A utopian one hundred years ahead of his time

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Jakob Vetsch's 1923 utopian novel "Die Sonnenstadt" anticipates many of the things people want most in today's society.

Jakob Vetsch (1879-1942)

CHARLES LINSMAYER

A book entitled "Die Sonnenstadt. Ein Roman aus der Zukunft für die Gegenwart" (which translates as "The sunshine city. A novel from the future for the present") was published in Zurich in 1923. The author was a certain "Mundus", who identifies himself at the end of the foreword as "Dr. jur. & phil. J. Vetsch", "in order to immediately provide a provisional rallying point for the desired gathering of like-minded people." Jakob Vetsch was born in Nesslau, in the canton of St Gallen, in 1879. He studied German philology and jurisprudence and became secretary of the Swiss beer brewers' association in 1916. In 1918, he married the daughter of a major shareholder in a brewery. And, as he noted sarcastically, he would have had "an honourable and comfortable old age in a happy family circle, lining his nest with well-paid directorships", if he had not gone down a different path with his novel. The teachers, politicians and priests to whom Vetsch gave his book could not hide their amazement at the helpless rage with which the trustee of a trade association savaged the capitalist economy. They weren't to know that Vetsch had accepted a settlement from his future father-in-law of a million Swiss francs to marry his daughter, who was suffering from a genetic condition, and raise a child (suffering from the same condition) with her...

A global urbanist utopia

Vetsch's Mundism is a global utopia with shades of urbanism. In 2100, the world is divided into the five "countries" of Europe, Asia, America, Africa and Australia, comprising 25,000 cities. The "countries" are each governed by 20 sages and a father of the nation, while the global government comprises 50 "national" delegates. Sunshine city Zurich is the setting for the novel and the place where life in the utopia is portrayed via a love story. Money has been abolished; people are given what they need. Everyone keeps studying for decades and, in return for the privilege, does temporary work, and no one is expected to do any more than that. Sexuality is independent of marriage, birth control and contraception are organised by the government, and marriage can be dissolved after five years. The working week lasts 25 hours, and the remaining time is for – artistic – development. Nature conservation has priority in uninhabited areas and the huge demand for electricity is met by hydro, solar, wind and tidal power stations. Emancipation has also been achieved to the extent that a woman, whether a mother or not, is guaranteed "the development of her own personality".

"Men arose who were horrified by the poverty in the world. And they realised what stood in the way of world brotherhood: money and capitalism. They weren't afraid to say it, even at the risk of being labelled communists. They stood together all over the world and global unity among all people drove them. They called themselves and their supporters 'Mundists' and their aim was global government and global stewardship."

An unfortunate outcome

"Die Sonnenstadt" was evangelistic, but Mundism failed to catch on. The 40,000 books issued triggered a venomous response from the media and Vetsch had to file for bankruptcy in 1924. When his wife's family tried to have him committed for being mentally unstable, he left his wife and moved, first to Liechtenstein and then to Oberägeri in the canton of Zug in 1934, where he was mayor until his death in 1942. He never published another line. "A people without curiosity is like soup without salt," is how Walter Robert Corti, founder of Pestalozzi Children's Village in Trogen, in the canton of Appenzell, described Vetsch's fate. "Curious people suffer more than most, but there is always something to learn from them."

BIBLIOGRAPHY: "Die Sonnenstadt" was last published in 1982 in the Ex Libris edition "Frühling der Gegenwart". Second-hand copies are still available.

(Excerpt from Jakob Vetsch's "Die Sonnenstadt", most recent edition Ex Libris-Verlag, Zurich, out of print)

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