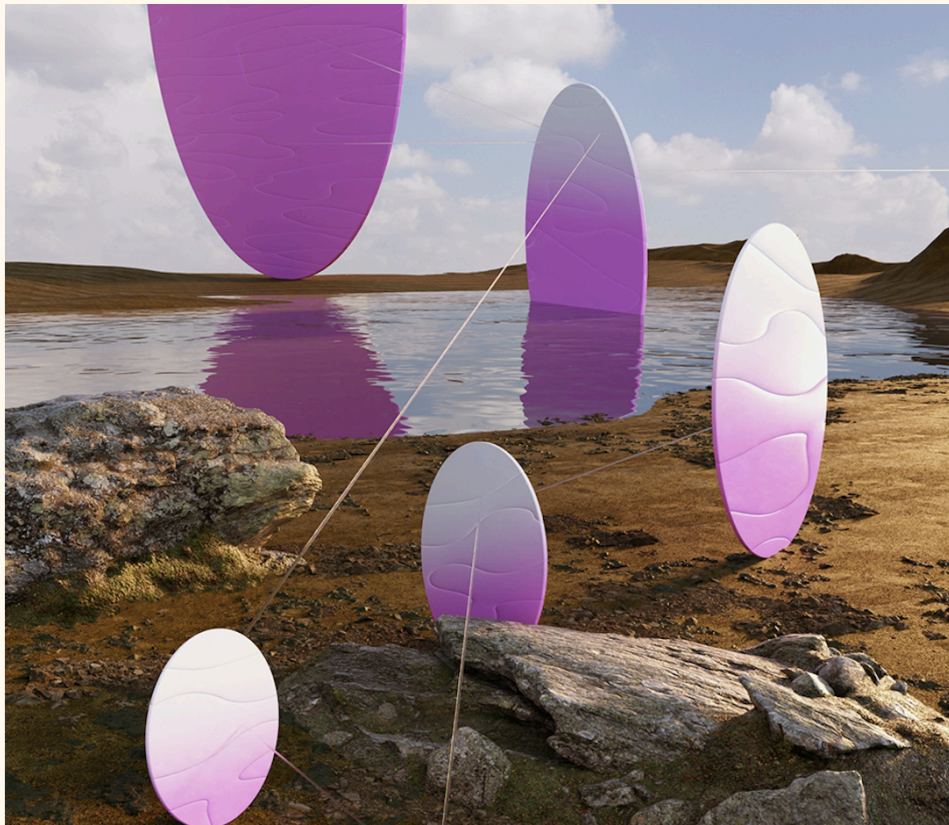


# Saint-Simonism

## Social Utopia at the age of AI

—  
By Jules Padova



Back in the 19th century, in France someone basically said “ the scientific revolution is something amazing, with the sum of knowledge we gain we were able to create a rational and material representation of the world. We now could for example replace the abstract idea of God by the universal law of gravitation (the most fundamental physical principle of the time). This could gradually replace step by step, with clarity the old moral and spiritual principles of religion. What if we could create a philosophy that would use those fundamental scientific

principles to create moral and social principles to answer the newly formed challenges of the industrial revolution?”

And now me, a guy from the 21st century is saying “wait, what if what this guy created could teach us something about how we could handle AI integration into society?”

If that interest you, keep reading

---

Let’s define a bit more formally who this guy was and where this brilliant idea come from:

The "guy" in question was none other than Claude Henri de Rouvroy, better known as the Comte de Saint-Simon, a pioneering French thinker whose ideas left a significant mark on the 19th century. Born into the French nobility, Saint-Simon served in the American War of Independence before returning to France, where he witnessed the dramatic changes brought about by the French Revolution and the rise of industrialization.

Witnessing these changes made him realize the power of science and its ability to fundamentally reshape our understanding of the world. But Saint-Simon saw in the scientific revolution not just a new way of understanding physical phenomena, but a new way of understanding society as well.

Before diving into the ideas of Saint-Simon and his followers let’s try to understand how fundamental the change of the first industrial revolution was at this time.

Picture France in the 19th century, a world undergoing a seismic shift as transformative as a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. The quiet, rural idyll, with its farms and laborers, was fading into the background. In its place, the Industrial Revolution was chugging into view, spewing steam and smoke, and bringing with it changes more dramatic than anyone could have imagined.

The Industrial Revolution wasn't just about the economy. Sure, it changed the way people worked, as farms gave way to factories and plows to power looms. The backbone of France's economy was no longer agriculture, but industry – textile mills, iron works, and later on, railroads. Steam power was the magic that made it all possible, fueling machines that could churn out goods at a pace that would've made an 18th-century craftsman's head spin.

But the impact of the Industrial Revolution went beyond just economics. It transformed the very fabric of society. People left their rural homes and flooded into booming cities, drawn by the promise of work. Yet, the reality they found was often harsh. The cities were crammed and

polluted, the work was tough, low-paid, and dangerous, and the living conditions were far from ideal

Amidst all this upheaval, a new class was rising – the industrial bourgeoisie. These were the factory owners, the entrepreneurs, the ones who held the reins of this new industrial powerhouse. Interestingly for the first time, scientific education was crucial to success.

But the Industrial Revolution didn't just change the way people worked and lived. It also changed the way they thought. This was an era of big questions, soul-searching, and philosophizing. Thinkers like Saint-Simon wrestled with the implications of this new society. How should this world of factories and steam engines be organized? What role should science and technology play in shaping society? How could the fruits of industrialization be shared more equally?

This gave place to many reflections that would start movements like socialism, and positivism. All those in part based on the precursor ideas of Saint-Simon.

Each Industrial Revolution isn't just a seismic shift in technology—it sends waves of deep social change rippling through societies, the full impact of which often take decades to surface and be properly addressed. The rise of a new bourgeoisie in today's terms might drum up images of growing social inequality. But cast your minds back to the context of the times, and you'll see it played a different tune—meritocracy.

In the epochs preceding the revolution, wealth was clutched tightly in the hands of the aristocracy, passing down generations via bloodlines. Only a select few merchants managed to ascend from the agricultural society of the era. This profound shift handed power to those armed with scientific knowledge and a drive to bring their ideas to fruition. It proposed that anyone equipped with the right knowledge and a sound idea could climb the social ladder. As harmonious as this idea was with the recent French Revolution, the reality was yet to catch up.

Enter Saint-Simon. He dreamt of a society woven together by human associations and bonds. To him, the removal of aristocratic privilege, signaling the end of feudalism, was a significant stride towards a fairer social order. He critiqued the life of the aristocracy, lived in opulence without work, as exploiting the nation's resources and the bulk of its population. His vision was one where every individual had the potential for social mobility, their ascent hinging on their contributions to societal betterment.

He saw the industry, representative of meritocracy, as the panacea to societal imbalance. Saint-Simon championed an alliance of all workers and industries, selecting the finest scientists, theologians, artists, lawyers, and rentiers to orchestrate the new social system. He

advocated for industrialists to form associations with their workers, fueled by shared sentiment, transcending individual interests for the common good and public interest. Their fraternal leadership should inspire affection, esteem, and trust.

In his envisaged society, industry and workers would not be "directors" but "managers," steering the nation like a corporate entity. Saint-Simon saw the nation morphing into a vast factory, with each social class executing their expert role. He was also an early advocate for gender equality, asserting that women should be integral to this societal blueprint. Followers of Saint-Simon's ideas championed the feminist cause in the 1830s and supported the first woman to pass the baccalaureate exam in 1861.

Interestingly, Saint-Simon's conception of social class, rooted in merit, meant he didn't push for absolute equality between classes. His stance on spirituality and morality was quite forward-thinking. The moral code and spiritual school he conceived were progressive regarding individual rights yet cautioned against selfishness and extreme individualism. He proposed a morality founded on freedom of conscience, drawn from the principle that "humans must consider themselves as brothers, associate and help each other." However, it should be secular and rational, based on tangible human interests, happiness, and brotherhood.

His moral vision strove to establish a social organization that spurred individuals to serve others with their best efforts. Its cornerstone principle was steering society towards the physical, moral, and intellectual improvement of all, ensuring work for everyone. His conviction was clear—the happiest man is the one who works, and the happiest family is one where all members employ their time usefully. He saw rational education and enriching activities as crucial for the intellectual development of the working class.

When studying Saint-Simon's work, it becomes evident that we are looking at a profound source of inspiration for some of the most influential political and economic systems of the modern era. It's as if we are tracing back the lineage of concepts that continue to shape our world. Would you be able to spot the links?

Marxism's call to unite all workers, for instance, shares roots with Saint-Simon's ideas. The saint-simonian emphasis on unity among workers predates and anticipates Marx's rallying cry.

Then we consider socialism, with its focus on social justice, improved working conditions, and gender equality. Saint-Simon's advocacy for a society that genuinely values its labor force and advocates for equal rights can be seen mirrored in these principles.

The technocratic movement, which advocates for decision-making and problem-solving by specialists in various fields, also draws from Saint-Simon's ideology. He envisaged a society

steered by the knowledge of scientific and engineering experts, an idea that has resonated through the centuries to our contemporary technocratic trends.

Looking at the European Union, we can spot the threads of Saint-Simon's dreams woven into its fabric. His aspiration for a peaceful Europe, united through a free international market to prevent war, is strikingly similar to the core ideals that underpin the EU.

Lastly, Saint-Simon's perspective on government intervention aligns with the core tenets of the free market economy. His belief was that the government's role should be limited to ensuring free trade, supporting industrial prosperity, maintaining favorable market conditions, and providing public infrastructure.

In essence, traces of Saint-Simon's philosophical DNA can be found in Marxism, socialism, technocracy, the principles of the European Union, and free market economics. It's a testament to Saint-Simon's timeless influence that his ideas continue to reverberate in the structures of our societies today.

### **The robots are coming....**

You and I are in the same boat, AI is coming for us... While I believe this revolution will be the greatest revolution humanity ever witnessed, it is undeniable that we are at its beginning.

As Saint-Simon saw the scientific revolution completely modifying our understanding of the world, impacting society through the industrial revolution, we too are in the middle of a radical change.

Since the beginning of our shared story, humanity has aimed to improve its life and reach its goals through technology and environmental modification. The development of various languages, writing systems, basic automation tools (like the weaving loom), and recently computer programs have amplified humanity's power over its destiny.

Today, we stand on the precipice of a new epoch, the age of intelligence—a time when intelligence becomes a manageable resource within our grasp. Put in simpler terms: we are creating intelligence.

Our capacity for reasoning and understanding, combined with our social skills, has made humanity capable of planetary intelligence (the stage we are in). While we've remained the only species able to perform this kind of large-scale intelligent work – this is about to change.

ChatGPT and other large language models (LLMs) are only the beginning of the huge productivity boost humanity will benefit from. We are still at the age of very specialized AI systems; for example, LLMs are not "intelligent" per se; they're only very good statistical models able to "understand" how to use language.

But as the specialized AI models develop, more general reasoning models will too. There is no reason to think that these models won't reach human intelligence or even surpass it. This comes with significant challenges, but the benefits could be limitless. Solving our world's most important problems, generating tremendous wealth, and empowering each one of us.

The rise of AI in society, initially specialized, giving productivity boosts and replacing some jobs, will lead to a second much more drastic wave as reasoning models develop and become trusted.

As we enter the first wave, we must build the foundation for a new societal organization, taking into account the new power shifts, wealth created, relationship with work and machines, and problem-solving possibilities. If you see a link between these elements and socialism, technocracy, global cooperation, you might start to grasp the link with Saint-Simon.

Apart from the productivity boost, some jobs will be gone forever. This is the big problem of the industrial revolution, the transition between displaced jobs and new jobs is often hard and creates critical social issues. If there's anything we can learn from history, it's that this transition needs to be planned. AI job displacement will give us the chance, with the increased wealth created, to work less, and more on things that we care about. But the completely replaced jobs will need retraining, and this transition creates a critical social and political issue.

Alongside working and economic changes, a power shift will likely occur. You likely live in a form of democracy, more or less individualistic, but it has some form of democracy at its core.

The reason to explain this is fairly simple, it works best. For millennia, empires and kingdoms have been administered from a very centralized form of government, either by an oligarchy (where elites govern) or an emperor/king. This was the best known way to manage and rule over large portions of territory. Athenian democracy or other similar forms worked fairly well but were limited in scale. Even if Louis XIV in France wanted to instate a democratic system, it simply wasn't possible. Technology speaking, the speed of information transfer was too slow to keep an entire population roughly up to date and take decisions in a decentralized way.

With information technology developing during the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, democracies emerged. As the information technology reached a high level of development, political systems

like in the Soviet Union became possible. A highly centralized decision-making political body and administration, with small personal freedom.

One of the reasons why the Soviet Union lost over the United States (a very decentralized political system) is that given the information technology of the time, the US was simply better at making decisions. The instinct of thousands of relatively well-informed individuals through free markets and the knowledge of farmers to decide their production was simply better than a planned economy.

But all of this could change again very soon. Democracy has already shown its limitations in dealing with advanced technology or large-scale problems, but it could be outperformed in many of its strengths by AI.

The rising power of AI allows it to make better predictions than humans. Nowadays, these types of predictions are limited to specific fields like advertisements, medical imagery, irrigation, and economy but the list keeps growing.

If there is something to take away from this, it is that more data equals better predictions. This implies that an organization like a government with powerful AI models and huge data can make better decisions than through a democratic process. It's already the case in specific instances but with bigger data /and more powerful systems, it will extend to more and more areas.

These systems would be incredible to help us make better large-scale, complex, and faster decisions, but they wouldn't replace a democratic process for more personal and social issues, right? Here again, AI might have an edge. Some AI models are already better at knowing us than we do. Some AI models have been able to deduce people's sexual orientation with simple pictures; there are many examples of these edge cases where AI knows more about us than we do. But imagine what will be possible in the following decades, with sensors in your body and even more data on your behavior.

AI might be in a place to make better decisions at most levels in society. Sounds scary? Don't worry, it does for most humans, a sign that this won't happen anytime soon. But its integration into democracy will be crucial to make better decisions and deal with the growing complexity of our problems.

Paradoxically, AI might empower individuals. Some researchers like Yann Lecun expect a new enlightenment with the multiplication of AI agents.

While centralized systems will probably be amazing at making decisions and predictions on a large scale, what if AI agents worked for you?

Several AI agents working for you, sourcing the best news and summarizing information based on your needs and interests, some analyzing the market for a competitive edge for your business, while you ideate with your personal AI brand assistant on what the next article on your website should be.

While you are working, your children are at school working on their assignments. An AI model analyzes their work and gives them advice on how to improve. When they discover a new concept, they learn to formulate the instructions and important questions to understand so their AI agent can give them personalized explanations.

Imagine if all of this runs at a low cost so anyone can have access to it. Imagine the huge economic impact of having "free qualified employees" no matter your skills in management, the level of development of your country, or your social status.

Each individual's ability to understand the world, build projects, make better decisions would be increased by several orders of magnitude.

The rise of AI in our societies will provoke profound changes, challenging our political structures, wealth distribution policies, create social tensions over power shifts, job displacement, and a fast-moving environment. This will be for humans a chance to improve drastically every corner of their lives, but it will come with huge challenges and decisions.

Let me ask this question again, what if the thoughts of Saint-Simon could give us some clue to design a better social system or even a social utopia?

## **Social Utopia:**

Picture a social utopia, a world where every human lives a perfect life, fulfilled with their relationships and success, living in peace with each other. They've struggled enough in their life but not too much, they've had the chance to contribute in each of the ways they wanted, and have access to unlimited resources.

This is essentially the imaginary world that Thomas More envisioned in the 16th century. Witnessing the same industrial revolution as Saint-Simon, Utopian Socialists used the thoughts of Saint-Simon to create a system that answered the rising social concerns of the time,

including poverty, oppression, and vast wealth inequality while trying to achieve the dream of Thomas More using science and technology.

As we've discussed, AI will create a handful of challenges but it will also bring tremendous opportunities, an incredible amount of wealth created, an increased amount of power for societies to understand and manage their problems while giving individuals even more resources. What if we could try to use the newly gained resources to solve the newly created problems to form a positive feedback loop?

Let's first look at the challenges brought by AI in the workplace. As we discussed, AI will allow huge productivity boosts and empowerment. This could create large productivity boosts, giving people the freedom to automate and spend more time on the tasks they prefer.

Humans are best at tasks that involve creativity and social interaction. AI could also be good at those tasks but it probably won't be desirable by society. This increase in flexibility and preferred tasks will first increase productivity and increase work satisfaction and fulfillment. The automation of the annoying or boring parts of each person's job could allow two choices.

Do more of the fulfilling part or do the same amount of fulfilling work and simply not work on the formerly boring part. Both are society's choices that might differ from economic sector to country. I believe Saint-Simon's principles could help us make a choice here, as he wrote those decisions have to take the greater good's interest and help to give better living conditions to humans. I believe one of the best ways of doing this would be to choose the second option. To maximize the freedom and life conditions of the productivity-enhanced jobs while minimizing the hard part of the transition. Let me explain.

The displaced jobs will create complicated social tensions, it will require a society-scale effort to smooth the transition. I would sum up the possible effort by 3 measures:

- 1) Improved education with AI. People's jobs getting displaced due to AI will force them to gain new qualifications. The current educational system in most countries is outdated. To face the growing need for "lifelong education" investing in education should be a priority for societies in the following decades. While some of the displaced jobs could be repurposed as teachers, this perspective is limited. A need for greater efficiency will also be needed. As described earlier, AI could allow a more personalized and efficient educational system. This newly gained advantage could be mainly used for the

retraining of adults, this would allow us to focus the usage of human teachers for children, which requires more human contact.

- 2) A reduction of working time. As mentioned above this would create more time for personal activities, passionate life, hobbies, and personal projects. Indeed, a reduction in working time is correlated with an increase in productivity and overall happiness. If people work less and focus only on the “human” part of the job, more people will be needed for human jobs. The idea of a 4-day week with a reduction in the number of hours has been tested several times in different countries and has shown very positive results. Some companies are already running on this system. – This kind of measure and the creation of new jobs should be able to fulfill most of the need for displaced workers.
  
- 3) The amount of wealth created during this transition should be captured by two things; first wages, so that the decrease in working time doesn’t lower the wages. And second, society-wide social measures; if you remember well the earlier industrial revolutions like the one that Saint-Simon witnessed taught us that transitions are hard and have many unexpected consequences. To minimize the social consequences and unexpected outcomes, we should build measures on the most certain aspects of the revolution to minimize its potential unexpected effects.

We are fairly certain that this revolution will bring tremendous wealth gain and we also know that it will change people’s work and free time, while producing power shifts that could destabilize parts of society. The most important thing during complicated transitions is to avoid a portion of the population's condition of life deteriorating. Indeed during the first industrial revolution people fled from the countryside hoping for a better life and found miserable working conditions and inhumane work. This created much suffering and heavily slowed down the benefits of the technological advancement, reserving it to some privileged classes. What is needed is the creation of “social safety nets” to avoid portions of the population “falling” and losing quality of life (moral & material). One of the potential material measures would be UBI (Universal Basic Income), allowing to lift the fear of losing material wealth and being forced to work. This could hugely facilitate the transition, help unexpected social impact, and simplify the potential existential and moral questions that could emerge during the transition.

As Saint-Simon thinkers described very well, the technological revolution should be in favor of the greater good, not neglecting the well-being of the population or letting individualistic mindsets slow down the progress of society.

While those sets of measures are probably imperfect, I believe they highlight the directions of actions that should be taken to maximize the benefits of the AI revolution.

Politically speaking, the same type of measures is going to be needed to balance the newly gained capacity and society's choices.

Saint-Simon advocated for a union of all industrialists to administrate the country, while gathering the best scientists, theologians, artists, lawyers, and rentiers to organize the new social system. While this can be broadly described as a technocratic system, I believe this should be analyzed as a "balanced technocratic system". Let me explain:

The first part of his system advocates for a chamber with the biggest industrialists to administrate the country. This is based on the idea that industry drives humanity forward, meaning that its biggest representatives should work to ensure its development. Saint-Simon adds that its members should be motivated by the country's interest, not by their own interest. While we all know this is highly idealistic, it was the reasoning behind Saint-Simon's blueprint. This part of the political system would be highly technocratic, meaning that only the "specialists" would be present and would "administrate". I believe the word 'administrate' has a lot of importance here. It describes the idea of management, solving routine problems, optimizing the economy, and realizing infrastructure projects.

The other part of Saint-Simon's system included an "inventor chamber", the one we described earlier. This chamber would be responsible for the proposal of projects to innovate (create laws), to improve life, and solve major problems. Its multidisciplinary nature makes it ready for debate and complex law design. This chamber should take care of the new social system. This is the democratic aspect of this technocratic system.

If we sum this up, we have a political instance that takes care of the large-scale economic, environmental and infrastructural administration, and another one that takes care of the creation of the laws, aka that solves problems with a social dimension; which is best solved through a democratic process.

I believe that the analysis we just did of Saint-Simon's political proposal creates an amazing blueprint for a political system that would balance AI's power to solve problems and humanity's desire for social debate.

Let's revise this blueprint with the possibilities offered by AI:

Each year society gathers more data and AI models improve their analytic skills (and soon their reasoning) along with many more different types of data input (visual, audio, textual). As we discussed earlier, AI can make incredible predictions with large-scale data and create many opportunities for actions that humans hadn't even considered possible.

As I write this article in 2023, the world is going through a moderate wave of inflation, primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on global industrial output. Now let's imagine that the same thing happens in a few decades. Instead of a government and several companies making decisions, a centralized AI system is in charge. It has a certain level of control over the country's supply chain logistics, bank loan policies, and several macroeconomic levers. By its actions during the pandemic, it could accurately predict the evolution of the pandemic, the most effective sanitary measures to take, and predict its impact on the economy. Through its continuous actions and recommendations, 100,000 deaths were avoided and post-Covid inflation reduced by 80%.

This scenario is not out of this world; actually, I took a very plausible example. Some simpler versions of these tools have been used during the pandemic.

Now let's imagine society going through this scenario in 15 years. Should we limit ourselves from this gain because we prefer a slower, elected executive government?

This is not a simple question; it involves many ethical considerations and debates (as establishing a system would be a social debate). But Saint-Simon's philosophy could give us some clues; Saint-Simon thought that this chamber should administer for the greater good of the country to maintain the best economic environment. An AI system has the advantage of having only the greater good as its interest (if well-designed) and understanding the "pragmatic state" of society that Saint Simon was talking about.

We could imagine a national AI executive system in charge of optimizing various economic factors, optimizing investments in health, road, electricity infrastructure, analyzing agricultural output to optimize irrigation and fertilizer while keeping an eye on the environment (population of each species, forest health, soil acidity, air pollution). These are many problems that are so complex and vast that a human mind struggles to comprehend, let alone continuously take care of.

Should we restrain society from all this progress and development? Saint Simon's followers would argue that a system like this is a chance and the best possible form of technocracy (for

the greater good, expert, smarter). They would argue that this contributes to human development and allows a better environment for society to have social debates.

We have to imagine this system monitored by a human commission and working with an executive government and parliament for the democratic social debate.

But as the reasoning system develops, democracy could also take advantage of AI.

This might sound like science fiction, but bear with me here;

Imagine your country's political structure being like this (western-centric version):

A head of government representing the majority alliance from the parliament and his executive team. They work with the parliament for every social debate and law creation. But as democracy in a large country is complicated, the executive team is assisted by a special democratic AI system. A system that is able to communicate with every citizen, listen to their complaints, needs, what they are happy about and what they would like to change, and summarize this to each member of the executive team. This allows the government to better understand people's problems and requests. But this AI system isn't just a simple interface through which citizens communicate their needs to the government, it also represents them. Meaning that the system is also able to present concrete measures that have been

taken by the government to solve your specific problems. It is also able, in some specific cases, based on general national policy of the executive government and some recommendations of the executive AI system, to take specific local actions. Note that these actions would be based on the political opinion of the executive government. This AI system would be an extension of direct democracy.

An executive AI system, meaning the general economic, environmental, and infrastructure framework, would be isolated from any political opinion (as opposed to the AI democratic system).

And a general parliament. Each MP could rely on AI to better understand the population's wishes and what decisions to take based on their political lines. But these would be party-developed systems, not national systems.

While a system like this might seem like science fiction, it could help solve some of direct democracy's flaws and weaknesses.

The executive AI would manage a long-term vision and continuously improve the general social framework in a non-political way. Doing something like this is currently impossible in many

direct democracies. The AI democratic system would help the population feel more heard and help materialize political decisions on their lives and problems. It would also help reduce the issue of the political body being disconnected from the realities of society, which, as society gets larger and more complex, becomes complicated for a single party to understand. These AI system ideas that I just laid down could help solve most of democracy's critical issues currently debated in Western countries.

We strayed far from our idea of laying down the blueprint of a balanced AI integration into human politics.

Let's sum up: AI will bring immense benefits to humanity on an even larger scale than each previous industrial revolution, but it will also have a significant impact, including social ones which are critical. Analyzing Saint Simon's thought teaches us that the benefits should be for the greater good, produce life and social improvement, push society forward in reaching a social utopia and thus minimize its negative effects. This implies that we need to take three main political measures to avoid complex and painful transitions and to create a positive feedback loop: 1) Improved education with AI 2) Reduction of working time 3) Various "social safety net" policies like UBI.

We then saw with an example of how AI could produce enormous gains if integrated into the political system. But we wondered if it was desirable. To answer this, we tried to design a balanced system preserving the need for social debate while using humanity's new technology to accelerate society's progress.

AI presents a chance for humanity to get closer than it has ever been to a Social Utopia. But for this to happen, it needs the right principles for its integration. Saint Simon's thought, I believe, captures many of the challenges that an industrial revolution brings and I hope that my contemporary reading of his work convinced you that AI integration needs strong principles and planning. But let's not forget that the potential benefits could outweigh the many challenges that we will face and bring us one giant leap closer to social utopia.

JP