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## Sustaining Autonomous Communities in the Modern United States (The United Communities of America)

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Sustaining Autonomous Communities in the Modern United States

(The United Communities of America)

Lucas Hester

Senior thesis

Directed by Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza

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### Abstract

America has become industrialized and characterized by social anxiety and overconsumption. The inability to be sustainable has led the once plentiful and flourishing nation into an ongoing sustainability crisis. Even if there is a deep connection between them, this essay focuses on *social* sustainability rather than ecological. It argues for an intentional community-based framework to keep American life Sustainable. Pollution, civil unrest, and intense social anxiety create unfulfilling life conditions for many American citizens. Using examples from modern American intentional communities, I will explain the need for self-directing, close-knit communities. Flourishing community members, as it will be considered from sociological and pragmatist theory, are notably more autonomous and environmentally conservative than mainstream American society. Communal societies immensely aid in successfully establishing contextually-based governments that help fulfill their citizens. They are more conscious of their environment (in the broader sense than the ecological one) and thus seek a healthy sustainable consumption rate and social climate. The values and traditions that cultivate environmental care are integral in communities and often combat the instability of American society. Though grass-roots communal living can be hard and often forsakes the amenities of capitalist America, it offers alternative values that would still sustain and help top achieve fulfillment by the population.

We come together as citizens of diverse beliefs and differing political affiliations to issue an appeal for the renewal of the American experiment in self-governance. We come together as Democrats, Republicans, and Independents, agreeing to put aside partisan political disputes in order to rediscover our primary institutions and shared civic story. We come together as people of various ethical and faith traditions, agreeing to set aside theological differences in order to rediscover the public moral philosophy that makes our democracy possible. What is the state of our union? Certainly there is much good news. America is the longest-lasting constitutional republic in history. Across the planet, opponents of freedom are on the defensive, as the American idea increasingly becomes the world's idea. Today the United States is not only the world's outstanding superpower, but more importantly, the world's great exemplar of democratic civil society.

Jean Bethke Elshtain, Chair, Council on Civil Society from *A Call to Civil Society*

God is Dead

Frederic Nietzsche

## **I. Introduction**

The United States of America (America henceforth) was once self-pronounced as united under God. The American dream was an endless beautiful pasture with a healthy loving family. But within the homestead, 'reality' is often at odds with such an idyllic view. Typically, the average modern American citizen finds different stories on the most popular television news stations. The TV station will show a flurry of tragedy, violence, natural disaster, and political unrest to be reviewed by talking heads, who more often than not, indecently shout fallacies and insults at those holding opposing views. American society – the culture as it has formed in this moment – has become a symbol of social anxiety and ecological irresponsibility, rather than a utopic homestead. The state of the nation is one riddled by environmental catastrophes and a plethora of social crises. Existing structural attempts at amending the American way have left it only more bureaucratic and wasteful. In this thesis I will argue for a holistic contextually based theory of communal living to combat the concerns of sustainability resulting from America's debilitating lifestyle. The use of environment and sustainability here encompasses both social and ecological facets. Though both are important and interwoven, the thesis will focus on the social aspect with the understanding that much of what's said also applies to the ecological facet. Community will be a concept closely tied to sustainability.

Social theories pertaining to ideal communal standards (though not utopian) are often riddled with defining conditions that keep them remaining as satisfying in some contextual way. I will also consider a series of overlapping conditions for such a sustainable and fulfilling



community. In the second section, I will first explain sustainability in a social sense, as it pertains to a community. Then, in the third section, I will define and differentiate community and an *intentional community*. Finally, in the fourth section, with an intentional community specifically defined, I will outline conditions for communal flourishing using Dewey's six conditions for a great community. As opposed to Utopian social theories, this perspective on community means to inspire communal involvement on a personal level to make life, wherever people are living, more fulfilling.

## II. Sustainability & Community

Sustainable community members, as described from the perspective of sociological theory, are notably more autonomous and environmentally conscious than average American citizens. They thus actively seek a healthy sustainable consumption rate as well as a healthy social climate, relative to their own and society's needs. Americans living in socially unsustainable conditions are not considered less valuable than those who are sustainable, only that the later have been conditioned to be healthier. The rudimentary principles that maintain a healthy sustainable culture of this kind can be found in pragmatist-influenced theory. Understanding what a community is and how people interact in it is fundamental to critiquing American culture. It will also help identify healthy communal habits.

Defining community is not easy to do, neither scholars nor members of communal societies have reached "any kind of consensus on exactly how the term 'communal' should be defined," as Miller states (1999 XXI). Yet, if not addressed carefully, this could easily exclude groups of people who would argue to be deeply communal in their interactions. Throughout this paper, a communal society will be approached contextually to serve as a framework to be applied to particular groups. To not exclude a system of interaction some group might have, a community could be broadly considered to be any *systematic* social interaction.

This framework is more specifically for sustainable and *intentional* communities, where intentional here refers to a deliberate, thoughtfully considered and habituated action toward maintaining social relations. For this reason community will be considered with sustainability in

mind. A generalized sense of this intentionally communal lifestyle is seen in V.F Cordova's (2007) comparison between the individualistic nature of nuclear families and the holistic nature of Native American families. "The Native American 'family' is the entire group", as Cordova writes, and "the 'community' includes not only the family but the surrounding environment (2007, 81). The different family dynamics result in uniquely cultivated social habits, where the holistic becomes mindful. In fact, the more integrated community mindset that Native American philosophers uphold is what much of American culture is lacking.

Consider the "simpler" case of what are typically considered biological requirements of a community. Sociologist McKenzie (1924) considers a human 'community', the kind of community we're concerned with, to be ultimately ecological in that it functions as a system seeking homeostasis. The ecological product arises from "the outcome of competitive and accommodative processes which give spatial and temporal distribution to human aggregations and cultural achievements" (McKenzie 1924, 287). McKenzie reduces community to a third-person functional definition that gives necessary though not sufficient conditions that can accommodate Cordova's stance. McKenzie claims the size of the group is based contextually on resources and competition, and that the internal structure of communities is territorially segregated as a result of the competition (1924.). An organizational structure, resources, and common culture do describe a community, but the complex social needs of living peoples, such as an identity or connection to place, need recognition. The modern human community is more determined by cultural values and the driving intention behind those values than the reductionist understanding of it.

Naturally a community is held together by social enforcement. In a community, people restrain one another by the power of coercion. Humans have the ability "to exert moral suasion

and extract a measure of compliance from their members,” which means communities are necessarily coercive as well as moral, threatening their members with the stick of sanctions if they stray, offering them fellowship if they conform (Pearson 1995 47). People even develop as a reflection of their social environment, as existentialist Sartre would claim. He writes “I can only become aware of myself through ... the ‘look’ of another person” (Pereboom 2001, 272). That is, people only conceive of the sense of self in relation to other people and things. This is why people often describe themselves by their occupation or aesthetic traits in America. Someone’s occupation is a contribution to society (and a reflection of how one spends time), and their physical appearance is a particular characterization normalized in America. A community, as a sort of social construct, is composed of the moral guidelines and character traits of people within a community.

Considering people are so intimately and directly connected to their culture, each group of people has its own inherited (and so uniquely interpreted) values, morals, and habits. With such complex factors involved in the creation of a community, we need to make a distinction regarding intentional communities. Core social conditions of “community”, which will be analyzed in greater detail in section four, are comprised of cultural values and symbols that developed for ease of socialization. A community, as defined by sociologist Pearson, is necessarily egalitarian; that is, a human social community behaves according to *integrated* values intended to “exhibit a particular version of the general welfare, an egalitarian one, whose sustenance ... presumes a special sort of political and economic organization” (1995, 44). Whether or not there can be non-egalitarian communities, this is too narrow of a definition for the diversity of communities in the world. Nonetheless, Pearson’s definition does help to begin describing intentional communities, the focus of this thesis.

### III. Intentional Communities and Individual Agency

“That government exists to serve its community, and that this purpose cannot be achieved unless the community itself shares in selecting its governors and determining their policies” so wrote *John Dewey* in *Search for the Great Community* (2009). This observation serves as a firm foundation for the *intentional community*: a particular kind of community differentiated by intent in its organization and regular behavior. A community that is intentional requires direct and active action from all of its participating citizens. Central to this is the notion of active intention, which here refers to a model of agency similar to “direct action” as it is explained by Emma Goldman. Direct action in the spirit of anarchy is “the open defiance of, and resistance to, all laws and restrictions, economic, social, and moral” (1969, 65). The anarchists advocate for a kind of concise and regularly habituated action against the grain in society. I do not argue for constantly deviant behavior, but there is a sense of responsibility for considerate intentional behavior behind Goldman’s rebelliousness that I do endorse and employ. Obviously the constant upheaval of a homeostatic social system would be unsustainable. Goldman is arguing for citizens, all citizens, to be aware of their own systems workings and have an effect on it.

Her social approach to the nature of society explains the need for intentional action. In her argument for anarchy, she “maintains that God, the State, and society are non-existent... since they can be fulfilled only through man’s subordination” (Goldman 1969, 52). Here she is touching upon the idea that people respond socially in the sense that if people have a socially confirmed belief that they are justified in being subordinated, then they will submit and not have self-governance. Goldman argues that anarchists adopt a philosophy that develops in the absence

of a unified agent society (1969, 53). By this Goldman means a society in which people have a unified ability to make societal decisions that affect the whole group. Though an anarchical form of government may or may not be completely sustainable, an anarchist's role as a politically agent citizen is crucial for a socially sustainable society. It is a major part of participation and integration in a community, the latter two being conditions of a flourishing community discussed later (see section IV).

Dewey helps describe this too when he criticizes the American system of governance. The voting system in America is a very limited form of government interaction, and often still the only one that Americans take advantage of. Dewey states:

the number of voters who take advantage of their majestic right is steadily decreasing in proportion to those who might use it. The ratio of actual to eligible voters is now about one-half. In spite of somewhat frantic appeal and organized effort, the endeavor to bring voters to a sense of their privileges and duties has so far been noted for failure. A few preach the impotence of all politics; the many nonchalantly practice abstinence and indulge in indirect action. (2003, 136)

The individual citizen is often disconnected from their political representatives. Moreover, the votes that people get, many do not utilize. Regardless of where to place blame for the lack of civil participation, there is no denying that a majority of Americans do not feel involved in their politics. Nietzsche's opening epigram announced *and* denounced the death of God. But, the reason is not because the omnipotent creator of the universe has deceased. Rather Nietzsche means that the socially accepted subordination, and thus unification, under the Christian conception of God has dissipated. The unity that citizens felt under God changed with the development of a more beauracray money-minded system. Modern American citizens have similarly lost their sense of national unity because of their disintegrated sense of political participation and have no, or very little say in the workings of the larger complex government. It

is for this reason, and of course the practical sustainability to maintain resources implied in intentional efforts to be communal, that a communally held sense of intention is fostered.

The appearance of Tent Cities in America is a great example of this communal agency in action. According to an online report by the National Coalition for the Homeless “the term tent city is used to describe a variety of temporary housing facilities that often use tents. Authorized and unauthorized tent cities, created by and for homeless individuals and families, are now found across the country” (*Tent Cities in America A Pacific Coast Report* 2010, 8). Many of these employ voluntary efforts put together by various homeless families. For instance, the Village of Hope is a self-governed community with a set of requirements for membership. Since the community is self-governed, it lives by the three basic rules “Take care of yourself. Take care of others, Take care of this place” (2010). These are localized rules to implement “do-it-yourself” values. The Villages belief in their agency and role in community is reflected in resident chores and activities such as cleaning up surrounding buildings, performing odd jobs, recycling projects, and other events to raise funds as a non-profit (2010, 45). An active intention is key to maintaining their community lifestyle, both in terms of sustainable maintenance and social integration. It is this model of agency that is needed in a community. In other words, it involves a sort of voluntary yet but socially motivated effort given for the specific purpose of sustaining the community.

#### IV. Flourishing Conditions for a Community

With sustainability and self-directedness already addressed, the flourishing conditions of an intentional community can be developed now. To maintain a society of socially active and intentional agents with more consideration than their mere immediate survival (which would not be a sustainable mindset anyway), there are certain contextual requirements the community must have.

The intentional aspect of intentional communities is partially important because flourishing conditions are largely dependent on intention. McIntyre (2012) outlines in *After Virtue* that the ideal conditions for a society are relative and based in the conditions of a population's situation. He says the virtues of life, the *successful* conditions of behavior and morals that people set for each other and themselves, are only successful for particular situations (McIntyre 2012, 205). This means these conditions are contextual, but to the community more than the individual. The individual aligns with their community and is a part of it, and thus approaches communal conditions from the perspective of the whole. McIntyre also asserts that virtues not only

sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods in relation to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of need for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good. (2012, 219)

*Good* for people here is so in relation to their particular practices, values, and environmental needs. Thus, flourishing is inherently first a contextual concept. Though the model is at root appreciative of contextually unique circumstances, there are still basic qualities –described by John Dewey– which I will use to describe the contextual framework. Flourishing then can be



relative to a society, or even an individual; however there are still conditions of life that promote an environment where people can act sustainably in the pursuit of their particular flourishing conditions. These conditions will be further detailed throughout the remainder of the paper.

Dewey's (2016) study of *the Great Community* can help clarify the scope of what a flourishing intentional community could look like emerging out of American society. Sustenance alone could be reduced to the idea of only satisfying humanity's rudimentary needs (food, shelter and the like), however *sustainability* is concerned both with the *ability* to live and the *quality* of life. Naturally a community must have relatively regular healthy cycles of food distribution, clean water, shelter, and other physical necessities, but it must also be socially harmonious in order to sustain these other systems. With social law being predominantly binding, the community is then responsible for defining what its needs are. With the needs to flourish held in mind, Dewey offers a list of social-environmental conditions that can set a contextual framework for establishing and satisfying these needs. According to Dewey a community must provide: 1) trust from natural association 2) mutual benefit 3) the possession and distribution of social knowledge 4) the active participation of the members in the directing of the community 5) the full integration of individuals and 6) communication through shared signs and symbols (1927, 113).

Dewey recognizes the contextual nature of human needs, and thus deliberately creates imprecise aspects of community that overlap and change relative to the pertinent social environment. The main framework for a fulfilling intentional community is necessarily created in each community's specific context. There are varying degrees of trust, benefit, distribution of knowledge, and so forth, and the absence of these qualities can cause great distress. Dewey is

trying to work *with* the social nature of human beings, which is socially contextual—as it could change among different cultures.

To explain each condition, I will compare traditions that originate in Europe and America with different American intentional communities. Of the many types of intentional communities, the main examples will be found in Native American philosophy, tent communities, the Hutterites, Brooks Farm, and a few other selected intentional communities.

An intentional community, at its core (values), must be egalitarian in its approach to self-preservation. That is, in the hopes of allowing each community member to flourish as life flows, the community adopts a value backed with an understanding of the interconnection of people to their environment as a whole. Beyond this, trust, mutual benefit, cultural transfer of knowledge and communication, active participation in community direction, and the full integration of members are relatively satisfying conditions. Relatively so in the sense that the community needs to satisfy its inherited social and environmental needs; no communities have identical conditions.

The conditions of a community that have been outlined above and will be investigated in greater detail next, should create a more contextually sustainable social foundation than is typically experienced in industrialized modern American life. To reinforce the contextual use of the framework and to dispose of any utopian idea I adopt Dewey's pluralistic perspective on communal characteristics. About which Pappas explains,

Dewey does not deny that, to some extent, we all share general and minimal conditions for individual development (e.g., a minimal education), but he stressed that these conditions may change and, more importantly, inquiry about this issue must be as sensitive as possible to the uniqueness and wholeness of each individual. (2008, 226)

Using Dewey's six conditions for a fulfilled community to compare American life with different intentional communities will help describe the kinds of changes that can be made in America

## A. Trust from Natural Association

Social sustainability requires a community to organically form trust. Dewey considers trust to be a sense of openness and freedom to communicate that is fostered by an education in a diverse environment (Englund 2011, 238). This is an experience that comes from having mutual trust, but Dewey does not describe it completely. Dewey's characterization emphasizes a social stasis where people feel comfortable to the point of expressing themselves to each other without hesitation.

In contrast, American citizens have grown untrustworthy of each other and their government. A report on the American public in 1996 that 87 % of people are afraid of the moral progression in the country and characterize its morality as weak (Elshtain 1999, 12). The distrust runs deeper than a mere division among individuals; it is connected to the national government, a political body that every community residing in the United States answers to. America is notorious for political corruption. United States strategic adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski advised that if America were confronting domestic resistance, it would be "difficult to fashion a consensus on foreign policy issues, 'except in the circumstances of a truly massive and widely perceived direct external threat'" (McMurtry 2002). Almost as if he was responding to Nietzsche, this implies the need for a strong unifying source in the country.

The problem with Brzezinski's stance is that it advocates for fear and control as the tactics to unify the people. Someone could easily argue that this is merely the sadistic power trip of a single political individual and it does not reflect the United States, however, money-mongering totalitarian culture is found in various branches of the United States government. In 2000, U.S. Senator Bob Smith helped pass the legislation for the U.S. "Space Commission" so

the military could monopolize control of space expansion (2010). In his speech Smith preaches for a new order by appealing to the long touted “Manifest Destiny” that ideologically underwrote the colonization that ruined the lives of Native Americans (McMurtry 2002). The trail of tears is still long and hard because the culture of consumption and control still runs rampant in the governing body today.

It is no surprise that people do not trust each other in such a politically aggressive environment. Instilling trust in a community as an organic process precludes, on account of its complexity, full examination in a single thesis, much less a part of one. But, the following remarks suffice to examining what a basic level of trust could look like for an intentional community.

I agree with Dewey that for a socially sustainable community trust can be found in a holistic educational experience. He believes in teaching what he calls “moral equality” which for Dewey, “means incommensurability, the inapplicability of common and quantitative standards” (Pappas 2008, 225). Dewey’s ideal of celebrating diversity is impingent on an environment that fosters trust in the community. Accordingly, an extensive educative process is key to this trust. This will be revisited later in the section on integration which discusses rites of passage and individual integration.

The inability to express oneself freely in United States public schools is explained well in comparison with Vine Deloria’s account of Native American traditions and their educational view. She describes the two systems of learning to be different in a few but marked particular ways pertaining particularly to the authoritative culture of Euro-Americans. First, in Native schools “children are not subjected to regimentation and adults do not represent authority that exists beyond question. What is taught at home is mutual respect: no adult has sole authority

over a child and no child has authority over any adult. All human beings are equal, including children”, though children, never having been here before, require special attention from adults (Deloria 1999). Cordova furthers the criticism as well, observing that in American schools,

Children sit in rows of seats that all face in one direction, toward the teacher. The teacher alone has a right to speak. She, or he, is the sole authority in the classroom. The student must not leave his assigned place without permission, and the only teacher grants permission. The Euro-American Classroom is an exercise in authoritarianism. (Cordova 2007, 80)

The extent of the authoritarianism enacted by, however the poisonous classroom culture does have an apparent effect on people.

Dewey makes a similar observations. If you consider the amount of culture imprinted on a child, Dewey argues, you will note that the capital values conditioned in schools helps “to create the specialized ‘business mind’ and this, in turn, is manifested in leisure as well as in business itself. The one-sidedness is accentuated because of the tragic irrelevancy of prior schooling to the controlling realities of social life” (1927) This is problematic because if schools only condition people to be money-making machines, then they will also create a culture of students ill-prepared for the complex amount of social and practical problems they will face outside of the school system. The capitalist ethics taught in school are not sustainable by habit or theory because morals are not a factor in the educative experience, unlike in some tighter-knit communities. This comparison can be seen well in the case of the Hutterites.

The Hutterian Brethren resides in almost 500 separate communities (each approximately 100-120 in population) spread around various Canadian provinces and several mid to western United States. They’re a Christian Anabaptist community whose roots trace back to a family in 16<sup>th</sup> century Moravia, in what is now the Czech Republic.

After 250 years of wanderings and persecution in central and east Europe, the Hutterites left the old world and in the 1870s immigrated to the United States, where they established a few communities. During the First World War, because of their German identity and their pacifist refusal to either bear arms or support the war effort, their American neighbors harassed them. Their young men were conscripted and imprisoned in brutal conditions for refusing to serve. As a result the Hutterites decided to liquidate their communities in the United States and move to Canada (Oved 2014, 241).

Hutterites have spread again through the United States as war tensions receded, but the connection to their background remains constant. They have a deep-rooted history and connection to their family and home place, wherever that has been, that enforces an entrenched sense of trust in family. Years of harassment and hardship created a unique bond and unity that sustains their society today. For instance, this social bond is predicated on a limiting the size of their community: when their villages reach a certain population, about 150 members, Hutterites split.

This involves locating and purchasing a suitable site, constructing the buildings, buying the equipment, and in the year of the move, planting the initial year's crops. Then on the day of the move, everyone packs and the half that moves is drawn by lot from two lists. These lists are organized by the occupations every village needs, for example, business manager and farm boss. (Thies 2000, 189).

Such practical organization involves much social complexity and requires a great deal of trust. For villagers to confidently switch out work and homestead in such an egalitarian fashion, people need to feel at ease with each other. Fostering trust to this degree is difficult for Americans compared to the Hutterites because the Hutterites have generations of common

background. Part of this sense, however, can be strengthened with other well-rounded social structures, such as a strong education system or immigration system. Reaching out to each other in this way can help establish this natural social confidence. Trust will extenuate a mutual benefit, Dewey's next point should also be embraced by a tight-knit community.

## **B. Mutual Benefit**

The concept of a basic sense of mutual benefit lies at the heart of a great deal of social theory. It interweaves with the other five conditions. Basically, people need a mutualistic relationship that is contextually *fulfilling* in that it involves and morally considers all participants in the relation. Dewey finds that good community members conduct themselves as members of a political group enriching and enriched by their participation in family life, industry, scientific and artistic associations. There is a free give and-take: fullness of integrated personality is therefore possible of achievement, since the pulls and responses of different groups reinforce one another and their values accord (Foley 2012).

The ability for maximizing the benefits of mutualism could be debated, but it is an ideal that can be strived after. The Hutterites have practiced this kind of socially sustainable practices through thick and thin. Over their long history, the Hutterite colonies have stayed technologically modern when it comes to the industrial race and they show an extended practice of basic mutualism beyond their local economy. The colonies are sustainable in their use of resources. They have systems of work in the form of colony jobs requiring different physical and intellectual capabilities in order to produce consumable goods for distribution and personal consumption. This includes the operating of certain machinery and managing of trades with companies and countries (Thies 2000, 266).

The mutual benefit from sustainable work motivates the Hutterites, who care for and trust each other, to keep each other as sustaining members of their community. They also adjust the sustainable ethic to modern capitalist culture. This keeps the mutual benefit on an international scale too in that their work puts out goods that are exchanged for foreign goods that are more or



less needed to sustain. Intentional communities are often accused of failing to be totally self-sustainable, for example, failure to grow their own food and harvesting their own meat. This is under the assumption that self-sustainability relies on exclusively locally produced consumables. However, trade with neighboring societies is also a factor of sustainability. Part of establishing social mutualism in the modern world is to acknowledge and grow with the neighboring communities.

In contrast, the United States government does not have an equitable sense of mutual benefit. Much like how the anarchist points out, a community member cannot use another for the sake of benefit. An American education often encouraging the use of others for self-serving purposes. Goldman observes the demand for property (or capital gain), is the driving force motivating work and thus schooling in America (1969, 54). This is problematic because people navigating the education system are taught habitually that competition and personal gain are prioritized values that promote a culture of distrust. Goldman criticizes the American prison system as well because it demonizes criminals instead of rehabilitating them, which disables them from social benefit. She argues that condemning criminals inhibits their ability to work, which is counterintuitive because people should “insist on the right of the convict to work, he should meet with him as a brother... and with his aid turn against the system which grinds them both” (1969, 125). If people are to be demonized and monetarily enslaved by their nation, they have the responsibility to contest for their agency.

Homeless culture showcases communities that sometimes can support each other to attain mutualistic benefits. Tent communities, like Dignity Village in Portland Oregon, establish benefits with an anarchist-like participation and organization. The once homeless group of

people gathered after Portland's anti-camping ban was lifted. In celebration of their achievement they have set out a positive and reforming mission:

Dignity Village's current mission statement is to create a safe, sanitary, self-governed place to live as an alternative to the over-burdened shelter system where there are about 600 beds for about 3,500 homeless people, sleeping alone in doorways and under bridges, or in the jails where the homeless are housed for urinating in public, jaywalking, and camping. (National Coalition for the Homeless 2011)

This kind of localized effort tent communities are putting forth to establish a healthy and sustainable living space for the homeless is a perfect example of mutually benefiting intentional communities. The effort Dignity Village has put into finding a home to sustain has paid off because of the struggle of being forced out of six squatting sites. The 6<sup>th</sup> site became recognized by city council and mayoral support (*Tent Cities in America A Pacific Coast Report* 2010, 12). Efforts of this sort are important, because they create the culture of trust and mutual benefit which is a necessary for sustaining a flourishing community.

### **C – Possession and Distribution of Knowledge**

Dewey notes the importance of passing down knowledge in a sustainable community. This includes the bestowing of new information that concerns the community, as well as education. Dewey says, “there can be no public without full publicity in respect to all consequences which concern it. Whatever obstructs and restricts publicity, limits and distorts public opinion and checks and distorts thinking on social affairs” (1927). In other words, for the public to still preserve a mutual benefit and trustworthiness, the public needs to have the freedom to access the same wealth of information that the rest of society has. This is to also achieve mutual benefit. Without censorship, he argues, a community forms a trusting environment where people can be free to express social inquiry that can help better develop the community (Dewey 2009).

A good example of this openness can be found in Cordova’s comparison of Native American community’s to Euro-Americans, specifically the United States segregated education system. Cordova finds that the kind of literary censorship practiced in schools interferes with children learning how to be human beings. In the first years of a Native American child’s life “the child is given a worldview- without books, without authoritarian means - and this is the child that is turned over to the official educational authorities of an alien society” (2007, 81). Not all United States public schools have problems with instilling trust, value, and a free expansion of knowledge, however the overarching academic culture, and thus many of the educational programs, in America act in the authoritarian fashion that Cordova criticizes.

The United States is clearly in violation of such free spreading of knowledge because of the tight control it has on information in the country. The United States government’s ties with

media and education create a far too regulated outlet of information. The government acts in a near authoritarian fashion in that it is present in much of society and operates “through global financial and media control centers, with Washington and Wall Street [being] the dominant nodes of the interlocked system” (McMurtry 2002, page). With the government’s hands being involved in media, the notorious trait of authoritarianism “occurs in a moving, ad hoc form, typically targeting an internal group and an external enemy” (McMurtry 2002). It is no other than Hannah Arendt who provides this view of the American government, thereby giving a picture for how constraining American culture can be. Control of information and capital limits the abilities and freedom of American people in addition to creating unequal benefit. The American people’s fierce response is further evidence of unfair government policies. The Anarchy-like movement called *Occupy Wall Street* came about in direct response to American inequality. Protestors coined the slogan “we are the 99 per cent” to voice how the government has stood by in the midst of an enormous wealth inequality (Gibson 2017, 346).

Dewey also considers the unregulated passing of information through a democratic education in an American community in contrast to the regulated American way. He thinks that in and beyond passing information, education needs to habituate students for community life. Unlike the industry-training that much of the American education system takes part in, an education ought to train students for community life. Dewey considers this aspect of education to be marked “by a decision-making process that is not carried out in a vacuum. Decisions are made neither by individual acts of will nor by individuals who claim insight into absolute truths. The process, rather, involves a willingness to take into account the information provided by others as well as their desires and situations” (Boisvert 1998, 114). That is, the information passed to

children should not be based on memorization of facts and data, but in analyzing and making active decisions as a cognizant human being.

Consider the passing of critical information in the Village of Taos. Cordova tells a story of generations of handed down information and methods of practice provides the ability for efficient sustainability. One day the government had sent a troop of agricultural experts to her village to teach them how to get better crops from their land. Taos is one of the oldest of the Rio Grande pueblos and may date back to AD 900. The village officials informed the experts that the people had farmed that ground for all that time. 'How long', they asked the officials, 'have you been farming your land?' 'Maybe,' the villagers informed the experts, 'you better send your farmers here so that we can teach them how we did it'. (195)

The village had a system of 'practicing' with the land that had been refined and handed down through centuries. Even though the western crop techniques were certainly sufficient in how they had learned to sustain, the residents of Taos long background of intentional community created an arguably more sustainable technique, as opposed to being merely efficient in its means of production. If Americans had a more opportunity to actively participate in their government and control of information, they would be more socially sustainable and thus raise their potential for flourishing conditions of life. Free communication is an aspect of mutual benefit and trust, of course. In the ensuing, it will be more apparent how the six conditions are non-linear and contribute to each other. Education will be detailed in greater detail in Dewey's conditions regarding social integration.

## **D – Active Participation in a Community**

One of the major criticisms of communal theory concerns its ability to mobilize and motivate a community that is enforced merely by peer pressure. Active participation in an intentional community can be enforced in different ways and would require unique skills per circumstance. Dewey (2012) describes what active participation in a sustainable community might look like: the two aspects of intentional participation are an awareness of the effects of active participation as well habituated participation. Dewey describes the social awareness that comes with participating in a community as that of people “who participate in an interest so that each had to refer his own action to that of others, and... consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own.” (Foley 2012) He considers this social re-enforcement of morals something that comes from the communication and mutual trust discussed earlier, and the understanding sparks a communal participation that transcends “the barriers of race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity.” (Boisvert 1998. 55)

From an individual perspective, Dewey considers ‘minimum participatory behavior’ to be the basic effort an individual who would need to contribute to a community. “It consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain.” (Foley 2012) The active participation, for an individual in an intentional community, is sculpted partially by the values that matter to the community. Thus, the community member’s morals would also be in sculpted by their greater social environment which asks them for participation for the sake of sustainability.

The anarchists exemplify the essence of this communal participation with the stance of gaining self-governance back from American tyranny. Goldman argues that “authority, coercion, and dependence rest on the mass” (1969, 78). Put otherwise, those subverted need to accept being subverted in order for it to persist. There is an implied criticism of the capitalist influenced society in her statement that can be backed by the way Americans disenfranchise certain citizens from participation. Low-income Americans are sometimes conditioned to be anti-social and act deviant to the point of even losing work opportunity. The treatment of homeless people in America exemplifies the nation’s struggles with social integration. “The first encampment in Olympia, Washington began as a protest movement of homeless people and homeless advocates against criminalizing “anti-social” legislation that was passed by the city in 2007— specifically referring to the ordinance restricting people from sitting on sidewalks” (*Tent Cities in America A Pacific Coast Report* 2010). The law was passed because of problems the city had with certain homeless people, as it wanted to portray the city as cleaner. But, in the end it only placed homeless people into harder conditions.

A localized sense of action like this could spark change, like that seen in tent cities, to create a more sustainable and communal culture. Though Dignity Village is no longer considered a tent city, the location stands as an example of communal integration amongst situation adversity. They run sex offender background checks, and provide members with equal voting rights and a presence in political meetings after 90 days of living on site and participating with the non-profit (2010, 12). This has allowed the government recognition of Dignity Village as a legal community that has been known for its rehabilitation of homeless people. An active communal effort for local change, like that exhibited by Dignity Village, would convince community members to be more socially dedicated.

Americans are clearly troubled by the lack of social participation in the work force culture, and are hungry for a more socially engaged and relational life. Isolation in America is evident from the rapid appearance of many subcultures around the world. That is, at a glance it seem that people around the globe are beginning to turn towards forms of association in line with those of an intentional community, whereas Americans seem to be searching for the sense of community in groups that have not established common values or inherent trust amongst one other; only common interests. Cooley suggests that, “people in modern societies readily formed a large number of groups—clubs, fraternal societies, educational and occupational associations, and the like—groups with some potential for real intimacy” (Pearson 1995, 47). Though these places do offer a common interest for people to commune under, they rarely integrate people to the degree of feeling as close as one would feel with a tight knit family. People are longing for the intimacy, and driving themselves to subcultures to develop connections that would be easier made in an integrated society.

The suburban-city-goer often seeks the communal experience: a relation of shared values, interests, and general background. Some would argue that the sense of social participation is satisfied by some of these subcultures, like college Greek life or dedicated cults, but some are clearly still dissatisfied by American culture. Communities like the Hutterites and many Tent Cities unify under their feelings of government mistreatment. Many of these groups are motivated and even come together “to destroy any larger set of enjoining moral principles, if not U.S. society itself”, like the anarchists for example. (Pearson 1995, 47-48) America is a diverse place with a various subcultures and many individuals desperately seeking communal fulfillment. They desire what is possible in an intentional community where there is a kind of *full integration* into the community that Dewey discusses. It’s a kind of integration that does not



come from merely joining an open social group. There is a sense of integration and place in a community that requires a more complex rite of passage.

## **E – Full Integration of Individuals**

Communal integration involves all of the other conditions that Dewey describes. Dewey believes in a sense of unity that connects and socially binds a community, and attests that America's norms surrounding political unity makes people feel less integrated. As a critic of individualism, he believes that "the creation of political unity has also promoted social and intellectual uniformity, a standardization favorable to mediocrity," and that despite gaining America's typical economic and political integration, the public feels lost (Foley 2012). In the United States, there are complaints of disintegrated family life, shown by a rush from rural to urban lifestyles and the longevity of business and industrial culture (Foley 2012). Though this was a criticism from Dewey's era, a feeling of integration is still missing from some urban and suburban neighborhoods. This is because it is missing a process of integration that goes beyond merely showing up and joining.

Determining how communal integration arises is trying because it is the result of a particular experience in a community. *Feeling* part of a community is based on the values and cultural norms of that community. The kind of integration that Dewey is hinting at is granted in a society from what sociologically is considered to be rite of passage, one that effectively integrates a person as a member of that society. According to The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy a rite of passage includes: ceremonies that mark important transitional periods in a person's life, such as birth, puberty, marriage, having children, and death. Rites of passage usually involve ritual activities and teachings designed to strip individuals of their original roles and prepare them for new roles. Rites of passage affirm community solidarity, especially in times of change or crisis (2002). Additionally Sociologist Davis-Floyd associates rites of passages with

ceremonies transmitting cultural values that include the entire community accompanying a major life-altering event such as the transition out of puberty, birth, or a new member's integration. These rituals intend to imbue those participating in the transition with a sense of interconnected importance with the group and place. (Davis Floyd 2004). A ritual like this is fundamental in integrating a member of a community.

Cordova gives an example of how communal interconnection is taught to members of Native American communities. Consider anthropologists or folklorists who become part of a *tribal* community for the sake of research. For these kind of conditional immigrations, "there must be a manual of proper procedure: *Adopting a White Person: An Intertribal Ritual.*" (Cordova 2007, 41-42) This manual, as Cordova explains it, should have an explanation as to what it is that this adoption does (*ibid.*). She describes a sort of immigration process that is marked by a rite of passage-like ritual that puts people through a lengthy integration process that eventually gives those socially confirmed rights and communal membership.

A well put-together rite of passage involves an intense dedication that is difficult to capture. Typically at the end of rite of passage a member will feel a communal satisfaction that arises from and is confirmed by all six Deweyan conditions: trust, mutual benefit, open shared knowledge, involved participation, and communication. Camp Quixote, a tent community, affords a case of citizens who have been through a similar process and became a unified community.

This tent city began as a protest supporting the homeless denouncing the "city's insistence of dismantling the [church] community on the grounds that churches maintain a specific land use right that allows them to offer sanctuary to the poor." (Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, or RLUIPA) After several protests the community now has legal

recognition and lives to “establish themselves as healthy communities while growing toward new and creative housing opportunities” (2010, 31-32). Their success is important because it is reflected by a sort of rite of passage that unifies its members with a common background while filtering out potential inhabitants who would not adopt community values. Olympia, Washington, the area the tent city resides in, has experienced a large repercussion from an American recession, and yet Camp Quixote does not unconditionally accept homeless families; they require applicants to undergo background checks with local law enforcement, interview with active members, and live in a probationary period for thirty days where the resident will agree the community's behavioral rules and standards be given access to meetings (2010, 35).

This community's process reflects integration periods of rites of passage in that it effectively politically and socially integrates citizens after a temporary transition period. Furthermore, it establishes a process for people being integrated to behave for the social sustainability of the community. Unfortunately, this requires enforcement by a no-tolerance for rule breaking policy, a byproduct of the lack of trust in America's poverty-stricken communities. This is why organically formed mutual trust, something found in such a rite of passage, is crucial to sustaining an intentional community. Though this tent community doesn't extend its arms out to everyone and has a process to keep its own people for sustainability purposes, it still stands for rights and maintains its humanist values.

The educative process of getting people to establish a common culture is key to fully integrating a person. Some criticize certain rites of passage as an indoctrination that resists the free thinking of people. In fact, the culture involved in the rite of passage determines whether or not this is true. Doubtlessly some communities will indoctrinate its members instead of

encouraging open exploration of values and concepts. Nonetheless, in an intentional, sustainable community the education will be more gratifying.

Take Dewey's account for a fulfilling education. Essentially, he takes a model of experience-based education that is communally moral. Dewey explains that since maintaining social cohesion in society requires an active interest in community welfare, then intentional acting for communal wellbeing "is the moral habit to which all the special school habits must be related if they are to be animated by the breath of life." (Boisvert 1998, 111) Communal values would be the aim of an intentional community's rites of passage regardless of what other cultural beliefs it holds. Rites of passage establish a kind of common culture that people are integrated into. Since education is often an integral part of, or its own rite of passage in a community, then a community's educative process must include the establishment of a common language so all communication can be possible.

Dewey's final condition on the need for shared communication through commonly understood language completes the scope of needs for contextually behaving toward a fulfilling and sustainable intentional community.

## **F - Communication through Shared Signs and Symbols**

All participation, trust, integration, benefit, etc. requires at the very least communication. Behavior and communication can only make sense “when there exist signs or symbols of activities” which an interpreting person can respond to. Communication is necessary for human fulfillment, as Dewey argues, because events and memories cannot be transferred between people, “but meanings may be shared by means of signs” (2009). Dewey’s suggested method to establish a forum of common language would be through an educational system. This system does not need to be structured like Dewey’s ideal education or the American educational system, it only needs to educate in a way that integrates people and creates a social bond. The formation of the bond also conditions a shared set of values and common language. Though I do not have a criticism for Language programs in American schools, complete integration in American society is rarely that of experience without the close bond to other people or even the presence of an overarching government. Shared language and values are thus important aspects of a more holistic education.

This kind of education has been passed down through religion in the case of the Hutterites. The Hutterites unity throughout much of history can be partly attributed to a handing down of a religiously structured language. Hutterite communal morality and theology is primarily based on “Anabaptist principles, on the Old and New Testaments, and on a determination to recreate ancient Christianity – the Christianity of the apostles, as described in the New Testament.” (Thies 2000) This instills in them a dedication to God and the role in the world “to fight evil and resist temptation, and to prepare constantly for eternal life in the hereafter” (Thies 2000, 246). This is shown in their dedication to family and deep rooted

connectedness that has held them together through such trying times. Their participation and mutual dedication is so consistent in part because of the strong religious tradition that is framed in the language that educates them.

The Stewardship that has kept their lives sustainable was greatly inspired from religious tradition. This is one reason why God was seen by Nietzsche to be so unifying. Whether a community commune over faith or not, basic communal values need to be instilled in language as it conditions the society. Cordova cites Benjamin Whorf who argues that “all higher levels of thinking are dependent on language” and further that “the structure of language one habitually uses influences the manner in which one understands his environment” (2007, 78). Staying clear of the controversial nature of some of Whorf’s claims, Cordova uses this to later note a difference between Native American conditioned sustainability versus American consumptive conditioning. She criticizes the Christian-inherited feeling of entitlement toward land expansion being a basis for the entitled language (Cordova 2007, 81). Even the structure of language in Modern America implies and imbues its citizens with unsustainable worldviews and habits. With an established common language that people internalize in a more integrative process an intentional community will be more socially sustainable.

## **V. Concluding Statements: America is Dead**

America is dead too. We killed it, and strive for a communal flourishing in our own communities. An intentional community aims at social and sustainable interaction. It needs members who acknowledge the effects of their behavior on each other and who actively engage in communal interaction. They need the fire and personal drive of the anarchists and the holistic understanding of sustainability, in both the social and ecological senses. America has been a shining beacon of defragmented and disintegrated community since the rise of industrialism, and the need for achieving communal flourishing is dire. With an untrustworthy government that regulates information and media, it is not surprise people are looking elsewhere for their communal satisfaction. People commit to family and tight-knit relationships over nationalism. It's difficult to participate in the national system, and many people are discouraged from doing so. There is even a deficit of mutual benefit in the economic system for many Americans. There is nothing sustainable about American culture, in the economic or social sense, and it is harming the conditions of life for people residing in the country. The conventions holding America as a unified nation are weakening because people are no longer committed to the idea of a United America. People ought to encourage community in their lives-in their everyday experiences. With the intentional community serving as a framework, people can try to live more fulfilling and socially sustainable lives. We can unify for the sake of each other; not for money, God, or America. For us.



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