Charles Fourier

Parody and Liberation in *The New Amorous World* of Charles Fourier

by Jonathan Beecher

Charles Fourier was the boldest and most original thinker among the strange group of early nineteenth-century radical social theorists whom Frederick Engels first identified as 'utopian socialists.' He was in fact so bold and so original that even some of his most ardent admirers have found it difficult to write about him without questioning his sanity. Others have simply discounted his wilder speculations, preferring to consider his thought from the standpoint of its contribution to the development of a socialist ideology understood to have reached maturity in the writings of Marx and Engels. Thus for several generations scholarly debate over Fourier's ideas focussed largely on a single set of questions: Was he or wasn't he a socialist? And what was the relationship of his thought to the 'scientific socialism' of Marx and Engels? In recent years the boundaries of the discussion have widened. Fourier is now seen as an ancestor of surrealism, of psychoanalysis, and of feminism. What has not changed is the tendency to view him as a precursor – a thinker important mainly for his contribution to movements and ideologies which only became fully self-conscious long after his death.

The sort of retrospective appreciation of Fourier has been a commonplace feature of commentary on his writings on love and sexuality. Here the main questions have been: Did Fourier anticipate Freud? And was he – or in what sense was he – a significant ancestor of the feminist movement? In this essay I would like to consider some of the specific features of Fourier's thought that make such approaches problematical, and I would like to

suggest another way of looking at Fourier's sexual theories. My principal text will be Fourier's long unpublished treatise, *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* (*The New Amorous World*).

I

Le Nouveau monde amoureux was an account of erotic life within Fourier's ideal community or Phalanx. It was a description of a world in which (as Fourier put it) love would become 'an affair of state and a special sphere of social politics' possessing 'its own code, its tribunals, its court, and its institutions.'[1] Among the new institutions proposed by Fourier was the establishment within every community of a Court of Love which would organize fetes, entertainments and orgies, while at the same time enforcing a minutely detailed 'amorous code' which would regulate the sexual activities of the members of the community. There was also an elaborate scheme for the erotic matching of strangers; there were accounts of the amorous adventures and gastronomic wars of bands of troubadours and knights errant who would traverse the globe in search of pleasures unobtainable in their own regions; and there was even a classification of orgies – including exploratory orgies and farewell orgies, fortuitous orgies and bacchanalian orgies, as well as the orchestrated orgy or 'omnigamous quadrille' in which the movements of each participant were as carefully choreographed as those of a court minuet.

One of the fundamental conditions for the realization of Fourier's amorous utopia was what he called the 'sexual minimum'. In the ideal world which he called Harmony every mature man and woman would be guaranteed a satisfying minimum of sexual pleasure. Whatever his or her age and no matter how bizarre his or her desires, no Harmonian could go unsatisfied. Fourier maintained that this sexual minimum would play a role in the amorous world similar to that played by what he called the 'social minimum' in the world of work. Labor could become an instrument of human freedom and human self-expression only when all men and women were freed by a guaranteed income from the obligation to work. Similarly love could become a force for both individual liberation and social solidarity only when its expression had been purged of every trace of coercion and constraint. For Fourier the important thing about this sexual minimum was that it removed the fear of sexual deprivation which falsified amorous relations in contemporary society.[2]

One result of the establishment of this sexual minimum, Fourier believed, would be an awakening of sentimental or Platonic love. 'L'amour céladonique' he called it, invoking the name of Celadon, the chaste and faithful lover who was the hero of Honoré d'Urfé's seventeenth-century novel, *L'Astrée*. In the civilization of the nineteenth century Celadon was only conceivable as a figure of ridicule: a lover who failed to bring an amorous relation to a physical consummation was a natural butt of jokes.

And those who vaunted sentimental love in civilization were "hypocrites who play the vestal virgin in public and behave like whores in private." In Harmony, however, where physical gratification could be taken for granted, erotic ties would become both more complex and more broadly diffused. The 'mania for exclusive posession' of a loved one would lose its force, and lovers would 'seek out refined sentimental relationships to counterbalance [their] physical pleasures.'[3]

Throughout *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* Fourier showed a special solicitude for the elderly, the poor, and the members of sexual minorities. This led him to envisage the creation of a variety of groups and institutions specializing in sexual philanthropy. The fakirs, for example, were assigned the task of bestowing their favors on individuals who got left out in the erotic matching. There were also the bacchantes, those camp followers of the industrial armies, who toiled on the amorous battlefield after a night's activity by providing solace to rejected suitors. The members of these groups naturally had passionate inclinations for the tasks they performed. But Fourier recognized that, just as there were some forms of truly loathesome work, so too there were forms of sexual philanthropy which had little intrinsic appeal. If there had to be hordes of filth-loving children to do the dirty work of the Phalanx, there also had to be an amorous nobility whose main responsibility would be the providing of sexual gratification to all those whom age or physical deformity would have condemned to loneliness in civilization.

Fourier defined the amorous nobility as 'the class of strong and refined individuals who know how to subordinate love to the dictates of honor, friendship, and the affections independent of pleasure.' The most important members of this class were the two individuals who constituted the angelic couple in each Phalanx. The partners in this angelic couple were handsome and virtuous lovers who were bound by such transcendant sentimental ties that (temporarily at least) they had no desire for physical relations. Instead, they displayed their devotion to each other, and to the community, through the performance of generous acts of erotic philanthropy. Like more altruistic counterparts of Laclos' Valmont and Madame de Merteuil, they served as each other's procurers, seeking out those members of the community most in need of their sexual favors.[4]

II

Fourier completed *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* in 1818, but he never dared to publish it. His disciples, who sought to transform Fourierism into a reformist movement for 'peaceful democracy', pretended it didn't exist. It was only in 1967, a century and a half after Fourier wrote it, that it finally appeared in an edition prepared by Simone Debout. At that time almost everyone interested in Fourier agreed that its publication was a major event. Apparently confirming the view of those who held that Fourier's

real importance was not as an economic thinker but as a prophet of instinctual liberation, *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* seemed to call for a major reassessment of Fourier.

Since 1970 a number of important studies of Fourier's thought have appeared. Curiously enough, however, there has been no reassessment of Fourier beyond what had already been suggested in works published in the '60s.[5] Nor has a critical consensus been reached on the importance of *Le Nouveau monde amoureux*. In fact the book seems to have mystified many of its readers, and after seventeen years historians and critics have hardly begun to take its measure. Of two substantial commentaries on it, one (by Simone Debout) is sympathetic, lyrical, and relatively uncritical, while the other (by Catherine Francblin) is an uncompromising attack on Fourier's 'totalitarian discourse' and what she regards as his thinly veiled fear of female sexuality.[6]

The reluctance or inability of historians to come seriously to grips with this strange work can be explained in several ways. First there is the patchwork character of the text itself. A mixture of analysis, narrative, dialogue, and description, *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* is not a 'finished' work. The manuscript includes numerous repititions and omissions and marginal corrections, and the whole lacks a coherent structure. But more important than these formal problems are those posed by the fact that the text is very difficult to assimilate within the categories that most recent scholars have sought to apply to Fourier.

Should Fourier be seen as offering the vision of a non-repressive society? is it correct to speak of *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* as a work which 'revealed that complete instinctual liberation was the destination toward which [Fourier] had always been leading the lost children of civilization?'[7] I believe such claims are justified. Yet they raise obvious questions. Fourier's text may look forward to the liberation of instinct, but it describes a world in which even orgies are carefully choreographed. It may celebrate unfettered desire, but it offers an amorous code. On a very obvious level there seems to be a contradiction between the libertarian impulse which so clearly informs Fourier's erotic utopia and his propensity for the elaboration of rules.

Should *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* be seen as the work of an early feminist? In some respects, certainly. In his early writings, which include vigorous pleas for the emancipation of women, Fourier attempted to build a whole philosophy of history on the assumption that historical periods can be characterized by the roles they assign to women. His statement in his first major work that "the extension of the privileges of women is the fundamental cause of all social progress" became one of the battlecries of radical feminism in the 1840s and served Flora Tristan, who knew Fourier during his old age, as the epigraph for her *L'Emancipation de la femme* (1845).[8] Fourier's contributions to early feminist ideology were significant enough that he has even (erroneously) been credited with inventing the

term 'féminisme.'[9] But still, as a few writers have suggested, there are problems with Fourier's feminism. No more than Prosper Enfantin was he concerned to change the conventional ideas of woman's nature. In fact, one repeatedly finds Fourier falling back on clichés in his characterization of women – their inclinations, their aptitudes, and even their ability to respond to his own writings. In *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* he often describes women as 'sensualists' moved by 'gross physical desires' which men must satisfy if they don't want to be ridiculed by women. And while developing an argument, he can suddenly interrupt himself to observe that he has doubtless failed to make the issues intelligible to his female readers because he lacks the ability to satisfy what Diderot calls the taste of women for 'flowers of rhetoric' and 'the dust of butterfly's wings '[10] Furthermore, the grounds on which Fourier argued for women's emancipation were, to say the least, idiosyncratic. As Elizabeth Altman has written in a shrewd study of the philosophical bases of feminism in the Saint-Simonians and Fourier: "It is not [Fourier's] sense of injustice, nor his sympathy for [women's] plight, nor his belief in their moral superiority that led him to argue for their emancipation. It is God's design of cosmic harmonic balance which requires they be free. As long as women are subjugated and restricted, the free play of the great balance scale of the human and cosmic passions will be hindered in its efforts to seek equilibrium'.[11]

Finally, was Fourier a precursor of Freud? Again, it is hardly possible for us to avoid viewing his writings on love and sexuality in this light. One of Fourier's main achievements was to establish a map of the human psyche which placed in relief the instinctual life of the human species; he formulated a pioneering theory of the dynamics of repression and illustrated it with case studies that brilliantly demonstrated the tendency of repressed passions to reappear in altered and often destructive form; he also discussed amorous manias in terms which bore some resemblance to the psychoanalytic explanation of neurotic symptom formation. In all these respects Fourier can certainly be understood to have anticipated Freud's insights. Yet I believe that what separates Fourier and Freud is at least as important as what they had in common. Fourier had no understanding of infantile sexuality; the manias which most interested him were not the "artificial" manias caused by repression or deprivation but rather "natural" manias which he regarded as the expression of authentic needs; and most importantly perhaps Fourier had a conception of the erotic impulse which was fundamentally different from Freud's. 'Sexual love is a relation between two individuals in which a third can only be superfluous or disturbing,' wrote Freud. Against this view of love as fundamentally exclusive and anti-social, Fourier argued that only in societies dominated by the institution of monogamous marriage did love become exclusive. 'What has caused all the civilized philosophers to err concerning the destinies of love,' he wrote, 'is that they have always speculated on love affairs limited to a couple'. His whole utopia was based on the assumption

that in a rightly ordered society love could be a binding element, a force for solidarity within the community as a whole.[12]

My point here is not that these perspectives on *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* are limited – what perspective isn't limited? – but that they are anachronistic. They view Fourier (just as he was viewed by many historians in the Marxist tradition) in teleological terms – as 'leading up' to Freud or Marcuse or fully self-conscious feminism.[13] The result is that while Fourier's "modern" ideas receive due recognition, it becomes difficult to understand why he held others that we would now find silly or archaic. What easily gets lost in such efforts at teleological understanding is a sense of the inner logic of an individual's thought.

III

One further problem with the perspectives that I have considered is that they also assume that Fourier's text should be read literally – as a 'blueprint' with a certain specific 'content.' It is true that to Fourier's early disciples like Just Muiron there was no doubt but that all Fourier's writings should be understood as blueprints. Thus when Fourier allowed Muiron to peruse the manuscript of *Le Nouveau monde amoureux*, Muiron responded with questions of a very practical sort. What 'particularly troubled' the disciple was the problem of determining paternity in doubtful cases. 'How,' asked Muiron, 'can we resolve the difficulties created by the concourse of several lovers at the moment of conception?'[14] Fourier's answer is unknown. But we might well ask whether Muiron wasn't missing the point and whether in *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* Fourier wasn't offering something else besides an instruction manual for community builders. For the elaborate network of rules, regulations, codes, and complex institutional structures – which seem so out of place in a fundamentally libertarian treatise – can be seen as serving an important critical function in the larger design of Fourier's work. What Fourier may have been offering in *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* is not so much the blueprint of an amorous utopia as a remarkable *parody* of the customs and institutions of civilized society, a parody in which the familiar world is turned upside down and stood on its head.

There are elements of parody almost everywhere in Fourier's writing. There are parodies of the language of the cautious moralist who always seeks the middle way, and parodies of the optimistic philosopher who claims to be flying 'on a sublime course leading to rapid progress towards perfectibilizing perfectibility.' There are also parodies built into the structure of Fourier's utopia. Within each Phalanx work groups were to be organized at the daily sessions of a Bourse which was in fact a benign parody of the civilized stock exchange. Likewise the dirty work of each community was to be performed by the Little Hordes, a corps of filth-loving children whose activities represented both a parody of monastic

service and an adaptation to the needs of post-civilized society of the dirty and aggressive impulses of the barbarian hordes. But it is in *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* that parody is especially concentrated, and it focusses above all on institutions, rites, and traditions associated with the Catholic Church.

Fourier's Court of Love was ruled by a female pontiff who was assisted by a large staff of priests and confessors and fakirs and fairies. On one level this was certainly a parody of the Catholic religious hierarchy. These officials had the power to issue 'indulgences,' to impose 'penances,' and to exact 'amorous tithes' from the faithful. In extreme cases they could even threaten sinners with excommunication. And this would not be an idle threat, Fourier boasted, because it would entail the sinner's exclusion from the Court of Love and not merely the "trivial" menace of punishment in a distant after-life. Of course sins in Harmony were infrequent and easily pardonable: generally they amounted to little more than lack of discernment in eating or the impolite rejection of sexual advances. And it would always be possible for a sinner to win an indulgence by providing sexual gratification to the needy.

Just like the Catholic Church, Fourier's utopia would also have its saints and angels and crusades. But the saints would acquire holiness through amorous and gastronomic prowess, and the one crusade most fully described by Fourier has been accurately characterized as 'a massive but carefully controlled orgy, accompanied by oceans of sparkling wine and tons of meat pie.'[15] As for angels, they would generally come in pairs, the highest rank being occupied by the angelic couple – those "angels of virtue" who would minister to the sexual needs of the poor, the elderly, and the unattractive. So great would be the odor of sanctity surrounding the angelic couple that their favors would become 'a balm of saintliness,' and all suitors would approach them 'with a holy respect.'

Fourier naturally insisted that rigorous tests be imposed on all candidates for saintliness. Criticizing the 'ridiculous idea' of rewarding 'useless practices' like prayer and asceticism with the title of saintliness, he specified that the novice who wished to attain the rank of Minor Sainthood would have to undergo seven tests, beginning with the paying of an amorous tribute to all the venerables and patriarchs in a Phalanx and culminating with a 'graduated omnigamy, or series of sixteen balanced orgies.' In Harmony as in civilization, the road to sainthood was difficult, and Fourier emphasized that the novitiate could last as long as thirty years [16]

Did Fourier mean all this to be taken literally? The possibility cannot be ruled out. But it seems more likely that his aim was not so much to spell out the institutions of a future society in any literal sense as to evoke the new world of possibilities that might be opened up simply by turning traditional Catholicism upside down. By peopling his new amorous world with priests and confessors and saints and sinners and by imagining amorous tithes and

indulgences, Fourier was incorporating within his utopia a parody of Catholic religious practice. The point of this parody was to dramatize the implications of an ethic which attached absolutely no virtue to self-denial and isolation.

Virtue, as Fourier defined it, was 'the extension of social ties,' and the pathway to virtue was self-indulgence.[17] Thus the world described by Fourier was a world in which love and gourmandise were expressions of religious piety and in which priests would 'stop preaching abstinence and ready themselves to officiate at the excellent tables which will be furnished to them for their five [daily] meals'.[18] It was in some respects a Rabelaisian world – a world in which Christian asceticism was mocked and close links were established between amorous and gastronomic satisfaction. But there is in Fourier little of the earthiness, the grotesque realism, and the celebration of the body and all bodily functions that one finds in Rabelais.[19] Fourier does not seem to draw, as does Rabelais, on the traditions of popular revelry and gallic humor originally embodied in the *contes* and *fabliaux* of the Middle Ages. Insofar as his work is rooted in any tradition, it draws on – and parodies – the aristocratic traditions of chivalry and courtly love embodied in the medieval romances and troubadour songs. For Fourier's female pontiff, his priestesses, his celadonic lovers, his bands of knight errantry, and even his elaborately worked out amorous code are all parodies, on one level at least, of figures and conventions deriving from the tradition of courtly love.[20]

What I have tried to offer here by way of conclusion is little more than a sketch of one possible reading of *Le Nouveau monde amoureaux* – a reading which interprets the text not as the map of a future utopia and not as a fixed body of ideas to be judged on the basis of its consistency with other, more modern ideas, but as something closer to a mental exercise designed to reveal the new world of possibilities that might be opened up by adapting Christian and courtly institutions to an ethic of self-indulgence. One might also argue that Fourier's parody of organized Christianity is the vehicle for a demonstration of what might really be entailed in a religion which took seriously the Christian injunction to 'love thy neighbor'.

Whatever the ultimate value of this approach, I think it has two particular claims to our attention. It enables us to recover the fundamentally libertarian character of Fourier's thought which is lost, I think, in many more literal readings of Fourier's text. It also enables us to establish a relation between Fourier's thought and a long prior tradition of utopian and millennial speculation which likewise aspired to see the familiar clerical and aristocratic world turned upside down.

NOTES

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1 *Oeuvres complètes de Charles Fourier* (subsequently referred to as OC), 12 vols (Paris 1966–1968), VII pp. 32, 157

2 OC VII pp. 438–445

3 OC VII pp 37, 50, 95, 98

4 OC VII p. 260, Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* 1782

5 Emile Lehouck, *Fourier aujourd'hui* Paris 1966, Simone Debout-Oleskiewicz 'La Terre permise ou l'analyse selon Charles Fourier et la théorie des groupes,' *Les Temps modernes* XXII 7 (July 1966) pp 1–55, Nicholas V Riasanovsky, *The Teaching of Charles Fourier* Berkeley 1969, and Frank E Manuel, *The Prophets of Paris* Cambridge, Mass. 1962, pp 195–248 Important recent studies include Simone Debout, *L'Utopie de Charles Fourier* Paris 1979, Henri Desroche, *La Société festive* Paris 1975, Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* Paris 1971; Michael C Spencer, *Charles Fourier* Boston 1981

6 Simone Debout-Oleskiewicz, Preface to *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* in OC VII pp. vii-cxii; Catherine Francblin, 'Le Féminisme utopique de Ch Fourier,' *Tel Quel* 62 Summer 1975 pp. 44–69.

7 Jonathan Beecher and Richard Bienvenu (eds.), *The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier* Boston 1971, p 55.

8 OC I p 133

9 This claim, which appears in much of the recent literature on the history of French feminism, appears to derive from Benoîte Groult, *Le Féminisme au masculin* Paris 1977.

10 OC VII p. 112. But see also OC I p 146.

11 Elizabeth C Altman, 'The Philosophical Bases of Feminism The Feminist Doctrines of the Saint-Simonians and Charles Fourier,' *The Philosophical Forum* VII, 3–4 (Spring-Summer 1976) pp 283–284.

12 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* tr by James Strachey (New York 1962) p 55, OC VII p. 47

13 These objections do not apply to the attempt to relate Fourier's thought to feminism if feminism is conceived as a developing and multi-faceted tradition rather than as a specific body of thought which earlier theories have anticipated

14 Letter of Just Muiron to Fourier, Besançon, October 4 1820, Archives Nationales 10AS 25 (2)

15 Spencer, *Charles Fourier* p 71.

16 OC VII pp. 80–81, 90–93, 118–126

17 OC VII pp. 47, 168.

18 OC VII p. 22.

19 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, tr by Helene Iswolsky Cambridge Mass 1968.

20 Fourier was writing at a time of revived interest in the tradition of courtly love and in the troubadour songs that did much to create that tradition. In 1817 the philologist Raynouard published his *Choix de poésies originales des troubadours* which made known Andreas Capellanus' *The Art of Courtly Love* and argued that the courts of love described by Andreas Capellanus were actual tribunals in which amorous disputes were judged Five years later in an appendix to his *De l'amour* (1822) Stendhal could write: "There were courts of love in France between 1150 and 1200. That is a proven fact." Current scholarship sees courtly love more as a set of literary conventions than as a historical reality and Andreas Capellanus' treatise as "a satire on, rather than a bible of, courtly love." Thus the elements of parody and satire in Fourier's work are actually consistent with the tradition as it is now understood. See Joan M. Ferrante and George D. Economu (eds), *In Pursuit of Perfection. Courtly Love in Medieval Literature* Port Washington N.Y. 1975.