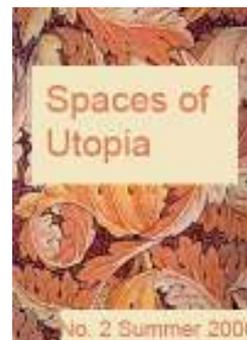


Owen and Fourier: Collusion and Collision

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The *New Moral World* (13 March 1841) wrote that Owen and Fourier had both given hope to suffering nations and invited them to have confidence in each of them and that in a period of political anarchy and social despair, it was of paramount importance to establish which of the two was the true Messiah towards whom the cries for help of Humanity rose.

We shall certainly not elect the true Messiah, nor bring an answer to the controversies to which the *New Moral World* largely opened its pages.

We shall try and relate here how Owen and Fourier tried to meet, at Fourier's instigation. Both their theories had the same aim: human happiness, *hic* and *nunc*, yet they took different paths and decidedly remained divergent on a fundamental point: the analysis of human nature.

Their paths started from the same point: a strong criticism of civilisation went towards the same horizon: how to free Humanity from the yoke of society and drew the labyrinth of happiness into which they shut themselves while trying to give us the keys.

A rich literary exchange started between Owen and Fourier, owenists and fourierists, an exchange that in the second half of the 20th century drew the

attention of Richard Pankhurst, “Fourierism in Britain”, Jacques Gans, “Relations entre socialistes de France et d’Angleterre au début du XIX” and Henri Desroche, “Owenisme et utopies françaises”. These paths left traces that went as far as the USA and across the world to create ‘global harmony’.

Owen and Fourier belonged to the famous triad that Engels named the Utopian Socialists together with Saint Simon, as opposed to the Scientific Socialists he claimed to be with Marx. Fourier strongly insisted on his being scientific from the beginning and hated the word utopian. Engels and Marx’s early works are directly inspired by those who advocated love, peace and harmony. Saint Simon was translated by the owenist J. E. Smith, Fourier and Owen by Hugh Doherty. The London Cooperative Society published a translation of Fourier in 1828.

Fourier made the first step, having become acquainted with Owen’s projects through the *Revue Encyclopédique*, written by Jullien de Paris, a former babouvist. Jullien de Paris had come to New Lanark in 1822 and published an article enhancing Owen. He wrote that “Great Britain and particularly Scotland are, in Europe, amongst those privileged countries where it is possible and permitted to work at human happiness, where many individual thoughts and public acts have something to do with the well-being of all social classes” (Paris 1923). He gave an idyllic description of New Lanark which he said was the obvious sign of a higher degree of civilisation. The description he gave of New Lanark was very akin to that Fourier gave of the Phalanstère. Both were situated in hilly places crossed by a river, proper to varied cultures, not too far from a large town. Jullien de Paris was convinced that the metamorphosis operated by Owen at New Lanark was a precious witness of the primitive kindness of human nature.

Thus intrigued by New Lanark, Fourier wished to meet Owen whom he perhaps considered as his double, although New Lanark was real and the

Phalanstère only dreamt of. Moreover, Owen's and Fourier's biographies shared similar elements. They both had left their families early and started as apprentices, both were autodidacts, but Owen investing 20 pounds, soon became the director of a cotton mill when he was 20, while Fourier who had borrowed 100 pounds, tried commercial business and failed, hence hated commerce and money, and soon retired in Bugey, where he came from, to sit at his table and write down a theory he had very early elaborated. In 1820, Fourier wrote:

Our century is on the look-out for a discovery that we have a premonition of, and that is even sensed by the English: the theory of Association (...). They chase after it heartily. One of them, Robert Owen, has introduced himself to Emperor Alexander, as being the inventor of a very new method in that matter. Here is a proof that he has not even touched the theory lightly: they are 2.400 people, with no success. If he really knew about this new science, he would need no more than the fourth of that number. An association in "degré simple" (simple degree) may be successful with only 400 people, in "degré mixte" (mixed degree) with 800 and in "degré composé" (combined degree) with 1.200. However, despite his jabbering, Robert Owen can be praised for facing such a useful problem. But when I'll make my proposals to England I shall only ask for the fourth of the people confided to Owen. He has been struggling to try for three years. I'll only need three months. (Fourier 1820: manuscript 10 AS 14 25)

In 1822, in the introduction he wrote to his *Traité de l'Association domestique*, Fourier praised Owen's initiative and yet already made some reservations. But he was still looking for collusion:

It is customary in Europe that England takes the initiative of useful enterprises and that France only comes on the stage only after the English have given the impulse (...) Robert Owen is the first who has put his research on Association into practice. His enterprise is praiseworthy (...) I could point out thirty mistakes in the mechanism of human passions. I prefer to praise what is praiseworthy. I notice with pleasure that the English agree with the fundamental principle of domestic economy: to operate on great numbers of people (...) They will learn in this book what marvels can be made by a reunion of five hundred unequal men, women, children associated according to the wish of nature, according to the methods determined by the arithmetics of passionate attraction. (Fourier 1966-69: 7-8)

Although he still hoped for a collusion, Fourier had already hinted at the subject of their collision: the theory of passionate attraction which was the fundamental principle of his own system.

In 1823, Fourier, learning through the *Revue Encyclopédique* that Owen wished to establish a community at Motherwell in Scotland, wrote to Owen, offering him his services and sent him a sample of his *Nouveau Monde Industriel*. In 1823 Fourier met Anna Doyle Wheeler, an Irish feminist who was close to the owenists and had just established herself in Paris. She was attracted by Fourier's ideas and tried to make Fourier and Owen meet. This did not work, but she introduced Fourier to some owenists, which nourished Fourier's hope.

In 1824, Fourier wrote to Owen and made a last attempt to convince him that he should use passionate attraction in his cooperative villages and collaborate to establish a Phalanx. He joined two samples of his *Traité*. Owen did not read French. Philip Skene translated their letters. Owen refused Fourier's proposals, having no use of Fourier's ideas as he himself was looking for a community to apply his own ideas. Thus Fourier received an ironical reply written in fourierist terms whose parody he did not see. He thus went on offering Owen his help, showing him that Motherwell was bound to fail if he did not apply the theory of passionate attraction.

We know through his biographer Charles Pellarin that Fourier hoped England would help him to put his theory into practice and be better known in France. He is said to have had one of his articles translated in English, to pretend that he had been published in England, before presenting it to a reluctant French magazine. Owen never replied to Fourier.

In 1825, he is still very enthusiastic about Owen's success in America and still hopes to influence the new owenist society, the London cooperative society. But his hopes are disproportionate. In August 1825, Philip Skene gives Fourier two translations of Owen's works which Fourier does not appreciate and finds contrary to the principles of industrial attraction and harmonious passions. Fourier seems

disappointed and writes in 1827 that when in 1822 he praised Owen's intentions, he was far from suspecting that he was in fact working at ridiculing the idea of association. As a result of Owen's muteness, when in 1827 some owenists tried to get in touch with him, Fourier did not reply. In 1831, Fourier published in Paris: *Pièges et charlatanismes des deux sectes Owen et Saint-Simon*.

Fourier and Owen never met until 1837, shortly before Fourier's death, at a banquet organised by the socialists when Owen came to Paris. They probably did not talk to each other as no trace has been left. Owen did not mention it in the letter he wrote the next day: "The majority of the French", he said, "are disgusted by the present system, a great revolution is absolutely necessary, but no one knows how to do it without immense sufferings as a consequence. This is the great problem I must solve for all nations".¹

Owen came to France in 1848 hoping to find a possibility for the realisation of his ideas. He had been advised to do so by some of his disciples. Owenist communities had failed in England and in the United States. On April 10th, Owen spoke before the members of the Société Fraternelle Centrale founded by Cabet. He also published two dialogues: Robert Owen, France and the world and a dialogue on the social system. Nothing that he had already spoken of.

Owen and Fourier asserted they were the pioneers of a new type of society. They were convinced that the regeneration of humanity could only be the work of a genius imposing his ideas upon the herd. Their strength lay in their understanding that the masses were exploited.

Both condemned the industrial civilisation for being irrational and creating deep misery. Owen addresses the poor in terms that remind us of Thomas More's analysis. Laws are inadequate: they should not condemn those who rob bread because they cannot afford to buy some. Everyone should be able to buy bread.

Fourier even imagined a social minimum, together with a sexual minimum for everyone.

Fourier makes a negative analysis of the 1789 revolution, too violent and unable to bring happiness: he proves that nothing is possible in civilisation, that any promise of freedom is hijacked by those who have made it once they have power because there has never been a true analysis of the deep causes of evil that condemn man to slavery. The French Revolution could have led to social harmony, had the leaders given justice to wage-earners and to women by recognising their natural rights.

For Fourier and Owen, revolution can only be made through reason, not through violence. Contrary to other romantics, like Carlyle for instance, they did not turn towards the primitive community as a model nor towards the golden age. Revolution was synonymous with evolution. Only a rational and fair system would help us come out of chaos and darkness. Owen and Fourier were convinced they had invented a system that would start a new era.

Owen and Fourier agreed on many points although Owen was a capitalist and Fourier was only a 'philosopher'. They agreed on the necessity of a new economical order providing a remedy to waste, due to anarchical production. For them, cooperation must replace competition: such is the basis of association. They aimed at creating autonomous associative communities and thought once some of them had succeeded they would naturally expand all over the world, i.e. globalise.

Work

They both insisted that work was an absolute right. Fourier was disappointed that there were still too many privileges in France and the right to work was not really applied. Owen advised France to give work to all her children if France wished to get rid of pauperism. He was very much concerned with the conditions of work as

we know. Although a capitalist he did much to improve the conditions in New Lanark. In 1830 he had created the “Equitable labour Exchange Bazaars”.

Fourier had a very new and original conception of work: according to the laws of passionate attraction, Fourier conceives work as pleasurable. He knows that it is a token of productivity. No work is compulsory in the phalanx. One chooses to do what one enjoys doing: moreover Fourier, being far ahead in that matter, imagines that one can find pleasure in different kinds of work, therefore he is allowed to work for 2 hours at some activity, then change for another activity. But this is not compulsory. Being in harmony with the other members of the community and therefore with himself, the individual finds pleasure in working and is therefore efficient. In the phalanx, there is a Labour Exchange too.

Money

Owen thought of replacing money by “work tokens”. In the Phalanx, Fourier opens an account to each member from early age. The benefice made is shared out according to the capital each member has invested in the Phalanx, and according to his talent and work. The association being built on the laws of passionate attraction there will never be conflicts due to personal interests. He also thought of work tokens.

Owen and Fourier shared with Saint Simon the idea of a political Europe. Although Saint Simon thought of the British parliament as a model for the European parliament, Owen and Fourier have confidence in France. Europe for them is only one step in the conquest of the Globe. They speak of the problems we are still trying to solve: unemployment, the right to work, concertation, peace, and how to change politics and invent new forms of sociability.

Yet, Owen and Fourier seriously diverged on the definition of man's nature. In the *Dialogue between France, Owen and the World* (1848), Owen wrote that the circumstances had allowed him to penetrate a few fundamental truths on man's nature.

Owen believed that a proper education and good working conditions would make good and happy men. He believed in the malleability of human nature. Man is the product of his milieu and family history. In order to 'civilise' the poor, he hoped to correct and improve them by offering them conditions favourable to their well-being and as a consequence to the well-being of society.

He introduced Rousseau's and Pestolazzi's ideas on education which he applied for both sexes. Education was financed by the benefits made by the cooperative village. Yet, despite all the improvements he made, Owen tended to mix up education and indoctrination.

Fourier reproached him with his dogmatism, severe discipline and civilised moral standards that encouraged virtue for virtue itself, although Owen, like Fourier, did not believe in the original sin.

Fourier preferred virtue allied to the pleasure of the senses. He had written to Skene (17 September 1824) that Motherwell was a dangerous experience that could provoke a return to a feudal system, if the monarchs realised the advantages offered by the cooperative village: progress, benefice, savings, disciplined and restrained people, they would apply the same regime to workers in towns and civilisation would then reach its 4th phase when the people are collectively enslaved.

Fourier was very diffident about the 18th-century philosophers whom he considered too inspired by Socrates and Plato, i.e. by those who wish to reduce man to abstract immaterial pleasure and wish man to be a soul without a body.

According to Fourier, Evil comes from our fettered passions. The Declaration of Human Rights, says Fourier, has only been a declaration of intentions, unable to modify and improve the real.

If we want to progress, we must forget that we have been taught and invent new relationships established not on abstract and empty unequal people principles but on our secret life, on our passions, on an effective counter moral. Equality then means graduated inequalities. Fourier reproached Owen with egalising people's natures. In that sense equality becomes a social poison. He wished to gather people unequal in fortune, character, interests, passions, and allow each individual to personal development without hurting the mass. This was the only means to reach collective harmony, to improve production and benefice. Such was, very quickly summed up, the basis of the theory of passionate attraction which aimed at using positive and negative human passions without restraining them.

Long before Marx and Freud, Fourier has understood that human nature is the product of a dialectic between man and his milieu. In his *New Amorous World* Fourier goes even further: he dreams of a cult of voluptuous pleasure.

Fourier identified 12 passions in man's nature to which he added a 13th passion: Uniteism, that is the pleasure to reconcile one's happiness with that of the group: the exact opposite of civilised selfishness. The Phalanx is a living system in which all is combined to reach personal and collective harmony.

Owen wanted to purge human nature of its dissonances, Fourier wished to integrate them.

Note

¹ Quoted in Gans 1964: Robert Owen à Paris en 1937, *Actualité de l'histoire* n° 30, 1960.

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