

H-France Review Vol. 1 (June 2001), No. 14

Jonathan Beecher. *Victor Considerant and the Rise and Fall of French Romantic Socialism.* Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif., and London: University of California Press, 2001. xvi + 584 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN 0-520-22297-0.

Review by Edgar Leon Newman, New Mexico State University.

"The école to which I belong carries in its loins the salvation, the liberty, and the happiness of the world" (242). Such forms of expression already seemed antiquated and overblown in April 1849, when Victor Considerant (1808-93), socialist apostle of Charles Fourier and Representative of the People, first said them to the Legislative Assembly of the Second French Republic. Derided as a utopian by later socialists and as a fool by many contemporaries, Considerant, a derivative thinker and failed apostle, has attracted a surprisingly large amount of scholarly attention. Among these learned works, Jonathan Beecher's biography stands out as a definitive gem, a heartfelt evocation of a man and an era, and one of the best books of the decade. Beecher combines new and standard sources to provide a wide-ranging scholarly apparatus on which rests a perfectly organized, gracefully written text. As he demonstrated in his classic biography of Fourier, he can make the most convoluted ideas both comprehensible and interesting, and he sympathizes especially with creative thinkers who can look at one reality and perceive another.

Beecher captures Considerant both in his glory and at that poignant moment when he realized, as Considerant himself said, that he was living at a time when science "was about to close forever the era of...great imaginary systems" (432). Late in life, Considerant accepted Charles Darwin's vision of a world locked in unrelenting struggle, but he clung steadily to the hope that could only come from the generous illusions of Fourier (437).

Romantic socialists, Beecher makes clear, lived in a better world than we do—one without original sin, in which all souls aspire towards harmony and love. Whereas most Enlightenment philosophes had imagined a static, clocklike universe with fixed Newtonian laws, the Fourierists envisioned a dynamic world in which workers, who had advanced from slavery to serfdom to the status of wage laborers, would inevitably organize the workplace so that cooperation would replace competition. A new spirit of harmony would supplant both individualism (a pejorative term) and materialism. This social revolution was viewed as inevitable, but political revolution was not. As late as 1847, Considerant could predict that King Louis-Philippe might soon be "laying the first stone of the first Phalanstery" (176). (A Phalanstery was a self-contained economic unit imagined by Fourier to include 1,620 people, one male and one female representing each of the 810 personality types.) Philippe, comte de Paris, writing in 1894, described Considerant as "a type that is absolutely lost today: the dreamer who believes it possible to reshape all of society solely by means of speech" (448).

In the "pure" Romantic years of the nineteenth century before 1848, speech had divine power. Many Romantics assumed that God had implanted in every soul His love of goodness and justice. A work of art or a turn of phrase could stir the soul to action. Whereas Enlightened philosophes had searched for simple, self-evident principles that appealed to reason, Romantics shamelessly assaulted the passions. Perhaps Beecher goes too far when he speaks of the hostility that the Romantics felt towards the philosophes and the French Revolution (3). Romantics were fascinated by the blending of opposites: prose and poetry, reason and sentiment, liberty and solidarity, science and imagination, interest and love, fact and faith. Consequently, many of them could fuse the liberal principles derived from Enlightened reason with their own faith in God and humanity, and they saw the Revolution as a God-directed step towards a world based on love. Considerant concluded "A purely rational humanity would be a monster" (377).

Beecher's narrative sparkles especially at those points where Considerant's ideas were tested by reality. Young Considerant early jettisoned Fourier's more outrageous notions like free love (Considerant was happily and faithfully married), the breakup of the family (Considerant had no children but was devoted to his parents and siblings), the seas that would turn to lemonade, and that gift to cartoonists, the archibras—a useful tail that all Phalansterians would eventually grow. Considerant, unlike Fourier, was skeptical about the natural goodness of all passions, and he appealed instead to people's higher nature (thereby recognizing that they have a lower nature). Considerant emphasized practical reforms: the "right to work," which would guarantee a decent job at a living wage to every man and woman, minimum sustenance for those unable to work, universal education, direct universal suffrage for both sexes, the legalization of divorce, the right of married women to own property (Considerant arranged for his wife to control her own dowry), and a reorganization of labor that would take from each according to his ability and give to each according to his value. Whereas Fourier had insisted that his program be applied in full, Considerant tailored his ideas to fit with those of other "socialists" (as they would be called after 1848).

Life and the *École Polytechnique* had molded Considerant into an officer who could not lead and an engineer who could not plan. He was, however, a talented writer, dreamer, speaker, and charmer. His triumph was to make Fourierism into a comprehensible ideology and a political force. His first tragedy was, after his election from Paris to the Legislative Assembly of the Second French Republic, to fritter away that force on June 13, 1849, when the democratic-socialist leadership dissolved into squabbling factions and left their followers at the army's mercy. Considerant repeated this cycle in 1854-56, triumphantly attracting to his Reunion, Texas "paradise" more settlers than it could handle, then lying in his hammock blowing smoke rings while the settlement collapsed around him.

Much of this book concerns a man who had lived beyond his time. "After 1848," Beecher says, "Considerant lost his audience" (451). Romantic socialism, with its trust in the people and in the spontaneous generosity of the human soul, seemed to have died on the barricades of June 1848, clearing the way for the empirically discovered horrors of Darwin's treatises and Zola's novels. Considerant clung to his old beliefs. As French armies reeled before the Prussians in 1870 (he had returned to Paris from Texas in 1869), he insisted that "the two most civilized peoples of Europe," France and Germany, had "every reason to join forces." Because the war was "an abominable stupidity," it would end and the Germans would go home once they had been presented with "a sufficient amount of intelligence" (407). In 1870, as in 1848, Considerant believed that the collective popular will would emerge spontaneously to save the day (409). After France signed an armistice and only Paris was still fighting, Considerant,

who had joined the Socialist International, assured his fellow members of the Paris Commune that the age of warlike, aristocratic societies was ending and that soon they would be living in a peaceful, productive world (417). Signing himself "Victor Considerant, visionary and American citizen"(451)--Considerant became a United States citizen in May 1858 and remained one for the rest of his life--he advised his fellow Communards to establish a federated "Proudhonist" France (418).

The wreck of the Commune, according to Beecher, left two Considerants. One, especially after the death of his wife in April 1880, spent his days at the Café Soufflet near the Sorbonne, often staring off into space. He wrote one friend around 1890: "To tell the truth, I've been dead for a very long time" (439). But there was another Considerant who, in 1880, nobly refused a government pension because he did not want to receive money that had been taken from the poor. His faith was still intact, even if his ideas seemed increasingly irrelevant. Late in life, although he condemned French socialists for "blathering about massacres," he was encouraged by the moderation and common sense of the German and Belgian socialists (438, 440). The ongoing struggle for the eight-hour day gave him hope that the "industrial feudalism" of the age of "civilization" (a pejorative term) might be overthrown by peaceful, democratic means. Pointing to a political cartoon from the 1840's that showed him with his archibras, he said in the 1880's that such mockery would never keep "the grain from growing or socialism from advancing"(443). To the end of his life, he remained a visionary, remembered by a host of people who seek a better world and now by one superb American biography.

Edgar Leon Newman
New Mexico State University
enewman@nmsu.edu

Copyright © 2001 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for non-profit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172