FOURIER AND AGRICULTURE

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Abstract: Charles Fourier has been disdained or ignored by social scientists. Some of his ideas were “mad,” but so many others were brilliant. Now we can see that even some “mad” ideas were simply premature, for example, global warming. His works are a “whole earth catalog” of solutions to today’s most intractable problems, such as agricultural labor in a democracy, environmental degradation, consumerism, loneliness, the decline of the family, the gradual disappearance of nutritious meals (and shared mealtimes), eldercare, boredom at work, unemployment, and the fragmentation of communities by “identity” politics. In 19th-century United States, Fourierist and Owenite communitarian models for settling the country were taken very seriously by intellectuals, and more than 100 communities existed. In 1909, the US Commission on Country Life found persistent problems in our largely isolated farming system: the “idiocy of rural life” and environmental degradation. Yet despite reforms, the agricultural sector today offers few options other than self-exploitation family farms, chemicalized agribusiness, brutalized migrant labor, or those questionable imports. Furthermore, labor-saving devices have not eliminated the time and thought required to obtain and prepare nutritious meals; even the affluent often resort to junk food. Fourier’s solutions illuminate our rural dysfunctions and also suggest some not-so-fantastic ideas for remediating the situation.

Key words: Charles Fourier; agricultural labor; socialism; family

1. Introduction

In the early 20th century, political and revolutionary Marxism had become “hegemonic” over other socialist theories. Perhaps now the others can re-emerge. The strange and brilliant Charles Fourier certainly deserves more exposure. We need not institute every detail of his schemes, and we can note some serious
omissions. His wilder fantasies need not be taken literally; they indicate the dysfunctions and miseries that a socialist society must remedy. “Socialism” originally referred to concern with the entire range of society’s injustices, including capitalism. However, the early socialists did not assume that the economic base was the source of all other unhappiness.

Nevertheless, Fourier provided practical policy ideas for his time and for the world as it is now, for developing as well as developed nations, and for an increasingly feminist world where boundaries of personal and political are shifting. His ideas are especially relevant to an era in which hard work is disdained and perpetual play desired, when the lust for luxurious consumption defies environmental sustainability at the same time that it leaves people “never content, constantly gnawed by desires despite being surrounded by opulence” (Fourier 1996, 279).

Fourier was an impassioned geographer and an observant demographer. He contemplates the promises and pitfalls of globalization. He has novel suggestions for the gap left by the “normal” family’s erosion and for the increasing proportion of older people. Here I will focus on an ancient problem with its own modern complications: how can a democratic society produce food (and other agricultural products) without enslavement, exploitation, or destruction of the earth? Fourier was literally concerned about “How can we keep them down on the farm after they’ve seen Paree?” He deemed agricultural laborers, in Europe and elsewhere, a reserve of “indigent . . . wretches” (Fourier 1996, 274). The family farm was no solution, as its individualistic approach was wearisome, wasteful, and inefficient. Besides, Fourier regarded the family as an institution deservedly on the way out. Finally, even in his day, agribusiness was imposing a new feudalism on farmers:

[M]onopolists . . . could reduce all those below them to commercial vassalage, and achieve control over the whole of production by their combined intrigues. The small landowner would then be forced indirectly to dispose of his harvest in a way that met with the monopolists’ agreement; he would in fact have become an agricultural agent of the commercial coalition. The final result of this would be the renaissance of an inverse feudalism, founded on mercantile leagues rather than leagues of nobles. (Fourier 1996, 264)

A related, important matter: how can meals be served up nutritious, delicious, and elegant, without servants or wife-servants? Feeding people is a complicated art and science, and there are few full-time housewives or househusbands with the time, energy, and knowledge to perform this most vital task for humanity. Of course, today, there are even more challenges, because of long-distance, chemicalized, commercial food production. Fourier gives this need its due; one might say that gastronomy has the central place in his utopia.

Let us take a brief look at Fourierism.
2. Fourierism

Charles Fourier (1772–1837), a silk merchant and autodidact, had no professional affiliation to restrain or tame his ideological meandering. He had a fine classical collège education (academic high school) and read widely. There are echoes of St. Simon, Rousseau, de Sade, and Restif de la Bretonne in his writings. In addition, as a single and loner traveling salesman, he observed the habits and crimes of the commercial world, as well as the high jinks of his relatives. Traumatized by the French Revolution and its aftermath, Fourier (1996) adjudged the ideas of the Philosophes as “floods of illusion.”

People . . . were forced to recognize that no good was to be anticipated from any of the knowledge accumulated thus far, and that they would have to look to some new science to provide social well-being, and find new and original paths for political thought; it was obvious that neither the Philosophers nor their opponents were able to alleviate the miseries of society, and that their respective dogmas served only to mask the continuing presence of its worst scourges, including poverty. It was pondering this that first led me to suspect the existence of a social science of which we were still unaware, and stimulated me to try to discover what it was. (Fourier 1996, 7)

He took as his method absolute doubt, finding that Descartes hardly doubted anything important.

As I had no connection with any scientific school, I decided to apply doubt to all opinions without exception, even regarding with suspicion arrangements which had universal agreement; for although this Civilisation is the idol of all philosophical schools, and the one they believe to be most nearly perfect, what could be more imperfect than Civilisation, and all the scourges it brings with it? What more dubious than its necessity and its future permanence? Is it not far more likely that it is just one more rung on the ladder of human progress? (Fourier 1996, 8)

To Fourier, “civilization” is a mostly pejorative term, referring to the present society. It had been preceded by the stages of Savagery, Patriarchate, and Barbarism, which still existed throughout the world and were not all bad. “Civilization” will be surpassed by the utopian era of “Harmony,” which would last for 70,000 years. Then chaos would ensue, and ultimately, the end of the animal and vegetable world.

Fourier’s political speculations began with two related problems: agricultural association and British commercial monopoly. His solution, the germ of his later “phalansteries,” was to bring together
At least eight hundred [people] . . . for the formation of a NATURAL or ATTRACTIVE association. I mean by these terms a society whose members would be driven to work by competition, self-esteem and other stimuli compatible with self-interest; this new order will fill us with enthusiasm for agricultural work, although at present it is regarded as suitable only for the lowest, and is only done out of necessity and the fear of dying of hunger. (Fourier 1996, 11)

The lure would be luxury and pleasure. With the principle of association, eliminating waste and middlemen, vast savings would result: “[T]hree hundred families of associated villagers need have only one well-ordered granary, instead of three hundred ill-kept ones; only one wine-vat instead of three hundred . . .” (Fourier 1996, 11). The benefits of combined creativity and knowledge would also be considerable even for the rich:

In the current order [it is necessary] for every head of household to know about oenology, knowledge which is not easy to acquire. Three-quarters of rich households lack this knowledge, and consequently are very poorly stocked with wine; they spend a lot of money on drink, but have nothing but adulterated and badly kept wines because they have to rely on wine-merchants who are the most adept swindlers, and on hired cellarmen whose only skill is cheating. (Fourier 1996, 123)

Fourier’s plan would vanquish the miseries of “civilization,” which included but were not limited to those created by industrial capitalism. Early socialism, even that of Marx and Engels, charted far more social ills than surplus value extraction. Fourier designed a society which not only allowed for great abundance and luxury (with minimal resource use) but also permitted the full expression of all human passions. Complete harmony was possible without the need for repressing any human desires or reforming humankind. Indeed, Fourier called his ideal society Harmony. He believed that people were born with certain personality types, based on their dominant passions. He posited 12 basic passions: the 5 sensual appetites; 4 appetites of the soul: friendship, love, family, and ambition; and 3 distributive passions: the cabalist (love of intrigues), butterfly (love of change and contrast), and composite (desire to combine pleasures of sense and soul). His psychology has found some modern verification (Angier 1996). The superior individuals were the ones with the greatest complexity and the largest number of dominant passions. Fourier believed that all passions, manias, and desires were good (otherwise God would not have created them). Crime, all social pathology, and dysfunction he attributed to repression. With the proper organization of society, all tastes would become socially useful or at least innocuous. Fourier considered himself the new Newton; he had discovered that psychological attraction made the world go round.
Obviously, Fourier’s understanding of human nature fell far short of modern science. However, he was on the right track with his concern for the incentives needed to construct and maintain a socialist society. Thus, he proposed that private profit, property ownership, and unequal consumption could exist in his ideal society, without serious harm to anyone. He was also being practical, making a bid for investors to finance a phalanstery. Indeed, some of the later Fourierist communities, all short-lived, were funded by resident and non-resident investors.

As Fourier developed his scheme, he decided that his “phalansteries” needed 1,620 people to include male and female representatives of all the basic personality types for the proper arrangements of work and love. They would be rich and poor, young and old, and of all persuasions. Although the income of the community would be “divided into three parts, 5/12 to labor, 4/12 to capital, and 3/12 to talent,” everyone would be guaranteed a generous social minimum of food, lodging, clothing, entertainment, education, medical and dental care, and sex. There would be three classes of dining rooms, allowing elevated tastes to enjoy peacock tongues or the like, conspicuous consumption, and competitive games, but no one would be deprived. An affluent standard of living would be possible because of the savings permitted by “uniting into combined households,” the avoidance of waste, the labor-intensive production of necessities and luxuries, the extremely high productivity of Harmony’s ecstatic workers, and the elimination of “12 classes of parasites.”

Fourier did not endorse mass-production techniques or consider them necessary for abundance. His objective was to achieve “1) The greatest possible consumption of different kinds of food; 2) the smallest possible consumption of different kinds of clothing and furniture . . .” Because manufacturing was odious, all manufactured goods would have to be nearly indestructible: “furniture and clothing will last an extremely long time. They will become eternal” (Fourier 1971, 288).

No one would be laboring to support capitalists, middlemen, idlers, priests, economists, bureaucrats, armies and navies, or various other parasites. Wives of the rich as well as all children would become workers. Fourier’s discovery of the “theory of passionate attraction,” a breakthrough which he compared to Newton’s discoveries, meant that people would voluntarily enroll in all those (and only those) types of work which satisfied their particular combination of passions. In addition, work would be spiced up with competition, intrigues, sex, and pageantry. No occupation would be pursued for more than two hours at a time. Necessary dangerous work, as in chemical plants and glass works, would be rotated so that one person might spend only two or three hours a week in those places. But no matter how enticing, all work would be done in short sessions. This would have the additional advantage of promoting equality and solidarity, as those who were leaders in one “series” would be novices in another.
The major productive work in Harmony would be horticulture, which, along with small domestic animal raising, game keeping, and fish farming, would supply a large part of the diet. Legumes, rather than bread, would be the staple food, with high consumption of fruits and vegetables. A wide variety of occupations would exist in Harmony; Fourier imagined that they would be developed to the highest standards. Thus,

The doctors of the phalange will be specialists in preventive medicine: their interest is to see that no one falls ill. In Harmony, doctors (and dentists) will always work as a team in a group. They will be collectively remunerated in proportion to the general health of the phalange, and not according to the number of ailments or number of patients treated. (Zeldin 1969, 72)

Dirty work would be joyfully pursued by the “Little Hordes,” teams of children who (according to Fourier) have a penchant for filth, noise, and disgusting tasks such as removing reptiles from the roads. In contrast, the “Little Bands,” those children with a taste for elegance, would have the responsibility of maintaining the decorative side of the phalanstery and correcting the grammar of their elders. There would be trade, partying, and joint enterprises with the outside world, which would also be organized in phalanstères. Most notable were the “industrial armies,” mustered for environmental projects such as reclamation of deserts, reforestation, and building canals.

The expenditure, he points out with the logic of a commercial traveller, would be much smaller for a productive army; and besides the saving in slaughtered men, burnt cities, devastated fields, we should have the saving of the cost of equipment, and the benefit of the work accomplished. (Zeldin 1969, 109)

Further peace-promoting activities would be world conclaves of those who shared each sexual or food fetish. To end the scourge of war yet allow expression of competitive passions, Fourier proposed a “world war of small pastries” (petits pâtés), in which massive armies (men and women) would compete to produce the best array of these pastries (Fourier 1967, 339–79).¹

Children would be educated in Harmony by following their instincts, imitating older children, finding mentors, and participating in the work of the community. Miniature workshops with tiny tools would be irresistible. Opera was a prime educational tool as well as a phalanstery-integrating activity. Its pedagogical value derived from the great variety of skills required, including managing complex operations (Kozinn 1994). For Fourier, there was nothing more enticing than the orchestration of the universe’s vast diversity. Adults, children, and members of all
classes would participate; a prince might well be in the chorus line and a pauper, the diva. Although some people would prefer set painting to performing, Fourier expected that all children would be trained in singing and playing instruments from an early age. All the working groups of the phalanstery would have distinctive anthems sung at the beginning and end of each session.

Fourier proposed a radical re-creation of the “amorous world.” He opposed monogamy and the family because they were uneconomic, but even more, because they did not fulfill their supposed purposes. Like other aspects of “civilization,” marriage encouraged corruption and harbored misery for almost all: wives, husbands, and children, as well as the unmarried. Fourier doubted that monogamy could satisfy sexual needs. On the contrary, the widespread debauchery which Fourier observed among his relatives and during his travels suggested that marriage was an unnatural institution.

Fourier also indicted the family because of its oppressiveness toward women. Neither their sexual nor intellectual needs could be properly fulfilled in it. Fourier, an early feminist, believed in the inherent superiority of women in matters intellectual and political. “In the combined order, education shall have restored woman to the use of her faculties, [now] smothered by a social system which engrosses her in the complicated functions of our isolated households” (Poster 1971, 210). Women’s personalities were warped because for years they were trained in duplicity for snaring a husband. This energy was in any case wasted, for once snared, the merry-go-round began. Fourier did not devalue “traditional women’s work.” On the contrary, the marital arts, especially cooking, gardening, child-rearing, and lovemaking, were to become the most important activities in the future.

The family was not a guarantee of security. Even the “normal” family was constantly threatened by death or departure of spouse, children, or parents. Falling out of love, boredom, or “internal migration” were constant risks even where technical fidelity prevailed. Sterility was another possible disaster: “Children come in torrents to people who are unable to feed them, but rich families seem particularly subject to sterility” (Fourier 1971, 182). Furthermore, the institution created especial hardship for those who were excluded—the single, for whatever reason, including unattractiveness. A particular concern of Fourier’s was the elderly, whom he saw isolated socially, vocationally, and sexually.

Was all the sacrifice worth it because the family was a wonderful nest for child-rearing? Fourier (1971, 99) thought not: “In the family system children spend all their time crying, quarreling, breaking things and refusing to work.” Children were oppressed by child-rearing which concentrated on breaking their wills and fitting them to society. He believed that a better method encouraged children’s instincts for imitation and play. Society must respect nature and provide
for the harmless release of all desires and passions; otherwise, the repressed would result in a “countermarch” of evil and violence.

Finally, Fourier saw the family as the enemy of community. The “wondrous inventions” of science and industry needed to be matched by a “social order which will assure our happiness,” which required a communal combination of skills and passions. Fourier sketched in elaborate detail his “new amorous order” in which marriage would be abolished, housework and child care collectivized, and a sexual minimum the right of all (Roelofs 1985, 1996).

3. Marxism and Fourier

Fourier’s indictment of capitalism was appreciated (some would say appropriated) by Marx and Engels, but there were significant differences between the two socialist doctrines. Fourier disapproved of all violence and revolution, did not see class struggle as the pivot to socialist transformation, and desired the happy collaboration of all classes, ages, talents, and personality types.

Fourier’s Harmony permitted private property, profit making and unequal consumption—as long as everyone enjoyed a high material and cultural standard. The proletariat was not the instrument of socialist transformation; that was the mission of the enlightened of any class.

Marx comes close to Fourierism in a few of his works. One (place) is the initial post-revolutionary program outlined in the Communist Manifesto: “Establishment of industrial armies, especially for agriculture”; “Combination of agriculture with manufacturing industries . . . abolition of the distinction between town and country, by more equal distribution of the population over the country”; and “Combination of education with industrial production” (Marx and Engels [1848] 1948, 30–31).

Another, perhaps Marx (1845) at his Fourierest, is in The German Ideology:

For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.

Marxists considered other socialists to be reactionary, as well as utopian. This is not an unfair characterization. Socialist thought often exhibits nostalgia for
aspects of earlier times, even feudalism, only without violence or inequality. Even Marx sometimes held such ideas, as in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Marx 1847):

Finally, there came a time when everything that men had considered as inalienable became an object of exchange, of traffic and could be alienated. This is the time when the very things which till then had been communicated, but never exchanged; given, but never sold; acquired, but never bought—virtue, love, conviction, knowledge, conscience, etc.—when everything, in short, passed into commerce. It is the time of general corruption, of universal venality, or, to speak in terms of political economy, the time when everything, moral or physical, having become a marketable value, is brought to the market to be assessed at its truest value.

Among the greatest differences in their ideas is that instead of the commodification of housework advocated by Marx and Engels, Fourier proposed the domestication of industrial work, local communal self-sufficiency, and small-scale “appropriate” technology. One writer has said that Fourier wanted to “feminize” the world (Coole 1988, 173). The abolition of the family—and substitute institutions for its every function—was necessary for the liberation of women and central to his doctrine.

Although they shared the periodization of history suggested by St. Simon, Fourier did not regard history as progressive; “civilization” was not superior to earlier epochs. Furthermore, Fourier did not share Marx’s enthusiasm for industrialization and centralization; he envisioned a loose association of low-tech communities. Both regarded “globalization” to be hastening a desirable federation of the world, but Fourier deplored such effects as the destruction of the Indian local textile industry (Fourier 1996, 274).

This is a necessarily brief discussion of the similarities and differences between Marxism and Fourierism. A more extensive comparison can be found in Kessous (1996, 70), who argues,

> It would be a mistake to assume that the differences between Fourier and Marx on the continuation of class differences are as great as might at first appear. For the "classes" in Fourier's phalanxes would not be the same classes as those which exist under capitalism. In the first place, both capitalists and workers would do useful work, and both would enjoy it. . . . In other words, there would be neither exploitation nor the extraction of surplus value . . .

4. **Problems of US Agriculture**

How does Fourier’s fantastic plan relate to US agriculture? First, let us look at the perennial situation of farming.
In 1909, the Commission on Country Life submitted its report to President Theodore Roosevelt; it was subsequently published as a US Senate document. Although the evidence was taken in a rare “prosperous” time for farmers, the picture it paints is dreary, and the Commission fears for the survival of rural life. Among its concerns are the power imbalance between individual farmers and the corporations squeezing them on both the supply and marketing sides, depletion of the soil, the poverty of social and cultural life (even successful farmers often had no books in their houses), and the “burdens and narrow life of farm women” (US Congress 1909, 15). The Report embodied the collectivist, nationalist, and ameliorative spirit of progressivism. It set in motion valiant attempts to save the family farm and farming communities—most notably the full blooming of the Extension Service and the encouragement of cooperation. However, these policies probably accelerated the elimination of individual farmers and the domination of agribusiness.

Every period in our history tells a dismal story of individual agriculture, although we should apply Fourier’s rule of seven-eighths:

For instance, if I say as a general thesis, civilised man is very miserable, this means that seven-eighths, or eight-ninths of them are reduced to a state of misery and privation, and that only one-eighth escapes the general misfortune and enjoys a lot that can be envied. (Fourier 1996, 34)

In colonial days, feudal relations, tenancy, indentured servants, or slavery prevailed over vast areas in agriculture North and South. Small independent farmers in the South had a low standard of living. New England farmers were the one-eighth remnant; they were healthy and prosperous by Puritan standards. However, they still followed the communal shared labor and decision-making practices of the English village; their crops were diverse and provided for self-sufficiency (with hemp, flax, and wool for clothing); and everyone engaged in agriculture, including artisans and ministers. Instead of wheat monoculture, they used techniques learned from the Indians, who grew corn and beans in hills, using hoes only.

This had economic, environmental, and nutritional advantages over later agricultural practices. Still, everyone worked hard, including wives and children, to maintain a Puritan standard of living. The overseas owners of the colonies wanted to make a profit on their investments and to this end hastened the settlement of inland areas for cash crops, especially lumber. As land scarcities increased after the War of Independence, so did class divisions. Self-sufficiency declined, off-farm work increased, most sons had to find non-farm careers or migrate, and dowryless daughters became spinsters. Finally, the poor soils of New England could barely
compete with the commercial farms of the West, which benefited from canal and railroad development.

By 1850, the market dictated what was produced on most farms. The southern slave plantations (and small proprietors) produced export crops (e.g., tobacco and cotton). In the West, cattle raising was most profitable (and required least labor, which was scarce), so that is what was done, no matter the negative consequences of a beef diet to the land, the water, or nutrition, for starters. The life of the cowboy was often miserable. Grazing and cattle droves used public lands, so “free enterprise” was also a myth. Finally, the long droves ended in market or railroad towns which featured saloons and brothels for recuperation. Indigenous people and native animal species were exterminated to make way for this on-coming “civilization.” Farmers exploited themselves, their spouses, and their children, yet most farmers failed. The best bet was land speculation—buy a farm and quickly sell it to the next hopeful coming from the East. Then, either repeat the process or move into any non-farm occupation. As is true today, some held onto their farms despite net loss by working off the farm or by using natural resources (e.g., trapping, lumbering, and fishing) as a cash crop.

An apt description was provided in 1859 by Horace Greeley (1963, 52–53), editor of the *New York Tribune* and a Fourierist:

There are too many idle, shiftless people in Kansas. I speak not here of lawyers, gentleman speculators, and other non-producers, who are in excess here as elsewhere; I allude directly to those who call themselves settlers, and who would be farmers if they were anything. To see a man squatted on a quarter-section in a cabin which would make a fair hogpen, but is unfit for human habitation, and there living from hand to mouth by a little of this and a little of that, with hardly an acre of prairie broken (sometime without a fence up), with no garden, no fruit trees, “no nothing”—waiting for someone to come along and buy out his “claim” and let him move on to repeat the operation somewhere else . . . how a man located in a little squalid cabin on one of these rich “claims” can sleep moonlit nights under the average circumstances of his class, passes my comprehension.

There were a few women farmers, but most were farmers’ wives, and they worked and bred until they died; farmers would go through several wives. Those women who converted to Mormonism were opting for a soft life compared with the average pioneer wife.

Farming in the far Western part of the country had all the usual problems, such as the lack of willing, competent farm labor. In addition, it was made possible only by vast government-financed irrigation projects (Hughes 1987, 288). Transformation
of the landscape and diversion of water remain today the source of environmental and social problems and belie the “free enterprise” claim of our agriculture.

From the start, government subsidies and promotion of “scientific farming” hastened the domination of agribusiness—even the Homestead Act resulted in fraudulent parcellation by big business. As farmers specialized and produced for market, they lost self-sufficiency, and both their consumption and production expenditures rose. This was a major cause of the farm crisis and Populist Revolt of the 1870s–1890s (Mayhew 1972, 464).

One response to the farmers’ plight was the Granger movement (Patrons of Husbandry). The first club was organized in 1868 by Oliver Kelley, a federal civil servant in Washington, D.C. The Grange had social, educational, and political aspects; it was the first farm organization in which women participated as full members. Coincidentally, this was precisely the kind of organization that Fourier had viewed as a transition to “associationism.” He thought that Freemasonry had the potential to become a new religion, based on pleasure, with, of course, the addition of women (Fourier 1996, 196). In fact, Kelley was a Mason and incorporated its aspects of ritual and solidarity into the Grange. There are still traces of festivity and pickled-beet contests in the Grange, but its activism became channeled into a doomed Farmers’ Party (doomed by the shrinking farm population). The relative prosperity of 1900–1920 brought farmers into conservative “interest group” politics with the creation of the American Farm Bureau (Danbom 1995, 182).

After 1920, there was a long decline in farmers’ fortunes from many causes. These included a drop in postwar exports, because of European recovery and competition from Canada, Australia, and other places. Dietary and style changes were an influence, prohibition nipped sales of various agricultural products, and food processors took an increasing lump of the food dollar. Farmers were now strapped to pay for automobiles, tractors, and fuel, while sales of horses and oats plummeted (Danbom 1995, 192). Furthermore, they were enticed by a huge array of stuff in Sears, Roebuck catalogs, which included labor-saving devices especially helpful for women, along with status symbols for the parlor and intriguing undergarments.

The Depression revealed the persistent poverty and insecurity of farm life, and the Dust Storms illustrated what the agricultural “system” had done to the land. The New Deal began a period of intense government intervention in agricultural markets. Acreage limitations, price supports, commodity loans, crop insurance, and similar income support programs were directed at the larger commercial farmers. The poorer farmers, including black sharecroppers displaced from the land, migrated. Many ended up on relief, and some were eventually absorbed by the war industry.
Some urban people decided to form rural communes in order to eat, following the advice of Ralph Borsodi and others of the back-to-the-land movement. The federal government’s Resettlement Administration created a few collective farms for displaced farmers and laborers (Conkin 1959). At these, an array of handicrafts was taught, cultural activities were promoted, and medical care was provided by salaried doctors. Their creators were socialists, progressives, and pragmatists. However, like other radical programs of the New Deal (e.g., National Resources Planning Board), these communities did not survive the war. Military production enabled the communards to hit the road in Fords, and they did. In the postwar period, a major farm depression was averted by continuing government income support programs (mostly for larger commercial farmers) and using agricultural products for foreign policy objectives. Nevertheless, the decline of family farms continued. In 1959, a coalition of rural organizations urged Congress to create another Country Life Commission; by 1990, it seemed that the small farm, as a profit-making operation, was headed toward extinction.

Both agribusiness and family farms employ migrant workers and often their children. Conditions have hardly improved since Edward Murrow’s 1960 broadcast “Harvest of Shame.” As Fourier noted, a semi-slave class contradicts basic democratic ideals.

Today there are not many profitable family farms. Mechanization and chemicalization have become more perilous economically, leaving aside the net damage to natural resources (National Research Council 1989). Perhaps Fourier’s “one-eighth” have found a niche market in which they make a decent living, have a normal workday (by today’s urban standards), and do not destroy the land. The organic and “locavore” movements have resulted in wonderful food widely available, but with steep prices and no solution to the labor problem.

Probably a more common experience of new small farmers is that of the young couple who converted their ancestors’ dairy farm in New Hampshire into a diversified operation, including vegetables, fruit, chickens, emus, pumpkins, and Christmas trees (both for short-term ornamentation and discard). They also sell ice cream trucked in from a producer in Massachusetts (protecting our population against ice cream deficiency diseases). Even though in many cases like these capital costs are minimized due to inherited property, the economic returns are meager. The wife has an off-farm job and “[T]hey tend the farm from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m., seven days a week” (Anderson 1998). They enjoy it now, but is this life sustainable in the long run?

Relevant to the decline of the family farm is the decline of the family. Some farmers can find no wives, and those who have been found often choose not to engage in traditional wifely unpaid labor. They have preferred careers or must support the farm by working in shopping malls and town offices. They are unlikely
to have seven children, and those they do have want to go to the disco, not the silo, or kick around a pigskin, not skin a pig. Meanwhile, in the urban areas, many women face a dwindling pool of suitable husband material, or vanishing husbands because of the many female options available (Guttentag and Secord 1983). Here is where the Fourier solution is especially useful, for phalansteries can work without an exactly equal number of men and women. It is much harder for the family to do so; those outside the family system have to butt out one of the partners in order to get in, live in a clouded status without full benefits, or remain entirely outside.

The aging of the population (farm and other) presents many challenges. Elderly farmers need lots of help, and their children are not itching to take over. Now more people are living to be 100. Who will take care of them? Their 80-year-old children? Thousands more immigrants? Care can be the work of a community, as it was in the 19th-century communitarian societies.

In recent years, many issues relating to agriculture in addition to the small farmers’ plight have been on the national agenda. These make us wary of the market solution—agribusiness is more efficient, so let it be, and let rural people be absorbed into other occupations or agribusiness. That had in fact been a consequence of the land-grant colleges created in the 19th century. Farmers’ sons and daughters studied “scientific agriculture,” supposedly to become better farmers. Instead, they were absorbed into John Deere, Jello, and Ortho corporations, to sell inputs and commodities to the remaining farmers.

These titles document the problems: _Silent Spring_ (Carson 1962), _Merchants of Grain_ (Morgan 1980), _Let Them Eat Ketchup_ (Collins 1996), _Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times_ (Hightower 1973), _Harvest of Shame_ (Murrow 1960), _Ill Fares the Land_ (George 1984), _Diet for a Small Planet_ (Lappé 1971), _Diet for a Poisoned Planet_ (Steinman 1990), _Living Hungry in America_ (Brown and Pizer 1987), _Bananas, Beaches and Bases_ (Enloe 1989), _Broken Heartland: The Rise of America’s Rural Ghetto_ (Davidson 1990), _Stuffed and Starved_ (Patel 2008), and _Fast Food Nation_ (Schlosser 2001). Energy economics demonstrates that the energy inputs in US agriculture exceed the outputs and indicates the rationality of intensifying human labor—which is plentiful (Martinez-Alier 1987). Even official sources in the United States see further mechanization and chemicalization no longer viable from economic, environmental, and nutritional perspectives (National Research Council 1989). Water-intensive agriculture is becoming impractical everywhere; a prime example is California, which has diverted rivers and sucked the aquifers dry.

Massive unemployment in the Third World has resulted from the “technical assistance” programs promoting industrial agriculture and export crops, and from the subsidized US crops sold abroad. Less publicized is the disdain some Third World countries have for our vermin-infested food exports and genetically altered seeds and food. Of course, Fourier was correct that farmers under capitalism would
become feudal vassals of corporations. Today they must use inputs designated by food processors, are forbidden to save seed, and are more like hired hands of agribusiness. However, they provide the capital and must take all the risk. As profits determine diet, so today junk food is supported by government policies. The US Congress has a popcorn promotion policy. Children are being trained by advertising, with their schools’ connivance, to eat junk food, in their cafeterias and also with soft drinks, from vending machines. My generation worried about pesticides in the children’s food; but today’s children do not eat meals anymore—apparently, not even at home. They live on M&Ms, colas, fritos, tacos, bagels, and pizza. Many people have no choice of diet, as they are fed institutionally, for example, students, elderly, prisoners, hospitalized, and often, workers.

Agribusiness also holds sway over textile and paper fibers, biofuels, forestry, and medicinal plants. The connection between clothing and social justice, environment, and imperialism is rarely made today, and environmental organizations sell sweatshop garments as fundraisers. This is where the industrial revolution began, with slave labor producing cotton, and children in factories and crawling through coal mines, all so we could have an ever normal stock of 40 T-shirts. Today, all aspects of agribusiness, including organic, require hired labor, and their condition remains a shame in this “prosperous” and “free” society.

5. Communitarianism

In the 19th century, communitarianism was a serious alternative to individual enterprise or family farms. Its theories were widely discussed in the intellectual world from the 1820s to the 1860s and many experiments undertaken. In 1825, Robert Owen (1970) gave a joint address to both Houses of Congress describing his proposed communities. For several years, Arthur Brisbane had a thrice-weekly column on Fourierism in the New York Tribune, which omitted some of the wilder aspects, but explicated the basic ideas. The advocates of associationism, as it was often called, regarded it as a preferred model for the settlement of the West (Bestor 1970). Forty-five Fourierist “phalanxes” were created in the United States; the best known was Brook Farm in Roxbury, Massachusetts (Guarneri 1991). There were also many religious communities, of which the Shaker settlements in New England, Kentucky, Ohio, and elsewhere were most numerous. Whatever their inspiration, they saw themselves as providing a practical alternative to isolated monoculture farming, slave plantations, and industrial capitalism. The Shaker literature proclaimed, “Abolition of all slavery: Chattel, Wage, Habit, Passion, Poverty, Disease,” and “Each using according to need.” These communities enjoyed a far richer cultural and material lifestyle than the average 19th-century farm family and were creative in the use of technology. The Oneida Community,
which practiced group marriage, came closest to the Fourierist dream. It lasted for almost 40 years; the records of this experiment have barely been studied by political scientists. Shakers flourished even longer, and served the celibate sexual niche, often chosen after married life.

Full consideration of communitarian human relations cannot be undertaken here. Evidence suggests that liberty, equality, and general satisfaction were often better than that prevailing elsewhere. There were few “drop-outs” from Oneida, a community which encouraged and fostered intellectual freedom. The Shakers, although totalitarian societies, offered security, good food, good music, and non-violence; religious fundamentalists in the outside world were also subjected to mind control, but without the communal benefits. Communities either prohibited or used alcohol in moderation, whereas ordinary farmers and workers tended to drink all day. Communitarians, even Shakers, were not cultish (i.e., Christians awaiting the end of the world while living in poverty), but rather a movement that attempted to solve the major political, social, and economic problems of this world, including race, sex, and class inequality. Some gestures toward women’s liberation were undertaken in “seven-eighths” of the communities. The Mormons, not without pronatalist motives, found a way to include the surplus spinsters of the East in family life. However, only the Shakers and the short-lived Nashoba experiment of Frances Wright had black members.

As a productive institution, communitarianism had many advantages. Farming, agricultural processing, and other manufacturing could be supported by the combined capital, labor, intelligence, and skills of the entire community. Skilled and educated people chose this way of life. (So did some odd ducks, but they also abided on isolated farms, where violence and abuse were hidden.) Both productive machinery and luxurious consumption goods became affordable to people of average means.

Appropriate technology (e.g., the Shaker mechanical washing machine) was applied to housework, which, although mostly performed by women, was much easier as a collective undertaking. Self-sufficiency was the rule, unlike the increasingly monocultural individual farms. Surpluses were sold locally along with value-added products that helped to insure economic viability. Their inventions were widely admired; for example, washing machines were bought by hotels and other institutions. Shakers sold seed packets and herbal concoctions by mail order; Oneida traveling salespeople distributed the community’s manufactures. Here was a model for human-scale economic development, in contrast to our slave labor, agribusiness, massive public works, highways, assembly line, military Keynesianism, and citizen-subsidized weapons exports.

Communitarianism was a promising answer to Fourier’s concern about agriculture in a democracy, which precluded peasants or slaves. He also desired
nutritious, delicious, convivial meals, yet believed that liberated women would not want to spend their days preparing them. Labor in 19th-century communities was confined to regular hours with unpleasant shifts rotated, holidays and time-off scheduled despite cows, boring work pleasant because of companionship and flirtation, and variety in work available according to taste. Indeed, among Oneida’s enterprises was the supremely Fourierist one: performing operas for paying audiences. Health and diet were superior to that of individual farmers, who were highly susceptible to alcoholism and violence. Education was provided for children and adults; both the Owenite New Harmony and Fourierist Brook Farm had notable, profitable, “progressive” schools for their own children as well as outsiders. The Shaker school in Canterbury, New Hampshire, was considered better than the public offering, and locals sent their children to it. Incentives for sustainability were built in. Unlike the normal pattern of speculative land use, communities developed a place where they intended to stay and were thus likely to promote long-range soil fertility and avoid toxic wastes. Equipment was shared by many farmers, and the communal situation encouraged repair and adaptation.

6. Implementation

Today, communalism would have many advantages for both rural and urban life. Ebenezer Howard’s ([1898] 1965) Garden City idea is still valid; rural isolation and urban congestion must give way to an intermediate form, highly self-sufficient, green, and cultured. We need to restore productivity to idle lands and unemployed people. Voluntary immigrants could find a friendly and comfortable home and decent work. The energy costs, pollution, and labor oppression of agribusiness could be gradually reversed. Chemicalized imports, including flowers, produced by plantation labor could cease. Communal self-sufficient agriculture could be resumed throughout the world, where hunger and unemployment have followed the introduction of capital-intensive cash crop farming. The impracticality of the family farm would be recognized, and the self-exploitation (and guilt) of those trying to maintain it ended.

A recent UN report on the problems of agriculture worldwide addressed the problem of equity in farming:

Important options for enhancing rural livelihoods include increasing access by small-scale farmers to land and economic resources and to remunerative local urban and export markets; and increasing local value added and value captured by small-scale farmers and rural laborers. (IAASTD 2009, 5)
Nevertheless, while the study recognized that there are many who would be farmers if land and capital, access to markets, and so forth, were available to them, it did not consider how the life of a small farmer would ultimately appear inequitable in an otherwise affluent world, which enjoyed reasonable hours of work.

How could such a fantastic scheme be implemented? How “anti-American” such ideas! On the contrary, there have been many successful cooperative agricultural or agro-industrial communities in the United States (albeit ignored in history books and Hollywood films). Throughout our history, cooperative economic activities have made individual farming tolerable: communalism in early New England; barn raisings; and insurance, supply, and marketing cooperatives.

As for its “anti-capitalist” nature, so has been our agriculture from the start: slavery; indentured workers; government subsidies for canals, research, irrigation, and development; rural electrification; price supports; “food for peace”; and so forth. In addition, monopolies have belied the “free enterprise” theory. Furthermore, for all our aversion to an imposed culture, the Extension Service, along with private organizations such as the National Recreation Association, once invigorated rural life with 4-H Clubs, folk dancing, local history pageantry, and peach-canning contests.

Some may argue that cooperatives are not in accordance with “human nature” and that people will not be able to “get along.” This ignores the eons of human tribal history, surely as genetically significant as the aggressive drives. Furthermore, people do not “get along” very well in individual families; pioneer farmers’ domains were rife with domestic violence. Communal living skills can be learned—after all, there have been successful experiments. Those older sustainable communities that had a probationary period did not admit troublemakers and those unsuited to the lifestyle. Today, the great popularity of co-housing developments indicates that there are many people who desire cooperative living; they may be the pioneers demonstrating its benefits to the more conservative citizens (McCamant and Durrett 1994).

The collective farm experience in Communist countries—in comparison with their individual farms—can indicate some benefits of the system. In Poland, where a mere 20% of farmland was collectivized, the few collective ones were among the most productive. More significant,

The development of the agro-industrial complex with small-scale industrial production concentrated in the non-harvest months has been another important factor increasing the welfare of farm families. These small-scale industrial operations are frequently employing farm women in rural areas who take advantage of the child care facilities provided by the collective farm. This process has given farm women more options in life
and it is possible for women to rise in the collective farm meritocracy thereby reducing the power of their formerly [sic] domineering husbands. (Turgeon 1991, 3)

Hungarian collective farms were especially successful, and the Cuban collectives brought regular hours, indoor plumbing, gender equality, and cultural amenities to former peasants. In Bulgaria, collectivization was regarded as a desirable alternative to the traditional dependence on parents and in-laws among younger farmers (Creed 1998, 58). Consumers appreciated the better enforcement of pesticide levels in the collective and state farms than was the case with the individual profit-seeking farmers. Reports of astounding productivity in USSR private plots usually ignored (1) the nature of the produce (e.g., chickens, bok choy, tomatoes, raspberries, etc., rather than wheat, potatoes, rutabagas, etc.); (2) the intense, unregulated self-exploitation and that of family members on the private plots; and (3) the vast collective farm inputs (e.g., seed, machinery, fertilizer) employed (often illegally) in private cultivation. Labor time was slacked from communal responsibilities. A fair judgment of these systems must include not only productivity but also quality of life for men, women, children, and elders; purity of food; and protection of the environment. Although agricultural chemicals were heavily used in Communist systems, it was not inherent in collective farming.

A detailed communal plan for the United States would require considerable planning. Here are a few suggestions. A new communitarianism would be voluntary and might recruit among farmers and would-be farmers, immigrants, homeless, single people, retirees, and 18–22-year-olds (college courses both practical and impractical could be part of the community). A revived Citizen’s Extension Service could facilitate experimentation and electronic exchange of information.

Financing could be provided initially by redirection of agricultural subsidies to sustainable cooperative farming. Educational demonstration farms are now being subsidized by the private sector through donations and foundation grants. Capital might also come from communards on social wages, social security, private pensions, or inherited wealth. All-age communities, with opportunities for both recreation and part-time convivial work (e.g., canning peaches, teaching children carpentry, composing opera scores, trouble-shooting email service), could restore the dignity and economic usefulness of elders, while constructively employing their economic resources from private wealth, pensions, and social security.

Of course, huge sums could be liberated (and taxes become minuscule) by reducing military expenditures, now used as an economic stimulant and protection for vital supplies of bananas and oil. Healthy lifestyles and preventive health care would reverse a monumental drain on resources. Overconsumption that is pushed by advertising or pulled by loneliness would be eliminated, along with billions
spent on most children’s toys, lawn care, wild bird feeding, and much other profitable stuff that contributes little to happiness. Many wastes could become productive, such as ghost towns, ghost farms, and ghost machinery; they could be adapted and repaired in a labor-intensive, decentralized economy.

Appropriate technology will reduce drudgery, yet reasonable expenditure of human labor is entirely rational and currently an underutilized resource. Obesity is now endemic worldwide. As in Fourier’s Harmony, the ideal diet would be based on horticulture and intensive farming, and includes fruits and vegetables, legumes as a major protein source, and either vegan, vegetarian, or carnivorous eating of small animals, perhaps snails up to sheep. This more healthful regime changes radically the land, energy, labor, and chemical basis of agriculture. Poor soils could be remedied with sufficient labor so that raised beds and composting could be employed. Likewise, textiles (e.g., flax, hemp), building materials, fuel, paper, medicines, and so forth could also be produced locally from cultivated, wild, or recycled resources. These projects would provide challenges to entice scientists and engineers to become communards, although all members would participate in both intellectual and manual work.

Total self-sufficiency is not likely. Most communities would not be able to produce all their machinery, or automobiles, TVs, computers, and so forth. Small communal industries could be developed for cash needs: food for the local non-farm population, exotic crops for the region, manufacturing, consulting, health care, education, entertainment, and so forth. This is not so different from what already exists, for “farms,” especially in the Eastern United States, earn income as horseback riding and cross country ski facilities, petting zoos, children’s workshop venues, sustainable agriculture demonstration centers, sheltered workshops for developmentally disabled, summer stock theater barns, old book dealers, craft schools, meditation parlors, “Woodstock,” weddings, and so forth. A communal scheme is more viable as the purchased (or bartered) goods, like Fourier’s wine vats, would be shared among many people.

It would be reasonable, as Fourier did, to see the world as it is demographically: the shriveling of the family, and the elderly category poised for explosive growth. It makes sense to use resources that are plentiful: land (including abandoned farms), human labor (including that of retirees and fitness bicyclists), and ingenuity. Such changes would support human and environmental health, for example, local organic food, use of renewable resources for most needs, convivial and supportive communities, mental and physical work—in reasonable doses—for all, and short supply lines.

What makes communitarianism a stronger option today is that the family farm experiment has been run with negative results (in seven-eighths of the cases) despite incredible natural resources, hard work, and government subsidies. All
indications are that agricultural problems are getting worse, and rural communities are dying. There is currently world overproduction of food (and textiles, and most stuff) while hunger persists. These very dysfunctions were what set Fourier on his utopian quest, which began when he saw wheat dumped in the sea to raise prices, and the urban price of apples 100 times the farm price. What he would think of the world-engulfing junk food diet cannot be imagined.

Note

1. This episode, titled *The World War of Small Pastries*, translated by Shawn P. Wilbur and Joan Roelofs, was published by Autonomedia, New York, 2015.

References


