations from ideation to application and, in this case, the land serves as a physical and metaphorical space of possibilities for human flourishing.

Zola’s first gospel, *Fécondité*, indeed offers a natalist vision of society where a hardworking family achieves happiness, prosperity, and dominion over a large estate through cultivating the land with their children. Over the course of the novel, they turn the swamp surrounding their farm into a productive homestead. Zola describes his protagonists Mathieu and Marianne as prudent conquerors who take over sections of land from idlers, including from their neighbor Séguin: “La fortune que l’oisif avait dédaignée, gaspillée, passait aux mains du travailleur, du créateur.”<sup>35</sup> Unlike most socialists of his time, Zola did not believe in equal redistribution of wealth; and, unlike most capitalists, he was also opposed to the accumulation of wealth by invisible shareholders. Likewise, Saint-Simon’s vision of production put limits on capital: for him, income should never be passive, and industrious effort should be at the source of every profit.<sup>36</sup>

In *Fécondité*, Zola looks to the countryside as an untainted space of possibility where deserving, hardworking farmers like the Froments can extract value from the land in an elegant manifestation of Darwinism. Zola’s vision of society, as evidenced by his use of “oisif” and “travailleur,” is typically Saint-Simonian.<sup>37</sup> For him, the implications are larger than the space of the village where the two families live. When Nicolas, Mathieu’s son, leaves to settle and start a so-called new dynasty overseas, Zola’s narrator envisions the family’s success radiating outward from the local to the global scale: “Après la race, il y a l’humanité, l’élargissement sans fin, le peuple unique et fraternel des temps accomplis, quand la terre entière ne sera qu’une ville de vérité et de justice.”<sup>38</sup> For the author, fertility, conquest – and even imperialism – were means to an end: the ultimate goal was transnational prosperity. Like Zola, who envisions the coming European

<sup>35</sup> Émile Zola, *Fécondité* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1899) 479.

<sup>36</sup> Juliette Grange, “Saint-Simon: Penseur et prophète du nouveau monde industriel,” *Les nouveaux chemins de la connaissance par Philippe Petit* (France Culture, 30.11.2012) 18:00.

<sup>37</sup> This use of “oisif” appears again in other Zolian novels, including at the end of *Le Docteur Pascal* when the birth of the child symbolizes the beginning of a new era. Only in “le cerveau enfiévré des oisifs,” Zola writes, can cynicism and pessimism endure. *Le Docteur Pascal* (Paris: Charpentier, 1893) 378.

<sup>38</sup> *Fécondité* 660–61.



peace at the end of *Paris*, the Saint-Simonians envisioned Europe and the Mediterranean at large as interconnected. Neither they nor Zola would limit their grand visions to the scale of the French nation.

More specifically, the ending of *Fécondité* combines the coronation of work ethics, universalism, and benevolent colonialism – three hallmarks of Saint-Simonianism. In the triumphant celebration which marks the last chapter of the novel, the utopian vision starts to materialize. As more than 150 family members over four generations gather in a bucolic garden of the 500-hectare farm, an unknown family member makes a surprise appearance. Dominique, the son of Nicolas and grandson of Mathieu, returns to the metropolis and meets his extended family for the first time. His late parents, blessed with eighteen children, had successfully settled in the French Sudan – present-day Mali. Dominique is presented as the prodigal “prince de la seconde dynastie des Froment, au pays de la prodigieuse France future.”<sup>39</sup> At this point in the novel, the action takes place in the late twentieth century, with Zola failing to foresee the end of colonialism.<sup>40</sup> Further, it should be noted that his depictions of Africa include many stereotypes of contemporary colonial literature.

According to Dominique, the great valley of the Niger is a colossal cradle of civilization and a virgin land which will feed humanity, thanks to modern agriculture.<sup>41</sup> In this passage, Zola transposes the old Saint-Simonian myths about Egypt and the Nile River to the newest conquests of the French state. Other writers a few years later, for example, Pierre Benoit in 1919, also fantasized about the South Sahara and the French Sudan as a forgotten, glorious land from the antediluvian times of Atlantis.<sup>42</sup> Each time, the land is compared to the virgin body of the mystical mother of Western civilization – a classic Saint-Simonian trope.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, as in the work of Louis Bertrand who was in Algeria at the same time as Zola’s foray into Africa in *Fécondité*, the land is described as a Roman granary – a “grenier d’abondance.”<sup>44</sup> This idea of settler colonialism echoes Saint-Simonian reformers like Émile Barrault who planned for “forty-two new agricultural colonies of over 10,000 people” in Algeria in the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>45</sup> In the end, though, according to Pilbeam, “very few of the original colonists remained, most of those who became established were agricultural labourers from elsewhere in Europe or retired soldiers. Needless to say, the Saint-Simonian colonists, including Barrault, Terson and Eugène François, were idealists.”<sup>46</sup> In his *Quatre Évangiles*, Zola certainly reveals himself also to be an idealist in his visions of benevolent imperialism.

In the epilogue of *Fécondité*, Dominique mentions the current plans to construct a trans-Saharan electric railway connecting “Notre Algérie” to Timbuktu, an important trading center on the southern edge of the Sahara, which would be connected to Senegal and the rest of the region through more trains and a fleet of steamboats.<sup>47</sup> This interest in Saint-Simonian engineering during the Belle Époque can be associated with the rising trend of futurism a few years after Zola’s death,

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<sup>39</sup> *Fécondité* 734.

<sup>40</sup> After all, Zola’s depictions of Africa, which include many stereotypes of contemporary colonial literature, show that the novelist was steeped in colonialist thinking.

<sup>41</sup> *Fécondité* 737.

<sup>42</sup> Pierre Benoit’s second novel, *L’Atlantide*, has been filmed several times.

<sup>43</sup> Pilbeam 104, 112.

<sup>44</sup> *Fécondité* 740.

<sup>45</sup> Pilbeam 172.

<sup>46</sup> Pilbeam 172.

<sup>47</sup> *Fécondité* 741.

represented by writers like F.T. Marinetti (1876–1944), who saw the monolithic myth of “Africa” as a land of possibilities across the narrow Mediterranean Sea.<sup>48</sup>

In many ways, Zola’s *L’Argent* was a precursor of these Saint-Simonian themes of connecting the Middle-East through technology and infrastructure. In fact, the memorable story of the notorious Aristide Saccard was based on real events and enterprises of the time. In the novel, the financial mogul invests in railways running into the Middle East, in silver mines in the Levant, and in steamships crossing the sea to Egypt. His extravagant visions culminate in the plan to reconquer Jerusalem from the Ottoman Empire and to relocate the Pope there. At a level below the fiction, can be discerned actual Mediterranean infrastructures and investment banks, many of which were led by Saint-Simonians under Napoleon III. At the time, a famous location for silver ore mines was the Bône region of Algeria (present-day “Annaba”),<sup>49</sup> where colossal profits and cultural imperialism often went hand in hand – a dynamic also underlying Zola’s novel *L’Argent*.<sup>50</sup> In particular, the story of Paulin Talabot mirrors Saccard’s. Talabot was one of the most successful businessmen of the Second Empire – and a Saint-Simonian. He and his brother engineered railways and mines all over France, had connections in the Ottoman Empire, Italy, and Egypt, and founded the Société Générale bank to rival the Pereires who were at the head of the Crédit Mobilier.<sup>51</sup> This period of speculation and growth eventually ended, but the banking, mining, and transportation innovation under Napoleon III did bring about lasting changes.<sup>52</sup>

What we should keep in mind, however, are the six decades that separate the genuine hopes of young Saint-Simonians in the 1830s and the cautionary tales of capitalist excess in *L’Argent*. For Michel Chevalier in 1832, “The future ‘peaceful association’ between ‘Occident’ and ‘Orient,’ [...] was to be cemented in the connectivities made newly possible by the industrial and scientific achievements of the young nineteenth century.”<sup>53</sup> Despite the violent outcome of imperialism we now know, Chevalier saw achieving the association of East and West as fundamentally pro-peace. He wrote, “Du jour où ce système *méditerranéen* aura été assez élaboré pour qu’on puisse en entamer la réalisation, la paix reviendra en Europe comme par enchantement, et elle y reviendra à tout jamais.”<sup>54</sup> What attracted Zola to the *Saint-Simoniens* was that, like them, he lived through decades of devastating war and internal conflict in Europe. Zola and Chevalier both looked for peaceful resolutions harnessing the power of new technology. It remains important, however, to contextualize the different generations of the movement throughout the nineteenth century. The

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<sup>48</sup> Historians have critically reassessed early twentieth-century promoters of settler colonialism and futurists, many of whom eventually associated themselves with Italian fascism. Rather than fault Zola for his lack of foresight, perhaps we should pause and wish that this fascinating left-wing technological optimism of the nineteenth century had never been co-opted by fascists and war-mongering imperialists in the twentieth. Today, zero-emission train lines powered by electricity and regenerative agriculture in dry climates are more relevant than ever; some of Zola’s idealism was therefore quite visionary. To explore this topic further, see Carmen Mayer for her work on Zola’s technological prescience in *Travail* and Alexandre Dubois for his research on utopian engineering projects like Trans-Saharan railways.

<sup>49</sup> Some of these mining companies, like the Société Mokta-en-Hadid, “continued to yield very well into the twentieth century” (Pilbeam 136).

<sup>50</sup> David Prochaska, *Making Algeria French: Colonialism in Bône, 1870-1920* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002) 81.

<sup>51</sup> Prochaska 80.

<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of Saint-Simonian influences on the transportation networks of *Travail*, see Elsa Stéphan, “The Electrical Network and the Ideal Community in Zola’s *Travail*,” *Excavatio* 29 (2017).

<sup>53</sup> Osama Abi-Mershed, “The Mediterranean in Saint-Simonian Imagination: The ‘Nuptial Bed,’” in *The Making of the Modern Mediterranean. Views from the South*, ed. Judith E. Tucker (Oakland: Univ. of California Press, 2019) 149-73. 149.

<sup>54</sup> Chevalier 127. Emphasis in the original.

young men of the 1830s, like Barrault and Chevalier, were well-intentioned in their plans to connect Europe and the Middle East through technology and spirituality; but Zola's take on the matter, as he revisits the geopolitics of the Second Empire in fiction, also shows the monumental failure and the ultimate moral bankruptcy of these Mediterranean projects.

In *L'Argent*, Zola highlights the greed, hubris, and failure of actual nineteenth-century entrepreneurs who inspired his character Saccard, turning Saint-Simonian imperialism into a violent and dogmatic "new Crusade": "l'engouement tournait à la foi aveugle, héroïque et batailleuse."<sup>55</sup> The original Saint-Simonian mission of helping the disenfranchised workers of society had been perverted, and the grand hopes of Saint-Simonianism in the Mediterranean suddenly looked like a grotesque orientalist act with a capitalist twist.<sup>56</sup> This perversion highlights the disconnect between the Saint-Simonian utopias of the 1830s about the projected fusion of East and West, the rise to prominence of the movement in the 1860s, and Zola's imitation of it in the 1890s in novels like *L'Argent*. Saccard represents everything that made the Saint-Simonians unlikable after the fall of the empire: the grand infrastructure they erected turned out to be purely for the extraction of foreign wealth; and the religious part of the project, in real life as in Zola's novel, failed to materialize.

In 1835, Émile Barrault published *Occident et Orient. Études politiques, morales et religieuses*. Pilbeam explains that the book was "part history, part geography and part culture, [...] conclud[ing] that the future depend[s] on bringing together the West and the Orient, with Jerusalem as the key."<sup>57</sup> It is therefore likely that this story inspired Zola's plot line in *L'Argent* about retaking the holy city in some way for, as Dorian Bell rightly points out, "[Saint-Simonian] mystical progressivism saturates Zola's novel."<sup>58</sup> Already in 1830, Prosper Enfantin published his *Doctrine de Saint-Simon*, featuring summaries of discussions and writings by a number of his disciples from the two years prior. For instance:

Jérusalem, Rome des Césars, et Rome du monde chrétien, voilà les trois grandes cités initiatrices du genre humain. Moïse, Numa, Jésus, ont enfanté des peuples morts ou mourants aujourd'hui. Quel sera le père de la race future? Où est la ville du progrès qui s'élèvera, glorieuse, sur les ruines des cités de l'expiation et de la rédemption? Où est la Jérusalem nouvelle?<sup>59</sup>

Written more than sixty years before, this direct quote from Enfantin summarizes Zola's literary ambition from *L'Argent*, *Rome*, to the end of *Paris* and the *Quatre Évangiles*. As Zola does in *Rome*, Enfantin takes a broad look at the movements of history, from the cradle of humanity in the Middle East in the Bronze Age to the rise of imperial and Christian Europe and finally the emergence of new powerhouses in the new world. The reference to "dying peoples" ("peuples

<sup>55</sup> Émile Zola. *L'Argent* (Paris: Charpentier 1891) 254–55.

<sup>56</sup> In typical orientalist style, Zola writes, "les trésors retrouvés des califes resplendissaient, dans un conte merveilleux des Mille et une Nuits. Les bijoux, les pierreries du rêve, pleuvaient dans les caisses de la rue de Londres, tandis que fumait l'encens du Carmel, un fond délicat et vague de légendes bibliques, qui divinisait les gros appétits de gain. N'était-ce pas l'Éden reconquis, la Terre sainte délivrée, la religion triomphante, au berceau même de l'humanité?" (*L'Argent* 256).

<sup>57</sup> Pilbeam 124.

<sup>58</sup> Dorian Bell, *Globalizing Race: Antisemitism and Empire in French and European Culture* (Evanston, US: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2018) 236.

<sup>59</sup> B.-P. Enfantin, S.-A. Bazard, and Hippolyte Carnot, *Doctrine de Saint-Simon: Exposition, première année, 1828-1829* [3<sup>rd</sup> ed.] (Paris? impr. Monsigny, 1831) 37–38. Emphasis in the original.

morts ou mourants”) by *Enfantin* echoes Zola’s diagnosis of civilizational decline in his novel set in Italy, a decline which appears to be due to speculation, superstition, and stagnation. After failing to reconquer Jerusalem in *L’Argent* and to revitalize Christianity in *Rome*, Zola raises similar questions as *Enfantin*, questions that drive the plots of his last utopian novels: Who – what father figure – will lead France into the new century? Where should the new city of progress and justice be located? What will this new utopia – a new Jerusalem – be like? The similarity between the ideological underpinnings of these novels and *Enfantin*’s proclamation is therefore almost eerie – the correlation seems too high to be a mere coincidence. While Zola, to my knowledge, does not use the phrase “la Jérusalem nouvelle,” he does frequently invoke “la Rome nouvelle,” and his search for the “cité de justice” is essentially a search for a renewed promised land.

### **From neo-Christianism to physicism: Religion as the cement in Zola’s Saint-Simonianism**

Religion in one form or another is omnipresent in Zola’s work. In many examples, including *L’Argent*, Zola uses religious fervor, or “la foi aveugle,” as a marker of excess and failure, whether it relates to political groups like socialists or anarchists, to capitalist tycoons, or to superstition in *Lourdes*. Already in *Le Ventre de Paris*, which shows the earliest traces of Zola’s Saint-Simonian influence, religion and prophecy are relied upon to maintain the dream of a future revolution against the unjust two-class system of “les Gras” and “les Maigres”:

Se bercer, s’endormir, rêver qu’il [Florent] était parfaitement heureux, que le monde allait le devenir, bâtir la cité républicaine où il aurait voulu vivre: telle fut sa récréation, l’œuvre éternellement reprise de ses heures libres. [...] Il devint un de ces orateurs illuminés qui prêchèrent la révolution comme une religion nouvelle, toute de douceur et de rédemption. Il fallut les journées de décembre pour le tirer de sa tendresse universelle. Il était désarmé. Il se laissa prendre comme un mouton, et fut traité en loup.<sup>60</sup>

In this passage, the republican utopia exists only in Florent’s mind, and Zola associates this socialist dream with the creation of a new religion. Zola appears ambiguous and skeptical of the use of religion to promote political ideas, as did Saint-Simon; but over time, his understanding of the role of religion becomes clearer and his appreciation for some aspects of it, arguably, grows. This is evident in his later novels, in particular the *Trois Villes*.

A key part of Saint-Simon’s ideology is the syncretism of Christianity and utopian socialism, and this is exactly the intellectual context that bookends the plot of *Rome*.<sup>61</sup> Zola’s young priest character Pierre Froment is writing a study and manifesto with the title *La Rome nouvelle*. He travels to the Eternal City to meet the Pope and present him with his project of social reform. This metafictional text is heavily based on Saint-Simon’s *Nouveau Christianisme* (1825), an unfinished book written seventy years before the plot of Zola’s novel. The fictitious Froment has in common with Saint-Simonianism a zeal and a certitude that the imagined future is not utopian but inevitable.<sup>62</sup> In *Nouveau Christianisme*, Saint-Simon explains that his new religion

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<sup>60</sup> *Le Ventre de Paris* 52–53.

<sup>61</sup> Some of Zola’s most Saint-Simonian novels – including *Rome* and *Vérité* – are also his longest and least appreciated books. This might explain, to some extent, why the presence of Saint-Simonianism in his work has been overlooked.

<sup>62</sup> Crossley 130.

represents a return to the sources of Christianity, the universal feeling of brotherly love and the imperative of helping the poor:

Dans le nouveau christianisme, toute la morale sera déduite directement de ce principe: *les hommes doivent se conduire en frères à l'égard les uns des autres*; et ce principe qui appartient au christianisme primitif, éprouvera une *transfiguration* d'après laquelle il sera présenté comme devant être aujourd'hui le but de tous les travaux religieux. Ce principe régénéré sera présenté de la manière suivante: *La religion doit diriger la société vers le grand but de l'amélioration la plus rapide possible du sort de la classe la plus pauvre.*<sup>63</sup>

When Zola writes his *bilan du siècle* in the *Trois Villes*, he recycles some of the same ideas. His character Froment argues that the promise of the Kingdom of Heaven made workers subservient, and that the wealthy elites of society, including the Vatican, had failed in their duty of sharing with the poor.<sup>64</sup> He imagines his future success and envisions the new society: “Le christianisme enfin redevenant la religion de justice et de vérité qu’il était, avant de s’être laissé conquérir par les riches et les puissants! Les petits et les pauvres régnant, se partageant les biens d’ici-bas, n’obéissant plus qu’à la loi égalitaire du travail!”<sup>65</sup> For Froment, as for Saint-Simon, what matters is not the dogma of original sin, the immortality of the soul or life after death, but the practical lives of the proletarians.<sup>66</sup> This is apparent in both Saint-Simon’s *Nouveau Christianisme* and in the first chapter of Zola’s *Rome*, where Froment’s thesis is presented. In a way, Saint-Simon’s “New Christianity,” like Froment’s fictional essay *La Rome nouvelle*, can be understood as an attempt to guide the proletarian masses towards his revolutionary cause. Saint-Simon had professed “morality without metaphysics” and “technology without theology,”<sup>67</sup> ideas which become apparent in *Paris* at the end of Froment’s intellectual journey.

Already at the end of *Rome*, Zola’s protagonist Froment shifts his commitment to an unconditional embrace of science. While this seems like a departure from this character’s earlier prospect of a new religion, science had also been at the core of Saint-Simonian faith. As early as 1808, Saint-Simon had imagined scientific truth as a new religion under the name “physicism,” admitting at the same time that “a form of Christian theism remained appropriate for the majority.”<sup>68</sup> In *Nouveau Christianisme*, he indeed reframed this embrace of science as part of a renewed Christian gospel, not as a separate faith. Froment’s posture in *Rome* closely tracks Saint-Simon’s ideas, albeit in reverse order. While Saint-Simon had progressed from a belief in physicism towards neo-Christianism, Froment’s intellectual journey effectively moves in the opposite direction:

Les religions peuvent disparaître, le sentiment religieux en créera de nouvelles, même avec la science. [...] Que la science ait donc sa religion, s’il doit en pousser une d’elle, car cette religion sera bientôt la seule possible, pour les démocraties de demain, pour les peuples de plus en plus instruits, chez qui la foi catholique n’est déjà que cendre!<sup>69</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon, *Nouveau Christianisme, dialogues entre un conservateur et un novateur* (Paris: Sautet, 1825) 11–12. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>64</sup> Émile Zola, *Rome* (Paris: Charpentier et Fasquelle, 1896) 23.

<sup>65</sup> *Rome* 38.

<sup>66</sup> Crossley 113.

<sup>67</sup> Billington 214.

<sup>68</sup> Crossley 120.

<sup>69</sup> *Rome* 739.

In *Rome*'s sequel, *Paris*, Pierre Froment's religious commitment is put to the test when his anarchist brother Guillaume exploits his knowledge of chemistry to manufacture a devastating bomb. This atheistic revolutionary impulse challenges the priest, and the dynamic between the two brothers stages an ideological clash between the idealism of early twentieth-century socialism embodied in Pierre and the violence of fin-de-siècle anarchists like Guillaume. As Crossley writes, "[t]he [Saint-Simonian] movement believed in growth, not revolution, and eschewed the volcanic and atomic metaphors beloved of some democrats and left-republicans."<sup>70</sup> Zola uses the metaphor of the volcano when Guillaume's final plan to explode the Sacré-Coeur basilica during mass is put into motion.<sup>71</sup> In extremis, Pierre's voice of reason convinces his brother to defuse the bomb.

In the end, Zola and his protagonist Pierre share a belief in peace and brotherhood. Zola always remained skeptical of religion in all its forms, including the blind faith of anarchists and extreme socialists. The urgent utopianism of the bomb and bloodshed were not part of Saint-Simonianism, which might explain why Zola connected with this movement: it captured the progressive optimism of the Enlightenment without the violent revolutions of the *Terreur* or of radical socialism a century later.

We know for a fact that Zola researched the different socialist movements of the century in his preparation for *Paris*,<sup>72</sup> and several references to Saint-Simon are also transposed into the novel.<sup>73</sup> Zola consulted the "Saint-Simon" and "Saint-Simonien" entries of the *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*.<sup>74</sup> In addition to reading Saint-Simon's *Nouveau Christianisme*,<sup>75</sup> Zola based his idea of the need for religion on the work of Auguste Comte.<sup>76</sup> Fabian Scharf diligently outlines these sources consulted in preparation for *Paris* – the starting point of Zola's utopias, but the similarities between the plot of *Rome* and Saint-Simon's *Nouveau christianisme* reveal a deeper relationship between Zola and the social theorist. The research phase for his last *Ville* might have coincided with his writing or rewriting of *Rome*, but as I have shown, echoes between Zola and Saint-Simon can also be found prior to his *Trois Villes* series. Based on the extract cited at the end of my second section on "la Jérusalem nouvelle," it is very likely that Zola had read Prosper Enfantin's *La Doctrine de Saint-Simon*. This collection of articles from *le Globe* outlines the mission of the Saint-Simonian school and was republished multiple times through the century. It includes sections titled "Les oisifs et les travailleurs" and "Organisation religieuse: le prêtre, l'homme et la femme."

In the last chapter of *Travail*'s first part, Zola's protagonist Luc reads actual material from Fourier and Saint-Simon in the library. Fourier's book is an illumination for Luc who later proclaims the need to create a new religion: "Il n'est pas de bonheur possible, si nous ne le mettons dans ce bonheur solidaire de l'éternel labeur commun. Et c'est pourquoi je voudrais que fût enfin fondée la religion du travail, l'hosanna au travail sauveur, la vérité unique, la santé, la joie, la paix

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<sup>70</sup> Crossley 136.

<sup>71</sup> Émile Zola, *Paris* (Paris: Charpentier et Fasquelle, 1898) 562.

<sup>72</sup> Beatrice Laville, "Le dossier préparatoire de Paris." *Les Cahiers naturalistes* 72 (1998): 237–45. 241–42.

<sup>73</sup> As Nicholas White points out, "The injured Guillaume is visited at Neuilly by the Communard Bade, who reads Saint-Simon and Fourier, by Morin, the evolutionist representing Proudhon and Comte, by the old-style Republican Nicolas Barthès, and by the anarchist Janzen." In "Reconstructing the City in Zola's 'Paris,'" *Neophilologus* 81.2 (1997): 201–14. 211–12.

<sup>74</sup> This is the edition of 1876, book XV (704), colloquially known as the *Grand Larousse*. See Fabian Scharf, *Émile Zola: de l'utopisme à l'utopie* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2011) 14, 347.

<sup>75</sup> Scharf 348.

<sup>76</sup> Scharf 24.

souveraine.”<sup>77</sup> Since his character Luc presents himself as “le défenseur” of this new religion,<sup>78</sup> Zola appears captivated by the Saint-Simonian vision of a transcendent faith that would bind humanity in the original etymological sense of religion. In *Travail*, as for Saint-Simon, religion does not include a belief in life after death and is firmly grounded in science.<sup>79</sup>

For Luc as for Saint-Simonians like Eugène Pelletan, technological modernization represents more than a mode of production, it is the fundamental transformation that would enable the “eradication of obscurantism and religious superstition, the replacement of war by peaceful commercial interactions between states, and the extension of the concept of ‘sovereignty’ through great inventions such as the steam engine.”<sup>80</sup> However, this eradication of superstition would not entail any promotion of atheism, for the Saint-Simonians or for Zola. In *Travail*, this vision materializes as the utopian city of justice comes to life at the end of the novel: technology provides unlimited renewable energy while Catholicism loses its grip on society and fades away.<sup>81</sup> Finally, a new religion based on nature rises spontaneously as the spiritual cement of this new society.

Before 1870, Saint-Simonianism was a broad constellation of ideas and ideals, larger than the individual thinkers who composed it like Saint-Simon, Comte, Enfantin, Pelletan, and even Fourier. It was a universalist secular religion based on work and the union of East and West under the banner of technological progress, to achieve global peace and prosperity. This movement lasted from the death of its founder in 1825 to the death of Napoleon III, and included many internal divisions and disagreements. Most Saint-Simonians shared an interest in infrastructure connecting Europe to the Middle East, as well as interests in proto-feminism and plans to reform society and establish a new meritocracy. Ultimately, for Saint-Simon, and as would be promoted in *Travail*, proletarian and agricultural communities should collaborate towards the flourishing of human society; farmers and factory workers reconcile their differences in Zola’s novel<sup>82</sup> just as Saint-Simon envisioned a union of the forces of workers and farmers under the umbrella of labor.

In this article, I have highlighted intriguing affinities between Zola and Saint-Simon based on their visions of socialism and colonial endeavor, showing the widespread influence of Saint-Simonian thought on Zola’s novels. While these fictional texts were inspired by multiple, sometimes contradictory sources, the endings of *Trois Villes* and *Quatre Évangiles* represent the culmination for Zola of decades of Saint-Simonian intellectual gestation.

Looking back on the nineteenth century, Zola was fascinated by this eclectic group of thinkers, many of whom, like him, believed in the middle ground of association and *fraternité* instead of the more polarizing absolutes of *liberté* and *égalité*.<sup>83</sup> Zola sensed a connection with these idealistic men and women writing decades before him; and he, Comte, and Saint-Simon were all pioneers of the field of sociology. Zola no longer felt at home in France in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair and in the dark mood of the fin-de-siècle period; he therefore looked to the past and to the future for inspiration, impatiently awaiting the coming of a new century dedicated to

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<sup>77</sup> *Travail* 196.

<sup>78</sup> *Travail* 338.

<sup>79</sup> *Travail* 544.

<sup>80</sup> Hazareesingh 178.

<sup>81</sup> *Travail* 564.

<sup>82</sup> “Et les deux associations allaient se consolider l’une par l’autre, les paysans fourniraient le pain aux ouvriers, qui leur fourniraient les outils, les objets manufacturés nécessaires à leur existence, de sorte qu’il y aurait rapprochement des deux classes ennemies, fusion peu à peu intime, tout un embryon de peuple fraternel.” *Travail* 252.

<sup>83</sup> “For Saint-Simonians the old revolutionary ideals of liberty and equality held no answers to the economic and social problems of their day. They hoped to develop the notion of fraternity or association, holding this principle as the key to social regeneration” (Pilbeam 11).

science and prosperity. As he paved the way towards *laïcité*, Zola remained skeptical of a socialist atheism which often falls into the trap of turning the cult of the state or the nation into a religion of its own – a notorious phenomenon in the twentieth century in the USSR and Nazi Germany.

In many ways, the twentieth century perverted and erased the original vision of Saint-Simonianism, but a contextualisation of the movement from a nineteenth-century perspective, reveals a genuine optimism in humanity harnessing the power of technology. As Anatole France said in his eulogy at Zola's funeral, he was a "sincere realist" and "nevertheless an ardent idealist."<sup>84</sup> As such, Zola could be called a *Saint-Simonien* after the fact – in the most laudatory sense of the term. He believed in the peaceful, bloodless revolution of scientific progress.

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<sup>84</sup> Qtd. in Vizetelly 519.