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Women's Rights and Women's Liberation in Charles Fourier's Early Writings

Jonathan Beecher

Is not a young woman a piece of merchandise put up for sale to the highest bidder? Is not the consent that she gives to marriage derisory and forced on her by the lifelong tyranny of prejudice? People try to persuade her that she is only bound by chains of flowers. But can she really doubt her degradation, even in nations that are puffed up with philosophy like England? ... On this point we have hardly made any progress since that crude era when the Council of Macon, a true council of vandals, debated whether or not women had a soul and decided in the affirmative by a majority of just three votes ... It is known that the best nations have always been those which concede the greatest amount of liberty to women. This is true of the barbarians and the savages as well as of the civilized ... As a general proposition: Social progress and changes of period are brought about by virtue of the progress of women toward liberty, and social retrogression occurs as a result of a diminution in the liberty of women. Other events influence these political changes; but there is no cause which produces social progress or decline as rapidly as a change in the condition of women. I have already said that the simple adoption of closed harems would speedily turn us into barbarians, and the mere opening of the harems would enable the barbarians to advance to civilization. In summary, the extension of the privileges of women is the fundamental cause of all social progress.¹

When Charles Fourier delivered the manuscript of his first book, the *Théorie des quatre mouvements et des destinées générales* (1808), the publisher expressed stupefaction. 'This title seems strange to you,' said Fourier. 'It has to be. Some day you will know why.' Upon encountering a similar reaction from his bookseller in Paris, Fourier replied only that the book's title, like its contents, was a 'riddle' that he would explain later.² A riddle: so the book must surely have seemed to its few contemporary readers, and so it has

seemed to subsequent generations of readers. The riddle of *Théorie des quatre mouvements* begins with its title page. The author's name is not given; the place of publication (which we know to be Lyon) is identified as Leipzig; and the book is identified in its subtitle as the 'prospectus and announcement' of an unidentified 'discovery'. Things get even more confusing when one opens the book and starts to read. The 'four movements' of the title are not helpfully defined. And the book itself is an outlandish mixture of preambles, notes and epilogues in which shrewd criticism of contemporary commercial practices, of marriage and the family system, and of the French Revolution, appear side by side with speculations on the copulation of the planets and the imminent transformation of sea-water into 'a sort of lemonade'. Fourier later wrote that the strangeness of the book was calculated: it was an intentional travesty, a work of 'studied bizarreness'. His purpose in publishing so strange a book had been, he explained, to confuse potential plagiarists and, at the same time, to test the reactions of the public – to note which of his ideas were scoffed at and which taken seriously.³

In 1808, Charles Fourier was thirty-six years old. For the previous decade he had been living a double life. Employed as a travelling salesperson and clerk for silk merchants at Lyon, he saw himself as an 'inventor' who had improved upon the work of Isaac Newton. Newton had determined the laws of gravitational attraction, but it had been left to Fourier, 'a scientific pariah ... an almost illiterate shop clerk', to discover the means to gratify and harmonize all the human passions. His law of 'passionate attraction' completed Newton's work and was destined to 'conduct the human race to opulence, sensual pleasures, and global unity'.⁴ His book was indeed the prospectus to this great discovery and he hoped to follow it with a complete treatise in six volumes. This would include, among many other things, a detailed plan for the organization of a community made up of small 'passional' groups whose members would be inspired to work at socially useful tasks by 'rivalry, self-esteem, and other stimuli compatible with self-interest'.⁵

Not surprisingly, Fourier's book sold poorly. In January 1809 his Paris agent wrote to inform him that exactly nine copies had been purchased. In the end most of the copies were destroyed – or simply lost – after gathering dust for decades in booksellers' basements. Only much later was the book recognized as a pioneering exploration of the social question and a founding document of both socialist and feminist thought.

What makes *Théorie des quatre mouvements* so interesting in retrospect is that it can be seen as one of the first great utopian socialist writings. Not only did it announce a remarkable utopian vision, a utopia in which the full and free expression of the passions would serve to promote concord and social unity, it was also one of the first major works to define both 'the social question' and 'the woman question' as the nineteenth century came to conceive of them. The fraud, duplicity and 'industrial anarchy' promoted by the system of free

competition; the endemic poverty of the most advanced 'civilized' societies; the irrelevance of the rights of man without the right to work – these issues, which were the stuff of subsequent discussions of the social question, were all forcefully raised in *Quatre mouvements*. So were issues that only later became central to feminist social criticism: the flourishing of prostitution and 'conjugal slavery' in a world made by and for men; the deception and hypocrisy that were the underside of modern marriage; and the repression of the instincts of women not inclined by nature to child-rearing and domesticity.⁶

Théorie des quatre mouvements also offered 'glimpses' of a better world – a world organized according to the 'dictates' of the passions. This was a world of abundance, in which all work would be gratifying, even the humblest individual would eat sumptuous meals in agreeable company, and the poorest village in the Alps or the Pyrenees would have an opera 'similar to that of Paris'. In such a society, imagined Fourier, women would enjoy social, economic and sensual opportunities unthinkable in the male-dominated world to which he referred derisively as 'civilization'.

In unfolding his vision of a free and wholly non-repressive society, Fourier began with a critique of marriage and the family system. If poverty was the prime source of physical suffering in civilization, Fourier wrote, the most intolerable psychic constraints of civilized society were those imposed by the institutions of marriage and family life. Thus, he attacked these institutions on all fronts and with all the weapons at his disposal. His critique ranged from tirades against the moral vices inherent in the family system to satirical invocations of the 'joys' of domestic life, from dry commentaries on the defects of the family as an economic unit and as an instrument of childrearing to pseudoscientific enumerations of the drawbacks of marriage for both partners and a taxonomy of types of cuckoldom. However, through all of this ran a recurrent theme: civilization was an order built on the repression of instinct, and its cornerstone was the institution of monogamous marriage.

Since the institution of marriage symbolized the failure of civilized man to devise institutions capable of satisfying the most basic human needs, Fourier never tired of pointing out its drawbacks. Sometimes, as in his 'Hierarchy of Cuckoldom', he focused on the plight of husbands. But he insisted that the principal victims of marriage were women. He described marriage as a 'mercantile calculation' in which the woman was no more than 'a piece of merchandise offered to the highest bidder'.⁷ Once the transaction was concluded, she became in the eyes of the law her husband's exclusive property. Until that time, civilized society obliged her to remain chaste. If her dowry or her looks failed to attract a suitable purchaser, she was left to wither on the vine. 'Just what are the means of subsistence of impoverished women?' asked Fourier. 'Prostitution, more or less prettied up, is their sole means of support, and philosophy even begrudges them that. This is the state to which they have been reduced by civilization with its conjugal slavery.'⁸

Fourier's discussion of 'the woman question', which was most fully developed in this, his first work, is one of the aspects of his thought for which he was and is best known. He was the first of the early European socialists to put a thoughtful and rigorous analysis of the situation of women at the centre of a comprehensive critique of his society. His writings on 'the woman question' were greatly admired by Flora Tristán and Désirée Véret (both of whom knew Fourier in his old age), and other pioneer French feminists; and his disciples did much to give currency within the socialist movement to the idea of the emancipation of women.⁹ This being the case, it is worth emphasizing one distinction. Unlike the socialists of the 1840s, who argued for women's emancipation on moral grounds, Fourier's argument was utilitarian. He saw the servitude of women as a 'blunder' that victimized society as a whole and retarded its development, most conspicuously in the economic sphere.¹⁰ Thus he concluded his analysis of 'the debasement of women in civilization' by asserting that there could be no real social progress until women were emancipated, both in their private lives and in the workplace.

*Social progress and changes of historical period take place in proportion to the advance of women toward liberty, and social decline occurs as a result of the diminution of the liberty of women ... The extension of the privileges of women is the fundamental cause of all social progress.*¹¹

Fourier went on to argue that 'there is in every historical period a trait that forms the PIVOT OF THE MECHANISM and whose absence or presence determines changes of period. This trait is always drawn from love.'¹² Thus in the period of barbarism, immediately preceding civilization, the essential trait was 'the absolute servitude of women' in the harem; in civilization the key institution was 'exclusive marriage'. The main cause for the transition from barbarous to civilized societies was the breakup of the harem and the shift from the 'absolute servitude of women' to the granting of some civil rights to women under the system of monogamous marriage. Had the French revolutionaries seriously attacked the institution of marriage, further progress would have been made.

*There was very little that prevented the vandalism of 1793 from suddenly producing a second revolution as marvelous as the first was horrible. The whole human race was approaching its release; the civilized, barbarian and savage order would have disappeared forever if the Convention, which trampled down all prejudices, had not bowed down before the only one that had to be destroyed, the institution of marriage ... This is the final blow that the French Convention failed to deliver because of its timidity. How could an Assembly that was so strongly hostile to half-measures have limited itself to a half-measure like divorce?*¹³

Looking towards the future, Fourier suggested various proposals for the gradual emancipation of women that could open the way for the transition from civilization to the ideal society that he called Harmony. Women might

simply be granted full sexual liberty at the age of eighteen; groups of eighty to 100 men and women might live together in 'progressive households' in which members of both sexes would benefit from flexible arrangements concerning lovemaking and the performance of domestic chores. The point in any case was that women should enjoy rights and privileges comparable to those of men – equal educational opportunities, freedom from the tedium of housework, freedom in the choice of sexual partners. Only when these rights were granted, and when the long struggle for women's emancipation was complete, could both sexes finally enter the new amorous world.¹⁴

The publication of *Théorie des quatre mouvements* apparently won Fourier a moment of local celebrity. In May 1808, a friend wrote to him 'with pleasure that women are encouraged by your work. I hear that the ladies of Lyon are wild about it.'¹⁵ But if the women of Lyon were enthusiastic about *Quatre mouvements*, their husbands ignored its existence. It was not reviewed in the local press, mentioned in the annals of any of Lyon's numerous learned societies, or even included among the acquisitions of the public library. In Paris a few reviews eventually appeared, but they simply ridiculed Fourier's 'absurdities' and raised questions about his sanity.

During the years that followed, Fourier was to be haunted by the rejection of *Quatre mouvements* by 'the Parisians'. When he sat down to write, it was only to catalogue the 'litany of jeers' which had greeted his book, to inveigh against the spirit of sarcasm and raillery dominant in France, and to console himself with fantasies of revenge and ultimate triumph. For six years he abandoned serious intellectual work and remained at Lyon, eking out a modest living in 'the jailhouse of commerce'. In 1815, however, he was able to retire to the countryside to devote all his efforts to the composition of the great treatise heralded by *Quatre mouvements*.

The five years that Fourier spent in the countryside – in the village of Belley, to the east of Lyon – marked the most fruitful period of his entire intellectual life. He at last found the time and energy to set down on paper a comprehensive exposition of his doctrine. Its rudiments had been clear in his mind since his initial 'discovery', but what Fourier managed to do at Belley was refine his earlier speculations and explore new branches of the doctrine. He devoted particular attention to problems relating to love and sexuality. In five thick notebooks, collectively entitled *Le Nouveau monde amoureux*, he elaborated the vision of sexual harmony hinted at in *Quatre mouvements*. Here Fourier described in detail the institutions and activities of a totally non-repressive society, a society which would ensure for all men and women an emotional and erotic life immeasurably freer and richer than a repressive civilization could ever provide. In such a society, Fourier argued, human relations would take on a new character, and the passion of love would necessarily undergo an extraordinary metamorphosis. No longer a diversion or a private affair, love would instead become an essential part of the collective life, a force for

social harmony whose binding power would be felt throughout the ideal community.¹⁶

Fourier stipulated three conditions for the realization of his amorous utopia. The first condition was the full emancipation of women, on which he had nothing to add to the arguments made in *Quatre mouvements*. The second condition was the recognition of the sheer diversity of human sexual inclinations. According to Fourier, the failure of civilization to devise a tolerable 'amorous regime' resulted in large part from the belief that all men and women were essentially the same in their sexual wants. This belief, which Fourier described as 'erotic Jacobinism', was generally accompanied by the claim that the 'natural' form of sexual grouping was the heterosexual couple. But Fourier insisted that to force everyone into a single mould could only result in pain and frustration. In devising an erotic hierarchy for his new amorous world, he maintained that the highest ranks would be open only to individuals with a passionate attraction to members of both sexes.

The third condition for the realization of Fourier's amorous utopia was the granting of a 'sexual minimum'. In *Harmony*, he wrote, every mature man and woman must be guaranteed a satisfying minimum of sexual pleasure. Whatever his or her age, and no matter how bizarre their desires, no one would go unsatisfied. Fourier maintained that this sexual minimum would play a role in the amorous world similar to that played by his 'social minimum' in the world of work. Labour could become an instrument of human freedom and self-expression only when people were freed from the obligation to work by a guaranteed income. Similarly, love could become the liberating and binding force that it was meant to be only when its expression had been purged of every tinge of coercion and constraint. For Fourier the important thing about the sexual minimum was that it removed the fear of sexual deprivation that corrupted and falsified amorous relations in civilization.¹⁷

Fourier never tried to publish *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* in anything like its complete form. Partly owing to financial difficulties, partly because of new discoveries, and primarily out of fear of alarming his readers by too full a revelation of his sexual utopia, he decided to issue an abridged and expurgated treatise in two volumes instead of the projected six. Fourier's shortened version of the theory appeared in 1822 in two 700-page volumes under the intentionally modest title, *Traité de l'association domestique-agricole*. Nowhere in this volume, nor in his subsequent works, did Fourier publish any detailed account of the radical transformations that amorous relations would undergo in his ideal community. And in all of this later work Fourier simply elided the view of history premised on the assumption that improvements in the status of women are the key to all social progress. Instead, he argued in his later work for the priority of economic relations as catalysts of historical change. Did this reflect a change in Fourier's thinking? Probably not. It is more likely that Fourier withheld his reflections on the historical importance of

the liberty of women because of the same fear that kept him from publishing *Le Nouveau monde amoureux*: the fear that he could never find a financial backer if he presented himself too explicitly as a prophet of sexual liberation.

Only in 1967 – 150 years after its composition – was *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* finally published.¹⁸ But Fourier's reflections on 'the woman question' – and especially his critique of the position of women in civilization – had been richly developed in his very first work. Not surprisingly, some of his first followers were women who had been drawn to Fourier by his understanding of and sympathy for the plight of women in contemporary society. Oddly, some of these first female Fourierists – notably Clarisse Vigoureux and Zoé Gatti de Gamond – were women of conventionally puritanical moral standards who would have been shocked by the baroque sexual fantasies of *Le Nouveau monde amoureux*.¹⁹ But they were excited by Fourier's assertion that 'the extension of the privileges of women is the fundamental cause of all social progress'. And this declaration was taken up by more radical feminists and socialists in the 1840s. It remained for later generations to recognize the full extent of Fourier's commitment to an ideal of sexual liberation, one which had only been hinted at in the *Théorie des quatre mouvements*.