

Jonathan Beecher, *Victor Considerant and the Rise and Fall of French Romantic Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

Social history is generally disheartening. Whereas the story of the powerful is often narrated in the epic mode, the chronicle of crusaders and activists who fight to improve the human condition usually generates melancholic reflection on the contrast between an optimistic faith in an ultimate triumph and the limited influence of such lives. Yet there is much to learn from the history of the losers, because their failures cannot blot out the quality of their lives and ideas and they remain a lesson in human resistance to the powers that be.

Victor Considerant (1808-1893) is a striking example of such a contrast. This manic-depressive former polytechnician, whom the cartoonists enjoyed representing with his huge red moustache and other appendages, is known in the United States for his failed communal experiment in Texas. Yet, for better or worse, Fourier's works would have probably remained relatively obscure in his time had he not had such a devoted follower as Considerant, who wrote and lectured with "sincere enthusiasm," clarity and elegance, and who inspired large audiences, even though he was not a brilliant speaker. Half a century later, the Russian Tcherkezov would even accuse Marx of plagiarizing Considerant's *Manifeste de la Démocratie au XIXe siècle*. Considerant's symbolic role was important, as can be attested to by the people who attended his funeral, which included "the socialists Jean Jaurès, Alexandre Millerand ... the anarchist brothers Elie and Elisée Reclus, the feminist Paule Mink ... and Karl Marx's son-in-law Charles Longuet" (444)

However, Considerant's influence on the development of Fourierism can only engender mixed feelings. He censored all of Fourier's speculations on love or what he considered to be eccentric in the thought of his master. But he also made a number of positive contributions to what was called the science of man and society. He rejected the ascetic version of socialism, – resignation, the denial of the flesh, and proposed a hedonist view that included "the passions of love, ambition, intrigue, the need for change, or the penchant for luxury" (134). His idea of association did not apply only to productive activities but to everyday life: why should a village of 2000 inhabitants have 400 kitchens, 400 dining rooms and 400 cooks? He popularized the view of contemporary society "as riven by class conflict – a conflict not simply of rich and poor but of capitalists and wage workers" (164-5)? He popularized the demand for the right to work and disseminated the ideas of association, community and democracy.

Still, one may wonder why Beecher, the author of two important books on Charles Fourier, of whom Considerant was only a disciple, has devoted so much time and work to this second rate do-gooder. The reason may be in historians' current disenchantment with Marxism and their quest for alternative

roots in a socialist period that largely antedates Marxist influence. Whatever the case, this contribution to the historiography of a leading Fourierist also presents a more general setting. Considerant's own evolution and the issues he had to face can best be understood within the context of this period, which was that of the emergence of French romantic socialism.

The author thus soberly reevaluates a number of assertions about early French socialism. There was a movement for change and it had political, intellectual and literary impacts, but the word *socialisme* only came into common usage after the 1848 revolution. Prior to that event, for some contemporary observers, "Babouvism," "Saint-Simonism," "Fourierism," etc. merely represented "sectarian movements or écoles, each with its own particular remedy and its own theoretical jargon" (145). Such a comment, which of course delighted the conservative press of the time, calls however for some nuances. The babel of voices was a symptom of the fertility of the social thought of that period, which witnessed the appearance of such a rich variety of reformers: Buchez, Cabet, and Proudhon, to name but a few. For political exiles like Wilhelm Weitling, Moses Hess, Arnold Ruge or Mikhail Bakunin, France was "a desert oasis" (160). Women, too, performed functions and the author justifiably emphasizes their roles, particularly those of Clarisse Vigoureux and her daughter, Julie, who would become Considerant's wife, but also Flora Tristan and even Désirée Véret, to whom Charles Fourier himself had made a love declaration. Last but not least, Beecher shows, again and again, how in spite of their bitter quarrels, all these intellectuals often met with one another and managed to command respect from each other. That was particularly true of Considerant who succeeded to some extent in maintaining a certain level of serenity as well as some lifelong friendships with people who did not share his ideas.

This well documented book, clearly written, maintains a critical distance from its main protagonist. It succeeds in sustaining the reader's interest as the different phases of Considerant's life succeed one another. And it will remain an important work for those who are concerned with human endeavours to improve our world.

Ronald Creagh
Université Paul Valéry