

The History Guide

Lectures on Modern European Intellectual History

Lecture 21

The Utopian Socialists: Charles Fourier (1)

By 1825, European society had undergone several shock waves of change. The transformation was set in motion by two immense revolutions: one set the pace for political change in the 19th century, while the other radically transformed the nature of economic man. As we have seen, the French Revolution made change the order of the day and helped to instill in man -- at least some men -- the notion that change was somehow both good and desirable. Occurring at the same time, although with a varied pace depending upon what European nation we are observing, an Industrial Revolution worked its wonders on nations, social classes and individuals (see [Lecture 17](#)). Although there were those thinkers who were critical of the Industrial Revolution and wanted to return to some pre-modern state of existence, there were other critics who saw that industry and industrial capitalism were here to stay. For these individuals, it was a forward-looking socialism which would help make sense of all these changes for the benefit of mankind. However, it is curious to note that following the Napoleonic period, a strong wave of conservative reaction set in across most of Europe. This is not that surprising since most monarchs feared what another French Revolution and another Napoleon could do in their country.

The first quarter of the 19th century was also marked by an artistic and cultural phenomenon known as Romanticism (see [Lecture 16](#)). The Romantic artist idealized medieval society and in general, exhibited a strong distaste for rationalism of any flavor. The Romantic also had no sympathy for the atomized individualism that was so prominent among the *philosophes*. Therefore, Romanticism also lent itself to conservative and reactionary purposes. But since Romanticism also meant the attempt to break away from established norms and standards in art, conduct and philosophy, it could also seem to have served the purposes of liberation that was embraced by the radical and revolutionary socialist.

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Romanticism was so complex a movement that historians have never reached a consensus regarding definitions or meanings. Romantics were liberals, conservatives, rationalists, idealists, Catholics, atheists, revolutionaries and reactionaries. Their essential message, however, was that the imagination of the individual should determine the form and content of all art. Such an attitude ran counter to the judgments of the Enlightenment. The *philosophes* attacked the Church because it

blocked human Reason. The Romantics attacked the *philosophes* because they had turned man into a soulless thinking machine, a robot. Christianity had formed a matrix into which medieval man found understanding. The Enlightenment replaced the medieval matrix with the matrix of Newtonian physics. For the Romantics, the result of all this was the demotion of the individual. Imagination, sensitivity, feeling, spontaneity and freedom were stifled, choked to death. Man must liberate himself. Like [Rousseau](#), one of their spiritual fathers, the individual must rediscover true freedom. Habits, rules, traditions and standards imposed by rational society must be lifted. Man must be liberated.

The *philosophes* tried to demonstrate that all men are the same because they are endowed with Reason. But where the *philosophes* saw commonality, the Romantics saw diversity and uniqueness. Discover yourself, they said, express yourself. Play your own music, write your own poetry, paint your own personal vision: live, love or suffer in your own way. Whereas as the 18th century *philosophe* would have agreed with [Kant](#) when he said, "Sapere Aude! Dare to Know!," the Romantics took up the battle cry, "Dare to be! Dare to be yourself" The Romantics were rebels and they knew it. They dared to be themselves. And they were most passionate about their subjectivism, their emphasis on the introspective self. After all, had not Rousseau's [Confessions](#) begun with the following words:

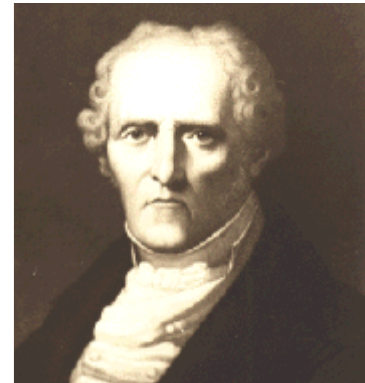
I am commencing an undertaking, hitherto without precedent and which will never find an imitator. I desire to set before my fellows the likeness of a man in all the truth of nature, and that man myself. Myself alone! I know the feelings of my heart, and I know men. I am not made like any of those I have seen. I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence. If I am not better, at least I

am different.

For the Romantic, it was poetry which revealed the highest truth. Poetry could do what rational analysis and geometric calculation could not. Poetry could speak to the heart, clarify life's mysteries, and bring the imagination out of the soul. "O for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts," said [John Keats](#) (1795-1821). "Bathe in the waters of life," said [William Blake](#) (1757-1827). The Romantics gave European culture an antidote to the excessive rationalism of the 18th century. Intensely subjective and introspective, the Romantics discovered the soul behind the mind.

It was in the context of the Romantic movement, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, that the Utopian Socialists made their appearance upon the historical stage. The three main Utopian Socialists -- Charles Fourier, Robert Owen and Henri de Saint-Simon -- differed from one another in a number of fundamental ways but they had enough in common to justify talking about them collectively. They all lived at approximately the same time: only twelve years separated the oldest (Saint-Simon) from the youngest (Fourier). All were alive between 1770 and 1825 and they all did their most influential work during the first quarter of the 19th century. Although it was Marx and Engels who eventually labeled these socialists as utopian (as outlined in [THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO](#)), they were not utopian in the sense that [Sir Thomas More](#) certainly was. The Utopian Socialists believed that their ideal societies could be established in the immediate future. More, on the other hand, could only admit that the island called Utopia was an ideal society, but also that the only way England or Europe could find its utopia was to go back in time rather than forward. This much said, the label utopian has been accepted but not necessarily because historians have agreed with the judgment of Marx and Engels. The real reason why Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen are Utopian Socialists is because their thought closely resembles that of the religious sectarian, the recent convert, the visionary and the Romantic. It might also be added that for the modern, the ideas of the Utopian Socialist also appear to have been formulated by fanatics. This is perhaps a result of the fact that they announced their plans for an ideal society with the zeal of the religious prophet.

Appearing as they did in the first quarter of the 19th century, it is necessary to identify the Utopian Socialists according to how perceptively they understood and dealt with the massive challenge of industrial society. In this regard, it was [CHARLES FOURIER](#) (1772-1837) who seems to have been the most utopian of the Utopian Socialists. What I mean by this is that although Fourier was aware of what was happening in England as a result of the Industrial Revolution, he rejected industrialism wholesale. He despised *laissez-faire* liberalism and the factory system not because of what effects they might have on human society, but because he believed that industrial society was a passing phase. He saw no need to rectify the dangers inherent in industrialism -- he simply went beyond industrialism by ignoring it. Visionaries can do such things, you know.



As a visionary, Fourier's ideas seem quite fantastical and without ground in reality. Indeed, there is much in Fourier's writing that is pure nonsense. Yes, like some of the representatives of the early French communist movement, Fourier exhibits that almost characteristic pretension of the visionary: contradictory, confused, repetitive, chaotic and, of course, long-winded. Reading Fourier after having read Marx and Engels, Fourier comes off as a confused thinker. For instance, Fourier's passion for numbers led him to predict that the ideal world he was helping to create would last 80,000 years, 8,000 of them in an era of Perfect Harmony in which:

- androgynous plants would copulate
- six moons would orbit the earth
- the North Pole would be milder than the Mediterranean
- the seas would lose their salt and become oceans of lemonade
- the world would contain 37 million poets equal to Homer, 37 million mathematicians equal to Newton and 37 million dramatists equal to Molière, although "these are approximate estimates"
- every woman would have four lovers or husbands simultaneously

It may be difficult to surmount these "difficulties" in Fourier's thought but I think it would be wrong to pass Fourier off as nothing more than an absurd eccentric. After all, even [Benjamin Franklin](#) (1706-1790) was a bit odd: he believed that men could extend their life spans indefinitely simply by the power of mind over matter. If one is able to wade through the near endless nonsense which runs rampant through Fourier's writings, one will find that he does offer even the modern reader some fresh and somewhat audacious views of the human condition. If his proposals seem rather extraordinary if not bizarre by modern standards, his insights into human society and individual psychology remain quite perceptive.

Fourier was a relatively isolated thinker. We cannot trace the origin of his ideas with any accuracy. He had no formal academic training and claimed to be bored with the discourses of the philosophers. Working as a traveling salesman during the day and scribbling away in the evenings, he was mocked and ridiculed by his critics. He had no meaningful contacts with any political organizations nor did his ideas correspond in any clear way to either the early French communists or the British democratic radicals.

This is not to say that we must accept Fourier's claim of originality or epoch-making genius either. Fourier tells us that his ideas had tremendous implications for the future. In his parable, "The Four Apples," Fourier sees history guided by four apples. The first two -- Adam and Helen of Troy -- were the bad apples. The good apples, on the other hand, were Newton and yeah, you may have guessed it, Fourier himself. Newton had discovered the physical laws of universal attraction: it was up to Fourier, so Fourier the illiterate shopkeeper tells us, to discover the laws of *passional attraction*. These ideas aside, some of what Fourier says does reflect certain rather typical Enlightenment themes. For instance, Reason and Nature were key terms in his writings. He called himself the "Messiah of Reason," and, like Rousseau, he criticized bourgeois society for having created an unnatural civilization. Fourier proposed a completely non-repressive society in which basic human drives would not be repressed but expressed and cultivated.

Fourier detested the English for their rapidly emerging industrial society and for men like [Adam Smith](#) (1723-1790), [David Ricardo](#) (1772-1832), [Thomas Malthus](#) (1766-1834) and other political economists who had done so much to rationalize that system. He held in special contempt the rationally calculating individualism of the [utilitarians](#). They were too intellectual, too rational. In their place, Fourier foresaw a community tied together by the bonds of emotion. Thus [Bentham's](#) system, designed as it was to repress human drive and will, was both wrong and impossible. Human nature, Fourier believed, was created by God and organized society should respect that and not try to fight it. Neither could Fourier accept Rousseau's concept of the General Will, nor Robespierre, nor the Reign of Terror, nor even the Jacobins.

Charles Fourier was born into a well-established family of cloth merchants and spent the bulk of his life engaged in commerce. But from an early age, so he tells us, he rebelled against his work, lamenting that it was his fate to be "participating in the deceitful activities of merchants and brutalizing myself in the performance of degrading tasks." He spent his early years in Lyons where he observed the efforts of the silk workers to organize themselves. Here too he observed the rampant commercial speculation, the cycles of inflation and industrial stagnation that prevailed when the free market economy was re-established under the Directory.

Fourier wanted to elevate the status of manual labor, to rescue it from a long-standing tradition of degradation and denigration. But while Fourier was interested in the rational reorganization and efficiency of labor, he by no means accepted the bourgeois work ethic or the older Judeo-Christian notion that work is unavoidably toilsome. For Fourier, all manual labor was arduous and irksome -- whether in the factory, workshop or field, the plight of the laboring population was intolerably dehumanizing. He believed, on the other hand, that it was possible to make all work into play, to make it pleasurable and desirable and deeply satisfying, both physically and mentally. This was perhaps the one vision of Fourier's thought that most captivated other socialist thinkers of the 19th century, including Marx and Engels.

The device which Fourier believed would make possible this non-repressive social cohesion, this Eden of joyous labor, he termed the *phalanstere*. A typically untranslatable concept, the term was coined by Fourier to suggest the ancient Greek phalanx, where men were tightly linked together, forming a highly interdependent and impenetrable fighting unit. Fourier's phalanx was to become a self-contained community housing 1,620 members with a myriad of subdivisions designed to encourage a dynamic interplay of various human passions. Why 1,620? Well, Fourier had determined that there are 810 different psychological types -- if you multiply this by two (male and female), you arrive at a figure of 1,620. Here the *Law of Passional Attractions* would be allowed to operate unfettered for the first time in history. What Newton had done for physics, Fourier had done for human society. And of course, Fourier believed his discovery to be much more important than Newton's.

There are twelve fundamental passions: five of the senses (touch, taste, hearing, sight and smell); four of the soul (friendship, love, ambition and parenthood); and three that he called distributive. The first eight passions are self-explanatory. It is the distributive passions that deserve our closer attention.

First, *la Papillone* refers to the love of variety. A worker quickly tires of one kind of task, just as lovers, in spite of their initial attraction, soon find themselves looking elsewhere. Fourier held Christianity in deep contempt because it made people feel guilty when they pursued their natural desire for variety in work or in sex. For the same reasons, he also hated Adam Smith's vision of a society of specialists, doing the same thing over and over all in the name of the division of labor. Whatever the productive advantages of the Smith's liberal political economy, the fact remained, according to

Fourier, that it created only stunted and repressed human beings. Society should strive to eliminate all tedious or unpleasant jobs, learning, if possible, to do without the products derived from such labor.

The second of the distributive passions, *la Cabaliste*, had to do with rivalry and conspiracy. While in previous societies this passion caused many problems, in the phalanx it would be put to good use. Productive teams would compete with one another to produce the most delicious peaches or the best pair of shoes. The need to compete would satisfy a natural passion for all men, by nature, are competitive. And the harmful aspects of competitive commerce in civilization would not be reproduced because production would keep the overall good of society in mind, rather than encouraging individual profit in the market.

Finally, *la Composite*, the distributive passion which Fourier considered the most beautiful of all. Nearly impossible to translate into reality, by *la Composite*, Fourier seems to have meant a combination of two or more different varieties of passions -- the sharing of a good meal (senses) in good company (soul) while conspiring (*la Cabaliste*) to arrange a sexual orgy with the couple at the next table. This suggests some of the special interest scholars took in Fourier in the 1960s. He was an ardent advocate of sexual liberation and a staunch defender of sexual preferences that were clearly not accepted by religion or society. He believed that the only sexual activity that could be forbidden involved pain or force. He was willing to accept sadism and masochism among consenting partners as well as sodomy, lesbianism, homosexuality, pederasty, bestiality, fetishism, sex between close relatives -- any sexual activity, in others words, that satisfied man's natural needs. Fourier was also a radical feminist. He considered the position of women in his society as a form of slavery. In one famous passage, he set it down that the level of any civilization could be determined by the extent to which its women had been liberated. On the other hand, Fourier did not advocate the equality of the sexes for the simple reason that there were real differences between the sexes. He rejected patriarchy and familial conditions in the phalanx were based on a structure entirely unknown in western civilization. He believed that the existing family structure was partly responsible for the subjugation of women. The family turned people exclusively inward to spouse and children, rather than outward to society.

Fourier's vision, together with his criticism of the existing system, places him as one of the most inspired prophets of 19th century socialism. His remarkable psychological insights, such as his championing of brief spells and variety in work, his quickness to see oppression no matter how veiled, and his penetrating concern with character formations and problems, links him to modern educational theory, the emancipation of women and even personnel management.

Fourier can also be described as a brilliant exponent of the idea of alienation, a concern which we will find fully developed in Marx, or as an early theoretician of the affluent society, a theme later developed by the American economist, John Kenneth Galbraith. His sometimes nonsensical statements aside, Fourier's ideas do make some sense when placed alongside the more advanced ideas of a [Karl Marx](#), [Sigmund Freud](#) or [Herbert Marcuse](#), the critic of the one-dimensional society of the 1960s. His vision that mankind's existence is somehow false or repressive, was certainly taken up again by later thinkers, of course, with quite different conclusions.

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