

Morelly's Utopian Code de la Nature: For your Labor Day weekend reading pleasure

I probably came across Étienne-Gabriel Morelly's name somewhere before, but I never gave it much thought until this evening, when, while reading Susan Sontag's **As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks 1964-1980**, I came across her citing (8/7/75) of Babeuf's quoting of Morelly: 'Society must be made to operate in such a way that it eradicates once and for all the desire of a man to become richer, or wiser, or more powerful than others.'

Hmm. Not a bad thought to consider in our era of late-stage capitalism, rampant hyper-individualism and possible collapse of neoliberalism.

Wikipedia says this:

Étienne-Gabriel Morelly (1717-1778) was a French utopian thinker and novelist. An otherwise "obscure tax official", Morelly wrote two books on education and a critique of Montesquieu. As well he is thought to be (perhaps erroneously) the author of *The Code of Nature*, which was published anonymously in France in 1755. This book . . . promoted a social order without avarice and proposed a constitution intended to lead to an egalitarian society without property, marriage, church or police. . . .

Morelly is often seen as a significant forerunner of later socialist and communist thinkers. François-Noël Babeuf, Charles Fourier, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Louis Blanc, Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx all discussed Morelly's ideas in their own writing."

Here is one of the more comprehensive discussions and excerpting of Morelly's work I found with a quick google search.

Nature and Utopia in Morelly's Code de la Nature

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"The only vice that I perceive in the universe is Avarice; all the others, by whatever name they be known, are only variations, degrees, of this one; it is the Proteus, the Mercury, the basis, the vehicle, of all the vices. Analyze vanity; fatuousness; pride; ambition; duplicity; hypocrisy; dishonesty; break down most of our sophistic virtues into their component parts, and they all resolve themselves into this subtle and pernicious element, the desire to have. You will even find it at the bottom of disinterestedness...

I dare to conclude here that it is almost mathematically demonstrable that all division of goods, whether equal or unequal, and that all private property whatever these portions is, in all societies, what Horace calls 'material for the highest evil'. All moral and political phenomena, are the effects of this pernicious cause; through it can be explained and resolved all theorems or problems about the origin or advancement of, the connection or affinity between, the different virtues and vices, disorders and crimes; about the true motives behind good or bad actions; about all the resolutions or perplexities of the human will; about the depravity of the passions; about the ineffectuality of precepts and laws that are meant to contain them; about the very technical faults in these lessons; finally, about all the monstrous productions that come from the aberrations of the mind or the heart. I say that the grounds for all these defects can be seen in the general tendency of legislators to allow the primary link of all sociability to be broken by the usurpation of the resources that should belong in common to all humanity." [177]

Morelly's Code de la Nature has long been read in a controversial way, both for criticism and historiography. The work was published in 1755 anonymously, a common strategy to escape censorship, and with the attributes of a fiction, as was also common at the time. But the combination of anonymity and fiction led immediately to heated debate about the authorship and significance of the work.

The Abbé Raynal was of the opinion that the encyclopaedist Toussaint was the author, while, for Grimm, it was a work by Rousseau, interpreting the criticism of civilization as similar to that in Rousseau's Essay on Inequality. La France Littéraire identified Diderot as the writer of the Code, noting the text's radicalization of the idea of equality which was then spreading among followers of the Enlightenment. Only in the nineteenth century, and more definitively in the twentieth, was the author established as being Etienne-Gabriel Morelly, who at that time was a teacher at a local school in a small town in Champagne: Vitry-le-François.[178]

Within Morelly's oeuvre, the Code opened a new debate, noteworthy in the history of utopias, but which can only be touched on here. Code de la Nature was indeed based on a strict communism, but it presented a political model different from the one celebrated in Morelly's other utopian work, Basiliade, published just two years earlier.[179] Some of the themes of Morelly's weltanschauung were also expressed in Basiliade: the belief that human nature has a drive towards harmony; faith in a form of social organization that would make men mutually supportive and moderate in their consumption of the goods provided by Nature itself; and a prospect of the end of conflicts between men, primarily due to the elimination amongst them of the right to private property. Nevertheless, the political government of the ideal society defined in Basiliade was not a communist one. According to the most widespread political theories of the eighteenth century, the best ruler was an enlightened Prince. The Prince was always connected with his citizens, more as an educating father rather than as a dictator, and his main task consisted in reducing government to simple legislation, in line with natural principles. Within two years, however, and in a surprisingly swift manner, Morelly lost faith in the political schemes typical of the Enlightenment, and switched to a coherent and total communistic system in the Code de la Nature. At the beginning of the Code, he explained that the fundamental purpose of Basiliade, which was the same as the Code, was the goodness of all humankind. If in the earlier novel the Prince stood out in the character of a prince-hero, it was mainly a matter of

genre, because in that case, the novel was an allegorical tale.

Let us return to the Code. It is divided into two parts. In the first, and longest, Morelly presented the key elements of his vision of the world, in the form of a philosophical essay. In turn, this philosophical section could be divided into two parts: one presenting the elements of the natural order, and the other showing that the distortions of history have been the cause of the human separation from an original harmony. All of this had a conclusion, almost like an appendix, which was the real focus and the real novelty of Morelly's argument: the 'Model of legislation conforming with the intentions of Nature' (189). Here he presented a perfect society with an ideal system of laws which, for the first time in the utopian genre, came very close to the drafting of an imaginary Bill of Rights.

In line with the utopian tradition, the Code is constructed as a pedagogical text, but it begins by recalling some of the topics the author had already dealt with in his early works on education.[180] His aim was to combine empirical and utilitarian views of human action in the hope that the individual can be motivated to pursue happiness as expressed within a harmonious social framework. The starting point of this theory lay in his conviction that both the ideas and the behaviour of men depended upon external, sensory impressions. Using an image similar to the one coined by his contemporary Condillac about an inanimate statue, in both his early writings and in his mature work, Morelly argued that, before receiving sensations from external motions, the human soul was like 'a canvas on which the painter has not drawn any sign yet'.[181] Ideas and actions did not come from abstract rationality, but from the concrete repetition of impressions that affect humans, causing pleasure or pain, according to circumstances. The formation of ideas depended on such sensations. As a result of human ability to remember and to catalogue the sensations which had been previously experienced, we were able to foresee the likely effects of our own future actions. The stimulation of feelings also depended on these sensations, enabling one to obtain as much pleasure as possible from one's own behaviour, while minimizing pain. Human nature had not only provided us with a rational system, but also with passions, which continuously drove us towards the pursuit of happiness.

This quest for happiness is both common to humankind and productive of social cohesion. Love for oneself might be the first feeling perceived, driving one to protect one's own existence and to make it as pleasant as possible. Nevertheless, humans showed a significant diversity when it came to the objects that made them happy, depending on their age, mental and physical character, tastes, environment and social organization. Such differences are usually a matter of primary concern for utopian writers. Morelly, on the contrary, underlined the propitious overlapping of unity and variability in human nature. The basis of a society founded on a common law was our common desire for happiness. Because individuals have different expectations, it is less likely that there will not be enough goods to satisfy their diverse wants. In the previous century, Hobbes had instead depicted this situation as one of inevitable conflict for the same goods between members of the human race. So, for Morelly, passions in themselves are not in themselves bad: Nature had endowed us with them to encourage us to take care of ourselves. In the context of the Enlightenment, he believed that passions should be moderate, and should not induce behaviours adverse to the ones of our fellows and to the social order.

Hence people were equal because they all had feelings (the first being love for oneself) and they all had needs. This egalitarian situation made people understand the rightness of the idea of equal rights and the necessity of shared work to meet everyone's needs. The different conditions of people (tastes, abilities, strength, etc.) made everyone's desires vary according to the specific situation. This, in turn, encouraged a mutual exchange between individuals, so that no one should be willing to keep things they did not need. What was not useful for one person could be of use to another and vice versa. So it may happen that the sum of desires at a certain point might be greater than the actual resources available. But this is not a bad thing in itself. It could be the key to cooperation among people, who understand that, only by working together more and more, can they easily achieve what they need. Nature wills that

the sorrow and the difficulty of attending to our needs, since when acting alone they are beyond our reach, make us understand the importance of turning to others for help. It inspires affection, if it is helpful. Hence our distaste for the abandonment of loneliness, and our love of the pleasures and for the benefits of being part of community and society. (25–6)

In Morelly's text, the idea of natural harmony combined with the critique of history, comparable to that in Rousseau's *Essay on Inequality*, which was written in the same period. The natural order, as a combined satisfaction of everyone's needs, may be known by people in a state of nature, but it has been swept away by a civilization progressively based on principles far from natural ones. As in Rousseau, demographic expansion was seen as the basis of such a negative process. Increasing in numbers, humanity had to deal with scarce resources and then often left their homes in order to be able to survive. But in so acting they discovered and somehow absorbed the spirit of competition instead of collaboration. In this way, they lost the concept of natural relationships. During this long historical process, the vices of individualism replaced feelings of solidarity. In Morelly's opinion, greed or avarice was the worst of these vices. By recognizing private property, greed had been consolidated in legal systems. So, in the Code such greed is subject to attack. This was clear in the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter. It could also be seen in the passages where Morelly argued against those legislators, past and present, who had failed their task as educators and guides to their people. By doing so,

they have stifled the causes of affection that are necessary to create the link between human beings, as well as having turned mutual agreement and mutual aid into undesirable divisions aimed at separating the great body of humankind into different parts. Besides they have stoked the fire of a burning greed and whetted the appetite of an insatiable and demanding avarice, by the several agitations opposing each other stimulated by those confused and divided parts. (35–6)

As is typical for many Utopians, Morelly's vision of past history is as a series of errors which pit individuals one against the other. Assuming that it would be possible to escape from this, the only way out might be a kind of return to original Nature as a source of truth.

People are the corrupt ones, not Nature. Man abandons the Truth, but the Truth never vanishes. And everything disputed in this respect would never affect my thesis; every nation, wild or not, can or could be redirected to the laws of Nature, maintaining what they allow and eliminating what they disapprove. (45)

In order to improve humankind, such a return to the natural order would bring together three tools disastrously separated by history. The first of these is Politics, as the capacity to lead individuals towards social harmony; the second is Legislation, because the truth has to become a codified norm; and the third is Morality, as a criterion leading human acts to the common good.

On the basis of such a critique of civilization contrasted with the natural order, Morelly concluded his work with the drafting of a legal system, laying the conceptual foundations of a perfect communistic society. At the same time, he presented this social ideal through legislation embracing all aspects of the usual planning of utopias: government, economic organization, employment, the cultural environment and social customs. Three laws, 'fundamental and sacred', underwrite Morelly's perfect society. In his opinion 'they are designed to cut the roots of all the vices and evils of society'. They are the abolition of private property, except for goods for purely personal use; the consideration of every citizen as a 'public individual, fed, supported and employed at public expense' (190); in return, third, for the duty of work as everyone's contribution to public necessity.

On such foundations, the new, natural society was characterized by the centralized distribution of the common product and by a common obligation to work applied to the production of only those goods specifically necessary for its citizens. Work as a duty had an educational meaning as well as economic implications. All citizens, at least for one specific period during their lives, devoted themselves to agricultural production, in a form most suited to the needs of the community. Morelly's ideal society was, however, neither poor, nor purely rural, as many cities and artisanal activities are encouraged. Nevertheless, any aspiration to luxury was excluded. Every form of social expression had to rest on egalitarian values producing a uniformity extending to architectural and urban structures, based on the geometric regularity of the road lines and of the building sizes.

The system of political representation was based on both democratic and paternalistic principles. Representation had its origin in the family and in the political role of the household leader. It extended to local institutions and to the Senate which was identified as the focus of the State. The social importance of the family was emphasized by legislation specifically dedicated to the marital system, subjecting marriage and divorce to strict regulation. In selecting those who would take political roles, the principle of election from below was important, but managed in such a way as to give prevalence to seniority. Indeed, it was not the function of political authority to outline new directions in the management of public affairs, but to preserve what the laws of Nature prescribed. For such a role the wisdom and the prudence bestowed by age were regarded as more suitable. Morelly, as a pedagogue, described the educational system of his ideal society in depth. Removing young men from the family was fundamental. They were first to be educated in boarding schools and then in the fields and in the factories. Like many other utopias, the Code described the social welfare services very fully, covering public health, care for the elderly, care for the disabled, etc. The result was a social system transmitting a feeling of great organic unity to the reader; maybe too much. The account of the secondary variability among people given in Morelly's first writings seems to give way to a desire for uniformity in which differences of status and of preferences between individuals dissolved into a single, general idea of happiness. This is a feature of utopian writing that we could observe not only in Morelly but even in many

other utopias.

Morelly definitely shares the tendency of utopian writers to an analytic and complete planning of a society alternative to the existing one. His effectiveness lies primarily in shifting the description of a perfect world into the language of legislation, the highest form of morality and politics (whether reformist or revolutionary) that is condensed in the writing of a new constitution. It was along these lines of thought that Babeuf was to take the Code de la Nature as a model of action (even while believing that Diderot was its author). In reference to the social ideas of the Enlightenment, Engels would reserve for Morelly, along with Mably, a very important role in the long line of 'precursors' of contemporary socialism from the authors of Renaissance utopias to the contributions of Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen.[182] In a similar way, a great historian of the late nineteenth century, André Lichtenberger, would consider the Code to be 'the great socialist book of the eighteenth century'.[183]