Charles Fourier Prefigures Our Total Refusal

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Fall, 2003

Issue #12 of Internationale Situationniste reported that, during a general strike in Paris on March 10, 1969, a group identified only as the "Guy-Lassac Street Barricaders" erected a handmade bronze-coated plaster statue of Charles Fourier. The new monument was placed on the empty pedestal where his statue had stood before being torn down during the Nazi Occupation of the 1940s. Within a day, however, French security forces had restored control to the street and the technical service of the Paris prefecture tore the Fourier statue down; like the Nazis, the French government obviously regarded the presence of this early nineteenth-century utopian writer to be a distinct threat to public order.

Arguably, Charles Fourier was one of the most visionary of the first-generation anti-capitalists. An embittered traveling textile salesman, Fourier reacted angrily to the ways in which robber barons and tyrants had hijacked the most revolutionary aspects of the Enlightenment into creating bigger cages and longer chains; the alienating tedium of work, the criminal waste of overproduction, and the ugly violence of destitution and class oppression multiplied rather than diminished under this new world order, and Fourier's constant criticism earned him the distinction of having been imprisoned by the Jacobins during the French Revolution as well as having been spied upon by the secret police of Napoleon and the Bourbon Restoration.

Fourier was disgusted by the degree to which people's lives could be ruined by an emerging class of professional profiteers and financial speculators- "the progress of civilization is real enough," he said with a sneer, "but it is progress in the art of legalizing and multiplying every conceivable disorder." In some ways,

he predicted the rise of neo-liberalism in our time, calling it "an art for devouring the future" developed by capitalists through wide-spread "fiscal trickery, systems of extortion, indirect bankruptcy, speculation on anticipated revenue" and of "encouragement given to commercial plundering and rascality." Fourier prognosticated that the day would come when industrialists would "share in the authority of governments and spread everywhere the frenzy of gambling in public funds." In short, civilization was a monstrosity that needed to be overcome.

Historically, Fourier was reacting to the boom of urban industrial-commercial enterprise that burst over Western Europe between 1760 and 1830, a boom that had done so at the expense of the individual's freedom, imagination, spontaneous creativity, and sensibilities. There was no progressive moral revolution that accompanied the violent changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution, and the old, pre-industrial codes of virtue and ethics had become inextricably complicit in the crass utilitarianism and egomaniacal materialism of laissez-faire bourgeois-liberal domination.

In search of a solution, Fourier imagined decentralized, semi-rural agrarian-artisanal cooperatives founded upon principles of direct democracy and mutual aid. This scheme for a revolutionary reorganization of life on all planes of existence was the subject of his wonderfully weird first book, Theory of the Four Movements (1808), which might be best characterized as a combination of philosophy, cosmogony, industrial psychology, science fiction, and prophecy. In the pages of this great utopian text, Fourier vigorously condemned capitalist markets, bureaucratic excrescence, the oppression of women, and suffocation of desire by the leviathans of industrial civilization.

To address these wrongs, he proposed a complex system of worker self-management, locally autonomous voluntary associations, and the restoration of existential meaning to daily chores. The goal of this system was "universal harmony," a near-hallucinatory level of sensual creation and gratification that would emerge from intentional communities. The paths toward Harmony would inevitably lead to the evolutionary overcoming of industrial capitalism: animals would learn to play musical instruments, stars will copulate and spray us all with their sexual fluids, weather patterns will shift, new moons will revolve around the earth, the chemical composition of the oceans would change, and human bodies begin to mutate.

I suspect that Fourier may not have intended that people read his Theory of the Four Movements as literal, instrumental prescriptions for social change. What his book did offer, however, was a glimpse of what unleashed passion and imagination could produce if you refused to let your mind be limited by the existing orders of knowledge and institutions of power. Woven throughout Theory of the Four Movements is the obstinate commitment to permanent revolution in service of

unconditional liberty which Fourier called "l'ecart absolu," or the "total refusal" of all known theories and models of thought. Total refusal was an integral part of Fourier's social analysis which he expanded to encompass his complete disdain for civilization, a contempt that was necessary for him in order to supersede the conditions of authority preventing him from imagining something else.

"The surest means of making useful discoveries was to deviate in every way from the paths followed by the dubious sciences [Fourier's term for conventional political science, political economy, metaphysics, and morality] which had never made the slightest discovery useful to society. I made it my business to remain in constant opposition to these sciences," he wrote. Fourier was convinced that only a total refusal of all existing philosophical, scientific, and epistemological systems would clean the slate enough to allow new discoveries; as one commentator on Fourier's work has explained, "total refusal stemmed from the sense of the irrationality of moral restrictions and the vast possibilities of liberation implied in abolishing them."

Fourier's equally manic Incoherent Industry (1836)–which began as a pamphlet calling for the abolition of the international slave trade before spiraling off into a frenzy of anti-industrial outrage against the rot at the core of Western civilization's most precious values-continued in the same vein of total refusal. The "incoherent industry" of the title referred to the exploitative, fractured, and dangerous conditions required to keep capitalism alive. Fourier writes in Incoherent Industry: "Civilization raises only one-thirtieth of its children with any well-being, and even they are still dissatisfied! When one sees this shameful fruit of so many sciences, shouldn't one doubt that this is what humans are really destined for, or is it a wasting disease, an interior vice, a secret and hidden venom, a level of transition to be crossed as fast as possible?"

By virtue of its role as a means for avoiding the standard contrivances of knowledge and emotion, total refusal was a useful tool for stepping outside of the bulwarks of insidious distraction and mystification that isolate the individual and insulate him or her from establishing a satisfying connection with the world. Fourier asserted that total refusal was a strategy for bypassing the miserable web of artificial desires that capitalist civilization has used to ensnare so many, a web whose tendrils today would include the unrelenting bombardment of unintelligible babbling that makes up capitalism's advertisement campaigns, the system's penchant for delirious marketing, and the hypnotic effects of its audiovisual mechanisms which capitalists use to obscure the essences of human desire, substituting instead multiple worlds of shallow, flickering illusion where direct experiences have been usurped by the passive contemplation of images, fetishized objects, and associated social activities. At first, total refusal may seem like an evasion or an escape, but it

is actually a disavowal of the narrow confines of the "possible" as defined by the numbing and cheerful effects of toxic conformism.

In Raoul Vaneigem's powerful and influential 1967 treatise on the revolution of everyday life, only the poet Lautreamont and Karl Marx are mentioned more often than Fourier. Vaneigem later explained that, for his generation of insurgents, "one of Fourier's great merits is to have shown the necessity to realize immediately–and for us, this means from the inception of generalized insurrection–the objective conditions for individual emancipation. For everyone, the beginning of the revolutionary moment must mark an immediate rise in the pleasure of living, the consciously experienced entry into the totality."

I would add to Vaneigem's comment that this revolutionary moment can only begin with the sustained and daring application of Fourier's concept of total refusal, followed, I hope, by a refusal of Fourierism as well.

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FIFTH ESTATE #362, Fall, 2003, Vol. 38, No. 3, page 28
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