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E. Cabet between History and Utopia

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Abstract. Cabet begins to elaborate his two most important writings : *Voyage en Icarie* and *Histoire Populaire de la Révolution française de 1789 à 1830, précédée d'une introduction contenant le précis de l'Histoire des Français depuis leur origine jusqu'aux Etats Généraux*, during the period of his exile in London. Through the study of history he achieves the system of work described in the *Voyage* but above all he is interested in the historical revolutions that lead him to theorize the central role carried out by the French Revolution. Thanks to the study of history, Cabet is able to identify the origin of the revolutions in a bad society organization, finding its remedy in a new planning of the society itself. The reflection about Revolution becomes the field within Cabet utopia develops and the link between Revolution and utopia could turn into a new and interesting way to interpret both the *Voyage* and the *Histoire*. In this sense the mutual relation between history and utopia represents not only the dimension in which Cabet starts his analysis but also it can be considered a significant expression of his entire thought.

The start of the third millennium saw the proliferation of projects and manifestations dedicated to the general theme of utopia. Notwithstanding that its death had been announced, there are many works by historians on the ‘problem’ of utopia, many questions still open for its polysemous nature, an expression that marks the plurality of functions that it has taken on in history.¹

In the work of Michèle Riot-Sarcey, *Le réel de l’utopie*,² utopia is seen as the engine of history. The utopian constructions of Saint-Simon, Fourier, Owen are taken into consideration for the concrete effects that they provoked, returning them above all to their political dimension, to what may be defined as the “realism” of the projects of the three great utopian thinkers of the XIX century.³

Starting from this century, the societies delineated by these utopian scholars become loaded with social planning and they are presented as a consequence of the social theories supported by the utopian scholars themselves.⁴

Etienne Cabet, considered a minor personage with respect to the great utopian thinkers of the 19th century, was the most popular one among the workers and his newspaper ‘*Le Populaire*’ was the most diffused of all the democratic journals. The community system described in his famous work, *Voyage en Icarie*, is the social and political organisation that must be imitated by all humanity. Cabet proposed with this writing to offer an efficacious means of criticising societies, but also a plan of reform to

¹ See the contribution by B.Baczko, *Funzioni stotiche e congiunture utopiche* at the International Conference held in Italy on occasion of the VII day Luigi Firpo, *Nell’anno 2000, Dall’utopia all’ucronia*, Turin 9-10 March 2000, proceedings edited by Bruno Bongiovanni and Gian Mario Bravo, Florence, 2001.

² M. Riot-Sarcey stated that between the perception of social relations in everyday life and the projection of another reality judged possible, there develops a broad source of the movement of history cfr. *Le réel de l’utopie. Essai sur le politique au XIX siècle*, Paris, 1998 p.7

³ Ivi, pp 120 sgg.

⁴ Cfr. Rota Ghibandi, *L’utopia e l’utopismo. Dalla grande progettualità al ripiegamento critico*, Milano, 1987; see also B. Baczko *Les Lumières de l’utopie*, Paris, 1978 p.21

enable its realisation. He came to elaborate the system described in the *Voyage* through the study of history and, in particular, he was interested in revolutions which made him aware that the French Revolution represented a central moment. The cause of revolutions is the bad organisation of societies while the re-organisation of these same societies represents its remedy.⁵ The reflections on the French Revolution, an event that Cabet believed signposted the path of humanity towards the *égalité réelle*, and utopia are interwoven: meditation on the French Revolution becomes the ambient in which the utopian imagination is developed.⁶

In the contemporary epoch a dialectical relationship of opposition and interconnection is delineated between utopia and revolution. Revolution leads to a tangible reality but at the same time to an aspiration; utopia evokes the ideal society but also the concrete attempts to realise it and it may also become a transhistorical force, a horizon of expectation, differentiating itself in this sense from myth and ideology.⁷ Cabet sets Icaria in history. Icaria adopted the communitarian system after the 1782 revolution and it was the dictator Icarus, after having defeated the power of the aristocracy, who established the foundations of the new society whose definitive realisation was to come about after fifty years.

The tendency towards democracy governs the development of history. In the slow evolution towards democracy, the French Revolution constitutes an important step; this leads him to write a history of the revolution, through the study of history, he came

⁵ Cabet wrote *Voyage en Icarie* and *Histoire populaire de la Révolution Française de 1789 à 1830, précédée d'une introduction contenant le précis de l'histoire des Français depuis leur origine jusqu'aux Etats Généraux*, the two works that marked his adhesion to communism during his exile in London between 1834 and 1839.

⁶ See in this sense M. Larizza Lolli, *Le XIX siècle et la Révolution française*, proceedings of the study day organised by the *Société d'Histoire de la Révolution de 1848 et des Révolutions du XIX siècle*, Paris, 1992, p.302

⁷ See M. Vovelle, *Utopie et Révolution à l'époque contemporaine*, in *Nell'anno 2000*, op.cit p.77

to an understanding that revolutions cause the reaction. The French Revolution had created the conditions to set up the commune, but the reaction obstructed it.

Like the other utopian thinkers whose systems were elaborated after the French Revolution, Cabet cannot avoid expressing a preliminary judgement on the revolution in the construction of his own project.⁸ At the root of this judgement, the basic idea is that the revolution was essentially political and that a transformation of society should, above all, be realised in the consciousness.⁹ Cabet refuted violence and accepted a peaceful method of struggle, individuating in the Transitory regime the means that would allow a gradual passage from capitalist society to communism.

The role of the historian, affirmed Cabet, is to draw from the studied events all the teachings that might be useful for humanity. Perhaps he can be considered one of the first thinkers to single out a connection between the imaginary dimension of the utopian path and the social dimension of the political development.¹⁰

The French Revolution was to be defined the most complete practical path of politics and philosophy and it is, of all the revolutions, the one that attempted the most radical reform of society. It is necessary to take advantage from the lesson of history that demonstrates that inequality is the cause of all evils while a perfect equality is its only remedy.

Cabet individuated the theoretical source of his communism in Jacobinism and in Buonarroti and distanced himself from Babeuf, who he reproached above all owing

⁸ The French Revolution marks a turning point in utopian thought. In this light, M. Ozouf analyses the judgement on the Revolution expressed by Saint-Simon, Fourier and Cabet. See M. Ozouf, *La Révolution française au tribunal de l'utopie*, in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol.3, *The Transformation of Political Culture 1789-1848*, pp.561-574

⁹ Ivi p.368

¹⁰ See H.Desroche, Introduction to E.Cabet *Voyage en Icarie*, Slatkine Reprints, Geneva 1979, p.XXXIX. Quotes from the Voyage are taken from this edition.

to the conspiratory method.¹¹ Even though many thinkers have approved the idea of common goods, one has become accustomed to consider it a chimera for the fear that the rich would not have allowed its realisation.

The drafting of the *Voyage* derives from the lesson of history. It describes the social and political organisation of a vast country with a communitarian system and indicates the transitory regime that will gradually permit the realisation of this system.

¹² A real alternative to aim for through the force of public opinion rather than with the violence of a minority. ¹³ Indignation pushed the multitude after 1830 to insurrections and conspiratorial methods¹⁴, but the ruinous effects of individualism had by now convinced the people of the importance of public opinion and of the validity of the fertile principle of *fraternité* preached by Christianity and proclaimed by the French Revolution. Cabet made this principle the foundation of his doctrine.¹⁵ The principle of *fraternité* is simple, but at the same time powerful for the consequences of its concrete application.¹⁶

Fraternité, a notion that cannot be understood if reference is not made to the new language that united workers from 1830 and that became a weapon with which to fight and regain their very emancipation.¹⁷ Cabet based the social regeneration that he wished for in the *Voyage* on the principles of *égalité* and *fraternité*, both necessary to

¹¹ *Histoire populaire de la Révolution Française de 1789 à 1830, précédée d'une introduction contenant le précis de l'histoire des Français depuis leur origine jusqu'aux États-Généraux*, Nouvelle Edition Continué jusqu'en 1845, Paris, 1845-1847 vol IV pp. 324-334.

¹² *Voyage en Icarie*, pp.358 -360

¹³ See in this respect the writings of Cabet on *Bombardement de Barcelona ou Voila les Bastilles*, Paris, 1843, p.98

¹⁴ *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, 1845, volume VI, p.14

¹⁵ *Voyage en Icarie*, Doctrine communiste, p.566

¹⁶ *Ivi.* p.567

¹⁷ *La parole ouvrière, 1830-1851 Textes rassemblés et présentés* par A.Faure, J Rancière, Inédit

realise a society founded on democratic grounds.¹⁸ It is in this direction that his political activity progressed after his return from exile in April 1839.

Fraternité, an ideal, rather than myth or utopia, reclaimed from the Second Republic.¹⁹

¹⁸ A strong democratic passion emerges from the reconstruction of the relationships between Icarians and Fourierists between 1845 and 1849. See F. Fourn, *Icariens et Phalanstériens: regards croisés entre 1845 et 1849* in "Cahiers Charles Fourier", n.10, 1999, *Fouriérisme, révolution, république. Autour de 1848*, coordonné par Thomas Bouchet, p. 57.

¹⁹ Thus concludes Marcel David's good work on *Fraternité* in France between 1830 and 1851. See M. David, *Le Printemps de la Fraternité, Genèse et Vicissitudes 1830-1851*, Paris, 1992, pp. 389-392 and A. Lanza, *All'abolizione del proletariato! Il discorso socialista fratemitario Parigi 1839-1847*, Milano, 2010.