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Крестьянская социальная утопия в Англии в XIII – XIV веках*

Аннотация. В статье освещаются некоторые аспекты крестьянской социальной утопии в Англии в XIII-XIV веках. Основным источником послужила крестьянская поэма XIV века «Страна Кокейн». На основе разбора данного источника, автор затрагивает как общие проблемы крестьянского мировосприятия, морально-этические представления, так и более конкретные представления крестьян об идеальном мире, их чаяния, мечты и надежды на лучшую жизнь.

Ключевые слова: крестьянская социальная утопия, «Страна Кокейн», крестьянский рай, мировоззрение крестьянства, английский средневековый фольклор.

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Peasant social utopia in England in the XIIIth – XIVth centuries

Abstract. This article presents several aspects of peasants' social utopia in England in the XIIIth- XIVth centuries. The study is based on the fourteenth century poem *The Land of Cockaigne*. After close examination the author highlights both general problems of peasant's consciousness, moral and ethical issues, as well as precise peasants' perceptions of an ideal world, their social aspirations and longings for a better life.

Key words: peasants' social utopia, The Land of Cockaigne, peasants' paradise, peasants' social consciousness, English medieval folklore.

In this article, we have attempted to touch only one layer of medieval folk culture - peasant social consciousness. We are

not concerned here to examine all aspects of peasant culture. Our aim is much more specific – to study those forms of peas-

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ant consciousness that are more closely connected with peasant social experience in general and their class struggle in particular. With this in mind, we paid our attention to the most remarkable piece of peasants' literature - such phenomenon as peasants' social utopia. By analysing it, we have attempted to describe the development of peasant aspirations, beliefs and dreams for a better life.

In most literary texts peasants' discontentment with their way of life and social inequality is expressed by means of criticism of the reality and complaints of their miserable existence.

From the thirteenth century, the main peasant perceptions and ideas took a definite shape, and we can discuss their direct expression. One of the main sources of peasant feelings is, undoubtedly, social criticism and satire of that period, which depicts a desirable society, a perfect dreamland, a peasants' utopia. If not the only one, but definitely the most well-known reflection of peasants' imaginary paradise is the fourteenth century poem *The Land of Cockaigne*. It is a poem of nearly two hundred lines, which describes as earthly paradise, an island of magical abundance, of eternal youth and eternal summer, of joy, fellowship and peace.

Everyone living at the end of the Middle Ages had heard of *Cockaigne* at one time or another. This poem had a great entertainment value. It was a country, tucked away in some remote corner of the globe, where ideal living conditions according to late-medieval notions prevailed. Work was forbidden, and food and drink appeared spontaneously in the form of grilled fish, roasted geese, and rivers of wine. One only had to open one's mouth, and all that delicious food practically jumped inside. The only thing left to do is chew and swallow. The weather was stable and mild, it was always spring, full of joy.

“All is sporting joy and glee,
Lucky the man that there may be¹.”

There was also the added bonus of a whole range of amenities: communal possessions, lots of holidays, no arguing or animosity, free sex with ever-willing partners, a fountain of youth, beautiful clothes for everyone, and the possibility of earning money while one slept. *Cockaigne* inevitably calls to mind an earthly paradise as frivolous as it is lavish. People fantasized about a place where everyday worries did not exist and there was no need to combat everyday fears. It was a kind of overcompensation in the form of dreams for an ideal life.

The historiography of the *Land of Cockaigne* is not quite vast. For years, it has been treated as something too childish to be worthy of serious attention. We had an opportunity to get acquainted with English² and partly with French³ works on this subject. However, being a part of all European folklore, more or less, it has attracted the attention of German, Dutch, Spanish, and Italian historians, as well and even Brazilian historians⁴. For the majority of the scholars, *Cockaigne* undoubtedly stands for a medieval utopia, either anti clerical, social, or folkloristic. According to Lewis Mumford, utopia has long been another name for the unreal and the impossible⁵; it is the representation of an imaginable world. Herman Pleijis eager to call *Cockaigne* a “dreamland,” an “earthly idyll⁶.” It seems that Morton was the first historian who started to use this poem as a source of peasants' social aspirations and

1 Morton A.L. *The English Utopia*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1952. P. 218.

2 Pleij H, Morton A.L., *Beuchamp G., Mumford L.* etc.

3 Le Goff J. etc.

4 Hilario Franco Junior.

5 Mumford L. *The Story of Utopias*, New York: The Viking Press, 1962. P. 11.

6 Pleij H. *Dreaming of Cockaigne: Medieval Fantasies of the Perfect Life*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. P. 5.

beliefs⁷. In his words, the history of Utopia reflects the conditions of life and the social aspirations of classes and individuals at different times. The English Utopia is a mirror image more or less distorted of historical England⁸. Thus, bearing in mind the poor corpus of historical evidences concerning peasants' perceptions and mentality, it seems that dreaming of Cockaigne is one of the main literary sources of information and, as a result, can provide us with vast material to examine.

No two stories of Cockaigne are alike, but each varies according to time and place. Things are further complicated by the problem of sources because tales of the Land of Cockaigne belong pre-eminently to an oral tradition. According to historians, countless Cockaigne texts must have circulated in the Middle Ages around Western Europe for centuries before its realization in writing. Only a fraction of them were recorded in the vernacular of various countries.

The most well-known texts are two Middle Dutch texts preserved in two manuscripts, one dating from the second half of the fifteenth century and the other from the early sixteenth century. There are also three related French texts, that were all recorded in manuscripts dating from around 1300, although attempts have been made to prove their derivation from an "original text" that supposedly date from the mid-thirteenth century⁹. However, given that Cockaigne first existed in oral tradition, they likely developed on their own and at the same time influenced each other. Some historians claim that it is pointless to search for the author who came up with the original cockaigne text. There were thousands of individuals, each of whom composed his own text by using the mate-

rial available to everyone, which had been circulating in countless forms in a number of languages. The Middle English *Land of Cokaygne* is dated from the early fourteenth century. A German variant, known under the name of *Schlaraffenland*, was recorded around 1500. Bearing in mind that all texts are the variants of the same poem, it seems that all versions are suitable to reveal the traits of peasants' aspirations in England. However, the main accent, of course, will be put on the English version.

It does not seem relevant to compare all these texts in details. However, it should be noted that all of them reveal both similarities and differences which are quite striking. The Middle English *Land of Cokaygne* pays much less attention to the portrayal of food abundance, whereas in French texts this very motif chiefly dominates. Some scholars attempt to explain this difference by the fact that the English version is much closer to monastic satire, and that is why they "played down the motif of what must be regarded as compensation for the necessarily frugal life of country folk¹⁰."

Not all historians dealing with this poem try to make sense of the very name Cockaigne. Pleij brings up a concern about why this term was used as a suitable epithet for a dreamland, whereas Morton and Umberto Eco leave this question without any answer. Generally, it is believed, that the word *Cockaengen* in Middle Dutch and *Cokaygne* in Middle English are toponymical translations of the French place name *Cocagne*. This name occurs repeatedly in several Old French fabliaux known from manuscripts dating from the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century, though the name must have taken root before this time as the designation for a dreamland.

According to historians, there are several explanations of the origin of the

7 Morton A.L. Ibid.

8 Ibid. p. 11.

9 Pleij H. Ibid. p. 58.

10 Pleij H. Ibid. p. 89.

name Cockaigne. According to Hilario Franco Junior, for the first time this name appeared in documents in 1142 in Italy¹¹. Firstly, it seems quite likely that its origin lies in the sounds and associations produced by French or Provençal words having to do with cooking and a special kind of honey cake – *cocanha*. This echoes with the Low German word *kokenje*, a word meaning honey cake as well, which also left its traces in the Dutch word *kokinje*, sugarplum. One theory is that Cockaigne is derived from a word designating a delicious food what seems to be quite logical, given that the greatest excitement from the spectacular superabundance of food bears the main accent in the poem. Cockaigne must therefore refer first and foremost to the land of honey cakes.

However, there is a number of other associations. For example, there is one which is derived from the satire of the church. A short song, dating from around 1164, from *Carmina Burana*¹² features an abbot who spends his time exhorting his brothers to drink and gamble: “Ego sum abbas Cucaniensis¹³.” This word *Cucaniensis*, as it is believed, appears to be a humorous corruption of well-known name *Cluniacensis*, monks from Cluny, famous in the whole Christendom¹⁴. By mocking the name *Cluniacensis*, the word *Cucaniensis* seems to produce a humorous effect with a negative

11 Hilario F.J. Cocagne. Histoire d'un Pays Imaginaire. Les éditions arkhê, 2013.

12 *Carmina Burana*, Latin for “Songs from Beuern” is the name given to a manuscript of poems and dramatic texts mostly from the XIth or XIIth century, although some are from the XIIIth century. The pieces are mostly bawdy, irreverent, and satirical. They were written by students and clergy principally in Medieval Latin; a few in Middle High German, and some with traces of Old French or Provençal.

13 Parlett D. Selections from the *Carmina Burana*, London: Pinguin Classics, 1986. P. 177.

14 Morris P.N. Roasting the Pig: a Vision of Cluny, Cockaigne and the Treatise of Garcia of Toledo, Florida USA, Boca Raton: Dissertation. com, 2007. P. 62.

association. The negative image here is the cuckoo, an unpleasant bird that tries to take advantage of everyone. In Pleij's words, this was a perfect image to throw in the clergy's face, all compactly expressed in that one word *Cucaniensis*.

This verse about the abbot of Cockaigne does not stand alone. Two other texts, also found in *Carmina Burana* and dated from the thirteenth century, tell of an abbatisa *Cacunacensis* and *Gugganiensis gulescopus*¹⁵, a gluttonous bishop. They seem to be from the same sphere as the Latin satire and express the same personification of the most extreme hedonism. Thus, the name of Cockaigne is the result of influence by the medieval Latin satire on the clergy.

The Land of Cockaigne is an instantaneous paradise full of medieval attractions. It acts as a parody, an ironic censure of the standard sins and vices prevailing in society. The poem is presented in a form of opposition. It is opposed to both the peasants' reality with its hard labour and troubles, and to the Heaven World that is not a match for it. It seems that, when talking about Cockaigne they cannot be talking about paradise, because narrators tell of a place they have seen with their own eyes. In this regard, Cockaigne is a kind of a dream of earthly abundance.

“Though Paradise is merry and bright
Cokaygne is a fairer sight.

For what is there in Paradise

But grass and flowers and greeneries?
Though there is joy and great delight,
There's nothing good but fruit to bite,
There's neither hall, bower, nor bench,
And only water thirst to quench¹⁶.”

Just as the true paradise, it can be found in a specific place somewhere on earth. The Middle English text opens with its geographical location:

15 The *gulescopus* is a subtle combination of *gulosus* and *episcopus*.

16 Morton A.L. *Ibid.* p. 217.

“Out to sea, far west of Spain,
Lies the land men call Cokaygne¹⁷.”

Morton believes that this westward placing clearly connects Cockaigne with the early paradise of Celtic mythology. In the Middle Ages, the existence of such a paradise was a firm belief in, but the church always placed its paradise in the East, and strongly opposed the belief in a western paradise as a heathen superstition. In Morton’s words, the beliefs were so strong that, in the form of St. Branden’s Isle, the western paradise had to be christianised and adopted by the Church itself, and a number of expeditions were sent out from Ireland and elsewhere of the Isle¹⁸. The parody and the opposition of the official perceptions here is thus evident right from the start.

Paradise was shut tight, but Cockaigne was open to everyone. According to the text, it is accessible, though with difficulty, in contrast to the heaven paradise, which is utterly inaccessible. The impenetrable walls surrounding the heaven paradise had only one gate of entry, and was guarded by an angel with a flaming sword. The Land of Cockaigne, on the other hand, was open to all who could find it. It is explained in details who and how can reach this place of abundance what, in my opinion, reveals its peasant origin.

“Whoso will come that land unto,
Full great penance he must do,
He must wade for seven years
In the dirt a swine-pen bears, Seven
years right to the chin, Ere he my hope that
land to win.
Listen Lords, both good and kind, Never
will you that country find Till through
the ordeal you’ve gone
And that penance has been done¹⁹.”

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid. p. 13.

19 Morton A.L. Ibid. p. 222.

Thus, Cockaigne is very problematic for rich men to enter, which means that the earthly paradise was open mainly to the lower class. Only by seven years spent up to the chin in swine’s dirt, what undoubtedly means living the life of the most wretched serf, can a man find his way to Cockaigne.

It seems that the main motif of this poem is the escape from hard labour, which was a part of peasants’ lifestyle. While the world was full of endless and almost unrewarded labour, the utopia promised rest and idleness. Peasants’ attitude to work is very crucial to analyse, as it can help to understand certain features of their mentality, self-identity and the place that they provided themselves in society.

Work and exertion of any kind were absolutely forbidden in Cockaigne. Food appeared from nowhere and in unimaginable quantities. Everywhere on earth, one had to toil to earn a living, but somewhere there existed a land where God has commanded people to avoid work of any kind.

“In Cokaygne we drink and eat
Freely without care and sweat,
The food is choice and clear the wine,
At fourses and at supper time²⁰.”

Thus, in contrast to a reality full of troubles, in this land a man was free from his burden. Here, we can see an ironical reference to the Christian doctrine of the Fall of Man when humankind was condemned to a life of toil. The image of the first couple being driven out of paradise, which lead to the painful beginnings of human suffering was presented in many different ways in Medieval culture– in the huge number of texts, paintings, religious processions, pottery and so on. However, peasant literature tends to question this. Apparently, God has made an exception in the case of Cockaigne, the place where everything comes true.

20 Ibid. p. 217.

The fantasy of Cockaigne clearly presents the peasants' tendency to avoid any kind of labour and their praising of idleness in its severest forms. At the same time, it consequently raises the question of one of the seven deadly sins – sloth. This sin, as the others, marks failure to perform one's religious duties. In the Middle Ages, it was regarded as being as sinful as the other sins. It appears that humorous and grotesque representations of sloth in the poem are closely connected with a concern for the necessity of hard work in everyday life.

Starting in the fourteenth century, a need to exhort people to work began to grow. According to Herman Pleij, it was necessary to combat the idea that toil and trouble were just punishment received by Adam and Eve when they were driven out of the Paradise. We agree with the idea that the more and more urban economy could not thrive if work was not viewed in a more positive light. The necessity of work and its positive effect on society was no longer in doubt. This goal was being achieved by different means, including a fantasy of a topsy-turvy world, such as Cockaigne's, where sloth was ridiculed. In the poem, idlers were likely to be seen as good-for-nothings or failures²¹. This upside-down world showed how one was not supposed to behave.

Thus, despite that fact that idleness is a cornerstone of the dreamland, the humour of the poem indirectly attacks the pleasure of being a lazybones, and stresses the necessity that everyone earn his own living. The image of idleness goes side by side with abundance. What is abundance for a medieval serf? According to the text, it first of all is food supplies, which are presented as an object of obsessive concern. A man is placed in an environment made of food. The inhabitants of Cockaigne even live in edible dwellings, every component of their

tangible world being composed of ready-to-eat bites of food.

“There are rivers broad and fine
Of oil, milk, honey and of wine...
All of pasties stand the walls,
Of fish and flesh and all rich meat, The
tastiest that man can eat²².”

In the Middle Dutch version, the fences are made of sausages, the windows and doors are actually salmon and sturgeon, and the beams are made of butter. An especially interesting aspect of this abundance is the spice tree:

“Ginger and cyperus the roots,
And valerian all the shoots,
Choicest nutmegs flower thereon.
The bark it is of cinnamon²³.”

In general, the poem shows a total obsession with eating. An overwhelming amount of attention is paid to gluttony, including an addiction to drink. In late-medieval society, gorging and guzzling came more to be associated with the highest forms of pleasure, and, at the same time, likened to a total lack of restraint. Again, Cockaigne has been fine-tuned to represent the exact opposite of what is desirable in the real world. The didactic manuals that cataloged virtues and vices preached that a layperson should not eat more than twice a day and then only at set times. This is how things generally were in practice. The first meal of the day was taken at the end of the morning, between eleven and twelve o'clock, the second one at the end of the working day. Breakfast in the modern sense was not customary. Eating more than twice a day, or eating at other than these set times, was considered a sin. On the other hand, eating only once a day was a sign of self-abnegation and this was deserving of the highest respect. Everything

21 Pleij H. Ibid. p. 366.

22 Morton A.L. Ibid. p. 218.

23 Pleij H. Ibid. p. 432.

in this land is so topsy-turvy that it seems to be a total opposition of reality.

Abundance is closely linked with social justice. The fantasy of Cockaigne creates a better and more just society. It is a wished-for dream of society, but not seen as an actual possibility. Undoubtedly, we can find the features of peasants' social aspirations and desires expressed in the idea of estate equality and common property.

“Every man takes what he will,
As of right, to eat his fill.
All is common to young and old,
To stout and strong, to meek and bold²⁴.”

This contrasts with the dominance of private property in real life. Government and private property was considered as being the inevitable result of the Fall and of man's sinful state.

Morton also sees in this poem a specific social feeling, the sense of fellowship which gives us a true and living picture of the mind of the common man. He writes, “One is conscious here, as elsewhere, that the class feeling that is never directly voiced lies only just below the surface²⁵.” It is particularly remarkable in the end lines of the poem, where peasants are directly opposed to lords almost excluded from the land of abundance.

However, there is no suggestion whatsoever of new laws or an alternative order, but rather the hope of being allowed to wallow in ideal circumstances of abundance and idleness within the existing system. The poem does not offer any alternative way of living or concern with any kind of revolution. What is more, being a topsy-turvy fantasy, the poem indirectly confirms the existing order by portraying in a playful way the total chaos brought about by the lack of that order.

Generally speaking, the Land of Cock-

aigne is a fantasy, a grotesque dream of a society wished for but not seen as an actual possibility. Because of this fantastic quality, it was regarded as a clumsy joke. By the end of the Middle Ages, no one any longer believed in such a place, yet the stories about it continued to circulate around Europe for centuries.

However, dreamworlds say a lot about those who devise them. Cockaigne is a reflection of late-medieval tastes, the fusion of the pre-Christian nature cults of abundance with the very practical needs and desires of the people. Portraying an ideal country, it embodies the profoundest feelings of the masses, most importantly peasantry, and expresses them in an extremely concrete and earthy fashion.

In this period, when revolution was not objectively possible, though popular riots were frequent, such poems as Cockaigne were the means of keeping alive hopes and aspirations that might otherwise have died away.

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²⁴ Morton A.L. *Ibid.* p. 218.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 18.