

A PAMPHLET BY FOURIER.

The discussion that has just taken place on the sales of new goods at auction makes it appropriate to reproduce a rather curious article published in Lyon, by Fourier, around thirty-three or thirty-four years ago, in the form of a pamphlet. We see with pleasure beautiful minds discovering every day the vices of anarchic competition and the unlimited and unregulated liberty of commerce; but it is also interesting to find in a simple sally by Fourier, launched in 1807 or 1808, more good criticism and good principles than we often find even today in many economic innovations.

This article, in which Fourier portrays himself as a commercial broker, is all the more valuable because it shows with what freedom and what simplicity of mind acted the one who, at that time, was publishing the *Theory of the Four Movements*.

This small pamphlet formed a half-sheet in-12, of which we only have one copy, probably unique in the world. The typography is in the same style as that of the first edition of the *Theory of the Four Movements*.

We reproduce the appearance of the title.

ON COMMERCIAL CHARLATANERIES

I have seen, he said, a cabbage bigger than a house.
And me, said the other, a pot as big as a church.
— La Fontaine.

This is how we must respond to *gasconnades* with even stronger lies. If the braggart has seen cabbages as big as churches, you must promise him pots as big as mountains in which to cook his cabbages.

I joked in this tone with two Parisians who had recently settled in Lyon, and who possess, or so they say, the secret of supplying all kinds of fabrics at 25 or 35 percent below the current price. I told them about a merchant who will discount 50 percent, which is as credible as the discount of 25. They boast of having at their disposal wool from the flocks of kings and fabrics from unknown factories; I give my merchant the tow from the region of Crac, woven by the naiads of the Garonne. All this is as true as the claims of our Parisians; they deserved to be mocked, as I did, in the Lyon newspaper of ...

However, one of them seriously undertook to justify his nonsense: he would have done better to keep quiet; but since he continues to post announcements insulting to all merchants, let us once again take stock of him, as well as of all the braggarts who may arrive from the boulevards of Paris; not that I envy them, as this one believed, but I like to mock charlatans. So let's examine what to believe about these so-called discounts announced by the Templiers and Vielleuse stores.

It is proven that, on fabrics of usual use, plain, shaped, printed, the retailer earns barely 15 percent net, excluding the case of a sudden increase. If he sometimes earns more on fashion trinkets, this is compensated by rejects, which must often be given at cost price, and of which it is said that the tail eats the head. In the final analysis, the retail product does not rise above 15 percent on all sales. This is so true, that any retailer will willingly show his purchase invoices and expense accounts to anyone who will only offer him the profit of 12 percent net, expenses deducted. According to this, if there are those who announce by posters discounts of 25 to 35 percent on the current price, discounts that would establish their merchandise well below the factory prices and added costs, it is important that these juggleries are confounded, and I will make it right.

The announcement of such a discount gives rise to the following three doubts:

1. Either the seller, who claims to give below the factory price, premeditates bankruptcy and wants to achieve it at all costs, to disappear soon without paying his creditors;
2. Or this seller has goods of suspicious origin, which may come from concealment, bankruptcy evasion and other illicit means;
3. Or, finally, this seller is a dedicated charlatan, who announces such discounts to bait and fool the multitude who are incapable of judging the qualities and values of the fabric.

I adhere to this third opinion, for the honor of gentlemen of the Vielleuse and the Templiers. I want to believe that they are only confirmed Gascons like their colleagues at the Palais-Royal; but many people incline to the second opinion, because we know (and various factories complain loudly about it) that there are several stores in Paris displaying fixed prices and big discounts, which do not scruple to buy on account goods of suspicious origin, which are always abundant in the capital: it is added that they sometimes have them resold far away, to avoid their being recognized. By means of these maneuvers, they can undoubtedly reduce the current price.

I am far from raising such suspicion against the two stores in question, on the contrary, I assign them the best of the three roles between which they must choose, that of *commercial charlatanry*, and to rule out any idea of malice against them, I will treat this joke as a general thesis; I will rally around the commercial principles accepted by the Government, demonstrate that mercantile charlatanries are an infringement of the system of competition on which the charlatans rely, and that freedom of commerce, like civil freedom, has limits beyond from which we fall into anarchy.

If it is true that excess is vicious everywhere, even in terms of virtue, it is therefore vicious in terms of industrial competition. The Government recognized this truth with regard to medicine and the bar: when the practice of medicine was completely free and abandoned to the tricks suggested by greed, we saw everywhere the traveling Aesculapiuses abusing the credulity of the people; they each had an invention capable of curing all diseases; they promised mountains and wonders, like the merchants of the Templiers and Vielleuse; as a result their balm murdered so many onlookers that we were obliged to pursue them, and among others we arrested an empiricist from Strasbourg who was accused of wreaking more havoc single-handedly than an enemy army.

The same excess, the same abuse of competition, took place among the lawyers, at a time when their profession enjoyed unlimited license: certain lawyers, imitating the shopkeepers at the fair, got used to touting practices, arresting and soliciting the peasants in the squares and at the gates of the palace to obtain their customers. This prostitution of a hitherto honorable ministry made it necessary to resort to means of repression, such as registers, fee rates, etc.

In these two circumstances, as in a thousand others, the Government has demonstrated that its rule is to prevent freedom from degenerating into license, and that it wants to put a stop to the intrigues of these shameless charlatans who, under the pretext of competition, demean their profession and their colleagues. We find such men in commerce, as everywhere. There are merchants who would promise, if necessary, to sell double louis at the same price as single louis. These impertinences are enough to seduce the multitude, who fall into the crudest traps.

I have demonstrated that these commercial juggleries are contrary to the views of the authority, that it wants to protect subjects against trickery, against violence, and that it wants to maintain decency in the exercise of industrial rivalries. It remains for me to add a few critical details on the conduct of the two aforementioned merchants, who scandalously exceed the limits of competition and the laws of commercial decency. I am going into this subject.

Announcing impossible discounts, such as 25 to 35 percent, on items that yield barely 15 percent profit, is defaming the entire body of traders. If such a discount is credible, everyone can say to three hundred merchants in Lyon, holding draperies and canvases: "You are leeches, harpies who brazenly defraud the public; you earn 35 percent too much; you deceive us so much, and we abandon you, vowing contempt for you." Such is the compliment that we are entitled to address to all these traders, as long as they have not authentically and explicitly refuted the Parisian Gascons who degrade them. Many traders believe that it is enough to despise these absurdities and let them fall by themselves: this is very ill-judged, because every charlatan relies on the silence of his rivals to further slander them and attribute to them the tricks of which he is capable.

On the other hand, the maneuvers of these foreigners tend to demoralize and cause the failure of the honorable merchants who do not know the art of fighting against the ruses of tricksters; they see themselves abandoned by the multitude who listen to the most absurd promises; it runs to these passing merchants with the plan of examining whether the discount is real, and it is like running to the trebuchet. The Parisians, trained in the crafts of the Palais-Royal, have their ruses ready to bewitch onlookers and mystify nine-tenths of the curious; we bundle them up, we snatch them up in these stores like birds in the trap; so the Templier merchant boasts of having sold a lot. I believe it without difficulty; because I know from experience that he has the tactics of the Palais-Royal, where it is said that he was a tailor before establishing his business house in Lyon. He tried this tactic with me. I thought I would put an end to his nonsense by telling him that I had been a draper before him¹ and that I knew all this jargon; then he told me more refined lies, of those that are reserved for people of art, and I was able to fully judge his talents.

¹ Fourier, son of a draper merchant from Besançon, had been, some time before the publication of this article, a clerk for MM. Bouquet brothers, cloth merchants in Lyon.

In the meantime, I saw someone caught at his house and made fun of him the next day. He was presented with two rough and loose sheets, well polished and gummed to disguise their poor quality. When he refused, he was answered with the refrain of the Palais-Royal: "So you would like something even more beautiful?" So we brought a third, a sheet which was not even more beautiful, but a little less bad. The patient asked me for advice, and I avoided answering, because in sales, as in gambling, one must not talk about the pending moves. Besides, a lesson is needed for those who are not suspicious of jugglers; we must let them try an *orviétan*² that only hurts the purse: I therefore let them get hold of this one with a detestable sheet, which they called "even more beautiful."

It is to excess competition that we owe all these new commercial intrigues, the invention of which commonly starts from the capital. The Lyonnais are still new to this genre; but they will be obliged to adapt to it, because now it is only cunning that leads to success and attracts crowds to the merchant. Those who maintain the practice of good faith lose their sales, and I would not be surprised to see several retailers in Lyon fail during the winter, from whom these charlataneries take away their consumption. In this case, it will be mass commerce which, hurt by these bankruptcies, will have paid the profit of the disorganizers who say they are reducing 25 percent. They only need a short vogue in each city to make their fortune and cause great disorder. They take advantage of the first ardor that their gasconnades excite, and they leave soon after without waiting for distrust to follow infatuation: so the merchant of La Vielleuse has already fled. And I do not pity the Lyonnais that he will have caught: it will teach them to attach themselves to the domiciled merchants, to whom we can address complaints when we believe that we have grounds for doing so.

Let us analyze in detail some of the tricks of these passers-by; because we have to go down to the smallest details to disabuse the multitude who are strongly infatuated with them. One tells you, to show off, that his sheets all bear the name of the manufacturer at the top; this brand name is often just another means of deceiving the less experienced buyer. Indeed, what factory is better known than that of MM. Ternaux frères, who have obtained the ten-year prize? It does not follow that their sheets deserve blind confidence, because this house manufactures sheets of all qualities and prices in various places, according to the outlets it has in Europe and Asia. Some of its sheets can cost 60 francs and others are worth only 30. As for this difference, it is not M. Ternaux who is deceiving; he sells each quality according to its value. But what use does a charlatan get from it? He presents you with a Ternaux worth 30 francs, bearing the name embroidered on the head like a 60 fr. "Here," says the braggart, "is a top-quality sheet, from the one who obtained the suffrage of the Institute. My colleagues sell it to you for 60 francs; I reduce 25 percent, and pass it on to you at 45 francs." We fall into the trap, and we are duped out of 15 francs. per ell; that is to say 50 percent, since we pay 45 francs for that which is only worth 30.

² A patent medicine sold in the 17th and 18th centuries. — TRANSLATOR.

This is how most of these good simple folks are mystified, who run to a discount of 25 percent, and who, instead of a discount, experience a deception of 50 percent, with the help of of this ruse and a thousand others of which I will spare the details.

These cheats are easier today than ever, because manufacturers no longer have, as in the past, a single sustained quality, they make all kinds of qualities to facilitate the traps of name and city, and to accommodate themselves to the system of tricks introduced by excess competition. The town of Louviers, so rightly renowned, plays at the end like all the others; it makes sheets which, bearing the name of Louviers, are not worth the ordinary qualities of Elboeuf. Every traveling merchant stocks up on these bad sheets and extols the old reputation of Louviers, to promote the drugs he bought there. This is one of the tricks familiar to all these passengers, who only want to catch the curious once, and when, after six months, we realize the deception, they are already a hundred leagues away, deceiving other curious people in another city. Note that they all follow the same plan: make apparent discounts on an object of little value, to excite confidence and gain enormously on more important objects.

The public is so little guarded against such traps that it can be surprised by risking the most ridiculous lies. I want to cite an example, a farce that I saw played by one of these tailors at large stalls, which hold made clothes. He wanted to sell a coat made of very poor gray cloth; wool, quality, color, everything was bad, but the learned tailor put on the coat and said to the person, in a doctoral tone: "Here is a Tilsitt gray coat, sir; a color that arrives from Paris, sir; this is how the English in Hamburg, sir, wore their clothes this winter, sir." With these nonsense, gray Tilsitt, sir, the English of Hamburg, sir, he convinced without difficulty the good-natured buyer, who was nevertheless a man of common sense and educated enough to know that Hamburg is not in England. Now, if it is so easy to fool prudent men, even by crude pranks, such as the quotation of the English from Hamburg or the French from Peking, how many chances must these wily fellows have, who, arriving from the capital where they have *perfected* everything, brought back the perfectibility of lies and trickery. They know how to find the weak side of everyone, and what proves it is that I, who am a stickler, was restrained like everyone else at M. Geroult's. Here is the fact:

One day, being in a hurry to buy some trifle in drapery, I ran to the nearest store. That of the Templiers presented itself; I asked for such casimir of medium quality, which costs 13 fr. in Aix-la-Chapelle, discount 6 percent. Mr. Geroult is not ashamed to ask for 20 francs, and slanderously adds that his colleagues, such and such, whom he designates by name, sell it for 24. He regales me with a string of lies on this subject, to which I reply that I came from the Aix factories, where I was able to find out the original prices; that I bought the said object for 10 fr. at a certain clothier in Lyon, whom he wrongly accuses of selling for 24 fr.; that finally, I offer him the 16 francs, making a profit of 3 francs. by yardstick, and abandonment of discount, as I have paid with others. Useless observations. He took advantage of the fact that I was in a hurry, and I agreed to pay more with him than elsewhere, because I didn't have a moment to lose. He knew how to make me feel tired: when I refuted two lies, he added four. These merchants trained in Paris are skillful actors;

they do not tell crude tales like those of the English in Hamburg; but they ape the accent of truth with a tone so suave, so benign, that one would give them the good Lord without confession.

Now, if these Parisians daringly boast with even those who know as much as they do about their trade, how much must those who venture into such stores without knowing the fabrics, and without being accompanied by a connoisseur, tremble!

Let us add that these passing merchants sell everything for cash; that's still a difference of 6 percent in their favor. The buyer often forgets to deduct the discount of 6 percent; for him it is an additional deception, and an additional disadvantage for the merchants of the country who sell forward. In summary, if the discounts announced by these foreigners were real, any merchant in Lyon would purchase their fabrics indirectly, because they would be well below the factory price; the opposite happens, it is Mr. Geroult who buys from the Lyonnais, and who gets his supplies from various houses in the Saint-Nizier district, whose names I can give him: perhaps that is where the 150 *new colored pieces arriving now*, every Sunday *according to the poster*. Now, these merchants from Lyon who sell wholesale to Mr. Geroult do not discount 25 percent to him or to others, because they do not want to go bankrupt. What are these houses so burdened as to give him, in exchange for wool, their sheets at 25 percent below the price? Are it the Petou, the Morainville, with whom he says he corresponds? It would be a great reputation for them to stop by and buy their wool for 25 percent, which is too expensive! Fortunately for these houses, they enjoy a credit that protects them from such suspicion.

Let us summarize this exchange of wools, which should not be scrutinized too much, because we do not owe serious refutation to ridiculous assertions: if we had to cite these manufacturers hungry for wool, from whom Mr. Geroult obtained sheets at 25 percent off; if it were necessary to show their invoices, I think that he would get out of trouble like M. de Crac, when it is necessary to show the letters of the great Frédéric, he would say:

“An invoice that no one will ever see.”

All these jokes go hand in hand with the tale of the *Famous fabric for pants which arrives just now every Sunday*, if we believe the poster, and *which has never appeared even in Paris*. Anyone who thus adopts the style of the jugglers who sell balm to the populace, deserves, like them, only the distrust of honest people, and I urge them to be wary of these passing shops, under penalty of paying dearly for their curiosity.

As for me, who has no particular interest in this debate and who is in no sense a rival to these gentlemen, if I speak in such a matter, it is because I find it supremely indecent that strangers, by coming to establish themselves in a city, begin by insulting in their advertisements the entire corporation to which they belong.

Mr. Geroult's poster insinuates, in covert words, and seems to tell the public, *that all the merchants of Lyon are deceivers, leeches, and that he alone is loyal and disinterested*. This is the opinion that gullible people will form upon reading this impertinent poster. If it remains unanswered, other charlatans will soon come and more openly denigrate the Lyon merchants, who are too indifferent to these indecencies. It is therefore appropriate that passing merchants and

tailors from the Palais-Royal, who come to establish *trading houses* in Lyon, are reminded to observe decorum; and when they fail so grossly, should they be surprised that we have fun *picking at their seams* and giving them a hard time?

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In our last issue, we forgot to put at the end of Fourier's article, *On Commercial Charlataneries*, the signature X, which is on the printed copy that we have. We are correcting this oversight, because this signature can be used to discover in which Lyon newspaper Fourier had published this little pamphlet.

La Phalange 3rd series, 2 no. 41 (April 11, 1841): 732-736.

Working translation by Shawn P. Wilbur.
(Last revised June 8, 2024)