

thoreau and etzler: alternative views of economic reform

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Behind most arguments about economic matters in the United States lie certain assumptions concerning the validity of economic reform, or at least the validity of the forms economic reform can take. Failure to understand the character and nature of these assumptions, or to comprehend their impact upon economic positions and values, makes definition and relevant discussion of current and past attempts at economic reform difficult, if not impossible. At a time in our national existence during which pressure for economic reform is endemic, understanding of these matters is crucial. This paper examines the bases of two sets of these assumptions, and deals specifically with their impact upon attitudes toward economic reform.

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In 1843 Henry David Thoreau reviewed the German economist J. A. Etzler's *The Paradise within the Reach of All Men, Without Labor, by Powers of Nature and Machinery; An Address to All Intelligent Men*.¹ Apparently having its analytical base in Fourierism and drawing its philosophic impulse from eighteenth-century socialism, Etzler's book provided Thoreau with an occasion to propose American Transcendental ideals of economic reform as an alternative to those of French Associationist Socialism. In effect the review stands as an incipient manifesto of Thoreau's Transcendental economic thought, receiving its inspiration from Emerson's *Nature* and anticipating its fruition in the "Economy" chapter of *Walden*. It is a document that goes far toward explaining why European ideas about economic reform failed to gain wide currency in nineteenth-century America.² And it provides a powerful argument

for an individualistic conservative approach to economic reform in the United States.

During the early part of the nineteenth century, particularly during the Jacksonian period, two concurrent movements were underway. First, the franchise was being extended increasingly to the non-propertied classes; second, the way was being opened to an extension of "Liberal Capitalism."³ These two movements reinforced one another. More importantly, they gave rise to a mood of optimism consistent with growth of the entrepreneurial spirit and acceptance, on its own terms, of the credo of materialism. It is not too much to suggest that the definition of productive and non-productive human effort began to resemble that offered by Adam Smith more closely than that of any American spokesman.⁴ With this change, the stage was set for concentration upon economic expansion and a relative denigration of human effort and thought not related to this end.

This was a period too in which, as a contemporary observer said, "the forms of life . . . were, in a measure, plastic," and "the test of truth was its availability."⁵ Not only was the United States too young for any serious concern about the future (at least not in any pessimistic sense), but it was also young enough to be impatient with fixed traditions. Experiments in life were made innocently, without regard to precedent. New England orthodox protestantism had metamorphosed into intellectual protestantism. In 1836 Emerson's *Nature* sanctified idealism as a critical method when it identified the self as spiritual authority for truth. American Transcendentalist methodology was unique. Having its roots in Platonism it was idealistic; but as a philosophical "system," it was also markedly individualistic. It was a reaction against formalism and tradition, against Puritan orthodoxy. O. B. Frothingham describes the distinctiveness of Transcendentalism in the following way: "Practically it was an assertion of the inalienable worth of man; theoretically it was an assertion of the immanence of divinity in instinct, the transference of supernatural attributes to the natural constitution of mankind."⁶

The Transcendentalists held that latent in all men is a force capable of propelling them toward attainment of their highest ideals. Man and society are perfectable if only the myopia of individual man can be corrected. The nineteenth-century music critic and Transcendental thinker John S. Dwight looked with disgust on the refusal of his contemporaries to unleash this force.

On all hands, men's existence is converted into a preparation for existence. We do not properly live, in these days; but everywhere with patent inventions and complex arrangements are getting ready to live. The end is lost in the means, life is smothered in appliances. . . . Goodness is

exhausted in aids to goodness, and all the vigor and health of the soul is expended in quack contrivances to build it up.⁷

For the Transcendentalist, reform was the primary duty of the individual; and this reform meant self-culture, culture of the heart, of conscience, of sympathy and of spirituality as essential components of a meaningful and progressive existence. Having as an article of faith man's capacity for infinite improvement, the Transcendentalist could never be happy with the man whom Emerson looked on as a "God in ruins" and whom Thoreau saw as inhabiting airy castles without foundations. The serious Transcendentalists discovered that idealism without moral hypostasis was unlikely to be fruitful.

Necessarily, then, the Transcendentalist gave precedence to regeneration of the human spirit over reform of human circumstance. It was impossible for a Transcendentalist to associate himself with any movement or cause that did not start from the assumption of the human requirement for personal dignity. He could oppose slavery (as most Transcendentalists did) because he was aware of the slave as a human being whose capacity for development was stifled. Or he could support mass education for children because this was a prerequisite to development of the self by the child. But wider social reform, particularly that in the economic sphere, was viewed with distrust because it implied a conscious act on the part of society to develop society in the abstract rather than to encourage organic development of the individual. No system that denied the self-determination of man within his given circumstances could be accepted. Only those acts by society that clearly could be shown to unlock possibilities for self-determination by individuals (possibilities they could not unlock for themselves) were acceptable; and artificial or imposed organization and class identification were viewed with suspicion.⁸

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In contrast to this Transcendental suspicion of abstract economics, European reformers led by Fourier and his followers proceeded from the premise that economic reform could be legislated upon the basis of social and philosophical truths.

Fourier was a member of the Associationist branch of European socialism, and his philosophic underpinning was that of eighteenth-century socialism.⁹ This body of thought started with the search for the source of evil in society and in man. It defined selfishness as the origin of evil, and the cause of selfishness was presumed to be self-interest. In turn, self-interest was held to be rooted in private property. For these socialists it followed, therefore, that elimination of private property (or, at least, placing social restraint upon its use) would eliminate the cause of evil and promote economic and social equality.

French socialists, typically, stopped short of advocating complete elimination of privacy in property. Instead they proposed that private property be circumscribed in its use so as to make it completely subservient to the social good.¹⁰ As spokesman for this group Fourier was mainly concerned with two problems. First, he wished to coordinate economic functions with each other and with social functions so as to eliminate impediments to maximum economic and social gain. Second, he wanted to eliminate forms of social and economic organization which allowed some individuals to over-consume while denying sufficient consumption to others.¹¹

Reforming the uses of private property, and particularly the rules of property administration, Fourierists thought, would sufficiently purify private property by eliminating the possibility of its manipulation for selfish ends.¹² This would make it unnecessary to do away with the institution of private property itself; the change in its character would be sufficient. But the Fourierists were consistent with the main body of socialist thought in their acceptance of the notion that privacy in property is a social institution, created by society and susceptible to destruction by society.¹³

Fourier's program for progress was three-fold: first, action by society to eliminate evil; second, conscious reform directed at changing the environment within which economic and social activity occurs; and finally, generation of change in man himself. In particular, Fourier believed there was a natural force that pulled men together for collective action. Man had become anti-social, he argued, because artificial obstacles had been put in the way of the operation of this force. His proposals for reform centered upon elimination of these obstacles, thereby making it possible for men to cooperate fully with their fellows under the influence of their natural dominant passion, brotherly love.¹⁴

Since existing institutions were perceived to be obstructive to the play of this passion (and of its corollary passions), Fourier proposed establishment of a new form of economic and social arrangement. He envisioned a system in which people would work and live together, thus developing a social system that would promote both a sense of harmony among the component parts of society and a more efficient production and distribution system. He envisioned development of production centers (phalanxes) and consumption centers (phalasteries).¹⁵ The purpose of each was integral to its form. The production centers were viewed as a means of integrating economic activity. The consumption centers were viewed as a means of integrating social and economic affairs. These organizational forms were defended on two bases: first, Fourier thought that integration of economic activities would give rise to substantial efficiencies in production;¹⁶ second, he hoped that development of the consumption centers would negate economic differences among individuals and remove this artificial barrier to social harmony.

The organizational structure of the phalanxes and the method of determining income shares were designed to facilitate attainment of social harmony. Everything consumed by members of a phalanx was expected to be produced by the phalanx; and in turn, the members were expected to consume everything produced. But this was of relatively minor importance. One can conceive of integrated economic and social activity without self-sufficiency. The income distribution aspect was more important. The phalanx was to be organized as a joint-stock company, with shares to be paid on the basis of individual holdings (stockholders were to receive four-twelfths of net receipts, workers five-twelfths and managers three-twelfths). It was hoped that these shares, as well as the notion of sharing, would eliminate economic distinctions among men, while the association of these same individuals in the phalasterie would eliminate social distinctions. The result would be a greater sense of equality of man.

Fourier and his followers believed, then, that mankind could be improved by changes in its economic and social circumstances. Of greater importance, perhaps, they believed that these changes in economic and social circumstance could best be generated through conscious, rational human effort directed at change in the economic and social forms of organization.¹⁷ Etzler's contribution to the Fourierist literature lay in his stress upon the potential of technology, applied in harmony with nature, to expand the efficiency of economic activity and to hasten attainment of the paradise in which problems of production and distribution have been solved. The method of financing and organization proposed by Etzler adhered closely to that outlined by Fourier.

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It is important to remember that the national mood in the United States at the time Thoreau wrote his review of Etzler's book reflected the attitudes of the materialists. The economy was growing rapidly, society was becoming increasingly urbanized in the New England area and expedient methods of attaining a progress unfettered by moral, cultural and religious institutions were being sought. These methods raised questions noted almost exclusively by Transcendentalists. They asked, what is the meaning of material betterment without concern for moral integrity? And what is the relevance of active reform without faith? Yet Thoreau recognized the need for reformers. He wrote:

We can afford to lend a willing ear occasionally to those earnest reformers of the age. Let us treat them hospitably. Shall we be charitable only to the poor? What though they be fanatics? Their errors are likely to be generous errors, and these may be they who will put to rest the American Church and the American government, and awaken better ones in their stead.¹⁸

In one sense Thoreau used Etzler's book as a vehicle to raise the questions. In another sense, to Thoreau Etzler was a reformer who deserved to be dealt with as a serious thinker.

Thoreau saw in Etzler's plan what he considered to be the dilemma of a scientific society unpossessed of spiritual guidance. As a Transcendentalist Thoreau agreed that man should be concerned with this world and should attempt its improvement. The greater portion of the essay serves to prove the point that Etzler's calculations should not be disparaged: "They are truths in physics, because they are true in ethics."¹⁹ But the first step, he thought, should involve a soul-searching reformation of man himself, by man himself. Thus, before he wrote the review, he recorded in his journal, "The times have no heart. The true reform can be undertaken any morning before unbarring the door. It calls for no convention. I can do two-thirds the reform of the world myself."²⁰

Thoreau was a moral realist who began with the Transcendental proposition that man possessed an inward capability of attaining a more satisfactory existence through the search of his own soul. He believed this inner achievement—man's recognition of his spiritual capacity—to be both more important than improvement in material well-being and more necessary if material well-being is to be meaningful in human terms. His own proposal for material reform was first to redeem the "New England soil of the world," the human soul.²¹

The essence of Thoreau's critique of Etzler's utopia was that Etzler put the cart before the horse. Etzler wished to harness nature to man's work before man had succeeded in harnessing himself. In Thoreau's mind Etzler had not come to grips satisfactorily with two crucial issues. First, what is the purpose of progress?²² Second, what will be the impact upon nature if man views it solely as something to be used by man to further his own ends?

Taking the second question first, Thoreau states, "It must be confessed that horses at present work too exclusively for man, rarely men for horses; and the brute degenerates in man's company."²³ Man should not deal grossly with nature. In an attempt to gain more from use of natural resources, man frequently destroys the function of nature. Thus the purpose of progress seems futile indeed when it frequently means an end to the potential for future progress. Thoreau engaged upon an attack of that which the Transcendentalist feared most—an overwhelming, warped sense of man's superiority over the things of nature and progress defined in terms of transitory gain.

His attitude toward materialistic reform is reflected most definitely in his reaction to a single idea expressed by Etzler: "'Any member may procure himself all the common articles of his daily wants, by a short turn of some crank. . . .'"²⁴ Thoreau answers that the crank that must be turned to begin any action is "the crank within," a tool "but sparingly

employed as yet.”²⁵ Here Thoreau attacks the materialist head on. The thing that is needed for reform, and the thing that is within the reach of all men, is faith or “divine energy.” This is the “crank” available to individuals possessing meaningful values. Mankind is too unpracticed to permit the kind of dependence upon others required for success of the Fourierist plan.²⁶ As Thoreau put it, “We are older by faith than by experience.”²⁷ And thus man should rely upon himself, knowing that society is so undeveloped that reliance upon others is useless, if not dangerous. One must suspect that even if this were not so Thoreau must object. When Etzler said, “It will now be plainly seen that the execution of the proposals is not proper for individuals. . . . Man is powerful but in union with many,” Thoreau despaired by saying, “Alas! This is the crying sin of the age, this want of faith in the prevalence of a man. Nothing can be affected but by one man. . . . We must first succeed alone. . . . In this matter of reforming the world, we have little faith in corporations; not thus was it first formed.”²⁸

But whether man goes it alone or bands together with others, the major problem remains. Is progress to be defined merely as change in the level of material output? Thoreau suggests that progress as spoken of by Etzler “aims to secure the greatest degree of gross comfort and pleasure merely. . . . It paints a Mahometan’s heaven, and stops short with singular abruptness when we think it is drawing near the precincts of the Christian’s.”²⁹ Progress so defined leads to a society without love, without moral influence; a kind of society that has historically “patented only such machines as the almshouse, the hospital, and the Bible society.”³⁰

iv

As an explication of a theory of reform Thoreau’s review is necessarily tentative. It is also written in the idiom of the protestant idealist who warily eyes the human motives and potential efficacy of a conscienceless corporation. But closely read, these remarks approach a viable resolution to the materialist-idealist debate in reform. As an idealist who found analogues to his truths in nature, Thoreau looked in vain for the reverse process in Etzler’s book: “His castles in the air fall to the ground, because they are not built lofty enough; they should be secured to heaven’s roof.”³¹ Thoreau thought that Etzler failed to see what he (Thoreau) saw only too clearly:

Undoubtedly if we were to reform this outward life truly and thoroughly, we should find no duty of the inner omitted. It would be employed for our whole nature; and what we should do thereafter would be as vain a question as to ask the bird what it will do when its nest is built and its brood reared. But a moral reform must take place first, and then the necessity of the other will be superseded, and we shall sail and plough by its force alone.³²

But, for Etzler, this “inner reform” was possible only after facilitating social institutions had been developed; and among these institutions were those facilitating development and exercise of “natural passions.” And these institutions required for their enactment the sweeping away of contemporary production and distribution forms. Etzler did not make this explicit. Had Etzler’s physical truths been conceived intentionally as ethical truths, Thoreau might have been satisfied with a discussion he found to be challenging to his faith. Instead, he could only bemoan the fact that Etzler’s means to the end—“the successful application of the powers by machinery”—omitted “the application of man to the work by faith”; this last he considered to be an “infinitely harder” difficulty to overcome.³³ Ironically, Etzler dealt with this in the Second Part of *The Mechanical System*. Etzler was, to Thoreau, one more materialistic reformer who had been unable to make the analogy between the axioms of physics and the laws of ethics any more than a figure of speech.

Thoreau saw Etzler’s proposals leading to creation of a mechanistic, structured society that imprisons its creators. He felt that freedom—defined as a wide range of commitment—would be unavailable within the framework of such a society. He saw the goals of that society as being ineluctably self-defined by the system in terms insuring its own perpetuation. And he saw that pursuit of those goals gives rise to mindless expansion of goods that lack real utility; to development of methods of control for the sake of control; to application of scientific knowledge without regard for its use. He saw a society created without concern for coherence of goals, and suffering, in consequence, the penalties of pursuit of specific goals single-mindedly. He saw, therefore, a materialistic society caught ironically in its historic economic definition of progress.

Such was the result of man’s imposition upon himself of a moral code which merely expedited the aims of a society with quantitative material gain. This moral code stemmed from application of man’s intellect applied uniquely to economic and social problems: it denied the analogue of the material and the spiritual. Paradoxically, it led, Thoreau feared, to love of self rather than to the love of others that would make possible lasting reform. Ironically, Fourier’s complaint against existing arrangements for production and distribution had been precisely that they impeded men in exercise of their dominant passion, brotherly love. And Etzler, as a Fourierist, had to be convinced that as soon as scope for man’s natural goodness had been provided moral man would rise spontaneously.

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footnotes

1. Ironically entitled “Paradise (To Be) Regained,” the review is reprinted from *The Democratic Review* in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau, IV, Cape Cod and Miscellanies* (Boston, 1906), 280-305. The review is of the First Part of the Second English Edition. The

Second Part, which Thoreau had not seen, is entitled *The Mechanical System*. For a reading of this review in the context of Thoreau's development as a thinker and writer see Sherman Paul's *The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration* (Urbana, 1958), 151-157. Paul writes, "In the period of Brook Farm and Fruitlands (Alcott left Concord for Harvard, Massachusetts, on July 1, 1843), of Greeley and the Sylvania Association and Brisbane and Fourierism, Thoreau, by attacking Etzler's still more grandiose humanitarian proposal, showed that all attempts at collective or mechanical reform, worthy of praise as they were as signs of man's hope, were as pearls cast before swine" (151).

2. This is not to say they had no currency. There were, of course, a number of Fourierist-inspired associationist experiments in the United States in the early part of the nineteenth century, including Brook Farm in its second stage. But these experiments were short-lived and the influence of the European socialists never became substantial in this country. By opposing the socialists who attacked capitalism on its own grounds—materialist against materialist—the idealists helped to consolidate the position of capitalism in the nineteenth century.

3. See Richard Hofstadter, "Andrew Jackson and the Rise of Liberal Capitalism," *The American Political Tradition* (New York, 1948), 45-67; and Louis M. Hacker, *The Triumph of American Capitalism* (New York, 1962), 16-27, 199-214.

4. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York, 1937), 314-332. First published in 1776.

5. Octavius B. Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England: A History* (Boston, 1959), 106-107. First published in 1876.

6. *Ibid.*, 136.

7. Quoted in Frothingham, *ibid.*, 147.

8. That this involved a simplistic view of the individual in society is clear; but it was consistent with the brave new world of early America, in which old strictures had broken and the new had not yet formed.

9. As pointed out above, Etzler was a Fourierist. It would follow that the basic principles of Fourier underlay the specifics of Etzler's system and that the unspecified philosophical underpinnings of the latter proposals can be explicated through analysis of those of Fourier in the context of eighteenth-century socialist thought generally.

10. *Selections from the Works of Fourier*, trans. Julia Franklin (London, 1901), 93-94.

11. The outline of Fourier's work provided by P. C. Newman, in *The Development of Economic Thought* (New York, 1952), 144-146, makes this quite clear.

12. See Edmund Wilson, "Origins of Socialism: The Communities of Fourier and Owen," *To the Finland Station* (Garden City, N.Y., 1953), 90.

13. This is to be contrasted with the Transcendental view of privacy in property as "natural," as an *a priori* institution upon which society is built.

14. Fourier identified twelve passions that cohered into this one passion. These were the five senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell and feel), the group passions (friendship, love, family feeling and ambition) and the distributive passions (planning, change and unity). See Newman, *Development of Economic Thought*, 145.

15. The modern apartment building, with its shops, service centers, playrooms, nurseries, etc., inevitably evokes the idea of Fourier in the mind of anyone familiar with both. Fourier envisioned these as being more than housing arrangements, however. They were to be social centers for the members of the phalanx, and were to complete and integrate the relation between economic and social affairs. See Newman, *ibid.*, 145.

16. Fourier suggested that the increased economic efficiency would make it possible for individuals to produce enough output between the ages of eighteen and forty-eight to provide them with lifelong subsistence. Thus, the individual would be freed from economic necessity during his years of maturing wisdom, and could be a creative human. See Newman, *ibid.*, 145.

17. It is interesting to note that Adam Smith (*Theory of Moral Sentiments*) had argued earlier that the moral quality of man depended upon his escape from poverty, and had espoused the market system as the means most likely to provide the kind of economic improvement that would enable man to escape the demoralizing influences of poverty. In common with most socialists, Fourier agreed with this; but he disagreed with the proposition that the market system based upon unregulated privacy in property would lead to this result, since this institution would breed selfishness, the basic enemy of morality.

18. *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, I, *Journals*, ed. Bradford Torrey (Boston, 1906), 478.

19. Thoreau, *Miscellanies*, 303. Obviously Etzler himself did not know this implication. Unlike Thoreau he had not read Emerson's statement in *Nature* that "The axioms of physics translate the laws of ethics."

20. Thoreau, *Journals*, 247.

21. Thoreau, *Miscellanies*, 282.

22. As suggested above, however, the Fourierists started from the proposition that a requisite for moral man was escape from the grinding force of poverty; and this was, in fact, the

basic assumption of all materialists. As Edmund Wilson points out (*To the Finland Station*, 89), Fourier was convinced that man is naturally good, and is only perverted by institutions.

23. Thoreau, *Miscellanies*, 286.

24. As quoted in Thoreau, *Miscellanies*, 295.

25. *Ibid.*, 297.

26. Fourier was convinced that man had difficulty in accepting interdependence because the “natural passions” had been habitually misused due to improper social institutions. (See Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station*, 88.)

27. Thoreau, *Miscellanies*, 299.

28. *Ibid.* Thoreau quotes Etzler here.

29. *Ibid.*, 302.

30. *Ibid.*, 304-305.

31. *Ibid.*, 301-305.

32. *Ibid.*, 302-303.

33. *Ibid.*, 300.