

The Utopian Community

The Industrial Revolution caused many problems in Western Europe and American society. The rise in productivity brought wealth to only certain groups of people. Most workers did not belong to these favored groups. The laws of supply and demand ruled the market for both goods and human labor. The law of supply said that the more plentiful good were, the less they cost. During the 19th century, labor-saving machines cut the number of workers needed on farms. Factory and mining jobs replaced many traditional jobs. People needing work far outnumbered the jobs available. Therefore, employers could hire workers for very low wages.

Male workers with families often did not earn enough to support them. Women and children had to go to work too. Working conditions were often unsanitary and dangerous. Families lived in crowded apartments. Disease was everywhere. Children often grew up stunted, sickly, and uneducated.

No laws ensured workers' health and safety. No compensation was available to the sick, injured, or elderly. Governments had no power to regulate wages, hours, or working conditions.

Many people were appalled by these conditions. Among the most outspoken critics of industrialization were the Socialists. The Socialists were a group of reformers who originated in France. They believed that society should be reorganized to prevent the miseries suffered by the poor. Cooperation should replace cutthroat competition among the powerful people of the world. To establish this cooperation, governments should engage in economic planning and regulate private property.

One of the early Socialist reformers was the Frenchman Charles Fourier (1772-1825). He dreamed of a utopian, or perfect, society, in which people could lead happy, healthy, and useful lives. This society would be made up of small cooperative farming communities, each inhabited by exactly 1,620 people. There, men women, and children would share both the work required to keep the community running and the profits of that work. Women would have the same rights and responsibilities as men

Review Questions

1. Why were mid 19th-century employers able to hire workers for very low wages?
2. How did the Socialists wish to reorganize society?
3. What is the meaning of the word "utopia"?