Thomas More, Etienne Cabet and the paradoxes of utopian thinking

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In 1516, Thomas More (1478–1535) published his description of an imaginary kingdom, located just off the coast of the newly found America. This Utopia was an ideal society that was perfectly organised in order to guarantee its citizens complete happiness. Private property and the privileges of the nobility have been abolished, everybody has to work six hours a day and to wear the same clothes, and the head of state is chosen in free, representative elections. The success of More’s Utopia created a whole new literary genre that accommodated both utopian visions of an ideal society, like Francis Bacon’s science-based ‘New Atlantis’ (1626), and ‘dystopian’ visions of a nightmarish society, like Aldous Huxley’s equally science-based ‘Brave New World’ (1932). It is an interesting genre from a public health point of view, because the prevention of health problems and the provision of adequate health care services are often described in detail. In More’s Utopia prevention is seen to be more effective than curative services. People therefore live in spacious and ventilated houses, the government inspects food and supplies clean drinking water, and a system of social security prevents those who fall ill from becoming poor, and those who are poor from becoming ill. All those who do fall ill have the right to be treated in public hospitals according to the highest professional standards.

Utopian visions must have served as a source of inspiration for those who believed that a better world could be created, in which nobody would suffer from avoidable or remediable ill-health. In the nineteenth century, when modern public health was born, traces of such ‘idealistic’ inspiration can be found in the work of people like Rudolf Virchow, Salomon Neumann, Louis Villerme, and William Farr. During their life-times Etienne Cabet (1788–1856) published his novel ‘Voyage et aventures de Lord William Carisdall en Icarie’. This book, published in 1840, describes a communist utopia with strong public health components. ‘Envision a city more beautiful than any which have preceded it; you will then begin to have a notion of Icara, especially if you bear in mind that all its citizens are equal.’ I will pass over the measures taken to promote good health, to assure the free circulation of pure air, to decontaminate it if required. Within the city there are no cemeteries, no noxious products manufactured, no hospitals: all these establishments are on the outskirts, in open places, near swift-flowing streams or in the country. The law – you will be inclined to laugh but this will give way to admiration – the law has decreed that the pedestrian must be protected even against the caprices of the weather; for all the streets are equipped with side-walks, and all these side-walks are covered with glass panes to keep out the rain without excluding the light, and with awnings to combat the heat. You see, dear friend, that one can go all over the city of Icara (…) with perfect confidence; while thousands of accidents and disasters, which each year overwhelm the people of Paris and London, point a finger at the shameful impotence or barbarous indifference of their governments. ‘And so I hear you exclaim with me: “Lucky Icarians! Unlucky Frenchmen!”’

Indeed, Cabet’s work attracted considerable support, and in 1848 a group of 1500 set off from France to America to establish a colony on the model of Icarie. Practice proved to be more difficult than theory, however; the group split, and Cabet himself died in St. Louis shortly thereafter. Clearly inspired by More’s Utopia, Cabet’s Icarie has many of the typical ingredients of these idealistic visions of a healthy society. Current readers will probably laugh at his covered side-walks, or will fear the boredom of pedestrians walking always on the right. But many nineteenth century readers must have felt attracted by the prospect of living in a cleaner, safer, more equitable, in short: healthier city. And it only required the abolition of private property and the appointment of a good government!

After a century in which several attempts at realising such utopias have ended in disaster, utopian visions have gone completely out of fashion. Don’t we know where communist utopias lead to? And here then is the paradox: We have created a better world, but we don’t believe in world-bettering any longer. Our health systems have realised More’s utopian dream, but the word ‘utopian’ has become synonymous with ‘impossible’. Western democracies have implemented many of Cabet’s prescriptions of good government, and we still associate grand visions with totalitarianism. Although most Europeans live longer, healthier and more comfortable lives than our nineteenth century predecessors, there is still much to be gained. Premature death is common, physical and mental illness leads to huge losses of quality of life, and both death and ill-health are as skewedly distributed in the population as they were in the nineteenth century. We are probably right to be suspicious of complete blueprints for new societies, but ideals of a world without avoidable or remediable ill-health may help us to focus our efforts in finding solutions big and small. Shouldn’t we therefore permit ourselves to have a little dream now and then?

REFERENCES


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