

ICARIA: A CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF COMMUNISM

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649079537

Icaria: a chapter in the history of communism by Albert Shaw

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ALBERT SHAW

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IN THE HISTORY OF
COMMUNISM**

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CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF COMMUNISM

BY

ALBERT SHAW, Ph. D.

NEW YORK & LONDON
G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
The Knickerbocker Press
1884

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1884

Press of
G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York

335.973
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309
Merrill Historical Society

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PREFACE.

A GREAT number of books and articles have been written in recent years discussing socialism and communism in the abstract. Some of these have been thoughtful and profound; most of them have a partisan tone, and are either in sympathy with the doctrines and projects discussed, or else are given up to condemnation and warning. The subject has been treated from almost every conceivable standpoint, and there would be no reason for the present monograph if it also undertook to enter the field of general discussion. Such is not its purpose or plan. Certainly the most common defect in the current literature of social and political questions consists in the tendency to generalize too hastily. Too little diligence is given to searching for the facts of history and to studying with minute attention the actual experiences of men. In the following pages the attempt is made to present the history of a single communistic enterprise. I have endeavored to explain its origin, to follow the external facts of its checkered and generally unfortunate career, to picture its inner life as a miniature social and political organism, to show what are, in

actual experience, the difficulties which a communistic society encounters, and to show, by a series of pen-portraits, what manner of men the enterprise has enlisted.

Whether or not such a study of a community now small and obscure is trivial and useless, must depend upon the manner in which the study is made. If made with the requisite intelligence and thoroughness, it may give a better knowledge of what communism really is and what it wants than can be obtained from reading abstract disquisitions about communism. Minuteness, far from being a fault, will be the chief merit of such a study. To be of any value it must be conducted in the true historical spirit. Truth must not be distorted in the interest of picturesque narrative. A didactic spirit and a conviction that communism and socialism in every form are dangerous heresies must not be allowed to make the investigator over-anxious to condemn or disparage; nor, on the other hand, should sympathy with good intentions and brave efforts lead him to a blind praise of projects in themselves useless or unpraiseworthy. I have tried scrupulously to avoid all preaching for or against communism, and it is hoped that no reader of the following pages will interpret expressions of respect for well-meant attempts to alleviate the condition of our fellow-men as signifying approval of particular projects about which I write without any dis-

tinct word of disapprobation. To speak well of certain men who participated in the Paris Commune of 1871 is not to justify that terrible episode.

There are two reasons in particular why this fragment of communistic history should be written. In the first place it is a story which, except in the most meagre and inaccurate way, has never before been told, and therefore it furnishes students of social science with a new bit of illustrative material; moreover, when compared with the annals of other communistic enterprises, the Icarian story is a peculiarly romantic and interesting one, and my opportunities for collecting the necessary materials have been exceptionally favorable.

In the second place, as an example of communism in the concrete, Icaria has illustrative value beyond all proportion to its membership, wealth, and success. Most of the communistic societies of the United States might better be studied as religious than as socialistic phenomena. Their socialism is incidental to their religious creeds. They believe themselves honored with special and direct divine revelations, and those revelations furnish them with governments of a theocratic character. They do not justify their socialism by any kind of philosophy of society, but simply refer the inquirer to a mandate received through their prophet or prophetess. I would not be understood as speaking contemptuously of these religious societies or their pe-

cular creeds ; but I must insist that the experiences of such societies can afford little material to aid in the discussion of rational, democratic communism or socialism. For example, the Amana Inspirationists, a German communistic body, are to be found in the same State with the Icarians ; and while Icaria, with its handful of members, has been struggling, in poverty and dissension, for very existence, Amana has numbered its many hundreds of people, has accumulated great wealth, and has lived in peace and harmony. And yet, for all that, the history of Icaria is as superior to that of Amana for the student of social science as the history of Greece is superior to that of China for the student of political science. Icaria is an attempt to realize the rational, democratic communism of the Utopian philosophers, hence its value as an experiment. The movement most akin to Icarianism was Owenism ; but Robert Owen's colonies were all dissipated before their communistic life was fairly begun. Fourierism gained much prestige and made a considerable history in this country ; but Fourierism was not communism by many degrees ; and even those two or three phalansteries which developed most strength and lived longest, died very young. If then it is proper to distinguish what I call the rational, democratic community from the religious community (Shaker, Amanist, Rappist, etc.), which seems only incidentally concerned with the solution