In Pursuit of Social Justice: Modern European Socialism, 1850–1940

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—Sharon A Kowalsky

As an ideological movement, socialism has taken on many forms. Its origins can be found in utopian yearnings for a better society that stretch back as far as recorded history. Early philosophers beginning with Plato's *Republic* tried to imagine a more perfect world based on social harmony, communal values and egalitarianism. Some implemented these ideas in small agricultural communities. Often, utopian thinkers, particularly those situated within the Christian context, found their perfect society in their vision of the next world or the afterlife. Modern socialism, in contrast, argued that a utopian society based on communal values could be realized in the present world and on a large scale. It evolved out of the specific historical context of rapid industrialization and urbanization in nineteenth-century Europe and was a product of that environment. Modern socialism emphasized a secular vision of society that focused on improving current conditions by achieving economic equality, particularly for the underprivileged. It sought to promote communal property ownership and equal access to resources. It based its ideas on rationality, natural law and notions of working-class solidarity. It stressed community, social justice and the welfare of one's fellow human beings at a time when it seemed that traditional ways of organizing society were being destroyed and the pursuit of individualism prevailed. Finally, it responded to the failure of other ideological movements to address adequately these issues and concerns. Most supporters of modern socialism came from the lower orders of society, those most directly affected by and least likely to benefit from the transformations brought about by industrialization. Moreover, these groups were underrepresented in the political systems