



"Utopian socialism and social science"

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UTOPIAN SOCIALISM, SOCIAL SCIENCE, AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF SOCIETY

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During the nineteenth century, utopian socialism was most often interpreted as an essentially political phenomenon. Few commentators took seriously its ambition to create a new science of man and society. Yet, the invention of such a science was one of the fundamental claims of Saint-Simon, Fourier, Owen and their disciples. They saw a scientific understanding of society as a prerequisite for its reconstruction.

At the turn of the century, Emile Durkheim was among the first to stress the role of utopian socialism in the emergence of the social sciences.¹ He named Saint-Simon, mentor of Auguste Comte, the true founder of sociology. Since Durkheim, the importance of utopian socialism in the birth of the social sciences has been widely recognized.² This role is however difficult to assess accurately. Utopian socialism was, after all, the inheritor of eighteenth-century reflections regarding man and society. These reflections were in their turn indebted to a long tradition of utopian writings dealing with social organization, beginning with Thomas More's Utopia, published in 1516.³ To what extent did Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen break with the Enlightenment and its utopian component to mark a new era in social thought?

Another reason for a more thorough inquiry lies in the definition of the social science given by the utopian socialists. Although meant as a departure from the philosophical tradition, their science was still imbued with philosophical and even metaphysical conceptions. Extending far beyond the limits imparted to our contemporary social sciences, Saint-Simon's, Fourier's and Owen's doctrines appear retrospectively as a disconcerting combination of brilliant intuition and oversimplification, original thought and prejudice. Given the ambiguities of these doctrines, as well as the wide range of issues addressed by them, it would be simplistic to reduce their contribution to the emergence of disciplines such as sociology and anthropology or to their influence on figures like Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill. Neither can Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen appear as mere forerunners of "scientific socialism", as Marx and Engels had put it in their Manifesto of the Communist Party. The relation between utopian socialism and social science must rather be placed within the broad frame of nineteenth-century cultural history.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT LEGACY

Whereas Owen readily acknowledged the influence of eighteenth-century philosophy on his thought, Saint-Simon and Fourier often presented their doctrines as reactions against the shortcomings of the Enlightenment. However, Saint-Simon's preoccupation with a new encyclopedia and Fourier's fascination with the Newtonian

law of mutual attraction revealed their debts to the eighteenth century, as did Owen's faith in individual perfectibility, a belief inspired by his reading of Helvétius. Above all, the utopian socialists inherited the ambition of constructing a science of man and society. Expressed by philosophers like Turgot and Condorcet, continued later by their main upholders, the Idéologues, this ambition was one of the chief legacies of the Enlightenment.

The notion of progress, the collective advancement of humanity, was another key heritage. It implied the redefining of history as an itinerary leading from the primitive origins of civilization to its present complexity. The present appeared in its turn as the anteroom to a still more brilliant future. Turgot had already conceptualized history as progress in his Tableau philosophique des progrès successifs de l'esprit humain of 1750 and his Discours sur l'histoire universelle et sur les progrès de l'esprit humain of 1751. During the French Revolution, Condorcet extended and systematized it in his Esquisse d'un tableau des progrès de l'esprit humain⁴. Published shortly after Condorcet's death in 1794, the Esquisse and its evocation of the future wisdom and happiness of mankind created an agenda for Saint-Simon. At the beginning of his intellectual career, the latter intended to complete Condorcet's broad historical picture.

More complex was the filiation between the eighteenth-century vision of society as the result of a voluntary contract between men, and the utopian socialists' organic conception of the social bond. Although seemingly contradictory, both assumed that social organization was highly malleable. The arbitrariness of legal

agreements and the adaptability of life both conveyed this flexibility. The conviction of Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen that society could be shaped according to different patterns was also a tribute to the Enlightenment. Such social experiments as Fourier's Phalansteries and Owen's Harmonies presupposed the extreme diversity of human institutions, laws and customs, a recognition sustained by travelers' accounts and theorized by philosophers like Diderot in his Supplément au voyage de Bougainville of 1772. This book, however ironic its tone, has a marked utopian dimension, especially in its preoccupation with the sexual freedom of the Polynesians.

The utopian form flourished in the later eighteenth century, and displayed then some novel features. One of these was a deep commitment to universality. Most previous utopian writings had stressed the singularity of the ideal society they depicted rather than its generic character. Thomas More, the creator of the genre, had named his utopia from the Greek *ou* and *topos*, meaning negation and place respectively. Utopia was not only singular, it was literally to be found nowhere. His utopia was intended not as a positive example, but as a critique of the existing social order. Only such a purpose could explain why a fervent Catholic such as More would assigned so many pagan habits to the citizens of his Utopia. Through their search for universality, eighteenth-century utopias began to acquire a new meaning. They came to represent models to be imitated all over the world. The broadly egalitarian perspective of the Enlightenment anthropology regarding physical and moral dispositions played a role in this shift. Utopia could be truly universal, since the fundamental needs and capacities of men were the same everywhere.⁵

An important consequence of this shift from singularity to universality, from nowhere to everywhere, was a gradual displacement of utopian into history.⁶ Whereas had previously been described as contemporary kingdoms, now they were often relocated into the future, as the final stage of human progress. Published in 1770, Sébastien Mercier's L'An 2440 displays this tendency with its evocation of a futuristic Paris. Two decades later, Restif de la Bretonne followed his example with L'An 2000. The trend toward the future culminated with Condorcet's Atlantide. Named to recall Bacon's New Atlantis, the Atlantide represented the final stage reached by humanity in the philosopher's broad historical trajectory.

From the desire to build a science of man and society to the redefining of utopia as an universal model, the influence of the Enlightenment on the utopian socialists should not be underestimated. Were Saint-Simon, Owen and Fourier original? Their originality was not only a matter of ideas and opinions, but also of moral sensibilities. The fathers of utopian socialism showed a common tendency to adopt a prophetic tone.

THE PROPHETS OF A NEW GOLDEN AGE

The three founding figures of utopian socialism, Claude Henri Saint-Simon (1760-1825), Robert Owen (1771-1858), and Charles Fourier (1772-1837) were very different one from another⁷. The first came from an aristocratic background, whereas

the two others belonged to the common people. Saint-Simon had begun as an army officer in the American War of Independence before turning to real estate speculation. Ruined by the end of the French Revolution he survived later on by working as a clerk. The only Englishman of the trio, Owen was a successful manufacturer at the head of the New Lanark factory before entering the ring of social reform in England and America. For most of his life, Fourier remained an obscure shop assistant.

Above all, the conceptions of the ultimate social organization developed by the three men diverged. Saint-Simon's concern with a large single industrial society ruled as a peaceful army of workers was incompatible with Owen's and Fourier's proposals for strictly limited agrarian communities. Owen's Harmonies were supposed to lead a rather austere life, whereas Fourier's Phalansteries would allow all sorts of pleasures.

Saint-Simon, Owen and Fourier shared nevertheless a common prophetic tone when contrasting the present forlorn state of humanity with its future happiness, with the new and definitive Golden Age to be ushered in by their principles. Like the romantic philosophers and writers, their contemporaries, the founding fathers of utopian socialism were magicians foreseeing a gleaming future through the mists and shadows of the present⁸. But their prophetic inspiration was also the consequence of their tragic vision of the early-nineteenth-century European societies. Contrary to the Enlightenment philosophers whose speculations remained generally somewhat abstract, Saint-Simon, Owen and Fourier were acutely aware of the distress of their time. The political and social changes brought by the French political revolution and

the English industrial figured prominently in this pessimistic assessment of the present. In the utopian socialists' eyes, the science of man and society was not only an intellectual challenge. It was a matter of urgency in order to prevent social chaos.

CLASSES, HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

The very different pictures of the Golden Age given by Saint-Simon, Owen and Fourier, were rooted in contrasting visions of man. With the exception of Fourier's both extravagant and precise study of human passions, these visions remained somewhat unformed. Although he had written a Memoire sur la science de l'homme at the beginning of his intellectual career, indicating that such a science should be based on the contemporary medical studies of Vicq d'Azyr, Cabanis and Bichat, Saint-Simon was never specific on his conception of man. From the various hints provided in his writings, he seemed to interpret man as an essentially active creature, the nature and degree of this activity varying strongly from one individual to another. Saint-Simon's anthropology was anything but egalitarian. Theoretical equality between individuals was, on the contrary, a fundamental principle for Owen, even if his Harmonies were to be severely hierarchical. This led him to emphasize man's capacity to improve himself through proper education, though he never worked this out in detail.

Improving man was not on Fourier's agenda. He boasted of taking man as he was instead of trying to change him. For Fourier, this meant studying the various passions that drove humanity. With its fascination for numbers, its sophisticated catalogue of human inclinations and its often provocative character, Fourier's "mechanics of passions" was an ambitious attempt to deal with man from an entirely new scientific perspective.

Despite their contradictory visions of man, the utopian socialists agreed on the organic character of the social bond. This implied defining society in another way from the eighteenth-century perspective of a mere association of individuals. In France, the political instability created by the Revolution seemed indeed to demonstrate that a permanent social order could not be founded on individualism. The growing social tensions experienced in Britain because of the industrial revolution could lead to the same conclusion. Thus, the restoration of an organic social order was among the priorities of Saint-Simon, Owen and Fourier.

The utopian socialists were not alone in this critical assessment of the shortcomings of individualism. Conservative thinkers such as Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald shared this perspective. But while the latter turned to transcendent religious and anthropological principles, to Providence and the family, Saint-Simon, Owen and Fourier focused on social classes. The notion of class was not an entire novelty. In his Esquisse, Condorcet had applied it to the priests, for example. But this notion had remained marginal in the philosopher's perspective, whereas it now acquired a fundamental importance.

Although Saint-Simon's characterization of the various social classes remained imprecise, it is in his work that they played the most decisive role. The consideration of social classes such as that of the industrialists, that he defined as the "mass and union of men devoted to useful works", freed him from the eighteenth-century belief in the constant interaction between psychological and social considerations. A new social science based solely on the study of collective functions and behavior was thus made possible, a science that his former disciple Auguste Comte would later call sociology. The accent placed on the social function and class was accompanied by a renewed interest in history. In contrast to the faculties of the individual on which eighteenth-century authors such as Condorcet still focused, the features of social class were historically determined. The new social science was to be founded on historical knowledge. Its ambition was to decipher the laws of evolution at work in the history of mankind, laws that implied the advent of a new Golden Age.

Whereas Condorcet was mainly concerned with the continuous progress of science and technology, the utopian socialists' vision of history was based on the identification of a series of organic stages such as the pre-Christian Antiquity or the Middle-Ages. According to Saint-Simon, those stages were separated by periods of cultural and social incertitude and unrest. The Reformation was, for him, such a period, one that had led to the eighteenth-century critical philosophy, to the ruin of Christianity, and eventually to the French Revolution. The Golden Age that he announced was to bring cultural and social unrest to a definitive end, to replace it by a new organic order. In many respects, Comte's Positive Age was to play a similar role.

The emphasis on social class by the utopian socialists was of course among the reasons that Marx could see them as forerunners of "scientific socialism." Marx shared their dynamic vision of society based on class struggle. Saint-Simon, Owen and Fourier, were acutely aware of the conflicts developing in the early industrialized societies. They saw class struggle not as a temporary characteristic of a period of incertitude and unrest, but as a dynamic principle of historical evolution. The prophetic tone they chose to adopt was partly a consequence of this conviction. Marx followed them also in stressing an intimate relation between economy and social organization. Like the triumphant Marxist proletariat, the utopian socialists' Golden Age was to be based on a drastic reform of production. Contrary to the Marxist doctrine, this reform was not however to be initiated by the proletariat. The first truly communist nineteenth-century utopia was developed later by Etienne Cabet (1788-1856).⁹ In contrast, Saint-Simon, Owen and Fourier remained deeply committed to a conception of social change based on the leading role of an elite. Severely criticized by Marx and Engels in their Manifesto, this elitist attitude was later denounced by twentieth-century liberals because of its technocratic implications.

TOWARD A RELIGION OF HUMANITY

The part played by the utopian socialists in the emergence of notions and themes that were to become fundamental for the social science must not lead us to

disregard the most extravagant features of their doctrines such as their intention to replace Christianity by a new religion. While religion was not prominent in Saint-Simon's early writings, it merged as essential in his Nouveau Christianisme, published the year of his death.¹⁰ As for Owen, he turned to Spiritualism rather late in his life. The religious dimension was nevertheless an important aspect of early nineteenth-century utopian socialism. Saint-Simon's, Owen's and Fourier's disciples were in that respect even more radical than their masters, with their various attempts at the creation of new cults. Although often inspired by the Catholic hierarchical order and by its appealing ritual, the new religions differed from Christianity in avoiding worship of a remote god. Humanity and its achievements, or, in the Saint-Simonian case, a pantheistic association between humanity and the rest of the universe, were to replace the former Christian deity.

The project to create a religion of humanity was to a large extent a consequence of the ambition to establish a new organic order, to restore a true community transcending individual differences and interests. Such a goal could not be achieved merely by appealing to the intellect, since the majority of men is ruled by their hearts and not their minds. This view had already been articulated at the very beginning of the nineteenth century by Chateaubriand in his Génie du Christianisme. In the utopian socialists' perspective, only religion could fill the gap between the general and abstract understanding of the elite and the more intuitive and emotional capacities of the people. Spreading efficiently a new social credo in order to insure its observance was not however the only issue at stake. At a more profound level, it was

also a matter of reconciling man's intellectual and emotional nature. Neglected at first by Auguste Comte, such an objective was to play a greater role after his encounter with Clotilde de Vaux around 1842. Like Saint-Simon, Owen, Fourier and their disciples, the creator of Positivism would then start the transformation of his philosophy into a religion¹¹.

The unity of culture was also at stake, a unity that was jeopardized by the growing gap between the exact sciences and other types of cultural productions. In his Esquisse, Condorcet had insisted on the link between religious beliefs, the state of scientific knowledge and the various cultural achievements of a given society. By the end of the Revolution, the same line of thought could be found in Charles Dupuis' De l'Origine de tous les cultes. The utopian socialists' religious preoccupation was an expression of their ambition to restore the fundamental unity of culture that had characterized organic periods such as the Middle Ages. In this respect, Comte would prove more realistic than his utopian forerunners. Positivism was never indeed an attempt to merge the various types of knowledge into a single body of scientific knowledge¹².

Although the founding of new religions was definitively abandoned by the social sciences of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the utopian socialists were again paving the way for some of the social scientists' most fundamental concerns. From Ferdinand Tönnies to Emile Durkheim, the replacement of former tightly bound communities by looser systems of social relations that had occurred during the passage from traditional to industrial societies was a major

concern of sociology. Just as in Saint-Simon's, Owen's and Fourier's writings, the rapidly developing sociological literature was permeated by a dull nostalgia for what had been lost in this passage¹³. Moreover, the relationship between religion, culture and social organization was becoming a major sociological subject. If Max Weber's Protestant ethic and the spirit of Capitalism was fundamentally indebted to the tradition of German historical economics¹⁴, Emile Durkheim's Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse had more to do with the utopian socialists heritage, through the mediation of Auguste Comte.

In an industrial world in which the exact sciences and their technological applications were gradually replacing religion as the ultimate source of spiritual legitimacy, while being unable to retain its emotional appeal, one may even wonder whether the social sciences were not attempting to occupy an intermediary position between pure scientific reason and feelings. The utopian socialists had precisely tried to fill this position at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The synthesis of scientific rigor with emotional fulfillment remained a concern of the social sciences.¹⁵

RESHAPING EDUCATION, FAMILY AND SEXUALITY

For the utopian socialists, science and action were intimately linked. This link was especially present dealing with subjects such as education, family and sexuality. Regarding education and family, Owen and Fourier were more radical than Saint-

Simon, since they proposed a collective upbringing of children that would weaken the traditional family structure. In Fourier's doctrine, this structure would be further threatened by a sexual life allowing for the expression of all types of human passions. Curiously enough, the views expressed in his Nouveau monde amoureux were generally rejected by his disciples, but exerted a profound influence on the Saint-Simonians in the early 1830s.

The emancipation of women was a major concern for the second generation of utopian thinkers that claimed to follow Saint-Simon, Owen and Fourier. Most of the women attracted to utopian socialism because of its promises were soon however disappointed by the superficiality of their male comrades' commitment to their cause. Former Saint-Simonian, Owenite or Fourierist women nevertheless played a fundamental role in the emergence of feminism as a political and social movement¹⁶.

Collective education and women's emancipation were part of a larger agenda aiming at a drastic reshaping of social relations. Consistent with the utopian socialists' condemnation of individualism, such a reshaping was meant to suppress or at least to weaken attachments that could impede the formation of a true collective spirit, from the social prejudices instilled by parents to exclusive love. Was this agenda totalitarian, as has been argued by many authors beginning with Friedrich von Hayek and Hannah Arendt,¹⁷ who often liken the utopian socialists' ideas with the program of twentieth-century Communism? It is difficult to draw conclusions from a comparison between doctrines that were never applied at a large scale and a type of regime that lasted for decades in many countries. One cannot but be struck however

by the contrast between the libertarian tone used by Saint-Simon, Owen, Fourier and their disciples, and the severe discipline of mature Eastern European and Asiatic Communism.

This libertarian tone was all the more surprising since liberty was not invoked as a fundamental value by the founding fathers of utopian socialism and their direct inheritors. They held that a proper social organization would make individual initiative unnecessary. Determinist in essence, their social science would supplant politics and its half-measures, as well as economic liberalism, its egoistic inspiration and its trail of miseries. In this respect, their science was far from Condorcet's conception, which allowed for human free will and action. Both in Europe, where it had first appeared, and in America, where Owen and Fourier made numerous disciples, the history of utopian socialism was characterized by an enduring tension between a determinist vision of history and a more positive assessment of human agency.

SOCIAL EXPERIMENTS AND FAILURES

The wide influence of Saint-Simon's, Owen's, and Fourier's doctrines seems quite comprehensible in retrospect, given the tensions of the early-nineteenth-century European and American societies. Nevertheless this success surprised many of their contemporaries by its extent. On his deathbed, Saint-Simon was surrounded by a few

friends only. By the early 1830s, under the guidance of Saint-Amand Bazard and Prosper Enfantin, Saint-Simonianism had attracted hundreds of engineers, lawyers and physicians, not to speak of the thousands of workers that followed the Saint-Simonian preaching in Paris, Lyon, Metz or Toulouse¹⁸. Luckier than his older counterpart, Owen was able to observe the diffusion of his ideas in England and America. The rise of Fourierism was even more spectacular. By the 1840s, it had become influential in France. The history of American Fourierism was about to begin with the conversion of the Brook Farm community to Phalansterian ideals. Dozens of Phalansteries would be founded in the following years throughout the United States¹⁹.

Following their initiators' preoccupation with social experiments, Saint-Simonians, Owenites and Fourierists tried to create new conditions of life and work. Most of these attempts were however short-lived. Beyond the mere impracticability of general schemes like organizing the working class as a peaceful army ruled by a new type of theocracy, as with the Saint-Simonians, or building harmonious, self-sufficient agrarian communities, as with the Owenites and Fourierists, other reasons accounted for this series of failures. In the Saint-Simonian case, the fundamental ambiguity of the movement played a role. Because of their proposals regarding the modernization of the French banking system, and the construction of railways, the disciples of Saint-Simon had attracted not only utopians dreaming of a new and better world, but also practical minds such as the bankers Emile and Isaac Pereire and the engineer and entrepreneur Paulin Talabot²⁰. Thus, Saint-Simonianism adumbrated both socialism and the type of authoritarian capitalism that would develop during the

Second Empire. The tension generated by the movement's dual nature was not easy to overcome.

On a more general level, utopian socialism was all the more appealing in so far as its promises were in profound accord with the aspirations of its time, particularly with the desire to make the new economic and social competition compatible with the restoration of collective and altruistic values. But once it became clear that these aspirations could as well be pursued using more traditional means such as political action, the decline of the utopian movements was rapid. In France, for instance, the Republican party was able to attract many former utopians in the late 1840s. The same process occurred in the United States where Fourierism gradually lost its relevance as a viable alternative to political activism.

At their apex, utopian socialist movements emphasized practical issues, thus neglecting the scientific ambitions of their founding fathers. This neglect was especially pronounced in America where the creation of communities absorbed the greater part of the available energies. The construction of a new science of man and society remained however an official goal. After the collapse of the utopian socialist movements, some of their old members became involved in scientific societies created for the same purpose. In France, for example, the former Saint-Simonian, Gustave d'Eichthal, became an active member of the Société Ethnologique, created in 1839²¹. Former American Fourierists played in similar role in the American Social Science Association founded in 1865 by the Massachusetts humanitarian reformer Frank Sanborn²². Generally speaking, their contributions to this type of enterprise

remained modest. Utopian socialism played perhaps a greater role as a counterexample than as a direct source of inspiration. Its failures seemed to demonstrate in particular the need to separate reflection and action. After Durkheim and Weber, the split between academic disciplines such as sociology and reformist activism was to serve as a guideline for the further development of the social sciences²³.

Were the utopian socialists the true founding fathers of the nineteenth-century social science? The answer remains ambiguous. On one hand, Saint-Simon, Owen and their followers paved the way for Auguste Comte and his positive sociology by focusing on such problems as the collective history of humanity and the study of society as a system of functions and classes filling these functions. Their focus on class struggle gave inspiration to Marx. On the other hand, their practical contribution to the emerging social sciences remained limited. Their characterization of society was based on general assumptions instead of being built on more specific material such as case studies and surveys. As a whole, one might be tempted to interpret utopian socialism as a kind of prehistory of our contemporary social sciences rather than as an early stage of their history in the strict sense. In raising issues such as the weakening of the social bond or the social importance of religion, Saint-Simon, Owen, and Fourier were probably creating an agenda for sociology rather than answering its questions.

As a more positive way to assess the role played by utopian socialism, one can observe that many of the issues it raised exceeded the scope of the emerging social

sciences. The disciples of Saint-Simon for instance paid attention to the emerging notion of network. Extending their reflections far beyond the transportation networks that were developing at the time, they tended to interpret society itself as a series of interconnected networks.²⁴ The Saint-Simonians were interested in global issues, such as relations between the Occident and the Orient, and they did not take for granted the superiority of Europe over the rest of the world.²⁵ Fourier's interest in sexual liberation would become a major theme of reflection for later social scientists. The rediscovery of Saint-Simon's and Fourier's works in the 1960s was to a large extent a consequence of this evolution.

Finally, the most unruly features of the utopian socialists' doctrines, such as Saint-Simon's or Fourier's cosmologies²⁶, may also be integrated in this positive assessment. Saint-Simonians and Fourierists were included in the notes left by Walter Benjamin for a book he never completed on nineteenth-century Paris.²⁷ The book was intended as a demonstration that Capitalism and the rationalization process it implied had a mythical, almost dream-like dimension. On the eve of the industrial revolution, utopian socialism was perhaps one of the best expression of this mythical dimension, a dimension that was to permeate also the emerging social sciences. If not the transmigration of souls, then the cult of progress and the belief in absolutely positive social facts as well as in permanent historical laws that could throw a light on the future of mankind, were perhaps among those founding myths.

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²³ Antoine Savoye, Bernard Kalaora, Les Inventeurs oubliés. Le Play et ses continuateurs aux origines des sciences sociales, Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 1989.

²⁴ Cf. Pierre Musso, Télécommunications et philosophie des réseaux. La Postérité paradoxale de Saint-Simon, Paris, P.U.F., 1997.

²⁵ Magali Morsy (ed.), Les Saint-simoniens et l'Orient. Vers la Modernité, Aix-en-Provence, Edisud, 1989 ; Philippe Régnier, Les Saint-simoniens en Egypte (1833-1851), Cairo, Amin F. Abdelnour, 1989 ; Ghislaine Alleaume, L'Ecole polytechnique du Caire et ses élèves. La Formation d'une élite technique dans l'Egypte du XIX^e siècle, doctoral dissertation, Lyon, Université de Lyon II, 1993.

²⁶ Michel Nathan, Le Ciel des fouriéristes. Habitants des étoiles et réincarnations de l'âme, Lyon, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1981.

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, Paris capitale du XIX^e siècle. Le Livre des passages, Francfort, 1982, French translation Paris, Cerf, 1989.