

# THE TWILIGHT OF UTOPIA IN FRANCE: AMÉDÉE CATTEY'S « UNIVERSAL ARMY OF WORKERS » AND THE RISE OF THE INDUSTRIAL STATE

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Utopian thinkers can be either visionaries or cranks, but the difference is not simply a matter of genius. Both the articulation and reception of utopian thought are perhaps more dependent upon historical circumstances than it is generally admitted. It was with this consideration in mind that I decided to introduce the ideas of the utopian thinker Amédée Cattey. Crank or visionary, Cattey contributed writings that closely follow what was, by the time of the early French Third Republic, a literary and political tradition<sup>1</sup>. However, his writings produced no echo among the public, and it cannot be truly said that he made a significant contribution to the existing corpus of utopian thought. Why, then, should his ideas be discussed? Simply, in my opinion, because his story reveals the dissonance which presently exists between what can generally be called the utopian impulse, and modern political culture.

Between 1886 and 1893, Cattey published four pamphlets which announced the creation of an organization called the « Association of the Universal Workers of France, Europe and the Two Americas » or the « Universal Army of Workers ». The organization would have three main offices, to be established in Paris, Saint-Petersburg and New York, and staffed by nationals from the respective countries. The objective of the organization would be nothing less than « the progressive development of humanitarian, philosophical, social and liberal ideas in the universe »<sup>2</sup>. It was a grandiose project which aspired to unite the working people into a fraternal organization providing for both their material and their spiritual well-being.

Who was this Amédée Cattey? He described himself as a banker living in the eastern part of France, in the town of Delle, in the region of Belfort. This is a fact that could provoke certain questions. Cattey's professional status and social class background are not unusual when compared to the

<sup>1</sup> That many of the utopian thinkers were « cranks » is difficult to deny. As George Lichtheim observed, Charles Fourier « was eccentric even by the tolerant standards of his age », while Saint-Simon at times « appeared slightly deranged to those around him ». My point is that such eccentricity was insignificant given the historical context and, thus, the potential reception of their ideas. George Lichtheim, *The Origins of Socialism*, New York, 1969, 31.

<sup>2</sup> Amédée Cattey, *Documents administratifs de la société des travailleurs-universels*, Belfort, 1886, 5.

situation of other utopian thinkers; Sir Thomas More, Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, Henri de Saint-Simon, Etienne Cabet and others were not exactly organic intellectuals of the working class. But, in 1886, a banker who presumed to organize the workers was perhaps more difficult to take seriously. Cattey's original brochure (49 pages in length) was dated July 1, 1886. At that time, he announced that a second publication would appear soon after. In this first brochure, he sketched the broad outlines of his scheme, the essential feature of which was the projected creation of a workers' savings bank. The details of the banking project are not particularly noteworthy in themselves, but it is worth mentioning that the first seat of this bank would be located in the city of Besançon. The reasons for the selection of Besançon are not stated, but we can at least entertain the idea that the petty-bourgeois banker was influenced by the work of two of Besançon's most famous sons – Charles Fourier and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon – whose ideas concerning social harmony, mutualism and federalism were so powerful an influence on the development of French socialism<sup>3</sup>.

The most notable feature of Cattey's plans to reorganize society is how they were limited institutionally. Cattey did not envision *replacing* the existing society with a new one of his own design, but rather he wished to establish a new mode of organization *within* the institutional framework of the existing society. More precisely, he had no quarrel with the political institutions of the French Third Republic, which was only fifteen years old at the time of the publication of his first brochure.

What were his plans? Apart from the idea of a savings bank, Cattey advocated the creation of a vast fraternal order regimenting the workers and providing them with an integrated social life. Their activities were to be oriented around educational endeavors – meetings, lectures and courses designed to elevate the intellectual level of the working population.

The diffusion of Cattey's brochure in 1886 did not arouse the enthusiasm he had hoped for; the mutualist bank in Besançon was not established, and no universal army of workers was formed. But Cattey did not give up. We hear from him again in 1893. Cattey was now living in Paris, and new brochures were printed (two of them booklength). More than likely in retirement, Cattey now described himself as an « Officier d'Académie. Publicist, voter in the 18th. arrondissement residing at number 54 Avenue de Clichy. Author of liberal brochures for the Universal Workers »<sup>4</sup>. Far from being a mere passing inspiration, Cattey's scheme seems to have become an *idée fixe*.

A striking feature of Cattey's propositions was a combination of traditional and progressive attitudes. On the one hand, his approach was paternalistic,

<sup>3</sup> On the importance of working class mutualism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Abram de Swaan, « Workers' and Clients' Mutualism Compared: Perspectives from the Past in the Development of the Welfare State », *Government and Opposition*, 21 (1), Winter, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Amédée Cattey, *Le libéralisme universel*, Paris, 1893, 11.

and even authoritarian. The workers were to be regimented, and even forbidden to discuss politics during meetings in any way that could be considered divisive. A hierarchy based upon intellectual merit was to be established within the organization, and outstanding members would be given influential posts and unspecified privileges. Military insignia and a special hand gesture would be used to identify and to greet fellow members. On the other hand, in contrast to these less than egalitarian features of his plan, Cattey revealed some relatively advanced tendencies. He would have, for example, opened the organization to women, even encouraging their admission by virtue of lower entry fees and dues payments – a sort of affirmative action program for a disadvantaged category of workers. Women would even be admitted to the Administrative Council in numbers equal to the representation of men.

The detail with which Cattey worked-out this program is somewhat overwhelming; and it would be, perhaps, tedious to specify the exact dimensions of the white satin ribbons with the three laurel leaf insignias, or the shape and size of the wall plaques destined to adorn the offices of the Technical Army all over the world. Such detail is perhaps to be expected from a provincial, petty-bourgeois banker, and it is of marginal importance. What is most interesting about this mediocre visionary's schemes are how they relate to the social and political environment from which they emerged.

If the utopian impulse is manifest in Cattey's writing, his ideas were nevertheless formulated in reference to real events and developments. Moreover, his plan represented, he said, an « ideal » which was capable of being realized. The *real* and the *ideal* were thus fused in a single vision of how social organization could lead to social harmony. His plan was, he claimed, « the most active and energetic way for work and industry to advance in France »<sup>5</sup>. He insisted that his visionary scheme would triumph over « all the difficulties aroused by envy and the jealousy of adversaries who will try to create discord or to counter the well-being of humanity »<sup>6</sup>. Utopian in a very eighteenth-century sense, in his confidence in the self-evident rationality and thus the strength of his proposals, Cattey was nonetheless inspired by a need to deal with concrete social problems.

### *When the real overtakes the ideal*

It is significant that Amédée Cattey did most of his thinking about social reform and organization between the early 1880's and the year 1893, for it was in the 1880's that France began to industrialize heavily. The groundwork of industrialization had been laid during the July Monarchy and the Second Empire, when modern communications and transportation networks were established, and when the great financial institutions were founded.

<sup>5</sup> Cattey, *Documents administratifs*, op. cit., 25.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

During the early decades of the Third Republic, the next phase of industrialization saw the rapid growth of the chemical, metallurgical and electrical industries, and then, following these primary industries, a myriad of secondary industries oriented more directly towards consumption appeared. These structural changes were accompanied by political and institutional changes. The very existence of the Third Republic, based as it was on universal manhood suffrage and a strong legislative assembly, increasingly « politicized » French society as different interests fought for the support of the electorate and as educational reform was carried out. Consequently, if Etienne Cabet had had difficulty in propagating his ideas before the Second Empire<sup>7</sup>, the years immediately following it would be even less propitious for utopian schemes.

In this new context, the laboring population became, nevertheless, an increased focus of political attention. As exiled Communards returned in the early 1880's, the labor movement was transformed in 1884 when labor organization was given legal status by the government. Economic developments thus coincided with a resurgence of activity among the workers, who were encouraged by a combination of favorable legislation and several years of economic slump. The importance of this conjuncture cannot be over-emphasized. As Jean Bron has stated: « The Law of 1884 marks an important stage because it offered potential cohesion to a class struggling for its dignity. Working-class action brought into existence a People that the bourgeoisie had hitherto considered merely as an object »<sup>8</sup>. This new perception of the workers was hardened when, in 1886, striking workers in the town of Decazeville lynched the unfortunate engineer, Watrin.

Soon, in 1889, the formation of the Second Socialist International and the adoption of the first of May as a day of workers' demonstration would complete the apprehension of a new era of social relations. In France, the May Day holiday of 1891 was thought to usher-in an entirely new situation with respect to working-class behavior and psychology. « It was last year, for the first time », it was reported in *Le Petit parisien*, « that the socialists of all countries proposed that the workers not work on May first. This year it is sufficient to glance at what is said at the demonstrations which have taken place in France, and to read the large quantity of dispatches from foreign countries, in order to understand the importance and popularity of this holiday with a special character ». The approaching event would be an unusual historical phenomenon; it was a « new fact » which should be scrutinized « with calm and foresight ». « Tomorrow », it was warned, « perhaps we will assess some disastrous effects... if nothing is certain, everything is possible, including ruin, civil war »<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> See Christopher A. Johnson, *Utopian Communism in France, Cabet and the Icarians, 1839-1851*, Ithaca, New York, 1974, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Bron, *Histoire du mouvement ouvrier français*, vol. 1, Paris, 1968, 250.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Frollo, « Le mouvement social », *Le Petit parisien*, 1 May 1891, 1.

May Day thus performed two important functions: it increased working-class solidarity and it alerted everyone to the growing militance and strength of working-class organization. This development was made evident even more dramatically by the steadily mounting number of strikes. From 1874 to 1880 there was an average of 40 strikes a year; from 1882 to 1885 there were approximately 131; 1888 and 1889 averaged 368 strikes a year. In 1893 alone there were 634 strikes<sup>10</sup>, a number unsurpassed until 1899 (739) and 1900 (902) and outstanding until 1904 when the average went over one thousand and continued to be above that level<sup>11</sup>.

Now full attention was given to the workers' attempts to lessen the insecurity of their lives as wage earners. The workers had demonstrated their power, and social conservatives reluctantly began to recognize that the workers would have to be bargained with one way or another. The moderate newspaper, *Le Temps*, for example, said flatly that « the strike is a state of war » and that « arbitration has no other usefulness than to prepare public opinion for the use of force ». Still, in the final analysis, it was observed, « we like to hope and it is for that reason that we are in favor of arbitration. But our assent is without illusion »<sup>12</sup>. Given the rhetoric of class « war » bandied about in the newspapers, it is perhaps understandable that Amédée Cattey thought to pacify the workers by organizing them into some sort of a « universal army ».

During the years in which Cattey formulated his response to the « social question », even the socialists figured as part of the perceived process of social disfunction. In the Spring of 1892 and the Fall of 1893, the socialists made significant gains in the municipal and legislative elections. These were not incidents of minor importance. Michelle Perrot, for example, sees the two elections as representing two « decisive stages » in the formation of socialist consciousness and tactics<sup>13</sup>.

At the same time, in 1892 and 1893, public confidence in the stability of the Third Republic was undermined by the famous Panama scandals, which involved the bribing of many deputies<sup>14</sup>. Coinciding as the scandals did with the electoral successes of socialists, it looked for a time as if the republic system was hopelessly corrupt. « For defenders of the French Republic », it has been said, « few events could have been more untimely than the collapse of the Panama Canal Company »<sup>15</sup>.

In addition to the belief that French society was unstable – a belief encouraged by strikes, rioting, scandal and the leftward shift of politics during the

<sup>10</sup> *Annuaire statistique de la France*, vol. 15 (Paris, 1894), 418.

<sup>11</sup> *Annuaire statistique*, vol. 30, Paris, 1911, 42 of the « Résumé rétrospectif ».

<sup>12</sup> *Le Temps*, 25 October 1892, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Michelle Perrot and Annie Kriégel, *Le Socialisme français et le pouvoir*, Paris, 1966, 50-52.

<sup>14</sup> See Jean Bouvier, *Les Deux scandales de Panama*, Paris, 1964.

<sup>15</sup> Marion J. Simon, *The Panama Affair*, New York, 1971, 85.

early 1890's – a concurrent outbreak of politically inspired assassination and bombing reinforced perceptions of social disintegration. The perpetrators of the violence were anarchist ideologues (often with help from the police) who considered such tactics to be the only realistic method of combatting an oppressive state<sup>16</sup>.

The uneasiness produced by events during the late 1880's and early 1890's brought about a shift of perspective which permanently modified French politics. Events which had directly resulted from industrialization in France had changed beliefs and attitudes about society to the point that political life was seen in a different light. Strikes, riots and terrorism dramatically revealed the need for more subtle methods of social control. The fear produced by an accelerating social movement was destined to produce more sophisticated explanations of, and approaches to, social problems. But was there a role for utopian thought in this new ideological atmosphere?

It is evident that Amédée Cattey's ideas were directly inspired by the new polity brought into existence during the early Third Republic. In fact, Cattey indicated two specific developments which called for the introduction of his scheme. The first was a general state of working-class demoralization revealed by the apparently spreading political alienation and violence. The second was the Panama scandal. Cattey recognized the appeal of socialist politicians but contended that the working class did not have to be permanently influenced by them. The working people must remain calm in the face of « all the arbitrary demonstrations of certain revolutionnaires [and] all political parties of perverse sects which have oppression as their avowed objective... »<sup>17</sup>. Although some workers had already been affected by the propaganda of these groups, this result had « almost always » come about because of some « accidents of life » or because of the influence of « false opinions »<sup>18</sup>.

Nevertheless, a significant number of workers had been demoralized by subversive propaganda, and their alienation from political institutions was aggravated by the scandals of Panama. Cattey himself was outraged by the corruption of « the exploiters, the misers and the vampires of finance... ». He agreed that the whole lot of them were a « gangrene » which must be eliminated from the social body<sup>19</sup>. But the proper response to these outrages, Cattey explained, was not to reject the republican system; it was rather to elicit the essential nobility of the workers, who should look with scorn upon those whose lack of character had been revealed by « some dangerous scandals »<sup>20</sup>. The workers should not focus upon the financial exploitation

<sup>16</sup> See Jean Maitron, *Histoire du mouvement anarchiste en France, 1880-1914*, Paris, 1952.

<sup>17</sup> Amédée Cattey, *Projet technique de la nouvelle armée universelle des travailleurs*, Paris, 1893, 11.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-48.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-22.

so much as upon the moral corruption. What was needed to end the demoralization of the working class was some organized effort to raise morals, something like Cattey's « mother republican association par excellence » which would eventually bring workers « with the most rebellious ideas » back to the fold<sup>21</sup>.

Cattey's plan is important because it showed the existence of real concern about working-class psychology and attempted to provide a detailed, practical solution. His chief concern was to create moral solidarity and to counteract social disintegration; thus he must be considered a sort of early, technically oriented « solidarist ». In addition, his plans for working-class education were very similar to those developed by the organizers of the Popular Universities in 1898. Although Cattey's notions about the necessity of symbolic trappings rather amusingly recall freemasonry or the Salvation Army and clearly echo traditional bourgeois paternalism, his project was designed to be more immediately applicable than a fourierist phalanstery. Cattey knew he would have to work within the social and political confines of the republican state, and he emphasized that far from attacking the basic principles of a « good government of a republic like ours in France » he wished only to reinforce them<sup>22</sup>.

The appearance of programs like Cattey's represented a moment in the growing strength of the Radical-republican forces which characterized the early Third Republic. In the 1870's and 1880's, Radical-republicanism was essentially an inchoate bundle of political factions without a semblance of formal organization or coherent direction. Its ideology at this time was largely expressed by freemasonry and educational leagues, and often by an unofficial anti-clericalism which found its practical expression in the movements for educational reform<sup>23</sup>. Not that these tendencies and efforts were futile. In fact, during the 1880's in particular, Radical-republican coalitions made large and important strides in carrying-out the peculiarist program. But the Radical-republicans realized that without formal political structure and organization they would never have the coherence necessary to win a parliamentary majority and enact the most controversial parts of their legislative program (especially the separation of Church and State) once in power. Historically, freemasonry, Radical and educational leagues, solidarism, Popular Universities and other informal and semi-formal associations and activities, should be understood as aspects of the Radical-republican march to power which culminated in the constitutions of the Radical Republican and Radical Socialist Party in 1901, the electoral victory of that party in 1902, and the separation of Church and State legislated in 1905.

Amédée Cattey's utopian scheme must be understood within the context of these political developments. Most significantly, freemasonry made its

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-98.

<sup>23</sup> See Evelyn Martha Acomb, *The French Laic Laws, 1879-1889*, New York, 1941.

most important contribution toward the attainment of the Radicals' goals in the 1880's, by uniting the republican Left through personal and fraternal bonds and by opening a forum where a Radical ideology could be articulated<sup>24</sup>. It is not surprising that Cattey concluded that the workers could be organized along the same lines. That Cattey's plans should have borrowed so extravagantly from the formal and informal institutions of existing civil society augured badly for the future development of utopian thought.

### *Between twilight and a new dawning*

The dialectic between existing civil society and utopian thought is, in fact, elusive and complex. Elusive because the relationship between social relations and social vision is not a directly determined one, complex because conflicting definitions in the human sciences cannot be separated from ideological orientations. Nevertheless, there seem to have been periods in the recent history of the western world when socio-political speculation had such a predominately prescriptive character that much of the intellectual production of the time can be characterized as « utopian ». In France, this period was definitely over by 1871, in spite of the fact that the utopian impulse still existed. We can see the persistence of the utopian impulse in the writings of Amédée Cattey. His ideas were resolutely utopian in the sense that they envisioned the creation of harmonious human relations through the systematic application of human reason – a restructuring of human thought and behavior that was to be brought about through an appeal to the good will and right-thinking of established social authorities and the general population.

Cattey's writings are not important for their literary or imaginative power, nor for the influence they had on reformers or reactionaries. They are significant precisely because they reveal how completely utopian thought was out of step with prevailing social conditions after the fall of the Communes of 1871 and the creation of the Third French Republic. My contention is that utopian social thought was outmoded by the formation of a civil society which represented the final stage of a process of political evolution launched in 1789. The advent of a formal system of political representation based upon universal manhood suffrage and mandatory civic education accomplished the civil equality promised in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and the Civil Code. In this context, utopian thought lost the universal appeal it once had at least the potential to enjoy. Symbolic of this change, Cattey's utopian scheme offered much less than did the more developed utopias of earlier thinkers. If, as Marx and Engels maintained, Charles Fourier opposed a « Gargantuan view of man to the unassuming mediocrity of the Restoration period »<sup>25</sup>, Cattey, to the contrary, offered a

<sup>24</sup> See Wildred J. Readings, *French Freemasonry under the Third Republic*, Baltimore, 1949, and Jean-Pierre Azéma and Michel Winock, *La IIIe République (1870-1940)*, Paris, 1970, 178.

<sup>25</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology, Parts I and III*, New York, 1947, 157.



mediocre view of man to the gargantuan pretensions of the Third Republic. But it would have been difficult to do otherwise, because social relations and civil authority had changed to the point that the parameters of social vision had been significantly modified. The state had now succeeded in invading civil society in such a way as to undermine (1) the anticipation of a qualitative social change, and (2) the idea that social authorities could be persuaded to simply acquiesce to such a change. Individual citizens had now incurred heavy political (civic) duties. Every man (to take-up Huey Long's phrase) was now a king, in the sense that formal civil equality implied an active individual responsibility for the maintenance of social arrangements.

The socialist utopias of the early nineteenth century were projects for the creation of a harmonious industrial society. As such, they were blueprints for a civil society that had not yet come into existence, but which had been anticipated since the French Revolution. The work of Fourier, Saint-Simon, Cabet, and even to an extent that of Proudhon, can be understood as different attempts to resolve the problems of industrial society before the actual emergence of the civil institutions (i.e., full parliamentary democracy, institutionalized labor unions, a comprehensive system of state education) that constitute the modern industrial-capitalist polity. In France, with the arrival of the Third Republic, which announced the creation of such a civil society, authority relations became more diffused. The political system was no longer formally constituted upon a paternalistic, or simply arbitrary, system of socio-political prerogatives. For the first time, the political promise of the French Revolution was realized on a seemingly permanent, stable basis. Simultaneously, the rapid emergence of an industrial economy complicated the consideration of questions of economic and social organization. The application of solutions advanced by utopian thinkers in previous generations was more difficult to imagine. Not only was economic life immensely more complex, but the experiences of the June Days in 1848, the Communes of 1871 and numerous other examples of open class conflict had revealed the limitations of pure reason and good intentions as a means of resolving social questions.

However, the utopian impulse remained. If the utopian imagination had not been completely suffocated by the 1880's, Amédée Cattey's scheme reveals why the age of utopian socialism had passed. Perhaps the last of the nineteenth-century utopian planners in France, Cattey attempted to follow the path blazed by the pre-industrial utopian thinkers of the post-Napoleonic era, while adapting their methods to an industrial society which had lately taken form. Cattey's ideas concerning the harmonious organization of industrial society reflect the structural changes that the French economy and society had undergone and the social conflicts which it was experiencing.

<sup>26</sup> Frank and Fritzie Manuel claim that « the metaphor of the twilight of utopia suggests an improvement of the utopian imagination not a prophecy of the end ». Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, Cambridge, Mass., 1979, 801.

The obscurity into which his schemes were almost immediately cast indicates how utopian thinking was coming to be considered simply impractical, regardless of how just its implicit critique of social relations in the industrial world may have been.

The utopian impulse persists, but since Cattey's day even the idea of socialism seems to have been progressively emptied of its visionary content, purged of the notion of a future society *qualitatively* different from that which presently exists. As Herbert Marcuse said in the late 1960's, and so many have said since (even if the criticism is not now in vogue), « the idea of socialism is still too often expressed in terms of the development of productive forces, in terms of the augmentation of the productivity of labor »<sup>27</sup>. Obviously there is nothing more contrary to Marcuse's description of the « one-dimensional society » than the utopian impulse, which is paradoxically a product of modern society, a product which society as a cultural matrix immediately attempts to extinguish. This dialectical struggle between the creative imagination and the rationalizing tendencies of modern, urban, industrial (or even « post-industrial ») society has been said to be a major cultural characteristic of our civilization<sup>28</sup>.

It is also claimed that the felt need for a more « universalistic » and visionary approach to social questions has not decreased, but has, rather, intensified as a collective emotional condition. In speaking of the apparent debilitation of socialist thinking in the United States and elsewhere in recent years, Alan Wolfe has observed that « The more outrageous capitalism becomes, the less visionary, in turn, becomes socialism ». In defense of utopianism, Wolfe maintains that « voters in advanced capitalist societies seek overwhelmingly to offer their support to the most unimaginative and cautious of politicians, only to lament, when asked, the lack of ideas and courage in their policy-makers. There is a realm of politics, in other words, that looms behind elections, and that, in the long run, influences what those who contest elections have to say. This is the realm that socialists must reclaim »<sup>29</sup>. Such a task is not simple, and it is certain that Amédée Cattey offers little in the way of a solution. What is also evident, however, is that the presence of a transcendent ideal in the analysis of and confrontation with the real — an ideal which is not a mere accommodation or resignation to the real — is no less necessary now than it was one hundred years ago.

<sup>27</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *La fin de l'utopie*, Paris, 1968, 14.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Jacques Wunenburger has an interesting definition of the utopian impulse: « Loin d'être uniquement discours littéraire ou pratique messianique, c'est à dire des entreprises parcelaires de prise en main de l'histoire par une subjectivité conquérante, l'utopie s'explique d'abord comme un jeu interne des images, une recomposition kaléidoscopique des symboles de l'espace et du temps, conditionnés ou relayés par certaines évolutions structurales de la société et de la cultures ». Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *L'Utopie ou la crise de l'imaginaire*, Paris, 1979, 60.

<sup>29</sup> Alan Wolfe, « In Defense of Utopianism: A Critical View of Socialist Possibilities », *Dissent*, Summer, 1985, 328.