

All their play becomes fruitful

The utopian child of Charles Fourier

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The central tenet of Charles Fourier's theory was the promise of universal happiness and social unity through a radical revision of man's relationship to labour. Vehemently opposed to both the violence of mass insurrection and the hypocrisies and corruption of burgeoning industrial capitalism, he dreamed of a pacific cultural revolution that would emerge from the liberation of all human passions. Always critical of asceticism, Fourier imagined a society grounded in a universal right to luxury, supported by an order of work based on pleasure. The place of childhood within this project is perhaps the least understood aspect of his thought. For, rather contentiously, he seemed to be suggesting that an ideal social order could be achieved by putting children to work as soon as they could walk. Evidently this is in striking opposition to the overt opposition to children working in the contemporary developed world. The eradication of child labour is generally considered to be one of the prime social achievements of Western history, and one whose merit can only be increased by its extension to the rest of the world. It would seem somewhat perverse, from this perspective, to turn to Fourier as a thinker who was apparently idealizing child labour during the same era that the history of childhood more often identifies as epitomising the growing opposition to children working.

A closer examination of this aspect of his writings reveals that his account of the relationship between work, sexuality and childhood offers profound insights into the division between labour (or productivity) and pleasure (or leisure) under capitalism. Fourier exposes a relationship between the drive increasingly to compartmentalize life and the Romantic idealization of childhood since the late eighteenth century. Specifi-

cally, he offers an opportunity to see how the cultural investment in an idealized childhood – and the rise of a market to filter these investments into products 'for' children (such as children's literature) – serve to contain and limit the desire for pleasure and, indeed, for a utopian social order. The denigration of so many pleasures as childish, regressive or superfluous to serious, adult life is central to this argument. Fourier makes 'childish' pleasures – for food, in play, in social camaraderie, through language and number games, and in ridiculous or fantastic images and scenarios – central both to his vision of a new world order and within the medium of his writing. And it is arguably this element of his theory that has stimulated the castigation and discomfort that has been expressed by so many of his subsequent readers, particularly on the occasions when Fourier has been dismissed as being simply mad.

Contrary to this diagnosis of insanity, I would argue, this aspect of his work poses challenges on two fronts. In the first instance, by resisting the impetus to write the fantastic or ridiculous 'for' children, but instead writing it for adults, Fourier dramatizes the adult's attraction to the childish and the childlike. He refuses to allow adults to hide their attraction to regression, their yielding to a retained, imaginary childhood space of unalloyed pleasure, behind the façade of a whole, secure, adult identity, while merely dipping into childhood spaces for leisured recuperation from the world of work. Not for Fourier the scene, familiar to us now, of commuters coyly reading J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, reprinted to amend the soft, pink jellybean train of the 'children's' version to the sleek lines of a film-noir steam-train on the 'adult's' edition.¹ Fourier abjures

such subterfuge, and by so doing exposes how anxieties about labour and pleasure can become polarized between ideas of adult life (work, social critique) and childhood (play, satire). Thereby, he reveals a utopian impetus within the insistence that children should not/do not work combined with the, often wilful, belief that childhood is/ought to be dedicated to pleasure or play. This is what is at stake in the need to preserve the image of the ideal child in the face of recent laments on the end of childhood or childhood in ruins. The retention of the Romantic ideal child, and the products created with this child in mind, serve as a last bastion for the utopian imagination that Herbert Marcuse has identified as withering under modern social conditions. But, importantly, unlike, say, within the genre of science fiction that holds this space as utopia/dystopia in blueprint form, the image of the child operates within an ephemeral, cultural blind spot. It is a utopia imagined through the 'innocent' pleasure of reading/looking in which the child as *tabula rasa* enables the projection or overlaying of an ideal child. To dramatize this pleasure – as Fourier does – is to challenge its innocence and confront the adult with the task of recognizing and taking ownership of the desires that are invested in such an activity.

Fourier's writing provides a unique perspective on the variety and intensity of emotional investments that our society reserves for children. These investments endeavour to preserve the image of the ideal child, even to the extent of disavowing the full complexity of children's lives. In an era when the issue of labour exploitation according to class, or indeed other 'adult' social groups, is often considered irrelevant in a now 'classless' society based on individual responsibility, Fourier reveals how the opposition to working children harbours tensions concerning work, which have remained part of our social inheritance from the nineteenth century. Fourier exposes what is at stake in sustaining the idea of the delightful, complaisant child – who can only be object or victim, but never an agent of its own existence. The child sustains a utopian space within which society feels content to dream of an Arcadian past and a better future, a future that is perpetually deferred onto an ever receding posterity. But it is a fragile and Janus-faced ideal – one that readily succumbs to the mass hysteria raised either by those children whose behaviour challenges its veracity, or by adults who threaten its destruction. Fourier's greatest contribution to this debate lay in his efforts to grant children a whole and solid social existence, primarily through casting inappropriate behaviour as a justified protest against the world into which they were

born. Admittedly, in this respect, he risked merely replacing one reification of childhood for another. But his account is worth re-evaluating because of its efforts to challenge so many of the presumptions regarding the place of children in society.

Fourier's child

Fourier has always been a problematic figure. His popularity in the early to mid nineteenth century was largely due to the need his first disciples felt to judiciously rationalize his ideas, rendering them more palatable to the uninitiated public and fitting them to what was, by mid-nineteenth-century standards, a more recognizably scientific economic theory. Their anxiety was aroused in particular by his ideas on the erotic, which represented too stark a challenge to contemporary sexual mores; his frequent lapses into eccentric cosmological and ecological theories; his idiosyncratic language riddled with neologisms and apparently arbitrary mathematical formulas; and his belief in a pantheistic and analogous relationship between all natural creations and man. His work was consequently subjected to rigorous abridgement and, outside of France, highly selective translation, which in many instances amounted to wholesale censorship and appropriation by considerably less radical ideologies. By the time Marx and Engels had begun to outline their theories later in the century, this process had become such that they could argue with certain justification that Fourier had been subsumed by the 'doctrinaire bourgeois',² who had systematically stripped away what was, for Engels, Fourier's most significant contribution to socialism: his acerbic satire of bourgeois values.³ Yet even Engels ensured a distance between the rational 'scientific' socialism he set out with Marx and the more eccentric, 'utopian', aspects of Fourier's thought. In the twentieth century, largely as a result of the surrealists' interest in his work, writers began to focus on retrieving what had been lost through this process: the poetic, the surreal, the erotic, indeed the whole proto-Freudian delineation of the unconscious that Fourier had haphazardly mapped, drawn into direct association with a socialist critique of the repressive effects of capitalist culture – ground that would only be regained through the Freudian lens over a hundred years later in the work of writers such as Marcuse and Norman O. Brown.

Fourier's representation of childhood has largely remained unchallenged within these explorations into his work. Nineteenth-century Fourierists perceived no risk in presenting, with a relatively high degree of accuracy, his pedagogical theories. But I would

argue that the chief reason for Fourier's work on childhood remaining largely intact, but incompletely considered, is due to the first abstraction of his ideas on the subject from the whole of his oeuvre in the mid nineteenth-century. As a result childhood was retained as a separate space outside the main corpus when it is in fact at its heart. Childhood was Fourier's ideal state of being. Right from his first account, in 1808, of the primacy of the passions, or instincts, in man, he was asserting that, 'Nature distributes them randomly among the children of both sexes, *such that eight hundred randomly chosen children could provide the germ of all perfection that the human spirit can attain to.*'⁴ Even within his utopia, which had from the outset contained the seeds of its own fall after 35,000 years of social perfection,⁵ childhood was the ultimate utopian space that predicted this fall as it collapsed into adulthood.

The main point on which Fourier differs from Rousseau, the more usual point of departure for studies on childhood, lies in his account of adult-child relations, and particularly the adult's, and his own, ambivalence to children – a factor that is only revealed in Rousseau's case through the biographical fact of his own abandoned offspring. Fourier's favoured terms to describe children were brats, antichrists and tyrants of discord in the household. This candour concerning his dislike of children in the current order served a number of vital functions, most of which can be explored as oppositions to Rousseau's opening dictum from *Emile* that 'God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil.'⁶ Fourier countered that nature was not innately perfect. Rather, it reflected the social nature of man, and was therefore subject to man's will. If children were imperfect, it followed, then, that this was not due to some innate flaw in either man or nature, but to the social system under which they lived. Rousseau's enlightened intervention in the child's early life could not resolve this problem, for it required the recognition of limits, both for the child and in society, which were teased into a new direction: a renegotiation of the social contract, as it were. At best Rousseau could only change attitudes. He could never institute the total change in social conditions that Fourier proposed.

This deep contradiction between social attitudes and conditions formed the main point of departure for Fourier's critique of 'civilization'. He subscribed to the idea of civilization as *le monde à rebours*, and consequently directed his work at 'corrective' reversals of social norms. As a consequence he insisted that

the child did not reveal her civilized nature when she was, as popular nineteenth-century literature and illustrations would have her, well-behaved at study, play and prayer, but when she surrendered herself to 'crying, quarrelling, breaking things and refusing to work'.⁷ These inclinations were a corruption of her 'true' inclination to productive work, but they were also indicative of the child's protest against the current order. 'Children are nature's echoes against morality', Fourier wrote;

they are all in league to escape its rules. Their only source of happiness lies in activities forbidden by their moralistic teachers – in breaking, destroying, quarrelling and insulting. They honour a person who excels in these respects, and tease and abuse those who are inclined to obey the authorities.⁸

The destructive, petulant child was, therefore, merely voicing her protest at a society that did not fulfil her needs; that repressed her desires through hypocritical and inconsistent moral doctrines.

The civilized order, Fourier argued, deluded itself in thinking it could teach children to be good, when its entire structure ran contrary to realizing this image of the child it nevertheless cherished as the ideal. His system of 'natural education', whilst retaining this ideal child as its goal, endeavoured to achieve it by resisting civilized moral doctrines concerning good and bad behaviour in children. Instead, he would place at the heart of his pedagogy everything that morality conceived as wrong. He based this on the idea that these reprehensible characteristics were natural tendencies. 'For the present', he wrote in 1808,

I will admit, these children are pretty intolerable, in fact all children are. But I will not admit that there is anything vicious about them; their so called vices are the work of nature ... I repeat, the only things vicious are Civilisation, which does not allow these God-given characteristics to be developed or put to use, and philosophy which is unwilling to admit that the civilised order is opposed to the views of nature as it has to stifle children's most universal inclinations, such as a fondness for greed and disobedience in boys, for laziness and ostentation in girls.⁹

His educational system would harness these tendencies rather than oppose them. As his theory developed it would become clear how greed and ostentation represented only the desire for luxury that Fourier understood as an essential human right; and that disobedience in boys and laziness in girls represented only a valid opposition to the current social order that restricted their lives.

Fourier's pedagogy exceeded the simple intent of demonstrating how behaviour that the civilized order castigated as bad in children would become good in his Harmonian society. For, in endeavouring to delineate the radical change afforded by his system, he presented what amounted to a carnivalesque reversal of adult-child relations. Within Fourier's system it would be children who worked the hardest, who would hold the highest values and the most rational understanding of the social structure. They would be the ethical leaders of his society who would understand the importance of sacrificing self-interest to the community. Notably, in this respect, everything one might understand as children's play became, within this system, their impetus to work. Their fondness for destructiveness became constructive productivity; their predilection for noise became musical, and specifically operatic, skill; gluttony was treasured as gastronomic sophistication; the highest order of labour and the foundation for Harmonian ethics was in the dirty work that channelled the energies of those (usually male) children who like to be mucky; and the coquetry of (usually female) children became the highest capacity for artistic and poetic sensibility, the aesthetic foundation of Harmony. From this perspective, it often seems as if it were adults who would be wholly dedicated to play in Fourier's community; that it was for them that Harmony was made to seem like a vast, colourful game with its parades, gatherings, costumes and Courts of Love; that it was they who must be cajoled through the immediate gratification of all their desires (or, when required, through censure from children to stimulate a sense of humiliation) into dedicating themselves to the community.

The pleasure of work

Carolyn Steedman has noted how the history of childhood tends to adhere to a teleological structure whereby the shift from labour to education is perceived as enlightened progress. It is, she argues, a factor that is 'extremely difficult to abandon, for we live and write history ... by a central tenet of nineteenth-century liberalism, which tells us that the measure of a society's civilization and progress is to be found in its treatment of disadvantaged and dispossessed groups: women, slaves and children.'¹⁰ It is as a result of this ingrained perspective that reading Fourier's pedagogy from the present perspective appears to support the exploitation of children's labour. His description of pea-shelling, for example, in which children sit in rows, ranked according to ability, dividing peas by size that are sent through a kind of human run con-

veyor belt, resonates too strongly with the drudgery of modern sorting work. Quite astoundingly, for Fourier the point was that children would eagerly engage in such employment because it occupied their passion for play. Every aspect of play in Fourier's theory represented a propensity for work. 'All children', he wrote in *La Théorie de l'unité universelle*, 'have the following dominant tastes:

- 1 FERRETING, a penchant for handling things, exploring, running around, and constantly changing activities.
- 2 INDUSTRIAL DIN, the taste for noisy jobs.
- 3 APING, or imitative mania.
- 4 WORKING ON A REDUCED SCALE, the taste for little workshops.
- 5 PROGRESSIVE ENTICEMENTS of the weak by the strong.¹¹

This utilization of the propensity to play to justify putting children to work runs rather sharply against the modern belief in the importance of play to children's development. It suggests a pedagogy intent on robbing children of play, ensuring their every hour was economically productive. Many of Fourier's followers took this line in appropriating his pedagogy to a more restrictive work ethic. Parke Godwin, declaiming against idle and incorrigible children in mid-century America, praised Fourier for ensuring that 'All their toys are tools, and have a useful end; all their plays are metamorphosed into labours and become fruitful.'¹² But it was an interpretation that emphasized only one side of a vital debate that Fourier was closely engaged in, concerning the cultural role of children in the nineteenth-century around ideas of labour, play and education.

The removal of children from labour is perceived as a rescue from exploitation. They are liberated to pursue social and intellectual development, but also, from a more sentimental perspective, to pursue the pleasure of play. But running alongside the debate on labour versus education in the nineteenth century was the debate on education versus entertainment. The division was based on class. The social concern over child labour did not consider working children to have any right to play, but circled around the question of whether work or education was a better means to instil moral principles and reduce the risk of the child succumbing to vice and idleness. In the case of middle-class children, educators and parents had, through the late eighteenth to the nineteenth century, increasingly come round to the view that play was a necessary component of the child's life. As Jack Zipes has noted in respect of children's literature,

middle class writers, educators, publishers and parents began to realize that the rigid, didactic training and literature used to rear children was dulling their sense and creativity. Both children and adults needed more fanciful works to stimulate their imagination and keep them productive in the social and cultural spheres.¹³

Zipes' account of the purpose of play, or entertainment, as a period of 'recuperation' from education and training suggests a more ambiguous dynamic to its function in the child's life that, in effect, still prioritizes productivity. By contrast, for Walter Benjamin, Fourier's idea of play represented his most profound critical challenge: the overturning of the work/play divide. Writing in *The Arcades Project*, he argued:

If the human being were not *authentically* exploited, we would be spared the *inauthentic* talk of the exploitation of nature. This talk supports the semblance of 'value', which accrues to raw materials only by virtue of an order of production founded on the exploitation of human labour. Were *this* exploitation to halt, work, in turn, could no longer be characterized as the exploitation of nature by man. It would henceforth be constructed on the model of children's play, which in Fourier forms the basis of the 'impassioned' work of the Harmonians. To have instituted play as the canon of a labour no longer rooted in exploitation is the great merit of Fourier. Such work inspired by play aims not at the propagation of values but at the amelioration of nature.¹⁴

According to Benjamin, Fourier was not seeking to turn play into work, but to turn work into play. Con-

sequently the challenge he laid down operated on four fronts. In the first instance, though overturning the work/play divide and the reification of leisure time, he was tacitly revealing the middle-class investment in education as a means of inculcating children to the capitalist work ethic. Second, he was proposing a more profound right to play for all children and extending it to include working-class children. Third, he was revealing that play was as vital to adult life as it was for children. And finally, most importantly, he was offering the means to expose how, even as the Romantic child has been constructed through her kinship with nature, the fight against the exploitation of children could also be construed as a disavowal of the true, exploitative status of labour.

Most of the objections to child labour in Fourier have focused on his account of the role of the Little Hordes. The proposition that the dirty tasks of the community, such as the cleaning of sewers, privies and suchlike, would be undertaken by a band of children, mostly male and between the ages of nine and fifteen and a half, has met with tremendous resistance in studies written through the teleological lens of the history of childhood. American psychologists Robert S. Weiss and David Reisman have argued that,

Our national reaction against child labour, and our commitment, as a nation, to the view that childhood be reserved for social and intellectual development, will prevent this notion being taken seriously (unless we can urge that that some work develops



‘character’). A more acceptable idea than Fourier’s is that by increasing the pay and lowering the hours of the most disagreeable jobs, people might be recruited who wouldn’t mind holding them, at least for a time.¹⁵

This assertion, however, completely disregards the status of children’s work in Harmony. It was precisely because ‘repugnant, disgusting, and degrading occupations are, in civilization, overcome by pay’ that ‘they must be surmounted by attraction’.¹⁶ And Fourier was convinced that the children who would make up the band of Little Hordes would find in filthy work an outlet for their propensity for getting dirty. ‘No passion is more marked in children from ten to twelve years of age than that of filth and dirt. If we do not wish to *change the passions*, we must find a way of making use of this taste, which Nature, it is evident, gives to one half of children’.¹⁷ It is clear that the intent behind allocating these tasks to children was not to exploit their vulnerability, but rather to harness an inclination. And, furthermore, Fourier was convinced that children would find pleasure in exercising this propensity; they would enjoy it as much as they would delight in playing in the dirt.

More interestingly, through this work the Little Hordes would also establish the community’s work ethic. Filthy work would be undertaken as an act of friendly benevolence to the community.

If there existed [Fourier writes] in [Harmony] a single function, which was despised ... all inferior parts or duties ... would soon be despised, a contempt for labour would grow up again by degrees, and the result would be that those persons who in civilisation produced nothing, and were good for nothing, would constitute, as in civilisation, the polite classes./ IT IS FOR CHILDHOOD TO PRESERVE THE SOCIAL BODY FROM THIS CONTAMINATION, by taking upon itself, *from a corporative spirit*, the performance of all unclean and despised functions.¹⁸

The premiss for this claim was that Fourier believed children were driven primarily by the desire for camaraderie and friendship, where adults were driven by the more selfish desires of ambition, familial pride or sexual fulfilment. Friendship, for Fourier, meant being both community-spirited and uncompromising in one’s criticism of those who were not undertaking their share of the work. It was the child’s capacity to be both benevolent and uncompromisingly judgemental that would stimulate the necessary degree of self-sacrifice for the good of the community in the more selfish adult. The manner in which children would set the ethical standard was emphasized in the idea that the

Little Hordes would also set the standard for profit levels. If a Series failed to be profitable, the Little Hordes, through their propensity for friendship and social unity, would offer their own income to make up for the shortfall. This would be the only exception to the rule that the child would not be allowed to handle its own money until he or she was fifteen. The shame of depending on the successful labour of children, so Fourier argued, would encourage the weak Series to work harder to regain esteem and self-sufficiency.

By disregarding these details, Weiss and Reisman fail to recognize the full challenge of Fourier’s system, and relapse into the idea of labour as exploitation through reinstating a hierarchy of labour tasks ranked according to how agreeable they are. For Fourier, granting equal status to all labour tasks and allocating them according to the inclination and the ability of the worker was absolutely vital to ensure the eradication of civilized economic elitism. Furthermore, adhering to the teleological history of childhood fails to acknowledge the extent to which the same problems that work in modern life imposes on the everyday lives of adult workers extends to children’s lives: not least the increased regimentation, fragmentation and compartmentalization of family life, school/work time and leisure. Imagining the collapse of the divide between work and play also highlights a number of twenty-first century issues relating to the status of children in a society where they do not contribute economically; when, rather, their productivity within the educational system is based on the idea of an investment in a future workforce – and not, as Weiss and Reisman would have it, in social and intellectual development for itself. The more emotive modern accounts of the nineteenth-century debate for education over paid work fail to acknowledge how demanding education has become for children. Assessments have been introduced earlier and with greater frequency in order to ensure standards are sufficient to serve the needs of a more highly skilled workplace. Holiday time has been eroded as a result of increased time pressure on working parents who cannot provide care for breaks. And that substantial body of children who, for either social or intellectual reasons, cannot compete with this pace are increasingly losing out in the system.

The demoting of this children’s work to a form of education also leads to the denigration of the paid work they do undertake, which accrues such an abysmally exploitative rate of pay in return for the dubious reward of ‘character building’. The idea of arguing for children to have equal earning rights to adults, which Fourier repeatedly insisted upon, remains a wholly alien idea,

despite the fact that, outside of the developed world, this inequality of pay supports the exploitation of an estimated 250 million 'economically active' children worldwide.¹⁹ The opposition to child labour must engage with this fundamental economic reason why children are employed instead of adults in the first place: that the belief in a converse relationship between age and remuneration for labour is still socially and culturally inviolate. Even when employers attempt to impose a Western working age limit, often within a society that is not served by accurate records, the question of fair wages and working conditions is rarely raised. The image of the working child as a victim, exempt from the responsibility for its own welfare that is expected of adults, is far more reassuring to the status quo. To imagine a utopia of working children under the conditions outlined by Fourier, therefore, requires a substantial cognitive leap for the modern mindset, which can only perceive this as the exploitation of hapless victims.

Elevating the orgy

In *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* Barthes argued that 'The motive behind all Fourierist construction ... is not justice, equality, liberty, etc., it is pleasure.'²⁰ It was this point, he argued, that formed the core of Fourier's distinction from Marxism. For Barthes, Fourierist pleasure represented a space that had become irreconcilable with (Marxist) politics. Politics had excluded desire through focusing on questions of need: on the large-scale concerns of class conflict, working hours and living conditions; of wealth distribution and the exploitation of labour. The result, Barthes argued, was that, under modern conditions, pleasure was organized through a 'fantasmatic system'. The reification of leisure time was one example of this; tourism another. It was a system that had "'forgotten" politics', with the result that 'politics pays it back by "forgetting" no less systematically to "calculate" for our pleasure. It is in the grip of these two forgettings, whose confrontation determines total futility, insupportable emptiness, that we are still floundering.'²¹ Fourierist pleasure was founded on the rehabilitation of luxury, not as the exclusive due of the rich, but as a primary, universal right. His utopia endeavoured to attain through universal wealth the ideal of happiness, of sustained pleasure. Basic needs were accounted for through the social minimum, which guaranteed all Harmonian citizens food and shelter heedless of the amount of work they undertook. This enabled Harmonian man to dedicate himself to pursuing his desires. Fourier even acknowledged that this pursuit

was perpetual, that desire was never wholly satisfied. It was a chase that continued past the destruction of the Earth, through the metempsychosis of the human soul into the planetary spirit, and onward through the Cosmos to fuel the sexual life of the stars.²²

The centrality of pleasure to Fourier's system has resulted in a common misconception that his was a libertine's utopia. It is an interpretation that was stimulated by the publication of his highly elaborate account of the sexual life of the Harmonian, which was only retrieved from the archives and published in 1967 as *Le Nouveau Monde Amoureux*. One important consequence of this reputation has been that childhood seemed to hold an anomalous position within his consideration of a liberated adult sexuality. As David Zeldin has argued:

Here Fourier contradicts himself. He is anxious that there should be no divergence between the practices of adults and of children. Indeed, he frequently criticises the educational system of his time for teaching different values to children which they would not be expected to practice in adults life. Logically, therefore, Fourier might be expected to have preached complete sexual licence for children. In fact, beneath the lip service he pays to liberty, his recommendations add up to a system designed to restrain adolescent sexual freedom.²³

Zeldin's argument is based on Fourier's belief that children were a third 'neuter' sex, free from sexual desire, who did not yet have a fixed gender identity, but were only more or less *inclined* to male or female identifications. He argued, for example, that many boys were more naturally inclined to identify with female behaviour patterns, and vice versa for many girls, and believed that this should be encouraged rather than discouraged. He considered it necessary to protect children up until the age of fifteen from witnessing any sexual activity, including the mating of animals. Add to this their removal from the nuclear family and their peer group education designed to collapse fixed gender roles, and he had ensured wherever possible that children would be completely shielded from sexuality. Even after the age of fifteen the male or female adolescent's initiation into the order of the 'Vestals' required that they abstained from sexual activity up to the age of twenty. Precocity was permitted from the outset, but this would result in what was clearly a demotion to the category of 'Damsel'.

The place of sexuality in Fourier's work was actually far more complex than Zeldin's simple formula of either licence or restraint allows. For, in the first instance, adult sexuality was presented as a profound problem in planning for the smooth running of society.

By challenging ‘the pious organization of leisure’ and constituting work on the principle of play, Fourier had sought to ensure a correspondence between pleasure and labour. As argued above, children were central to this system as their propensity to play meant they were innately inclined to labour under these conditions. This was most evident within his theory of analogy, where he chose the mignonette, the heavily scented but largely inconspicuous wildflower, to represent the Harmonian child. In the following extraordinary passage the qualities of the flower express the most astounding and idiosyncratic range of correspondences to childhood. Not least within the flower’s species name, *Reseda*, the healer, which suggests that it was the task of children to heal civilization.

Its flower has no visible petals; it is composed only of the productive parts, stamens and pistils, from allegory to the children of Harmony, incessantly busied in productive functions and finding pleasure only in the useful labours which they execute in a number of passional series; by analogy, the mignonette suppresses the petals, emblems of unproductive pleasure. A very sweet perfume escapes from this little flower, in symbol of the charm excited by children passionately addicted to useful industry... Beneath the little flowers comes a long row of little sacks partially filled and open; this is the emblem of all the little treasures amassed by the Harmonian child in his youth – when he expands but little. And usually accumulates some fifty small sums saved ... which is given to the child when he is fifteen.²⁴

Most importantly, the mignonette analogy demonstrates Fourier’s intimation that adolescence would challenge the child’s propensity to find pleasure only through work/play by inaugurating a new order of desire. Henceforth it would be necessary to harness the adolescent’s emerging sexual desire, ‘To *make work attractive* to children who are near, or just past, the age of puberty.’²⁵ The idea that adolescence represented a corruption of this ideal was supported by Fourier’s insistence that the Damsels would be barred from the children’s meeting held each morning. ‘For this and for other reasons they are held in low esteem by children.’ But these same children would ‘revere the Vestals ... with a sort of affection that one feels toward a group that *has remained faithful after a schism*’.²⁶ This would strongly suggest that Fourier understood adult desire to be ruled by this schism, torn between passions for work and sex.

Fourier invariably referred to the various manifestations of adult sexuality as ‘amorous manias’, innately irrational and irrevocably inclined to fetishism and perversities. Civilization had attempted to organize sexuality through restraint: that is, through the institution of marriage. But restraint not only bred hypocrisy (as lavishly exposed in Fourier’s famous account of the forty-nine orders of cuckoldom²⁷); it also engendered immense frustration, often to a savagely sadistic degree, through forbidding alternative expressions of sexuality. Fourier’s solution to this impasse was to insist that ‘Everyone is right in matters of amorous manias, since love is essentially the passion of unreason.’²⁸ As the ‘passion of unreason’, however, sexuality risked disrupting the social equilibrium. To prevent this, Fourier co-opted all the highly codified



Jermina and Dolly Brown, Duckie, 2001

and ceremonial structures of Catholicism. Through a wickedly satirical sleight of hand, sex and religion were once again conjoined as the means to order the cultural *irratio*. In Fourier’s Courts of Love, however, the role of God’s ministers, the ‘Confessors’, under the direction of the ‘Pontiffs’, was to draw out and realize the individual’s secret desires rather than suppress them.²⁹

Fourier's interest in sexuality was based on his belief that emotional affinities could either be constructive or destructive to the community. They were divided in his system into four passions, each of which dominated a different stage of life. Children were driven by friendship, the young by sexual desire, the mature by ambition, and the elderly by familial or genealogical attachments.³⁰ Childhood remained the ideal, as friendship was the most beneficial to the productivity of the community, providing the strongest drive to co-operative work/play. Sexual desire posed a problem, not only because it was irrational but also because, under civilization, it was organized through the exclusive couple. Familialism was also opposed on the basis that it bonded family units against the community and perpetuated the transmission of civilized values through the generations. Fourier's natural education would eradicate the family institution through disrupting biological ties from birth and channelling familialism into a mentoring system based on the principle of adoption. Sexual desire would be communized through denigrating monogamous relationship and elevating the orgy. However, as he explicitly stated, 'Civilisees may think that the harmonian orgy is an assembly of pure sensuality, as is the foul civilisee orgy; but the two have nothing in common.'³¹ The distinction was that the harmonian orgy held the spiritual passion of 'celadony', or sentimental love, in highest esteem.³²

There is much to suggest that all Fourier's elaborate designs to accommodate adult romances were to ensure that sexual desire would support rather than disrupt the bonds formed through his organization of work. His account placed sexuality between two ideals: the subordination of desire to the good of the community in adulthood, and the absence of sexual desire in childhood in favour of the pleasure of work/play in friendship. Yet again the child was the ideal, who, in civilization, only had the desire to work/play and thus in Harmony was wholly satisfied by productive work. The adult, on the other hand, was split between the two opposing pulls of work and sex. Fourier's disruption of the boundaries between work and play, therefore, had a correspondence in his account of sexuality. For, as a result of overturning the work/play divide, labour became the primary basis for pleasure – not simply as a means to luxury, but as an activity in itself. Labour as pleasure was opposed to the overexcited 'mania' of the adult's amorous adventures. Rather, it achieved a sustained level of pleasure within his system: one that was pursued primarily by children

'busied in productive functions and finding pleasure only in useful labours'.

Dreaming and awakening

Seven months after the initial publication of *The Theory of the Four Movements*, Fourier received his first independent review in the *Journal du Commerce*. This was to set the tone for most future receptions of his work.

If we lived [wrote the anonymous reviewer] in the time of the enchanters, we would beg Astolph, that courtly paladin, to help the patient as he helped the celebrated Roland. But if there are no more necromancers or paladins or winged horses, fortunately we still have doctors, pharmacologists, who know how to prescribe and administer the remedies suitable for the restoration of the organs of the brain, We believe we have detected grave disturbances in the cerebral organs of M Charles.³³

Jonathan Beecher notes, in the conclusion to his biography of Fourier, that there has always been a tendency, even within those most sympathetic to Fourier's work, to maintain 'a clear distinction between Fourier's occasional insights as a critic and planner, and the fundamental absurdity of his cosmogony and metaphysics'.³⁴ For whatever the contradictions in propositioning his backers with promises of untold wealth and the elimination of poverty through peaceable means, the rational reader was likely to feel somewhat sceptical at his assurances that their support would cause the planets and stars to move from their orbit, eliminate all diseases, and bring about the birth of new animal species. That so many of his admirers supported his desire to improve the lives of workers from philanthropic motives, whilst rejecting the cosmogony and metaphysics as irrational, only testifies to the extent to which his core principles were distorted. For it was unthinkable that Fourier would have supported this interpretation when he had so vehemently insisted that 'the human mind has never created anything more mediocre than the two religions philosophy gave birth to at the end of the eighteenth century, the *Cult of Reason* and *Theophilanthropy*'.³⁵ And, as Jonathan Beecher has argued, 'What lay behind all aspects of [his] doctrine was his conviction that we are capable of creating a world consistent with our needs and expressive of our powers. Fourier's criticism, his cosmology, and his design for utopia were all rooted in the belief that the only limit to our possibilities is our desire.'³⁶

In a note entitled 'On Impotence' Walter Benjamin makes the following point, which is highly applicable

to the fate of Fourier's theories on childhood in the light of the problematic reception of his work:

The dream of having children is a beggarly stimulus when it is not imbibed with the dream of a new nature in things in which these children might one day live, or for which they can struggle. Even the dream of a 'better humanity' in which our children would 'have a better life' is only a sentimental fantasy ... when it is not, at bottom, the dream of a better nature in which they would live. (Herein lies the inextinguishable claim of the Fourierist utopia...) The latter dream is the living source of humanity, whereas the former is only the muddy pond from which the stork draws children.³⁷

Through neglecting the importance of childhood in Fourier's system his followers did render his theories somewhat impotent. With adult pleasures censored out of propriety, and childish pleasures rejected as insane, the vital component of his utopia, the creative and total transformation of the world, was eradicated.

The consequence of this can be most readily demonstrated through examining a related representation of the working child in the nineteenth century. For Fourier was to make an appearance in one important text that represented this desire for a 'better humanity' through the figure of the child: Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*. This was, indeed, by Humphrey Carpenter's definition, a meta-children's book, combining all the tropes that would become distinguished in the genre: part fantasy, part social comment, an entertaining fairy tale and a didactic treatise.³⁸ It is notable that the central character is a chimney sweep, compelled not to change his conditions, but to purify his body and soul; and that, furthermore, Kingsley should have freely engaged with all the 'insane' pleasures of nonsense writing, and imaginatively recreating the world, even as he asserted:

If you think what I am talking is nonsense, I can only say that it is true; and that an old gentleman named Fourier used to say that we ought to do the same by chimney sweeps and dustmen, and honour them instead of despising them; and he was a very clever old gentleman: but unfortunately for us and the rest of the world, as mad as a March hare.³⁹

In the nineteenth century the working child was to carry the burden of representing both the harshness of industrial capitalism and the hope that something good could still emerge from within it for the future. And this was arguably as true within the turn to child welfare later in the century in the work of campaign reformers such as Margaret Macmillan, as it was in literary representations of the working child. It

is this inheritance that accounts for the propensity within the rhetoric of child welfare reform to expand the immediate aim – to abolish child labour, or end child abuse – so that it encompasses the realization of a more complete and brighter future for mankind: for example, the website dedicated to the Global March Against Child Labour has expanded its aims to include global disarmament, the elimination of armed conflict, global poverty and the exploitation of both man and nature.⁴⁰ The Fourierist utopia is incorporated in a public opinion poem on the site by Mohammad Mukhtar Alam, written from an imagined perspective of the fortieth century, which 'remembers' the campaign for 'dismantling structures/ Of domination, exploitation and oppression', for bringing the sun to life, causing flowers to bloom, and enabling our children's children to play 'cooperative games of survival at planetary levels'.⁴¹

For Benjamin the '[t]ask of childhood' was 'to bring the new world into symbolic space'.⁴² This was Fourier's primary achievement with his fantasies of a new world order: not as a blueprint for utopia, nor a project to be stripped of its idiosyncrasies and put into action, but the complete expression of the dreams and fantasies that lie beneath our intensely emotional investments in childhood. And the model he did offer could arguably still serve to add substance to the often empty rhetoric of a perpetually deferred hope for our children's future: to identify our fantasies and dreams, acknowledge them as our own, to recognize them as belonging to us as adults and not to some ephemeral, fantasized figure of childhood, but, more vitally, ultimately to awake from such dreaming and act on the world we inhabit.

Notes

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2. Marx and Engels, cited in Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller, Jonathan Cape, London, 1977, p. 109.
3. Friedrich Engels, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* (1892), in *Engels: Selected Writings*, ed. W.O. Henderson, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1967, pp. 192–3.
4. Charles Fourier, *The Theory of the Four Movements*, trans. Ian Patterson, ed. Gareth Stedman Jones and Ian Patterson, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 86 (my emphasis)
5. *Ibid.*, p. 48 and inserted diagram.
6. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* (1762), trans. Barbara Foxley, Everyman, London, 1996, p. 5.
7. Charles Fourier, *Harmonian Man: Selected Writings of Charles Fourier*, ed. Mark Poster, Anchor Books, New York, 1971, p. 99.
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 13. Jack Zipes, *When Dreams Came True: Classical Fairy Tales and their Tradition*, Routledge, New York and London, 1999, p. 118.
 14. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1999, p. 361.
 15. ‘Social Problems and Disorganisation in the World of Work’, in R.K. Merton and R.A. Nesbit, eds, *Contemporary Social Problems* (New York, 1961); cited in David Zeldin, *The Educational Ideas of Charles Fourier*, Frank Cass, London, 1969, p. 102.
 16. Charles Fourier, in Albert Brisbane, *The Social Destiny of Man*, trans. and ed. Albert Brisbane, Augustus M. Kelley, New York, 1969, p. 443.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 444.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 447.
 19. Statistics as published on *Global March Against Child Labour* website, <http://globalmarch.org/>. Accessed 29 April 2002.
 20. Sade, *Fourier, Loyola*, p. 81.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
 22. See ‘The Mathematical Poem’, *The Utopian Vision*, pp. 397–415.
 23. *The Educational Ideas of Charles Fourier*, p. 120.
 24. Charles Fourier, in François Cantagrel, *The Children of the Phalanstery*, trans. F.G. Shaw, W.D. Ticknor, Boston, 1848, pp. 54–5.
 25. *The Utopian Vision*, p. 359 (my emphasis).
 26. *Ibid.*, p. 360 (my emphasis).
 27. See *ibid.*, pp. 183–8.
 28. *Harmonian Man*, p. 112.
 29. *The Utopian Vision*, p. 383.
 30. Beecher and Bienvenu, Introduction, *The Utopian Vision*, pp. 37–8.
 31. *Harmonian Man*, pp. 261–2.
 32. See *ibid.*, p. 260. The term was derived from the pastoral novel *L’Astrée* by Honoré d’Urfé (1567–1625), which told the story of the sentimental love affairs of *Céladon* and *Astrée*. The word *Céladon* in French has subsequently been used to designate ‘a platonic, sentimental, shy and faithful lover’. See Anonymous, *Charles Fourier*, <http://arthur.u-strasbg.fr/~ronse/CF/celadon.html>.
 33. Anonymous review, *Journal du Commerce*, November 1808, cited in Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1986, pp. 125–6.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 500.
 35. *The Theory of the Four Movements*, p. 199.
 36. Beecher, *The Visionary and His World*, p. 500.
 37. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 342.
 38. See Humphrey Carpenter, *Secret Gardens: A Study of the Golden Age of Children’s Literature*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1985.
 39. Charles Kingsley, *The Water Babies* (1863), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1995, p. 191.
 40. See *Global March Against Child Labour*.
 41. Mohammad Mukhtar Alam, ‘Global Marchers: An Expression of Gratitude by Children of the 40th Century’, *Footprints*, vol. 1, no. 4, May 1998; cited in *Global March Against Child Labour*, http://globalmarch.org/newsletter/newsletter5_page7.htm.
 42. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 390.

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