

***THE ENIGMATIC LEGACY OF FOURIER:
JOSEPH CHARLIER AND BASIC INCOME****

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1. INTRODUCTION

The origins of the ‘basic income’ idea remain to be fully explored. A basic income is conventionally defined as an income unconditionally granted to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement. In this paper we examine the completely neglected contribution of an elusive Belgian ‘jurist’, Joseph Charlier, to the spasmodic history of proposals for basic income and its cognates. Although crucial aspects of the basic income approach have been traced back to at least the 18th century, the conventional belief is that the first fully-fledged scheme was formulated in 1919 under the name of *State Bonus*.¹ We demonstrate that Charlier presented a surprisingly ‘modern’ basic income scheme as early as 1848 and then advocated it in other works over some fifty years.

Despite being reticent about his intellectual ancestry, Charlier acknowledged an initial but not uncritical sympathy with Fourierism. The general affinity between basic income and the Fourierist notion of the *minimum* has been indicated in some of the limited discussions of the intellectual origins of the idea, but apparently not subjected to any sustained analysis.² This paper analyses Charlier’s scheme and its intellectual pedigree in detail. In section 2, we consider Fourier’s view of the *minimum*, and demonstrate that it differed considerably from a modern basic income. Section 3 reviews the association between the idea of the *minimum* and the doctrine of the ‘right to work’ in the thought of

¹ The rediscovery of that scheme must be attributed to the pioneering research of Walter Van Trier (1995, pp. 29-142).

² Cf. Van Parijs (1992, pp. 9-11) and Nozick (1974, pp. 178-179); cf. the webpage of the *Basic Income European Network (BIEN)*: <http://www.econ.ucl.ac.be/etes/bien/Origins_of_Basic_Income.html>.

Fourier's leading disciple, Victor Considerant. Section 4 examines Charlier's proposals and shows that they constitute a genuine basic income scheme which is distinctive and significantly different from its Fourierist precursors.

2. FOURIER

The suggestion that Charles Fourier was an early proponent of a basic income scheme has been made most clearly by G.D.H. Cole. In his *History of Socialist Thought*, Cole explained John Stuart Mill's sympathy for Fourierism as follows:

Mill did, however, regard as much nearer practicability those forms of socialism which, at a sacrifice of idealism, accepted a moderate degree of economic inequality. On this score he praised the Fourieristes, or rather that form of Fourierism which assigned in the first place a basic income to all and then distributed the balance of the product in shares to capital, talent or responsibility, and work actually done. (Cole, 1953-1960, Vol. I, p. 310)

Mill himself apparently did not use the term 'basic income' in his writings on Fourierism. Instead he preferred the more vague expression 'a certain minimum':

The most skilfully combined, and with the greatest foresight of objections, of all the forms of Socialism, is that commonly known as Fourierism. This system does not contemplate the abolition of private property, nor even of inheritance; on the contrary, it avowedly takes into consideration, as an element in the distribution of the produce, capital as well as labour. (...) In the distribution, a certain minimum is first assigned for the subsistence of every member of the community, whether capable or not of

labour. The remainder of the produce is shared in certain proportions, to be determined beforehand, among the three elements, Labour, Capital, and Talent. (Mill, 1965, Book II, pp. 211-212)

A close textual examination reveals that Mill's characterisation is without any doubt the more accurate of the two. In this section we show that Fourier's *minimum* is certainly *not* a basic income in the modern sense.

The idea of a *social minimum* appears in all of Fourier's major works, both published and unpublished.³ We find it in *Théorie des Quatre Mouvements* [1808] (I), *Traité de l'Association Domestique Agricole* [1822] (re-issued later as *Théorie de l'Unité Universelle* [1841-43]) (II-V), *Le Nouveau Monde Industriel et Sociétaire* [1829] (VI), *La Fausse Industrie* [1835-36] (VIII-IX), and even in *Le Nouveau Monde Amoureux*, which was published only in the 1960s (VII). It also shows up in many of his manuscripts, not all of which have been included in his *Œuvres Complètes* (X-XII).

The earliest mention of a *minimum* is in his "Lettre au Grand-Juge", written in December 1803.⁴ Fourier characterised poverty (not inequality) as the principal cause of disorder in society, and proposed to eradicate it by sufficiently high wages and by a 'decent minimum' for those who were not able to work.⁵ In another manuscript of the

³ For detailed information on Fourier's publications and manuscripts, cf. Del Bo (1957) and Poulat (1957). Whenever possible, we refer to the *Œuvres Complètes de Charles Fourier* as published in 1966-1968 by Anthropos in Paris; in this section, Roman numerals refer to the volume numbers of the *Œuvres Complètes de Charles Fourier*, followed by page numbers.

⁴ On the issue of the date of writing, cf. Beecher & Bienvenu (1983, p. 83, n. 1). The letter was published only in 1874, cf. Del Bo (1957, p. 9), and is not in the *Œuvres Complètes de Charles Fourier*.

⁵ "When the people enjoy constant comfort and a decent minimum, all the sources of discord will be

same period, “Les Trois Nœuds du Mouvement” [1803-1804], he launched the idea that society should give to every (poor) member of society a small amount of land.⁶ A third early occurrence is in the Introduction to the first edition of *La Théorie des Quatre Mouvements* [1808]. In a merciless attack on philosophy and the ‘inexact’ sciences in general, Fourier accused ‘reason’ of having contributed nothing at all to a solution of the problem of providing each member of society with a relative degree of comfort.⁷

Although Fourier may not always have used the term *social minimum* in the same sense, we may safely say that the following three characteristics are fundamental: (1) the minimum is *destined for the poor*; (2) the minimum is *paid in kind*; and (3) the minimum is *advanced without any work requirement on the part of those who receive it*. The main goal of the *minimum* was certainly not the reduction or elimination of inequality, but rather the eradication of poverty, by guaranteeing to every member of society a minimal standard of living. This standard of living should be at least high enough to cover the

dried up or reduced to very little.” (translation by Beecher & Bienvenu, 1983, p. 87). Parts of this letter can also be found in the manuscript “Du Plan Providentiel” [1806], in (XI(1), 289-293).

⁶ At first he proposed to “accorder un *minimum* de territoire à chaque individu pauvre” (XII, 458), but immediately after that he made the stronger proposition that “La société doit garantir à tout individu, par des mesures quelconques, un *minimum* de terre labourable (avec les instruments nécessaires), qui peut fournir amplement à sa subsistance, sans l’éloigner beaucoup de son pays natal” (XII, 459). It should be noted that this is the only instance in which Fourier interprets the minimum in terms of a (land) endowment.

⁷ “La Raison, quelque étalage qu’elle fasse de ses progrès, n’a rien fait pour le bonheur tant qu’elle n’a pas procuré à l’Homme cette fortune sociale qui est l’objet de tous les vœux; et j’entends par FORTUNE SOCIALE, une opulence graduée qui mette à l’abri du besoin les hommes les moins riches, et qui leur assure au moins pour minimum, le sort que nous nommons MÉDIOCRITÉ BOURGEOISE.” (I, 15-16)

basic necessities of life, consisting of (subsistence) food, clothing and housing.⁸ In some places Fourier gave detailed indications of the composition of the *minimum*.⁹ A few times he spelled out that the *minimum* should include ‘pleasure’ as well.¹⁰ He was confident that in a harmonious state the *minimum* would allow the poor to enjoy a fairly high standard of living.¹¹

In some of his writings Fourier apparently gave slightly different meanings to the term (social) *minimum*. In accordance with his view that economic inequality had to persist, Fourier wanted the introduction of a *minimum* to leave the existing class structure

⁸ A typical expression is “un mimimum social, un nécessaire en subsistance, vêtement et logement” (II, 156). Other expressions used by Fourier include “minimum ou nécessaire” (III, 39, 43), “minimum, ou honnête nécessaire” (VI, 35), “minimum sociale ou honnête nécessaire” (V, 382-383), “minimum d’entretien” (III, 48, 49; IX, 491; X(2), 22, 321), “un nécessaire de minimum d’entretien” (X(2), 22), “minimum d’entretien décent” (VIII, 9, 12, 263, 374; IX, 462), “minimum d’entretien et subsistance” (X(2), 20), “minimum décent” (II, Avant-Propos, 20; VI, 336, 339; IX, T3; X(2), 340), “minimum suffisant” (III, 15; VI, 29; X(2), 343), and “minimum intégral” (V, 387, 392, 402).

⁹ See, for instance, (IV, 445) and (VIII, 288-289).

¹⁰ A clear example is: “un *minimum* en subsistance, vêtement, logement, et, de plus, en plaisirs; car le nécessaire sans l’agréable ne saurait suffire à l’homme” (III, 163). He also used the expressions “minimum de plaisir” and “minimum en jouissance” (V, 544). In this connection it is interesting to note that in *Le Nouveau Monde Amoureux* Fourier proposed the notion of a ‘sexual minimum’; cf. Beecher & Bienvenu (1983, p. 55).

¹¹ Witness expressions such as “minimum copieux” (VI, 3, 10), “minimum abondant” (IX, 490, 492), “minimum de subsistance abondante” (IX, 491), “un ample minimum” (V, 387; X(2), 97), and “minimum supérieur au sort de nos bons bourgeois” (V, 4). Fourier firmly believed that in a harmonious state the system of attractive labour and association would lead to a massive increase in production.

intact. This could be accomplished by specifying a *minimum* for each class of society, expressed in the notion of a ‘proportional *minimum*’.¹² In other places he spoke of a *minimum* in monetary terms. This occurred when he discussed how in a Phalanstère the surplus, and especially the part of it allotted to Labour, should be divided. The procedure envisaged by Fourier is rather complicated, but one of its characteristics is that nobody who has made a productive contribution, no matter how rich he or she is, can refuse the minimum share.¹³

The justification of these diverse forms of the *minimum* is largely based upon natural rights entitlements constitutive of ‘liberty’. Those entitlements are variously classified, but the four cardinal ones are the rights of hunting, fishing, gathering and grazing.¹⁴

¹² Society should guarantee “un *minimum* ou nécessaire en aliments, vêtements et logements proportionnés aux trois classes, la haute, la moyenne et la basse. Il faudrait par conséquent trois sortes de *minimum* pour les pauvres des trois classes” (III, 169). In other places Fourier used the terms “minimum proportionnel” (II, 202; III, 171, 182; IV, 270; V, 380, 493, 553; VI, 291; VIII, 356) and “minimum gradué” (III, 177; IV, 582, 583; VI, xij).

¹³ Cf. “le taux de minimum, huit fr., qu’on ne peut pas refuser” (V, 504), “le minimum que chacun accepte par bienséance, pour ne pas s’isoler d’association” (V, 508), and “Un riche harmonien se trouve assez payé d’un travail *attrayant*, quand il est entouré de sectaires dévoués et fidèles appuis de sa passion. Il regrette que la bienséance l’oblige à accepter un minimum de lot en industrie.” (V, 511); see also (VI, 316-323).

¹⁴ At one point the set consists of: 1. “Cueillette”, 2. “Pâturer”, 3. “Pêche”, 4. “Chasse”, 5. “Ligue intérieure”, 6. “Insouciance”, and 7. “Vol extérieur”, the first four being designated as “Cardinaux ou industriels” and the others as “Distributifs” (III, 166); an almost identical list is given in (VI, xij). In another work, however, the rights mentioned by Fourier are: “1. Récolte naturelle, chasse, pêche, cueillette, pâturer, 2. Libre essor des sens, 3. Libre essor des âmes, 4. Participation au progrès. 5. Ligue

These rights could be exercised only in a ‘state of nature’, but not in ‘civilisation’. One of the problems with civilisation was that it offered no real equivalent or indemnity for their loss. Fourier argued that if people were deprived of their natural rights to earn their subsistence, then society should at least make sure that its most vulnerable members would not starve to death. This meant that a decent social *minimum* had to be guaranteed to the poor.¹⁵ Fourier not only criticised civilisation for failing to offer an equivalent in the form of a social *minimum*, but also tried to show that even if it attempted to do so, the result would most certainly be a complete disaster. If a genuine social *minimum* were to be offered, one of its consequences would be widespread idleness as individuals would be eager to avoid the ‘repugnant labour’ they were forced to accept in the absence of such a guarantee.¹⁶

To avoid that outcome, the regime of repugnant labour had to be replaced by one of attractive labour. This was one in a set of interconnected conditions which according to Fourier would constitute the basis of social equilibrium in the ‘societary order’ destined to replace civilisation. Apart from ‘passionate series’, the conditions involved attractive

intérieure. 6. Insoucance. 7. Vol extérieur.” (IX, 490).

¹⁵ But in civilisation just the opposite occurred: “au lieu du *minimum* qui supposerait une subvention du corps social pour assurer le *nécessaire proportionnel* aux individus lésés dans les trois classes, riche, moyenne et pauvre, nous n’avons qu’un *égoïsme général* qui va croissant et habitue chaque civilisé à rester pleinement indifférent sur les besoins de son semblable” (III, 166).

¹⁶ This is a point which Fourier repeats over and over again: “si le peuple civilisé jouissait d’un *minimum* copieux, d’une garantie de nourriture et d’entretien décent, il s’adonnerait à l’oisiveté parce que l’industrie civilisée est très-répu gnante” (VI, 10); similar phrases can be found in (III, 16, 39, 49, 172; V, 383, 553; VI, 3; VIII, 12; IX, 492; X(2), 20, 22, 94, 97, 343; XI(2), 151-152).

labour, the *minimum*, education and population control.¹⁷ Crucial in all this is that Fourier first emphasised the necessity of the social *minimum*¹⁸, then pointed out that it could be introduced only if a number of other conditions were simultaneously satisfied¹⁹, and finally arrived at the conclusion that civilisation could not satisfy any of them.

3. CONSIDERANT

In his capacity as the foremost populariser and indeed the creator of ‘Fourierism’, Victor Considerant endorsed this conclusion.²⁰ His most influential works in the period from 1834 to 1849 repeatedly emphasised the ‘orthodoxy’ that the provision of a physical

¹⁷ “Comment espérer de rallier riches et pauvres, les amener à une affection réciproque, si le pauvre est exposé à tomber dans l’indigence qui est l’épouvantail du riche? Comment assurer au pauvre un minimum intégral, comprenant subsistance, vêtement et logement décents, si on ne sait pas créer l’attraction industrielle, à défaut de laquelle il abandonnerait le travail dès qu’il serait pourvu d’un ample minimum?”

D’autre part, comment réunir amicalement le riche et le pauvre, si celui-ci n’a pas reçu une éducation propre à lui donner le ton et les manières du riche? Enfin, que serviraient les trois propriétés précédentes si le régime sériaire avait, comme le familial, la propriété de population illimitée, produisant des fourmilières sans balance numérique, sans proportion avec les moyens d’aisance générale?” (V, 387)

¹⁸ Cf. expressions like “hors du MINIMUM point de salut pour le monde social” (III, 172), “le droit primordial de société, qui est le minimum” (IV, 193), and the characterisation of the minimum as a “condition *sine quâ non* de l’harmonie sociétaire” (X(2), 23).

¹⁹ Most clearly explained in (III, 172-177); cf. also (V, 380-381; XI(2), 152-154).

²⁰ That role is examined in two recent works: Davidson (1988) and Vernus (1993).

minimum could be realised only under conditions of attractive labour.²¹ Considerant pointedly remarked that if a minimum were to be granted under the present economic regime, then an incentive would be created for a general escape from repugnant labour into widespread idleness.²² Since only the social provision of a guaranteed physical *minimum* ‘to each man, each woman [and] each child’ could secure liberty,²³ he argued that it was imperative to move to an economic regime characterised both by “un ÉNORME ACCROISSEMENT de la richesse publique” and “le TRAVAIL ATTRAYANT.”²⁴

In some of his works, however, Considerant developed an alternative doctrine of the ‘right to work’.²⁵ This doctrine called for a reformist policy applicable even under existing conditions of repugnant labour in which the state would act as an employer of last resort, guaranteeing not only work but also a minimum wage. In order to do so, there would have to be the (planned) “ORGANISATION DU TRAVAIL, ou, pour mieux dire, de

²¹ Considerant’s main works in that key period were: *Destinée Sociale* [3 vols., 1834/1838/1844]; *Théorie du Droit de Propriété et du Droit au Travail* [1848, first published in 1839]; *Exposition Abrégée du Système Phalanstérien de Fourier* [1845]; *Le Socialisme devant le Vieux Monde* [1848]. In addition, there were his numerous contributions to, and editorship of, successive Fourierist journals: *Le Phalanstère* (1832-1834), *La Phalange* (1836-1843) and *La Démocratie Pacifique* (1843-1851).

²² “Il serait impossible aujourd’hui de faire au peuple l’avance du *minimum*: il tomberait aussitôt dans la fainéantise, attendu que le travail est répugnant.” (Considerant, 1845, p. 49); see also Considerant (1848a, p. 50).

²³ Considerant (1845, pp. 90-91).

²⁴ Considerant (1848a, p. 50).

²⁵ The key text is Considerant (1848b); see also Considerant (1837-1844, Vol. I, pp. 153-155). Davidson (1988, pp. 71-73) contains an analysis of Considerant’s own doctrine and its connections to Fourier’s use of the term ‘right to work’. With respect to Fourier’s views, cf. Beecher (1986, pp. 213-214).

l'ORGANISATION DE L'INDUSTRIE" (Considerant, 1848b, p. 32). In his extended justification of the right to work, Considerant distinguished two kinds of capital: the 'primitive or natural capital' of all natural resources and especially land; and the 'created capital' produced by human labour on those resources. Property rights in natural resources should be a collective usufruct of humanity across generations and regardless of location. Provided that this was the case, property rights in created capital should be private, in direct proportion to individual contribution and including personal transmission between generations. However, the existing property regimes in 'civilised societies' were based on the usurpation of natural capital by a minority of private landowners. The consequence was that conventional legal titles to property expressed the cumulative effects of natural rights' violations. The excluded majority had not only been deprived of natural right entitlements but also denied any compensation. The right to work was intended to provide precisely that compensation.²⁶

Considerant's argument for a compensatory strategy was based on a presumption against any radical change to the current concentration of private landownership, especially in the form of equal division. Any such change would be undesirable because it could be achieved, if at all, only by a violent revolution. It would be self-defeating because any initial pattern of equal division would become unequal through time as population changed. It would entail, moreover, the return to the 'savage state' together with the abandonment of the (potential) advantages of industrialism for all. Above all, it would be superfluous because the natural rights to primitive capital were not rights to equal individual shares in land but those of each person to hunt, fish, gather fruit, and let

²⁶ Considerant (1848b, pp. 34-36).

his/her animals graze on the commons. The issue was not to resurrect those rights in their ‘primitive and crude FORM’, but to find ‘the form in which [they] could be reconciled with the conditions of an industrious society.’²⁷

For Considerant himself, at least, the solution to that issue was simple. In primitive society, these rights could be exercised only through individual activity. By analogy, in civilised society, the compensation for their violation had to allow each individual the opportunity to engage in productive activity:

(...) qu’une Société industrielle, qui a pris possession de la Terre et qui enlève à l’homme la faculté d’exercer à l’aventure et en liberté, sur la surface du sol, ses quatre Droits naturels; que cette Société reconnaisse à l’individu, en compensation de ces Droits dont elle le dépouille, LE DROIT AU TRAVAIL: alors, en principe et sauf application convenable, l’individu n’aura plus à se plaindre. (*Ibid.*, p. 24)

Considerant hastened to add the requirement that the reward for this productive activity should be at least as high as that which would have been achieved in the state of nature, which effectively turned him into an advocate of the right to work at a wage sufficient to secure subsistence:

La condition *sine qua non* pour la Légitimité de la Propriété est donc que la Société reconnaisse au Prolétaire le DROIT AU TRAVAIL et qu’elle lui *assure* au moins autant de moyens de subsistance, pour un exercice d’activité donné, que cet exercice *eût pu* lui en procurer dans l’État primitif. (*Ibid.*, pp. 24-25)

This was the minimum condition of a legitimate property regime in accordance with natural rights. However, for Considerant, the duties of such a regime might actually go

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

beyond this; an individual born into a civilised society might have new wants created by that society itself, which would generate a claim to more than would have been available in any state of nature.

Sometimes, therefore, Considerant promoted the Fourierist orthodoxy that the guarantee of a physical *minimum* could be given only under a regime of attractive labour. On other occasions, he advocated the ‘right to work’ as a doctrine that might be realised even under a regime of repugnant labour. In the first case, the entitlement was derived from a natural right to subsistence itself; in the second, it was derived from a natural right to the equal opportunity to gain a subsistence through labour.²⁸

4. CHARLIER

The ‘right to work’ was debated widely by socialist thinkers involved in the 1848 Revolution in Paris.²⁹ These debates were followed carefully in Brussels, which acted as a centre of refuge for many significant French and German socialists of the period.³⁰ Undoubtedly Joseph Charlier, who first published his views on the social question in the

²⁸ In a similar vein, the Fourierist writer Zoé Gatti de Gamond strongly advocated the minimum, the right to work and education as compensations for the loss of natural rights: “Ne serait-il pas d’une justice rigoureuse que la société lui donnât un dédommagement équivalent à la perte des droits naturels? N’est-ce pas pour elle un devoir sacré d’assurer à tous ses membres le *minimum*, le droit au travail et l’éducation ou développement des facultés qui rendent l’homme apte à participer aux bienfaits des arts, des sciences et de l’industrie, cachet de la civilisation?” (1841-1842, p. 42).

²⁹ Cf. Tanghe (1989) for an overview of the intellectual discussion on the right to work.

³⁰ Marx and Engels spent some time in Brussels, as did Considerant.

second half of 1848, was well aware of the ideas that were circulating. Whether or not he was directly reacting to Considerant's views, it is clear that he accepted Considerant's critique of the existing property regime but rejected the adequacy of the 'right to work' as a surrogate for natural right entitlements. The originality of Charlier is that he argued that those entitlements should be recognised by an unconditional basic income scheme, even under conditions of repugnant labour.

Charlier was born in Brussels on 20 June 1816 and died there on 6 December 1896. He published at least thirteen books, ranging from novels and poetry to works on technical legal issues and social theory. The four key works in that last category were:

- *Solution du Problème Social ou Constitution Humanitaire, Basée sur la Loi Naturelle, et Précédée de l'Exposé de Motifs* (1848, 106 pp.). This introduced the scheme for a 'guaranteed minimum' funded from the socialisation of rent. Charlier explained in detail why he advocated the scheme, and presented it in the form of a 'humanitarian constitution'.
- *Catéchisme Populaire, Philosophique, Politique et Social* (1871, 88 pp.). Here Charlier refined the core theme of the guaranteed minimum under the new form of 'the system of territorial dividend'.
- *La Question Sociale Résolue Précédée du Testament Philosophique d'un Penseur* (1894, 252 pp.). This is Charlier's most substantial work. He reproduced the relevant sections of the *Catéchisme* on territorial dividend, included a scheme for pension provision initially suggested in 1887, and introduced another 'humanitarian constitution' which was similar but not identical to the 1848 version, together with a set of justifying 'interpretative remarks'.

- *L'Anarchie Désarmée par l'Équité. Corollaire à la Question Sociale Résolue* (1894, 35 pp.). This summarised the diagnosis and solution of social issues presented immediately before in *La Question Sociale Résolue*.

Apart from these texts, we have very little to work with.³¹ His exact profession is unknown; he once classified himself as a “juriste”³², but in successive population registers his occupation is variously described as ‘writer’, ‘accountant’ and ‘merchant’³³. He is considered only in passing in many of the standard sources on the history of socialism in Belgium, and there is no substantial study of either his life or work.³⁴

³¹ Despite our sustained attempts to discover more information, Charlier remains much of a mystery.

³² Charlier (1894a, p. 10). His preoccupation with legal issues confirms that he was active in some capacity in the Belgian judicial system. On occasions he severely criticised the system as a whole, “toute cette corporation parasite de juges, d’avocats, d’avoués et d’huissiers qui généralement vivent et s’enrichissent aux dépens de la masse; car tous gens-là ne produisent rien, n’ajoutent pas un atome au capital social” (1848, p. 63), and notaries in particular, “le notariat n’ajoute rien à la richesse publique” (1871, p. 41). He also characterised himself as an active member of the “Société internationale d’études sociales et politiques” (1894a, p. 3). We are uncertain whether Joseph Charlier is the Charlier who played an active role in the Brussels-based *Cercle Démocratique* around 1880; cf. Wouters (1971, Vol. III, pp. 1504, 1513, 1518, 1525, 1553).

³³ This information has been provided to us by Maryline Van Parijs. We are very grateful to her for her extensive archival searches.

³⁴ References to Charlier have been made by Malon (1879, pp. 475, 488-489), Malon (1892, p. 115), Henrion (1892, p. 132), Bertrand (1902, Vol. I, p. 175), Bertrand (1906-1907, Vol. II, pp. 424, 428-430), Serwy (1948-1952, Vol. I, pp. 27, 96-97, Vol. IV, p. 110), Dhondt (1960, p. 271), and Dandois (1974, p. 21).

In one of these passing references Charlier is designated as a ‘Fourierist’.³⁵ This might well be an accurate description, but we have found no evidence to suggest that he played a significant role in Belgian Fourierist circles.³⁶ Although the intellectual provenance of his views is unknown, it cannot be denied that in the *Solution*, Charlier did indeed present a sympathetic but not uncritical assessment of Fourier and Fourierism. He explicitly (but not unconditionally) praised Fourier and his work,³⁷ and used terms clearly borrowed from the Fourierist tradition.³⁸ In all of Charlier’s subsequent works, however, neither Fourier nor his theory are referred to, as if Charlier later in life distanced himself from his original source of inspiration.

In the *Solution*, Charlier insisted in a typically Fourierist manner that the central problem to be addressed was the “amélioration du sort des classes déshéritées” (Charlier,

³⁵ Serwy (1948-1952, Vol. IV, p. 110) described him as “Publiciste, poète, fouriériste”.

³⁶ Although the publication of his 1848 book was signalled in *Le Débat Social*, a Brussels-based journal with Fourierist sympathies, together with the announcement “nous nous empresserons d’en rendre compte quand nous en aurons fait l’examen” (1er octobre 1848, 5e année, no. 25, p. 217); the promised review never appeared. There is no trace of Charlier in the study of Discailles (1895) on Considerant’s influence in Belgium.

³⁷ Cf. “(...) de toutes les doctrines socialistes mises en avant, il n’en est aucune qui puisse être traduit en fait sans jeter la société dans une grande perturbation, en tant du moins qu’elles touchent aux intérêts matériels, le Fouriérisme excepté. Mais le Fouriérisme c’est une merveille orientale qui charme, subjugué et fascine l’esprit, et qu’on admire comme une brillante féerie. Il faut quant à présent une machine moins compliquée, et qui soit surtout dégagée de toute espèce d’illusion.” (Charlier, 1848, p. 10); see also (*ibid.*, pp. 11, 37, 39, 40).

³⁸ Such as “minimum garanti” (*ibid.*, pp. 33, 37), “destinée sociale” (p. 20), “travail (...) attrayant” (p. 36), “industries répugnantes” (p. 36), “garantisme rationnel” (p. 83).

1848, p. 19). This was above all a ‘material question’ relating to ‘physical life’: the concern should be with material not political rights and the aim should be to realise ‘physical’ or ‘material emancipation’ but without political or social upheaval. He rejected two currently fashionable responses to the problem: ‘the right to assistance’ addressed only the effects and not the cause of the problem, whereas the ‘right to work/organisation of labour’ would result in an unacceptable extension of state control.³⁹ Instead, he proposed an alternative solution that both guaranteed natural right entitlements and respected existing legal titles, through compensation arrangements.

Charlier adopted the familiar jurisprudential contrast between natural and produced resources. Like Considerant, he argued that a creators-keepers principle did not justify individual property rights in land itself, but only in assets resulting from human labour.⁴⁰ That familiar distinction was given a new dimension by Charlier, however. He maintained that natural resources were intended by God to provide a guarantee for the ‘vital needs’ of all persons. Produced assets by contrast were destined to meet the ‘acquired needs’ of each person.⁴¹ Only the ‘vital needs’ generated an absolute right: because every human being had the right to live, each person had a right to a share of the

³⁹ On the right to assistance, cf. (*ibid.*, pp. 6-7), and on the right to work, cf. (*ibid.*, pp. 11-14).

⁴⁰ “*Le sol à personne, mais le fruit à tous. Telle est la grande, la véritable maxime sur laquelle repose le salut de la société humaine et dont nous allons démontrer la légitimité intrinsèque et les bienfaits.*” (*ibid.*, p. 23).

⁴¹ We use the expression ‘vital needs’ for Charlier’s “besoins absolus”, “besoins naturels” or “besoins naturels et vitaux”, and ‘acquired needs’ for his “besoins relatifs”, “besoins artificiels” or “besoins acquis”.

fruits of the earth sufficient to provide subsistence.⁴² The essential role of the state consisted in guaranteeing these individual rights to the produce of the common patrimony by ensuring that all were included and none excluded. The ‘acquired needs’ did not generate a right but merely a discretionary power.⁴³ Whether and to what extent these relative needs were fulfilled was a matter for individual choice expressed through labour. For Charlier, therefore, entitlements to property should be assigned on dual principles each applying to different domains: common property in natural resources, with guaranteed individual shares in their bounty, but full private property rights in produced assets. So, the fundamental law which symbolised truth and justice was:

Que la propriété foncière, œuvre de Dieu, appartient à l’universalité des êtres créés: elle est indivisible et immuable comme l’humanité au service de laquelle elle a été affectée et dont elle doit garantir les besoins naturels et vitaux;

⁴² “L’homme en naissant apporte avec lui le droit de vivre; de ce droit inhérent à son être et que personne à coup sûr n’osera lui contester, découle comme conséquence obligée le droit de demander au sol, patrimoine commun des hommes, sa part dans les fruits nécessaires à son existence.” (*ibid.*, p. 20).

⁴³ “Les besoins absolus sont ceux indispensables à l’entretien de la vie. Ils constituent dans le chef de l’individu *un droit*.

Les besoins relatifs ou acquis sont ceux que donne le raffinement des sens, et que l’on peut supprimer sans compromettre l’existence. Ils ne constituent qu’une *faculté*.

Le droit doit être respecté, protégé et satisfait par la société ou l’État.

La faculté, au contraire, ne lui impose aucune obligation; elle doit être abandonnée à l’activité individuelle dont elle est le plus énergique ressort.” (*ibid.*, p. 24)

Que la propriété mobilière, œuvre de l'homme, est essentiellement personnelle: elle est destinée à donner satisfaction aux besoins acquis, en raison directe du degré d'activité de chacun. (ibid., p. 39)

On a more practical level, the problem to be resolved was the implementation of these principles in a setting where there was private landownership, especially in a concentrated form. Although Charlier emphasised that private landownership was incompatible with the notion of a common natural patrimony, he also insisted that current legal titles to land had to be respected. The proposed resolution hinged on a system of mutual compensation, mediated by the state, between the minority of current landowners and the landless majority. Landowners would be compensated, at least partly and temporarily, for any loss resulting from the reassertion of the collective right to the land. The landless majority would be compensated permanently through the disbursement of a 'guaranteed minimum'. The state would derive the financial resources for this system of mutual compensation from the socialisation of rent and related measures. In Charlier's view, only this mechanism could remedy the injustice of private landownership without introducing another injustice by a forced dispossession of legal titles. He claimed that his 'humanitarian constitution' provided a 'mathematical solution' to the problem.⁴⁴

Charlier did not limit himself to a general description of the scheme, but consistently with his own injunction against impractical plans, worked it out in great detail and added calculations to show that it was financially sound.⁴⁵ The main question was whether the

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴⁵ The calculations applied to Belgium; he arrived at the conclusion that in the first year the scheme would yield an income of about 50 francs per head. For more details, see (*ibid.*, pp. 47-50).

state would have enough financial resources for the two compensatory payments. As the sole landowner, the state would receive all the existing land-rents; in addition, it would generate new revenue streams by a better management of the land. In compensation for the loss of their land, owners would not receive its capital value but instead would be entitled to an annual revenue equal to the estimated loss of land-rent income. The revenue would be an increasing function of the capital value of the land, whereas the ratio between revenue and capital would be a decreasing function of it.⁴⁶ Moreover, it would diminish through time according to the number of intergenerational transfers: with each transfer the revenue would decrease by a quarter of its original amount.⁴⁷ The difference between the rent revenues of the state and its compensation payments to the original landowners would be the amount available for the guaranteed minimum. Charlier stressed that the right to the minimum was equal and universal, in that it was possessed by each individual from birth: this effectively means that his guaranteed minimum is a basic income in the modern sense.⁴⁸

The level of the minimum would be established annually; in the beginning it would be fairly low because of the transitional compensation payments to the original landowners, but it would increase as those payments declined and eventually ceased. Payments would be made quarterly, and in cash. The right to the minimum was a personal lifetime one,

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴⁷ “La valeur de ces biens sera, après l’estimation cadastrale, ou toute autre mode d’appréciation à déterminer, convertie en rentes viagères au profit des propriétaires et leurs descendants jusqu’à la quatrième génération et par amortissement d’un quart par génération.” (*ibid.*, pp. 40-41).

⁴⁸ In Appendix I we reproduce the relevant articles of the ‘humanitary constitution’ of 1848 which make this clear; in Appendix II we give the corresponding articles of the ‘humanitary constitution’ of 1894.

which was inalienable and irrevocable. In the first instance, the criterion of ‘membership’ of a society was by nationality; but, ultimately, Charlier hoped that this criterion would become redundant as the entitlement came to be calculated on a global basis. Alongside the minimum, which expressed the general obligation of society to guarantee the mere existence of its members, there would other measures reflecting particular obligations to specific groups. Children would be entitled to education, and the old and the infirm to special care. This implied that the state would have to provide institutions for these purposes.⁴⁹

With intriguing minor variations, this diagnosis and the corresponding prescription remained constant throughout all of Charlier’s subsequent works in social theory over nearly fifty years. Two of these variations were the change in terminology from ‘guaranteed minimum’ to ‘territorial dividend’, and the increase in the frequency of payment from quarterly to monthly.⁵⁰ In his last two works, Charlier assessed the scheme which had occupied him for most of his life. He listed nineteen advantages such as a reduction of religious rivalries, robberies and begging, a decrease in legal disputes, the abolition of ‘the domination of capital over labour’, and so forth.⁵¹ The claimed advantages were so many and various that the scheme resembled a panacea. Nevertheless, Charlier also looked at the potential disadvantages. Three of them had worried him since his first advocacy of the scheme. These are particularly fascinating

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-73, 82-86.

⁵⁰ Compare the appropriate sections in the appendices.

⁵¹ Charlier (1894a, pp. 244-247).

because they directly anticipate some of the reservations that figure prominently even in present-day debates.

The first potential disadvantage concerned the level of payment that could be achieved through a scheme apparently based on the market value of natural resources only. The suspicion was that the aggregate flow of land-rent revenue would be insufficient to cover the basic needs of all, especially after the deduction of the compensation payments to the original landowners.⁵² Charlier readily accepted that the initial dividend level would be ‘necessarily minimal’ and probably insufficient to satisfy basic needs. But what about the level once the transitional compensation payments had fallen significantly? Although in some countries the per capita land-rent revenue might be too low to meet vital needs, Charlier believed that on a global scale the dividend generated by the common patrimony would be more than enough. Incidentally, in most of his calculations Charlier did not restrict that patrimony to pure natural resources, that is to land in its original condition before any changes resulting from human labour. Without offering any explicit justification, he increased the pool considerably by identifying it with ‘real estate’.⁵³ This category included not only land in its improved form as a result of labour, but also buildings and other fixtures. With one possible exception, no attempt was made to separate the revenue attributable to the original site from the total.⁵⁴

⁵² Charlier (1848, pp. 76-77; 1871, pp. 44-45; 1894a, pp. 211-212, 226-227).

⁵³ He moved from “la propriété foncière” to “la propriété immobilière”.

⁵⁴ “La propriété immobilière produit:

A. Les fruits civils, comprenant les loyers pour l’usage du fonds;

The second and related danger was that the provision of a territorial dividend would act as an incentive to population growth, reducing the per capita level of payment below a subsistence rate.⁵⁵ According to Charlier, this would not be the case; population increase would continue to follow its ‘normal course’. Apart from endorsing the familiar appeals to divine providence, he argued rather unpersuasively that a guaranteed minimum would have no effect on parents’ calculations (if any) about family size.

The third concern echoed the Fourierist fear that a guaranteed minimum would constitute “une prime d’encouragement à la paresse” (Charlier, 1848, p. 35) which would create a new class of “rentiers” (Charlier, 1871, p. 51). Charlier recognised the possibility that some individuals might be content to survive on the dividend alone, but he accepted without reservation that this was their right:

Tant pis pour les paresseux: ceux-là resteront réduits à la portion congrue. Le devoir de la société ne va pas au delà: assurer à chacun sa juste participation à la jouissance des éléments que la nature a mis à son service, sans usurpation des uns au préjudice des autres. (Charlier, 1894a, p. 56)

B. Les fruits industriels, c’est-à-dire tout ce que l’homme peut, par son travail, en obtenir ou extraire.

Les premiers appartiennent, de droit primordial, aux usufruitiers du fonds commun, en vertu de leur droit *sui generis* d’usage. Ici, point de propriété personnelle sur le fonds.

Les seconds appartiennent à ceux qui les ont produits; ils constituent dans leur chef le droit d’en disposer selon leur volonté et leur intérêt. Ces produits donnent donc lieu à un droit de propriété absolu en leur faveur.” (Charlier, 1894b, pp. 17-18).

⁵⁵ Charlier (1848, pp. 73-74; 1871, pp. 64-65; 1894a, pp. 241-242).

Charlier was convinced, however, that this would hold only for a minority; for the majority, the dividend scheme would actually be an incentive to labour. The security derived from the guarantee of basic needs would allow individuals to concentrate on satisfying the expanding domain of their acquired wants, which could be achieved only through labour itself. Moreover, that security would promote the independence and dignity of each human being, liberating all from the tyranny of dependence on others especially for the satisfaction of basic needs.⁵⁶

5. CONCLUSION

We have demonstrated that the entirely neglected Belgian writer, Joseph Charlier, presented as early as 1848 a fully-developed basic income scheme, strikingly similar in all significant respects to present-day proposals. In Charlier's scheme, as in modern proposals, a basic income would be paid unconditionally to each individual member of society - as of right - without work requirement or means test. In one respect it goes even further than most of today's basic income plans, since each individual would be entitled to receive the full amount from birth. Moreover, the guaranteed income would be substantial, at or near the prevailing level of subsistence. In defending his programme, Charlier directly anticipated objections to basic income which still figure prominently in present-day controversies. The fundamental objection is that a basic income licenses the exploitation or parasitism of those willing to make a productive contribution by those unwilling to do so. Charlier directly admitted this possibility, but denied its relevance in

⁵⁶ Charlier (1894a, pp. 54-55).

the context of the unconditional right of each person to existence. By means of calculations he tried to establish that a substantial basic income could be sustained by capturing the rewards of fixed property.

The initial inspiration of Charlier's views undoubtedly lay in the Fourierist tradition. We have shown that this tradition did support the idea of a minimum, but not that of an unconditional one. For Fourier the minimum could be realised only under a regime of attractive labour, and even then it would be restricted to the poor and provided in physical form. Considerant endorsed Fourier's view, but also advocated the right to work as a more politically realistic possibility. Charlier's truly remarkable novelty lay in his sustained advocacy of an unconditional monetised minimum, which was dependent neither on attractive labour nor the right to work and could therefore be introduced almost immediately.

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APPENDIX I

CONSTITUTION HUMANITAIRE,

ou

LOI ORGANIQUE

Basée sur la loi naturelle

(…)

ART. 2. Par cela seul que l'homme existe il a le droit de vivre. Ce droit, absolu comme le principe dont il dérive, trouve sa garantie dans le règne végétal créé en vue des besoins physiques de l'humanité. Le sol est donc essentiellement propriété collective, et à ce titre ne peut appartenir en propre à des particuliers; les hommes ne sont que les usagers de la terre.

En conséquence le droit de propriété territoriale réside dans l'État.

Toute possession contraire à ce principe sera rachetée comme attentoire au droit collectif de l'humanité.

ART. 3. Les revenus territoriaux seront perçus par l'État au profit de la collection, comme propriété nationale, et serviront à garantir à chaque membre de la société, sans distinction d'âge ni de sexes, un *minimum* pour la substantiation de ses besoins absolus.

ART. 4. Ce minimum sera fixé annuellement par le grand conseil représentatif de la nation, sur la valeur locative des immeubles, déduction faites des charges publiques.

ART. 5. Le droit au minimum est personnel. Il naît et meurt avec l'individu.

Il est inaliénable et insaisissable.

Néanmoins l'émigration non autorisée entraînera la suspension pour toute la durée de l'absence; et la perte définitive en cas de résidence à l'étranger sans esprit de retour ou de condamnation pour attentat contre la sûreté extérieure de l'État.

Il sera payé à chaque individu trimestriellement et en espèces, sur la présentation de son brevet d'indigénat, en marche duquel chaque paiement sera annoté.

(...)

Excerpt from: Charlier (1848), pp. 93-94.

APPENDIX II

CONSTITUTION HUMANITAIRE BASÉE SUR LA LOI NATURELLE.

(...)

ARTICLE PREMIER. – L'homme en naissant apporte avec lui le droit de vivre.

La vie humaine est sacrée.

ART. 2. – La jouissance du droit à la conservation de la vie lui est garantie par la loi suprême qui régit les mondes, et qui a mis au service de cette conservation les quatre éléments primordiaux constituant le patrimoine commun de tous:

- A. Le soleil qui l'éclaire;
- B. L'air qu'il respire;
- C. L'eau qui le désaltère;
- D. La terre pour le nourrir.

ART. 3. – Il ne peut être établi aucun droit de propriété individuel sur ce patrimoine, œuvre de Dieu, l'homme n'étant que le simple usager de la terre.

(...)

ART. 18. – Il sera délivré, à la naissance de chaque enfant, un carnet dans la forme prescrite par la loi pour la perception du dividende territorial, lequel sera établi, chaque année, sur les bases arrêtées par le gouvernement et approuvées par les Chambres.

Il sera payable par douzième au bureau du préposé dans chaque commune.

ART. 19. – Le dividende territorial est inaliénable, incessible et insaisissable, pour n'importe quelle cause.

ART. 20. – L'indigène qui se fixera à l'étranger pour une période de plus de cinq années perdra son droit au dividende territorial.

ART. 21. – Les étrangers établis en Belgique et leurs descendants jusqu'à la troisième génération, nés dans le pays, ne pourront participer aux dividendes territoriaux, sauf les cas de grande naturalisation ou de réciprocité de leur pays d'origine, et moyennant que les descendants aient fait connaître leurs volonté de faire partie de la nation.

(...)

Excerpt from: Charlier (1894a), pp. 175-180.