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The Utopian Organization of Work in Icaria

David Leopold

I went back to join Valmor, who was meeting me in the clock-making workshop where one of his cousins worked ...

How amazing it was! Everything is together there, from the raw materials lined up in the first storehouse to the clocks, pendulums, watches, and devices of all sorts set out in a final warehouse that resembles a brilliant museum. The special clock-making workshop is a three-storied building of a thousand square feet, held up by iron columns instead of thick walls, which make each floor into one big room, perfectly illuminated by a very simple system of light diffusion. On the bottom floor are enormous, heavy machines for cutting the metals and roughing out the pieces. On the top floor are the workers, divided into as many groups as there are different pieces to make; each one always makes the same piece. You would think you were seeing an army regiment; such is the high degree of order and discipline there.¹

The life and work of Étienne Cabet (1788–1856) challenges the familiar but lazy contrast often drawn between utopian ‘dreamer’ and effective political actor. Cabet was both the author of a classic literary utopia – in which a visitor from the author’s own world discovers a superior civilization in a (geographically) distant location – and an effective political organizer who played a significant role in the nascent workers’ movement in France.

Born into a republican and artisan family in Dijon, Cabet subsequently pursued a legal and political career in Paris. He joined the *charbonnerie* (a secret society based on freemasonry) in the 1820s, and was elected to the National Assembly following the 1830 Revolution. Cabet also launched *Le Populaire*, a hugely successful republican newspaper, with an artisan readership (but cross-class ambitions), which sold 12,000 copies per issue in Paris alone, in 1833.² Indicted for publishing seditious articles, he took the legal option of exile for five years to avoid being imprisoned for two years in France.

Exiled in London, Cabet wrote prolifically, kept radical company, and added a commitment to ‘community of goods’ to his republicanism. Cabet would later claim that the idea for *Voyage en Icarie* had come to him whilst perusing

More's *Utopia* (1516) in the British Museum. Other influences on the work are much contested, but include: an early exposure to Fénelon's *Telemachus* (1699); the egalitarianism (but not the violence or secrecy) of Babouvism; and the gradualism and communitarianism of Robert Owen.³

Cabet returned to France in 1839, resurrecting *Le Populaire* as a monthly advocating 'Icarian communism' alongside descriptive accounts of contemporary social and economic conditions. The Icarian movement developed strong provincial support, especially in Reims, Lyon, Nantes, Périgueux, Toulouse and Toulon.⁴ However, after 1845, the movement took on some of the characteristics of a sect; Cabet increasingly portrayed communism as 'true' Christianity, and in 1846 announced his ambition to found a communitarian settlement in America.⁵ This move fractured the Icarian movement and damaged *Le Populaire*, since many supporters neither wanted, nor could afford, to 'abandon' France.⁶

Having failed to sustain his initial impact on the revolutionary events of 1848, Cabet joined the supporters he had encouraged to migrate. (He returned to France, from May 1851 to July 1852, to answer legal charges concerning the emigration, but otherwise spent the rest of his life in America.) After a series of difficulties and a false start in Texas, the Icarians took over a Mormon settlement at Nauvoo in Illinois. In 1856, a long-germinating schism saw Cabet expelled by a (small but stable) majority unhappy with his financial (mis)management, divisive policies and growing authoritarianism. Cabet took 124 adult loyalists with him, but died before they reached the site of their new settlement (Cheltenham, Missouri).⁷

Voyage en Icarie was first published (pseudonymously) in 1840, although it was the second (1842) edition which adopted that now familiar title and abandoned the conceit that it had been written by the fictitious English nobleman who was its central protagonist. Part One provides an account of the main political and social institutions of Icaria. Part Two provides an imagined history of Icaria, a reply to certain objections, and an appeal to a bewildering selection of (often unlikely) authorities on equality and community (running from Apollonius to Zoroaster). Part Three rehearses the 'Doctrine Communitaire' of its author, and emphasizes the importance of transitional arrangements.

Voyage en Icarie could not be called a literary masterpiece. Its programmatic and romantic threads – the pill and its sugar coating – barely hold together. (The visible join is reproduced in miniature within Cabet's book, when Lord Carisdall reads an overly didactic novel elucidating Icarian marriage arrangements (139/114).) Nor is the sugar coating well made; most characters can barely muster one dimension, and the melodramatic romance is contrived and dated.⁸ However, the literary form might have had some protective function – complicating Cabet's liability under increasingly strict press laws in France.

Voyage en Icarie has some interesting formal features. Not least, it contains an account of the historical emergence of Icaria – a narrative involving revolutionary origins, a benevolent ‘dictator’ and a lengthy period of transition to communism – confounding those who (mistakenly) claim that utopias never explain their own origins.⁹ However, I focus here on its social and political content, and especially the discussion of work.

Cabet holds that all of the evils familiar from human history (war, disorder, torture, crime and more) are the result of poor social organization, and especially the result of inequality. Consequently, we should not hesitate to re-organize society in order to eradicate them, and Icaria, he suggests, can give us ‘an example’ (to be modified and perfected by others) of how that might be done.¹⁰

The central values of Icarian society are equality and community; the ‘duties and benefits’ of association are shared equally, and ties of ‘fraternity’ turn society into a single ‘family’ (35/31). These central values find institutional embodiment (economically) in the community of property, and (politically) in a democratic republic. ‘Democracy’ is identified with popular sovereignty and a high degree of participation (there are no political parties and only a single national newspaper). Icaria is a rule-governed and non-liberal society; the legislature, for example, regulates ‘everything pertaining to their persons, actions, goods, food, clothing, lodging, education, their work, and even their amusements’ (37/33). Yet this highly regulated egalitarian communism still constitutes something of a ‘half-change’ (to borrow an expression from William Morris). For example, family structures and gender roles are modified rather than transformed; women, for instance, appear to be excluded from political decision-making yet retain a monopoly on housework. Moreover, whilst there are huge republican festivals (worthy of the imagination of Rousseau), the Icarians mainly spend their leisure time in gentle bourgeois pursuits – concert-going, promenades, horseback riding, the theatre and picnics.

As for productive activity, Icaria is not Cockayne (the mythical land of plenty where ready-roasted pigeons fly onto your plate). Work remains necessary, and the moderate abundance is hard won. Icarian productivity is portrayed as the result of the eradication of idlers, the absence of unproductive occupations, the extensive use of machinery, the application of a detailed technical division of labour, and widespread technological innovation.

First, in Icaria everyone ‘is a national worker and works for the republic’ (100–1/82). In particular, there are no idle rich. Dukes, marquises and barons have become locksmiths, printers and architects; although a stray ‘us’ and ‘them’ in the mouth of one such Icarian suggests that the historical memory of class origins has not yet entirely waned (28/25). Women are also now part of the republican workforce, although Cabet’s imagination limits them to certain kinds of gendered (and segregated) production.¹¹ The women’s workshop visited by Carisdall is devoted to millinery, and

overflows with 'brightly colored silks and velvets, laces and ribbons, flowers and feathers' (136/112). Other women's workshops are said to involve 'the seamstresses, the florists, the makers of undergarments, the laundresses, and so forth' (138/113).

Second, certain 'unproductive' occupations have disappeared. Gun and dagger manufacturers, notaries and stockbrokers, for example, have gone the way of the nobility. Most importantly, we are told, the 'curse of domestic service' has been eradicated (except, the sceptic will suggest, for women) (28/25). In one revealing case, the occupational role survives but is no longer occupied exclusively; Valmor (Carisdall's host) dismisses the suggestion that the role of the police force has disappeared, remarking that 'nowhere on earth' are there more police officers, since 'all our citizens' are required to enforce the law, and pursue miscreants (132/108).

Third, much human labour has been replaced by machinery. Non-agricultural production mainly occurs in huge, heavily mechanized, communal workshops devoted to particular branches of industry. In one print shop, for example, a variety of machines do 'almost everything themselves', replacing 'almost fifty thousand workers' (32/29). And in the republican bakery, 'ingenious machines knead the dough, cut it, and carry it to the ovens' (48/42). Initially, machinery was adopted to perform 'all the dangerous, tiring, unhealthy, dirty, or disgusting work' (101/83). However, mechanization has clearly progressed much further; at a wedding, for example, we discover a 'mechanical orchestra' without 'a single musician' (205/167).

Fourth, in the work that remains, a detailed technical division of labour is applied. In the women's millinery workshop, for example, 'each worker is used to doing the same operation all the time, and this repetition doubles yet again the speed of the work, while making it perfect' (137/112). In a letter home, one of the visitors confirms the savings and perfection resulting from 'machines or workers' performing the same operation (60/50). It is a revealing elision; reduced to simple repetitive tasks, human and mechanical labour look to be largely interchangeable.

Lastly, Icaria is an innovative society, with constantly advancing technology. We are shown a dazzling array of new products: smokeless fuels; submarines; dust-resistant furniture; odourless gas lighting; steerable air balloons; and so on. More entertaining breakthroughs include adumbrations of astro-turf – 'a sort of wetted mastic that turns neither to mud nor to dust' covers an arena – and of muzak – 'soft music produced by an invisible machine' plays in a hospital (112/92, 256/211).

Many questions remain. Not least, one might wonder how the decisions to produce are made in the absence of markets. Predictably, it is the republic which decides what will be made (providing the necessary resources and gathering up the resulting product) (100/82). The same is true of foreign trade decisions, since Icaria is not autarchic and imports materials and products where it is

efficient to do so (164/134). Domestic production follows a deceptively simple (and never fully elucidated) priority rule, making: first, those things that are 'necessary' (for survival); second, those things that are 'useful'; and last, those things that are 'pleasing' (100/82). (Where feasible, all three categories of product are made.) The resulting output is distributed equally, and time-rationed if it cannot be given to everyone outright (subject to everyone being able to enjoy it alike). Thus, since there are only enough horses for a tenth of the population, each family gets to go riding on every tenth day (221/180). Much here depends on the statistical and information-gathering expertise of the republic, and those cognisant of the informational function of market mechanisms are likely to remain sceptical.

Readers might also wonder about the Icarian work ethic. It is one thing to recognize that society requires production, but quite another to understand what motivates the individual workers to turn up for their shift and pull their weight. This concern is magnified by the distributive principle emblazoned on the frontispiece of *Voyage en Icarie* in its 1845 edition: '*A chacun suivant ses besoins. De chacun suivant ses forces* [To each according to their needs. From each according to their powers].' (The anticipation of Karl Marx's so-called 'needs principle' will be apparent.) Crucially, this principle breaks the link between the size of an individual's contribution to social production and the size of their material reward. Icarians, we learn, instead receive goods according to 'sex, age, and a few other circumstances provided by law' (36/32). Moreover, whilst coercion is not ruled out, it is seemingly not needed in order to elicit the required contribution. The necessary productive effort is generated in two steps: by lightening the burden of work, and increasing the moral motivation to bear that lightened load.

The burden of productive activity is reduced by its being made shorter, safer, cleaner, physically undemanding and pleasurable. The working day begins at 6 a.m. and lasts for only six or seven hours depending on the season (the shortness here would be more striking to Cabet's contemporaries). Workplaces are subject to the Icarian preoccupation with safety: protective barriers are widespread (by riversides, for instance), the air is purified, large wild animals have been eradicated, and so on. Cleanliness is also an obsession; in the stone mason's workshop, for instance, every precaution is made to avoid dirt, and even the workers' clothes are free of dust and mud (104/85). Work is physically undemanding; thus masons never have to carry a load, but simply direct the machinery that replaces human physical force (104/85, 154/126). Finally, work is made pleasurable. However, it is clear that Cabet views work as an intrinsically burdensome activity, and the pleasures here are external to productive activity as such. In particular, Icarian workers are seemingly invigorated and entertained by engaging in, and listening to, periods of communal song (interspersed with periods of silence and periods of conversation). Readers might be doubtful, but Carisdall trembles when, in the women's workshop, 'those 2,500 pretty

mouths opened to sing a magnificent hymn, far too short, in honor of good Icar' (the founding father of the republic) (137/113). As a cumulative result of these arrangements, work has become 'so untiring, and even pleasant' that many Icarians ignore the nominal retirement ages (of fifty for women and sixty-five for men) (101/82).

The lightened burden of productive activity still needs to be carried, and in the absence of either material incentives or coercion, Icaria utilizes what might be called moral motivations. Negatively, 'laziness and idleness' are 'stigmatised' at least as fiercely as theft and robbery are condemned elsewhere (102/84). Positively, 'the honour with which all forms of work are treated by public opinion' plays a crucial motivational role. From an early age, Icarians are taught to 'love and value' their work as a form of public service owed to the community as a whole (101/83). Moreover, Icarians happily discharge this civic duty out of 'republican passion and feeling' (270/222).

The satisfactions of public service may be sufficient, but there are additional honorific incentives to encourage even greater technological innovation. Citizens are encouraged from an early age to make themselves 'even more useful to society' by making a discovery or invention, and those who succeed earn 'special esteem, public recognition, or even national honours' (102/84). Icaria is littered with material tributes to those who have made discoveries or won competitions (such as that to design the model city of Icara). Perhaps the most ubiquitous is the charming little statue found above the toilet door in every Icarian home, immortalizing the woman who invented a procedure for expelling '*les odeurs fétides*' (89/73, 66/55).

Work also plays a symbolic role in *Voyage en Icarie*, representing the identity and character of Icarian citizens and society more generally. It is in the huge communal workshops, Valmor tells Carisdall, that the 'intelligence and reason' of the people and government really 'shine forth' (103/84). The dominant images of productive activity always involve order and discipline. Icarian work, like Icarian society, functions in precise and regimented ways, which can initially appear to leave individuality with no space to emerge (let alone develop and flourish). In the clock-making workshop, workers are said to form a 'little army', and Carisdall remarks that you 'would think you were seeing an army regiment; such is the high degree of order and discipline there' (60/51). And in the masons' workshop, Valmor uses the language of clockwork, observing that 'this ensemble forms but a single vast machine in which each cog fulfils its function without irregularity' (105/86).

Military and mechanical images might predominate but individuality does have some place. In particular, at the age of seventeen (women) and eighteen (men), Icarians get to choose the occupations they will enter. There are some constraints here; for example, the republic calculates which jobs are needed, and women are restricted to the 'industries that are particular to women' (106/87). However, given certain features of Icarian occupations – that

material rewards are independent of individual performance, that all jobs are held in the same esteem, that no job is burdensome, and so on – the choices that remain would seem to reflect individual preferences and proclivities. (If a particular occupation is oversubscribed, the places are allocated by means of ‘a competition, examinations, and the judgment of the competitors themselves who make up a jury’ (106/86–7).) Whatever one’s views about the feasibility and desirability of such arrangements, Cabet is acknowledging issues of individuality here (just as elsewhere he tries, albeit not entirely successfully, to explain how the sumptuary laws allow variety as well as uniformity) (56–9/48–50).

Cabet appears not to recognize that (some) work might (potentially) be an *intrinsically* pleasurable activity. He is unsympathetic to the idea – emphasized elsewhere in the socialist tradition – that organized in the right way, productive activity could be creative and fulfilling in itself. Given that the enthusiasts for Icarian communism were craft workers (tailors, shoemakers, weavers, cabinetmakers, hatters, locksmiths, and so on), modern readers are liable to be puzzled by their apparent willingness to abandon artisanal skills in favour of machine-tending and the mindless repetition of small mechanical tasks. Modern concerns about alienation are noticeably absent. In the present context, any explanation must remain tentative, but from the vantage-point of artisans (not proletarians) in a largely pre-industrial France, the costs of de-skilling were largely unknown, whilst the march of mechanization could easily seem inevitable, and the compensations of association overwhelming. Negatively, Icaria promised to release artisans from the grip of commercial middlemen, the dangers of downward social mobility, the threat of grinding poverty and the burden of over-work. Positively, it promised to provide them with a heady cocktail of egalitarianism, community, material plenty, bourgeois culture, compatibility with Christianity and republican virtue.

In such circumstances, it is perhaps not so surprising that parts of Cabet’s audience found themselves identifying so fully with the fictitious visitors to Icaria who were ‘dazzled by so much reason and so much happiness’ (161/51). One of the latter concludes a long descriptive letter home, by imagining the recipients’ likely reaction: ‘I believe I can hear you exclaiming, along with me: Fortunate Icarians! Unfortunate Frenchmen!’ (48/42).