

ETIENNE CABET: THE ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY IN URBAN AND RURAL SETTINGS, OR THE ADAPTION OF THEORY TO CIRCUMSTANCE

Roberto Tumminelli

Although his name was long associated almost exclusively with the publication of the *Journey to Icaria*¹ and with his experience in the overseas Icarian colonies, the involvement of Etienne Cabet² (Dijon 1780 - Saint Louis 1856) with social experimentation, with the setting up of small-scale alternative social models and what Jules Prudhommeaux calls « experimental socialism »³, was somewhat uneven. An inspired and charismatic exponent of social utopia, Cabet had always been concerned with the concrete possibility of establishing his « own » alternative society on French soil, and his political instinct had led him to consider in very realistic terms the possibility of a communist movement within the French situation. Until 1843-44, in fact, all Cabet's political activity had focussed on the achievement of two major goals: the creation of a democratic communist movement, and the formation of a coalition between proletariat and the progressive middle class to defeat the aristocratic and capitalistic ruling class⁴. In this light should be seen his clashes with the followers of Babeuf over the leadership of the working class (the « natural » addressee of the communist ideal) and with the « societarian school » (i.e. the Fourierists), who were competing with him for the favours of the progressive bourgeoisie.

It was no coincidence, in fact, that in 1847, as soon as Cabet had opted for « flight » to Icaria⁵, the controversy with the « societarian school » diminished considerably, and many Fourierists actually followed Cabet in his venture⁶. Although Cabet never abandoned his effective political activity in France, from 1847 onwards he was directly involved in the foundation of

¹ *Voyage et aventures de Lord Williams Carisdall en Icarie*. Hippolyte Souverain, Paris, January 1840, 2 Vols., 2nd edition, *Voyage en Icarie*, Mallet, Paris.

² For further discussion of Cabet and the Icarian movement, see Roberto Tumminelli, *E. Cabet. Critica della società e alternativa di Icaria*, Milano, 1981.

³ The most complete study by Jules Prudhommeaux is *Icarie et son fondateur: Etienne Cabet. Contribution à l'étude du socialisme expérimental*, Paris, 1907.

⁴ Cfr. Cabet, *Ma ligne droite ou le vrai chemin du salut pour le peuple*, Paris, 1841.

⁵ In « Le Populaire de 1841 », 9 May 1847; the periodical was founded by Cabet (14 March 1841).

⁶ Cfr. « Le Populaire de 1841 », 5 August, 1847.

experimental colonies. He made a clear and accurate analysis of the February revolution⁷, but on 23 July 1848 he was announcing from the pages of *Le populaire* that « from this moment on all our thoughts are on departure ».

It was the signal of the definitive break with any political programme in France and of his decision to throw himself into the American adventure. One is tempted to add that this was against his own wishes, for the colonial project lost all real « Icarian » form; it had none of those prerequisites that Cabet considered « essential » for a successful society based on economic collectivism, industrialisation, political democracy and fraternity in social relationships. Indeed, Cabet thought that a society of this type could only be successful if founded on the development of industry, that is, on plentiful consumer products and widespread wealth: it would have to involve an entire nation, an entire people. Even if Cabet's wildest dreams had come true (the emigration of about 20,000 people), we are still nowhere near the achievement of a whole nation democratically and consciously working towards the setting up of communist society.

The sole aim of Cabet's 1844 proposal to found « small fraternal colonies » on French soil was to publicise and exemplify the communist model⁸. These colonies were certainly not claiming to provide the main and substitutive « instrument » for political struggle, even though at that moment the Icarian movement was at its height, spreading throughout France and extending its influence abroad⁹. This project is perhaps worth examining in greater detail.

The Fourierists had observed that the government was unable to repress the spread of Cabesian communism among the lower classes, and had themselves suggested that the government should grant the Icarians land and means to experiment with the new social system. It was as a result of this that Cabet put forward a proposal to create experimental « small communities » on French soil.

Expecting help from the Establishment was, for Cabet, only « a dream », but he held that social experiment was possible (and also useful) even if he had to rely on his own resources. He was not concerned with establishing communities which would be isolated from the real social context, but with organisms able to involve a large number of people with different levels of political awareness and commitment. As always, alongside typically Utopian elements Cabet demonstrated his grasp of politics and his ability to work out practical plans to involve the masses.

The project was to form organisms with two or more participation levels. First of all there would be a nucleus (from 5 to 20) of « Icarian » communist

⁷ Cfr. Pierre Angrand, *Etienne Cabet et la République de 1848*, Paris, 1948, 28.

⁸ « *Le Populaire de 1841* », 2 May 1844.

⁹ The Icarian communist movement numbered about 250,000 members; cfr. Christopher H. Johnson, *Utopian Communism in France: Cabet and the Icarians, 1839-1851*, Ithaca and London, 1974.

militants, educated and trained, with suitable characters and a degree of cultural homogeneity, to constitute the central thrust of the community; they would be, so to speak, full-time communists¹⁰. Around this hard core would be groups of sympathisers whose relationship with the community would be more elastic; they would be between twenty and thirty in number, composed of gardeners, kitchen hands, butchers, « people necessary to the life of the community ». Then there would be the workers needed for building construction and fitting out the homes in the colony. The community would in this way be linked to its social context, and would have a stimulating and unifying influence on it, especially since the colony would probably have been built in Paris or very near it.

The community was also to be « open » in character: it would have room for a certain number of paying guests and about sixty workers in complementary activities (tailors, clockmakers, artists) who would live for several (three or four) months a year only in the commune. There would also be forty children (twenty boys and twenty girls) to be brought up in the spirit of the commune. The community would be stimulated by groups of friends and visitors spending only a few days in the colony¹¹.

Written application and certain requisites such as « absolute morality » and « brotherly feeling », « dedication to humanity », a willingness to maintain peace and harmony and a formal commitment to respect community rules were necessary for admission to the colony. All religious opinions were admitted on condition that there be complete tolerance. Everyone was to be prepared to work four or five hours a day. Free time was to be dedicated to « social activities » in which cultural initiatives were emphasised. A doctor and pharmacy were also planned.

The twenty full time militants were to be « members, owners, buyers, administrators and managers of a limited partnership company », with capital derived from shares and donations¹². Cabet's idea was thus one of a « *petite communauté de dévoués* », of full time communist militants, surrounded by a « *petite colonie fraternelle* » composed of less regularly committed sympathisers. It would be open to friends or people holding similar political beliefs. The political role of this organism was, for Cabet, to be of considerable importance; organised to be independent, it was to express all « useful truths », without directly attacking the government. It was to take on the role of a sort of « people's council »; taking root among the masses, with various kinds of outside collaboration, it was to carry out extremely effective propaganda work, perhaps even printing a newspaper. Cabet even envisaged an association to group together all existing social organisations or communities of this kind in a sort of national « coordination » of all forms of

¹⁰ « Le Populaire de 1841 », 2 May 1844.

¹¹ Ivi, Supplement to the May 2 issue.

¹² « Le Populaire de 1841 », 2 May 1844.

democratic association. He saw their function particularly as providing a democratic alternative to the political and economic Establishment¹³. He saw this movement as undermining institutional power from within by giving a new democratic substance to a framework or organisms and associations based on interwoven relationships which were in themselves alternative.

The idea was extremely sound as the later history of the workers' and democratic movements demonstrated. When, however, it was presented in the spring of 1844 to the *Société démocratique française* of London by Cabet's friend Berrier-Fontaine, it was discussed and rejected, because, as Berrier-Fontaine wrote to Cabet, « we think that your efforts cannot be crowned with success, ..., we have not solved this important question of attempts at small communities in your way,... »¹⁴.

The criticisms to be found in the minutes of the society's meetings focus on two levels of difficulties: firstly those likely to arise from internal discord in the colony, and secondly, those caused by Establishment intervention. Bauer seems to have been the most favourable to the project. He thought it had a chance of succeeding « if the men are really willing to dedicate their lives »¹⁵. Schapper, on the other hand, does not seem to have understood or shared the essence of the project or the emphasis placed by Cabet on relations with the outside world, for he concluded that to have some likelihood of succeeding a community would have to be « isolated from the rest of the world ». In any case it is clear that opposition to the project stemmed more from a concern with opportuneness than from principle.

Cabet published Berrier-Fontaine's letter in *Le Populaire* on July 12, stating that the criticisms seemed relevant when referring to « closed » colonies, but that his proposal was completely different; a significant venture could have considerable propaganda effect. Cabet's plan was never to be carried out even though the French and Germans abroad were eventually influenced by Cabet on two important points: the rejection of conspiracy, and the renunciation of violent intervention in favour of peaceful propaganda.

Between 1845 and 1846 a decisive change took place in the social structure of Icarian militants, closely analysed by C.H. Johnson¹⁶. Cabet, however, had not yet given up hope of converting or at least attracting support from the « progressive » middle class. He threw himself into a bitter controversy with the « societarian school », although much of his support came from its followers¹⁷. Cabet was particularly anxious to confront the Fourierists, since his

¹³ *Ivi*.

¹⁴ Cfr. Arthur Lehning, « Discussions à Londres sur le communisme icarien », in *Bulletin of the International Institute of Social History*, Amsterdam, 1952, N. 2, 98.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, 101.

¹⁶ C.H. Johnson hypothesizes an increase of « proletarian » Icarians in the period: cfr. C.H. Johnson, *Etienné Cabet and the Icarian Communist Movement in France, 1839-1848*, The University of Wisconsin, 1968, Ph. D. thesis, 335.

¹⁷ Cfr. Fernand Rude, *Voyage en Icarie. Deux ouvriers viennois aux Etats Unis en 1855*, Paris, 1952, 19.

« small community » project was similar to one put forward by Considérant and followers of Fourier, proposing a new anti-authoritarian social organisation made up of a group of small communities (phalansters) characterised by a communitarian (but not communist) economic organisation in which each member could follow his own inclinations and desires.

The debate had no positive outcome. Despite the efforts of Joseph Rey to reconcile the two movements, the question of the ownership (social or private) of means of production proved an unsurmountable obstacle to agreement. Cabet went so far as to declare in a letter to Rey that « the Fourierists want to rise from the corpse of communism »¹⁸. The failure of Icarian propaganda among the middle classes, the realisation of middle class indifference to a tactical alliance with the proletariat, and the proletarianisation of Cabet's own movement were sufficiently convincing factors to make him abandon his conviction that « in every democrat is hidden a communist »¹⁹. As a result also of his theoretic research into the social and economic role of the middle and working classes, Cabet came to conclusions which were very far from his earlier beliefs. Since he was against a revolutionary uprising, he felt that the very logic of events was sweeping him towards a flight from historically determined reality, to make an attempt to build a new world based on his own ideas, in an experimental Utopia.

No longer a political programme for the French nation, Icaria became the Promised Land for those who, exposed to poverty and hunger, were now even deprived of the right to association, to discussion and free speech, and forced to seek bread, work and freedom elsewhere. Thus Cabet, in prophet-like tones, evoked his dream: « ...let us go to Icaria to seek happiness for ourselves and our families,...; let us leave the home of servitude to conquer a promised land, a new Paradise on earth! ». « Let us go, Icarians, to found and achieve Icaria! »²⁰. It was clear that this dream could only be fulfilled in the new continent, in North America.

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The decision to found a communist (Icarian) community on North American soil was clearly quite different from the « small communities » project we have examined above. The latter was intended as a mere propaganda experiment, and was to constitute an instrument to spread a new way of life in a wider context, on a political level. It was to integrate Cabet's traditional political activity with vehicles for association which, in his opinion, would prove vital for converting the masses.

The American adventure, on the other hand, represented the radical break with all Cabet's previous political experience, which he now considered

¹⁸ Cabet to Rey, IISG, Amsterdam, Archief Cabet, unpublished letter.

¹⁹ Cfr. Cabet, *Le démocrate devenu communiste malgré lui*, Paris,

²⁰ « Le Populaire de 1841 », 9 May 1847.

thwarted by the combined pressure of Orléanist repression, revolutionary groups and economic recession.

The decision, therefore, was not a chance one, but determined by a series of « objective » circumstances which led Cabet to revise his opinions on the usefulness of founding alternative colonies outside France. Cabet was also convinced that he was going to found a numerically strong colony, by transferring more than 20,000 people to America; he also thought there would be an avantgarde majority of a trained élite, whereas the opposite was true: the majority was enthusiastic but not high level.

On 29 January 1848, the first 69 Icarians took the train for Le Havre, where they set sail on the « Roma » on 3 February. They landed in New Orleans on March 27, where the news of the revolution reached them. This was to be the start of Cabet and his companions' dramatic story, taking them across the entire territory of North America, to the foundation of six colonies and forty years of hard struggle.

The failure of the first colony, founded on the Red River in Texas, was caused by a series of factors ranging from enormous environmental difficulties to disease, from the problems of the foreign language to those caused by their almost complete isolation²¹. The new settlement in Nauvoo was a decided improvement from this point of view, and Cabet, after winning a law case for fraud in France and being exiled by Louis Napoleon, was called by his followers in the summer of 1852 to direct the colony.

Nauvoo also suffered from the malady which struck all the Icarian colonies: the inability to be self-sufficient. The Icarians arrived in the United States almost empty handed and were forced to rely on the funds sent by the Icarian office in Paris; The admission rules were also very strict, asking participants to hand over all their possessions apart from a basic 600 Fr. If they changed their minds, there was no repayment. Although the rules were later moderated, the numbers of new people joining, after the initial rush, were much lower than those hoped for by Cabet, as few colonists were willing to make such an irrevocable decision.

Between March 1849 and July 1855, 2000 people had spent time in the colony, but the basic number was around 286, counting both the Nauvoo and the Corning colonists, because very few colonists were able to persevere in their venture²².

The small number of inhabitants, however, did not prevent colony life from being active and lively. All the colonists had to work, and despite the rigid centralisation and the absence of any reward for talent or particular commitment, Icaria was a model for hard work. The positive aspects were carefully described by Cabet himself, and ranged from collective production

²¹ Cfr. Cabet, *Colonie ou République icarienne dans les Etats Unis d'Amerique, Son Histoire*, Paris, 1854, 24.

²² Cfr. Prudhommeaux, *Icarie et son fondateur, cit.*, 292.

to the abolition of money, from the absence of criminals to their Spartan (but not wretched) life, from the absence of a police force to the meals together²³. It must, however, be said that they paid for this with the formation of a bureaucratic structure, with poor quality meals, and with endless red tape to be overcome to meet the simplest need. Moreover, the rigid leadership of Cabet and the total subordination of the colonists to his personality pushed the Icarians into a passive role and led to a dangerous spirit of dissent²⁴.

The most serious aspect of the colonies, however, was that the community was fundamentally inefficient. The work was wasteful and Cabet was a rough and ready administrator. Fishing and the mill were productive, whereas the rest was not. There were too many tailors and shoemakers, and the distillery was also over-productive. The printing-press, stimulated by Cabet's inexhaustible pen, was, on the other hand, extremely active. Icaria, thus, took on from the beginning a Spartan appearance which was the result of its leader's moralism and productive incapacity. It was a far cry from the flourishing consumer society described by Cabet in his *Journey to Icaria*. The nearest model seems to be the military communism proposed by Babeuf, so hated by Cabet. The moralistic pressure brought to bear by Cabet also caused a rigid control of the sexual morals of the Icarians and the maintenance of the patriarchal family.

The real Icarian community was clearly very different from that envisaged by its founder and his followers. The colonist's life, however enthusiastic and willing he might have been, was difficult, caught as he was between the coils of the assembly system and the structural lack of individual freedom, and overshadowed by the suffocating presence (or rather, omnipresence) of a paternalistic leader. Cabet, in fact, was much more in his element leading the popular-democratic opposition to Louis Philippe and in his commitment to a national policy in France, than in directing in America a micro-society of peasant colonists, however devoted, who were made quarrelsome by the restrictions in their lives.

All these factors were bound to lead to a fracture in the colony, and inevitably it occurred, even accompanied by violence. Cabet underwent attacks and accusations²⁵, the Paris office's authority was disputed, and finally Cabet and his followers, overwhelmed by the majority, were forced to leave the colony²⁶. They moved to Saint Louis, Missouri, where Cabet had a stroke and died 18 November 1856²⁷.

²³ Cfr. Cabet, *Progrès de la colonie icarienne établie à Nauvoo (Etats Unis d'Amérique)*, Paris, 1854, 4.

²⁴ Cfr. Frédéric Olinet (pseud. Job), *Voyage d'un Autunois en Icarie à la suite de Cabet*, Autumn, 1898, e Pierre J. Proudhon, *La voix du Peuple*, April 1850.

²⁵ Cfr. *Rapport de la Commission de surveillance et de vérification des comptes à l'Assemblée générale de la communauté icarienne*, Nauvoo, 1856, 2.

²⁶ Cabet, *Départ de Nauvoo du fondateur d'Icarie avec les vrais Icariens*, Paris, 1856.

²⁷ Cfr. *Nouvelle Revue Icarienne*, May 1859.

The colony of Cheltenham, founded by the remaining « faithful », was to have a difficult life, and in 1864, Arsène Sauva, the last administrator, had the unpleasant task of closing down the colony. Some of the survivors (8 men, 7 women and a few children) rejoined the dissidents, and later they all moved to Corning. This colony survived for many years, until, in 1878, a younger group of dissidents opposed the « old ones » and moved to California to found Icaria-Hope (Cloverdale).

One of the central difficulties of these colonies was that of fitting into a society which was alien to the colonists' world. The problem of the relationship with the outside world (in North America), both on the social level and the institutional one, was ever-present and remained essentially unsolvable for the Icarians. The first community in Texas was too cut off from its social context, whereas the experience in Nauvoo, where the Icarians were in direct contact with the non-colonist inhabitants, threatened to destroy the embryonic communism with the attractions of the outside world, however few and slight they were. It was Cabet himself who pointed out the dangers of this daily contact with the citizens of Nauvoo, and as a result he arranged the transfer to the new settlement of Corning, more « suitable » because of its isolation. It became an accepted tenet that the community should live in ascetic detachment from its social surroundings, consequently renouncing any dialectic relationship and also the chance to effectively make converts. The fear of outside attractions drawing colonists away and destroying the community's unity actually made the inhabitants withdraw more and more from reality.

In his application for naturalisation Cabet expressed his desire for legal recognition of the colony, and ten years later, in 1861, the new leader, Mercadier, also stated his wish for a complete identification with the United States.²⁸ American society proved insensitive to their Utopian prospects: out of curiosity the press dedicated a few lines to the Icarians, and the reading public of the Icarian publications was limited to the members of the community or at most to those of similar communities. Cabet's hopes of raising supporters and even financial aid were thus dashed.

The Civil War might have provided a suitable opportunity, and in fact Mercadier tried hard to organise Icarian participation, on the side of the abolitionist North, naturally. But the operation was not successful and the Icarians, according to their conscience, merely enlisted in the Northern army. They acquitted themselves with honour, however, and earned the respect of the Federal government²⁹. But Mercadier's aim was still to become an « officially recognised association ».

²⁸ Mercadier to Beluze, Camp Cuba, 14 April 1861, Paris, Bibliothèque National, dossier XIX, carton 3 (N.A.F.) fol 1, unpublished letter.

²⁹ *Cfr.* The document approved on 3 May 1862, signed Sauva, Poirer, Mercadier, Paris, B.N., dossier XIX, carton 3, fol. 28, and Mercadier's letter to Beluze, Cheltenham, 7 October 1861, Paris, B.N., in the same group, fol. 24, unpublished documents.

These attempts at integration demonstrate sufficiently clearly how the « critical », revolutionary energy of Utopia becomes completely watered down in social experimentation. The communist ideal is, moreover, the exact opposite to the spirit of North American society and that of the colonist striving for self-assertion and conquest. The experimental colonies, therefore, had no hope of attracting American citizens, who saw them as harmless if eccentric curiosities, with a view of the world which was completely opposite to their own. It is no coincidence that the Utopian colonies which spread throughout the United States in this period depended almost entirely on human resources arriving from Europe.

The very number of these experiments gives a particular historical emphasis to the movement³⁰. They were the outcome of attempts to escape from the most harmful consequences of industrialisation and also of the conviction of the uselessness of any revolutionary, even reformist, activity in Europe. These groups, however, were not able to overcome the problems created by the need to achieve a solid, fundamental and lasting socio-ideological solidarity within the community and the desire to spread and expand into the outside society.

The first tendency led to the construction of unsurmountable barriers to defend themselves from any moral and ideological contamination. The sublimation of that radically critical outlook on the world, which makes up the fundamental character of Utopia and provides the drive for experimental enterprise, paradoxically brings about the need and desire for official recognition, for contact and even confrontation with the external social contest, with men and institutions which are often fundamentally divergent in their opinions and life styles.

These great tensions pulling in opposite directions were to completely undermine their experiments in alternative micro-societies, which were already beset by practical organisational difficulties. For this reason, and despite the immense energy and commitment of Cabet and his courageous followers, Icaria could only be a reference point for the outcasts and uprooted driven from Europe by the defeat of their social struggles, while it was tolerated as so many other harmless eccentricities by North American society.

Isolated and standing still inside a society which was in feverish movement, Utopia ceased to be that « principle of innovation for institutions and peoples » of which Cioran speaks³¹, to become at best a rest home for the illusions of European revolutionaries.

³⁰ Cfr. John Noyes, *History of American Socialism*, New York, 1966 (1st edition 1870), and Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States*, New York, 1976 (1st edition 1875).

³¹ E.M. Cioran, *Histoire et Utopie*, Paris, 1960, 21.