The Journey to Icarie and Réunion:
A Romance of Socialism on the Texas Frontier

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The viewer of the internationally-popular television show Dallas was routinely treated to an aerial tour that skimmed across the open prairie over the distinctive skyscrapers across the fifty-yard line of Texas Stadium and up the manicured pastures of South Fork. This facade of larger-than-life Texana reflects an urban reality in which money lavishly spent is the ultimate mark of social acceptability and poverty is a condition that can safely be attributed to weakness of the poor themselves. In light of Dallas’s well earned reputation for conservatism in the latter half of the twentieth century, one of the greatest anomalies in the city’s past occurred during the mid-nineteenth century when the region was settled by men of radically different beliefs.

The era of Dallas’s birth was an era of great change in both Europe and America. The French Revolution left a greater gap between classes than the great social chasms of the ancien régime. With the Le Chapelier law (1791), the unfettered right to acquire property became a guiding principle. The ultimate victims of this move were the workers who saw their labor organizations outlawed. In this super-heated environment socialism was born.

With the starkly different economic realities between the bourgeoisie and industrial proletariat, suggested societal reform varied greatly. Springing from the Enlightenment, early nineteenth-century socialism insisted that humanity’s lot would only change as its environment did. This “obvious and simple system of natural liberty”– the regulation of property and production to attain the greatest good for the greatest number– would have to be forcibly installed to offset the competitive evils of industrial society. Since the greedy factory moguls would not peacefully submit to such changes.

Many socialist authors hoped for a new perfect social organism from the chrysalis of the old imperfect one. Writers, such as Claude Saint-Simon (1760-1825), assumed that the new social order would emerge through the dictates of new revolutionary governments. Charles Fourier (1772-1837) went far beyond Saint-Simon’s ruminations to lay out a veritable blueprint for the new post-industrial society. This community, the phalanx, though initially underwritten by its settlers and other investors, would rapidly became self-sufficient. The phalanx’s inhabitants, never more than fifteen-hundred in number, would elect their leaders. To obviate the drudgery of industrial work, each citizen would willingly labor at several factory operations. Fourier assumed that colony’s members would soon lose their competitive urges and work naturally for the common good. Despite this rosy picture, Fourier’s plans contained structural flaws. Though all members of the phalanx were supposedly equal, the colony’s government exercised all-but dictatorial powers over the colonists. This included compensation for work, with greater wages being given to the skilled than to the unskilled. When phalanxes finally came into being in the mid-nineteenth century, it was realized too late that the lashing of self-interest
to group goals could not be consistently attained without some form of coercion.

If Fourier built his new world with the bourgeoisie, Etienne Cabet (1788-1856) constructed his utopia with the proletariat. A long-time opponent of France’s post-revolutionary monarchy, Cabet attained instant and widespread popularity with the publication in 1839 of his novel, *Voyage en Icarie*. In his particular brand of perfect society, the members of society would stand as brothers, while factories were run on a democratic basis. Though Cabet assumed that industrial production would continue, he was certain that the abandonment of money and the stockpiling of both industrial and agricultural goods would make consumerism obsolete. In this Icarian world, “every man would be his brother’s keeper.” In spite of its idyllic appearance, Icarie, like the phalanx, was an Eden full of serpents. Though theoretically dedicated to accommodating a wide variety of views, the Icarians could scarcely tolerate diversity of any kind. Religion and morality were defined by the state which would attack all “harmful” ideas. Icarie, then, was hardly a libertarian paradise.

While the socialism of Cabet and Fourier found a ready audience in a Europe, it also appealed to an ante-bellum America primarily moved by the intellectual engine of individualism. Translated into American verities by such authors as Arthur Brisbane and Horace Greeley, utopia became an answer to America’s emerging underclass. With the destabilizing extension of American industrialization, many in the lower middle classes were ready to at least consider new social ideas. Religionists, especially those expecting the last days, were already beginning to desert the old faiths for communal experiments that fled America’s growing materialism. The dominant intellectual strain of the era, transcendentalism, called for the abandonment of self aggrandizement and dedication to social justice. In the midst of America’s burgeoning factory-state, then, many in the middle class, who saw family values and democratic ideals eroding in the mad rush for profit and land, turned to socialism as a realization of American ideals.

Socialism’s road to Texas was one traveled by many other immigrants who looked to the region for unlimited opportunity. The assignment of huge tracts to individuals or companies for resale to paying settlers had begun with the Mexican regime and continued during the Republic of Texas. The land agents, increasingly desperate for settlers, ran advertisements in American and foreign periodicals. With such inducements, British, French and German groups eventually moved to establish settlements in Texas. Though some of the new visitors to the region portrayed it as a howling wilderness, the vast majority of foreign immigrants were reluctant to abandon the rosy assessment of Texas they had invested in. They soon, however, fell victim to changing land policies during the second presidential term of Sam Houston (1841-1844), which made individual land purchase the rule. The great companies violated the law by bringing in settlers. One of the most persistent offenders was the W. S. Peters Colony which controlled most of north central Texas. Despite the Republic’s effort to reclaim this territory, the Peters Colony continued sponsored immigration until 1850. In the throes of this landed uncertainty, the French socialists came to Dallas.

The city that served as a laboratory for the ideas of Cabet and Fourier was a city only in
the minds of the Peters Colony agents and of the region’s first settler, John Neely Bryan. They consistently exaggerated the urban presence on the headwaters of the nondescript Trinity River, that was falsely characterized as viable connection to the Gulf of Mexico. In place of the tall-tale Dallas, visitors to the spot in 1843 found only two log cabins and no more than twenty-five inhabitants. While the site had undeniable potential at the intersection of three well-traveled roads, it was still largely untamed, routinely witnessing the passage of great herds of buffalo and native American hunting parties. From the socialist point-of-view, however, Dallas was an empty slate awaiting the message of utopia.

The decade of the 1840s ultimately affirmed for Etienne Cabet that real social justice could only be attained in America. As Louis Philippe’s government became more autocratic, widespread frustration fueled an “accidental” revolution in February, 1848. As with France’s first revolution, the winds of political opposition blew erratically between the poles of capital and labor. With the king’s fearful abdication, France came under the rule of the Second Republic, which was pulled between socialism and conservatism. When Cabot’s colleague, Louis Blanc, proposed the creation of “national workshops” that regulated factory hours and conditions while allowing workers to unionize and control their own job sites, many of the ideas of Icarie seemed within reach. With the backlash of the propertied classes in the spring of 1848, Blanc’s workshops were converted into poor houses. Though the leftists fought in the famous “June Days,” they could not stand up to the new government forces that packed Paris.

During these events, Cabet, though hoping to see many of his social aims accomplished in his homeland, prepared for an American Icarie. Consulting with the enlightened industrialist Robert Owen in 1847, he made arrangements to purchase north Texas acreage. In an issue of his newspaper, Le Populaire, Cabet announced that Icarie would spring to life outside of Dallas. He counseled his followers “to discuss arrangements for immigration.” As a result, French workers were cajoled into seeking the wilds of Texas. Though the response to these efforts was tepid, the inner core of Cabot’s supporters remained committed to Icarie. An “advance guard” of sixty-nine men who took ship at La Havre for New Orleans on 3 February 1848 were true “soldiers of humanity.”

Believing Cabet, the Icarians assumed they would reach the Texas colony by flatboat on the Red River. When this proved untrue, they were forced to transport their gear from New Orleans to Shreveport, some 250 miles from the colony site. Abandoning their possessions and with no knowledge of the language or land to be covered, they crossed the prairie through a blistering Texas June. Taking a month to get halfway, the exhausted party took another few weeks to reach their destination, some twenty miles northwest of Dallas. A second party arrived in late August. The failure of this first Texas utopia was assured since few of the “advance party” knew anything about farming. Even if they had not broken their plow on its rock hard black sod, the dry season held north Texas in its grip and made getting in a crop impossible. Angered at Cabet’s misrepresentations, the Icarians soon found that their leader had himself been deceived by the agents of the Peters Colony. Far from controlling a million acres, Icarie could only lay claim to some ten-thousand, none of them continuous and each requiring the erection of a cabin by the end of the summer to guarantee ownership. Eager to claim as
much land as possible, the colonists worked frantically through the summer. Ten were afflicted with a lethal dysentery while one, unused to the deadly vagaries of Texas weather on the plains, died of a lightning strike.

Though the heat broke in the fall, the Icarians realized that the colony could not possibly support the hundreds expected the next year from Europe. Rather than squander the money given them, the remaining colonists decided to abandon Icarie. Dividing the cash, which came to about seven dollars apiece, the survivors returned to Shreveport. Unwilling to admit defeat, Cabet, who had received letters from members of the “advance party” shortly before they abandoned Icarie, transformed the retreat to Shreveport into a “death march” of sorts that cast the Icarians as heroes endowed with superhuman courage.

Journeying back to New Orleans, the Icarians awaited in growing penury the arrival of their leader for almost a year. Shortly after Cabet landed in America, he was forced to agree that Texas was no place for utopia. Paying off many of his disgruntled followers, Cabet took the rest to Nauvoo, a deserted Mormon site in southern Illinois. Though this community persisted for several years, it soon found that its leader was much more democratic in theory than in practice. Refusing to accept a majority decision of Nauvoo’s “board of directors” in 1856, Cabet broke with the colonists and died shortly afterwards, leaving other groups to seek utopia.

While the socialist venture of 1848 was barely noticed, European conditions encouraged further utopian enterprises. Though dissatisfaction with France’s Second Republic and its only president, Louis Napoleon, increased, his establishment of imperial power gave the left very little operating room. Some of the socialist forces responded by again trying to rally the workers with the formation of the First International in 1864. Others left Europe behind for promising careers in America. In the midst of a French immigration that doubled between 1850 and 1860, some few crossed the Atlantic again seeking utopia. Though Fourier had died in 1837, his vision of the phalanx was nurtured by his most important disciple, Victor Considerant (1808-1893), an soldier who had resigned his commission to edit the newspaper La Phalange. A self-promoter like Cabet, he proved even more strong willed. Considerant’s bitterness at seeing his first attempt at colony-building in France fail was deepened when Napoleon III outlawed such ventures. Opposing the emperor in 1852, Considerant was exiled and traveled to America.

Landing in New York, Considerant soon contacted Arthur Brisbane who accompanied him to the North American Phalanx in northern New Jersey. Moved by the experience, Considerant again considered colony-building. With Brisbane as his enthusiastic companion, he set out on horseback through the trans-Mississippi west. In late May, 1852, they crossed the Red River and followed the Preston Road to Dallas. Near Bryan’s cabin along a line of limestone bluffs that reminded him of France’s richest wine country, Considerant found what he sought. Reaching Europe in the fall, he began to make the colony a reality. After raising a sizeable sum, he legally endowed the Dallas phalanx on September 26, 1854 with the establishment of the European American Society of Colonization. Capitalized at over five million francs, the Society purchased over two thousand acres near Dallas as well as four thousand near Galveston.

Like Cabet, Considerant proved an expert publicist. Producing a memoir that
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intertwined his account of the journey into the “great west” with a sales pitch for utopia, he published *Au Texas*, a modest literary success that was translated into German and English. Readers across northern Europe were regaled with descriptions of north Texas as “one of the most favored regions on the globe” where little labor was required to harvest great bounty, where no Indian problem existed, nor “sickness was ever heard of.” The utopia that Considerant planned was apparently to be just as perfect. The colonists could reach the site “without hindrance or trouble”, and, once there, could expect finished structures and full storehouses. Despite American nativism, Considerant believed that Dallas would eventually welcome his “soldiers of...peace.” Europeans, deadened by the unchecked growth of industrialization, would find in Texas “a home and a field of action and development for the progressive thought of humanities.” Considerant ended the book by summoning his fellow Europeans to join him “in that immaculate land, where we have only to sow the seeds of liberty, science and love.” His view of the Texas colony as a magnet for like-minded individuals would eventually provide its name: *La Réunion*.

With the book’s popularity, individuals from France, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, and Alsace-Lorraine began to flock to the Texas experiment. Unlike the Icarians, those pledged to Réunion came from both the middle and lower classes. Conspicuous by their absence from the illustrious company of professions of all sorts were men with agricultural experience. Though many of the colonists wanted to escape Napoleon III’s empire, some left for simple ennui: they were “bored to death” and hoped for adventure. The Réunion colony eventually numbered some five-hundred members, well below the number Fourier had called for, but in line with the populations of other American Fourierist colonies.

The colonists quickly realized that utopian idealism could not long survive on the frontier. After a two-month passage, Considerant and the majority of his followers landed on the Texas coast in the spring, 1855. Finding the Trinity dry, the party grudgingly shipped most of their goods north by wagon, while they made the long trek on foot to Réunion. Individuals and small parties straggled into the colony for the next eight months, each telling similar tales of hardship and hunger laced with frustration from their ignorance of the language. In truth, only one Réunion resident could speak English fluently.

Though colonists generally trusted Considerant, their faith began to evaporate once at Réunion. While he had promised in print that the colonists would be amply supplied with living quarters and other necessities, the newcomers found the Trinity bluffs undeveloped when they arrived. Under the supervision of Philip Goetsel, a banker, the land was cleared and the first structures built. The greatest effort was lavished on a two-story public building containing a meeting hall and private apartments. Besides this “grotesque southern Mansion,” the colonists also built a low-ceilinged dining hall and primitive stone kitchen. The rest of the colony land was given over to pasturage and garden space.

Despite the hardships of travel, close quarters, and weeks of heavy toil, the spirits of the colonists remained remarkably high for most of 1855. Meeting several times a day to allot work schedules, discuss future plans, or listen to lectures, the colonists increasingly seemed imbued
with a spirit of community. This feeling of inter-dependence was best expressed in the music which permeated the colony. Besides the constant recitals organized by Allyre Bureau, one of France’s great orchestral stars, the colony seemed aptly defined by the songs written by its members. One of these anthems, sung to the tune of the *Marseilles*, declared: “We are the holy band/ Of workers of the future./ We go to prepare a place/ Where must all unite.”

While this enthusiastic altruism carried Réunion through many of its early crises, it could not overcome structural flaws in Fourier’s root philosophy. Though open to all classes, the Fourierist colony clearly had a bourgeois soul. Its “law of love” was not a formal democracy; its permanent offices, along with temporary officials elected every few months, allowed the colony to run efficiently without political complications. The scheme of linking professionals with wage laborers in one venture, requiring them to work selflessly for the common good, was soon found wanting. Experienced artisans felt slighted at routinely having to perform tasks well below their skill levels. The feeling of being shunted to the bottom of Réunion’s nascent society was deepened by a wage scheme that rewarded colonists depending on how important their work was classified by the ruling council. Many of the laborers who had joined Considerant’s venture in search of the simple kind of democracy were bitterly disappointed at still being subordinated to a bourgeois elite. They looked on their president and his henchmen as inefficient dictators. The colony, they feared, could not long remain solvent with such an inexperienced cabal in charge.

With the arrival at Réunion in the summer of 1855 of the learned and obstreperous army doctor, Auguste Savardan, unspoken frustration with the colony’s ruling council was given a clear voice. The hurt feelings of the workers deepened into open distrust of Considerant. Savardan and his supporters were certain that the president and his coterie would either “eat the capital or exploit the workman.” Such a strained silence descended between the factions that none of the workers would even wish Considerant a happy birthday. The president, for his part, remained in a despondent isolation that was deepened with the lavish use of whiskey. Many of the colonists, especially the women, grew tired of the feud and the uncivilized conditions. When a freak snowstorm destroyed all the colony’s crops in May, 1856, the will of the majority to subsist broke. Despite the fact that they barely spoke English and were given a pitifully small severance allowance by the colony’s leaders, family after family deserted Réunion, most returning to Europe, but some settling on individual plots cut out from colonial land and still others joining the short-lived village of Mantuelle at the intersection of the Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston-Lancaster roads.

With Considerant’s departure in the summer of 1856, the second of Dallas’s utopian ventures failed. Like Cabet, Considerant proved a terrible administrator, but a remarkably faithful adherent to the idea of utopia. Admitting no fault in Réunion’s demise, he purchased west Texas land and tried to gain backing for yet another phalanx from the European American Society. Stunned by Considerant’s effrontery, the directors refused and then spent almost twenty years in trying to recoup their losses, badgering the families of the colonists in both Europe and America for repayment and finally selling off all the assets of the defunct venture in
1875. In Réunion, as in all American phalanxes, Fourier’s vision of utopia proved to be, as the southern abolitionist Frederick Grimké would observe, “flattering and delightful to look upon, but its fair exterior vanishes at the touch of experience.”

As a living canvas, Dallas influenced and was, in turn, effected by the experiments with utopia it attracted. Icarie and Réunion came into being at a time when two issues were paramount in American politics: immigration and slavery. Shortly before the appearance of the French in Texas, the Know-Nothing party, with all its anti-foreign and anti-urban sentiments was firmly established in the state. Nativist newspapers in both Austin and Dallas railed against the “certain poison” of socialism. One nativist journalist so feared “the repulsion and retirement of slave holders” that he preferred to see the state “a howling desert rather than witness the spreading wave of Socialism stretch itself over the Christian Churches and Slave institutions of Texas.”

Though such alarmist responses reported that “our whole population are against them,” the French seldom found this to be true. Considerant had experienced Know Nothing rhetoric on his first trip to Texas and prepared considered responses in his books. He effusively praised America’s liberty while emphasizing the rottenness of European society and hoping that the “effervescence” of France could be wed to the “calm judgement” of America in order to “resolve the destinies of collective humanity.”

Considerant’s forceful propaganda and the strength of his personality initially cast the French colony in a positive light. One local editor celebrated Réunion “for its intelligence, genius, and skill in mechanical arts,” all of which would greatly enrich the surrounding community. Despite these favorable reactions, the socialists of Dallas never outlived the suspicion that they harbored abolitionist sentiments. Though none of the French were slave holders, neither did they believe in the formal abrogation of slavery. Instead, they felt that the entire question of industrial and plantation slavery would be rendered mute by the victory of socialism. After all, the plantation owners, while ostensibly free, were really slaves of “ignorance,...degredation,...wretchedness, and...vice.” The ambivalence of the French toward slavery continued into the first years of the Civil War when they vehemently refused to serve, eventually receiving exemption from military service. Despite the possibility of a safe neutrality, several of the younger colonists served with distinction in various Confederate units.

If a civilization’s success is to be judged by the great monuments it leaves behind, neither Icarie nor Réunion can be considered successful. The myriad of makeshift cabins that marked the first venture had been reclaimed by the prairie long before the colony land was resold in the early 1880s; the cluster of buildings of the second colony stood as a ghost town until the 1950s when structures and land alike disappeared before the relentless assault of a local company’s heavy equipment, busy turning the limestone bluffs of the Trinity into cement. While the physical environment of utopia was thus soon forgotten in the burgeoning settlement of Dallas, the influence of its citizens on the city was immense. Thus from Réunion, Dallas received its first dancing master, vintner, butcher, and professional musician. Until the early 1900s and the benevolence of Andrew Carnegie, the libraries of former colonists comprised the largest
collection of books in Dallas County. Réunion also graced its urban host with two of America’s
great naturalists of the nineteenth century, Jacob Boll and Julien Reverchon. Perhaps, then, we
should measure utopia, wherever it sprouted in the United States, not by its permanence but its
people who spread “the excitement of community life” into the American social psyche.

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