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# Utopian Communalism: a comparison of 19th and 20th century phenomena in the United States

TRUMAN DAVID WOOD\*

**ABSTRACT** — The utopian communal phenomenon has been present in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The longevity of various religious and secular utopian communal experiments is examined in terms of four organizational factors and the twentieth century communes are considered in terms of four ideals. The main stream of American society has assimilated nothing from these utopian communal experiments.

The utopian communal phenomenon is not new. It is similar to the nineteenth century phenomenon when Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote to Thomas Carlyle in 1840: "We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform. Not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket . . . One man renounces the use of animal food; and another of coins; and another of domestic hired labor; and another of the State . . ."

There is a high degree of similarity between nineteenth century and twentieth century utopian communal experiments. The organizational factors which explained the longevity of nineteenth century utopian communal experiments could be applied to twentieth century utopian communal experiments.

Those factors were: 1. strong, effective leadership; 2. an adequate financial basis; 3. screening of prospective members; and 4. an ideology, creed, or dogma which provided a unifying basis. Thus religious utopian communal experiments have generally survived longer than secular efforts lacking a strong ideology.

Richard Fairfield in *Communes USA: A Personal Tour* (1972) stated that a commune's contribution should not necessarily be evaluated in terms of longevity. He argued that if the members develop a greater awareness of self and others, then the commune must be considered a success. Fairfield's value orientation is the individual. Success can be seen differently if other values are given top priority. Thus longevity has been selected, rather than Fairfield's value of success, as the focus of this paper.

An examination of nineteenth century utopian communal experiments shows that there was a high incidence of organizational fatality. Many of the communal efforts were of extremely short duration and there is little historical evidence of their organizational structure, basic philosophy, or other features. The same can be said of the utopian communal experiments in recent years.

Numerous efforts have been made to tabulate and study these American utopian communal efforts. Advertisements

appear periodically in college newspapers and so-called underground newspapers asking those involved in communes to please contact the researcher to facilitate the study. Needless to say, many communes disappear before the contact is accomplished or many communes refuse to respond to such ads because they are weary of visitors from the outside world. Kathleen Kinkade in *A Walden Two Experiment* (1973) notes the reluctance of commune members to respond to questionnaires and how the novelty of visitors soon wears off in a typical commune.

The estimates of the number of utopian communal experiments are many and varied and generally range from several hundred to several thousand. These estimates for the 1970's can be compared with nineteenth century figures (Holloway, 1966). Holloway stated that there were more than one hundred communities with a total membership over 100,000. These figures must be regarded as only crude indices of this kind of activity as empirical research in tabulating and studying utopian communal experiments is extremely difficult, but the estimates do illustrate the point that during times of tension and upheaval in society there is a renewed interest in a more perfect form of social, political, and economic organization. This interest manifests itself in the form of writing and reading utopian literature and also in the form of utopian communal experiments. There has been a marked increase in both forms in recent years.

The communal experiment may come as a response to some literary utopia. An example would be Kathleen Kinkade's Twin Oaks, which was in response to B. F. Skinner's ideas in *Walden Two*. The utopian communal experiment may be a more generalized flight from the imperfections of the ongoing society. The rejection of existing society is often a withdrawal-to-reorganize reaction. Typically several people perceive their inability to change the policies and structures of modern American society and they choose to "do their own thing" in a secluded setting. They choose to establish the perfect society in a microcosm rather than to futilely struggle toward the establishment of utopia in the macrocosm. Many times the utopian communal experiment is the combination of the impact of utopian literature plus the rejection of American society.

## Nineteenth Century Examples

The utopian communal experiments of the nineteenth century might be classified broadly as either religious or secular. Some examples of the religious type would be the Shakers, the Rappites, the Zoarites, Bishop Hill, and the

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Amana Society, one of the largest and longest lasting utopian communal experiments in U.S. history. This list is not comprehensive, but it does contain well known examples. Typical of the secular category were Robert Owen's New Harmony, Brook Farm, the Icarians, and the phalanxes of Albert Brisbane's Association movement, such as the North American Phalanx in New Jersey.

Precise empirical data is largely lacking concerning the nineteenth century utopian communal experiments, but some generalized conclusions can be drawn from our limited knowledge and brief resumes of some selected experiments illustrate the four organizational factors which contribute to the longevity of such entities.

Eric Janson led a group of Swedish immigrants in founding Bishop Hill in Illinois in 1846 (Holloway, 1966). This was a communal settlement with a religious dogma, strong leadership from Janson, but an inadequate initial financial basis. The community overcame its financial problem by way of industrious effort and because one member recovered several thousand dollars worth of debts owed him in Sweden. Janson's leadership was removed when he was murdered by a member who probably would not have been admitted to the group had proper screening been used. The death of Janson in 1850 was followed by a brief period of prosperity for the group, but real estate speculation and other dubious financial practices of the post-Janson leadership brought an end to the community in 1862. There was also a rapid deterioration in the strong religious ties of the community following Janson's death.

The Rappites' success was due to Father George Rapp's spiritual leadership and the administrative ability of his adopted son (Holloway, 1966). They brought six hundred colonists across the Atlantic in 1804-1805 without a mishap and transferred the colony from Pennsylvania to Indiana in 1814-1815 and back to another site in Pennsylvania in 1824-1825. The relative stability and economic success of the Rappite Harmony Society in Pennsylvania and Indiana and then as Economy in Pennsylvania can be attributed to the religious dogma basis and strong leadership. Screening was not effectively used, and a split did occur in 1831-1832; but the Rappite group was prosperous enough to withstand the loss of membership and the \$105,000 given to the departing group. The death of Rapp at age ninety and a policy of celibacy contributed to the decline of this generally prosperous group which lasted until 1905.

The Amana Society likewise had strong and effective leadership in the early period of its long history from 1842 until 1932 (Holloway, 1966). Christian Metz and other "instruments of the will of God" led German immigrants to a 5,000 acre site near Buffalo, New York, in 1842. There they were organized as the Eben-Ezer Society. They sold their Buffalo settlement without loss and moved to an Iowa site over a ten year period. The Amana Society, as the community was re-named in Iowa in 1859, benefited from an adequate financial base. One wealthy member had contributed \$50,000 to the community. There was a strong religious basis, and that religious dogma performed the screening function to a degree, keeping out those who would not subscribe to the doctrinal requirements. The Amana Society, which lasted until 1932 as a communal effort, was a 20,000 acre operation.

The North American Phalanx of Red Bank, New Jersey, a secular utopian communal experiment, was established in 1843 with less than eighty members and \$8,000 in capital, which could be classified as inadequate by the standards of the Frenchman Charles Fourier (Holloway, 1966). The Association movement of Albert Brisbane was built upon Fourier's principles, and Fourier had indicated that a phalanx had to have at least 1,600 members and capital amounting to one million francs. Brisbane had reduced the membership minimum to four hundred and capital of \$400,000. Brisbane pointed out that none of the phalanxes was a true test of Fourier's theory because none ever met even the minimum requirements of Brisbane. Of the more than forty such experiments, only three survived beyond two years. The North American Phalanx lasted the longest of any phalanx, a total of twelve years.

The North American Phalanx did use screening of membership, but it lacked a strong dogma or creed, and some members departed in its ninth year on religious grounds.

Fire destroyed their workshops and mills in 1854 and the financial loss plus lagging spirits brought the end of the phalanx with the longevity record for the Association movement.

There was no outstanding phalanx leadership the equivalent of Father George Rapp, Christian Metz, or Eric Janson; although Albert Brisbane, Horace Greeley, and William H. Channing helped prepare the groundwork for the North American Phalanx and visited it often.

### Twentieth Century Examples

The twentieth century utopian communal experiments have a more diverse quality in general than the nineteenth century phenomenon, but the fundamental classification of religious and secular can still be applied. The religious category can be subdivided into traditional religious communes from the past and modern. The modern subdivision can be divided further into contemporary Christian, eastern, and mystic. The secular category can be subdivided into ideological, group marriage, work-service, and drug-centered.

Kathleen Kinkade (1973) offers a similar but simpler classification: political, classical utopian, religious, and family-type. She in turn places Twin Oaks in the classical utopian category, but since it was inspired by Skinner's *Walden Two*, Twin Oaks would seem to be more appropriately placed in the secular-ideological category.

Twin Oaks has survived for five years, and Kinkade and her daughter Jenny are the only two original members still in the commune. Kinkade was seeming surprised that the experiment lasted, and her comments on this relate to the four organizational factors:

We didn't have any money to start with; we were heavily dependent on the skills of one member, . . . half of our original members weren't dedicated to our principles; . . . there wasn't a truly charismatic leader among us, a situation that naturally led to leadership struggles; . . . we never had a common religion, common community experience, or even a common enemy.

Any one of those things could have killed us. The combination was almost certain to. How is it we have survived?

I am not sure, but I think the answer to that question is just that we didn't give up . . .

It would be an exaggeration to say that Twin Oaks has succeeded as a commune. After all, . . . we still lose members



to the outside world. Our apparent success is only in comparison with communes that have folded, and with our apparent chances those first two doubtful years (Kinkade, 1973).

Twin Oaks is a relatively small unit, and membership losses are particularly critical to small units. That a book about a five-year-old commune with forty members and one hundred acres was published and widely read may be indicative that there are no better success stories of secular utopian communal experiments. There may have been such a high fatality rate among secular communal experiments of the ideological, group marriage, work-service, and drug-centered types that a five year longevity record seems to be significant.

The impressionistic evidence in terms of books, magazine articles, and oral personal accounts would seemingly convey the overall picture of leadership problems, financial problems, membership problems, and interpersonal strife resulting from a lack of strong dogma, creed, or ideology in secular communal experiments.

Although Twin Oaks has survived for five years in spite of the state of the four organizational factors, it should be remembered that several nineteenth century utopian communal experiments lasted longer and still ultimately failed. The test is not over for Twin Oaks. Its longevity record thus far is relatively short.

One subdivision of the secular category of twentieth century utopian communal experiments, the work-service commune, is different from the nineteenth century types. Another is the drug-centered commune. The work-service type may differ even more than the drug-centered type does from the nineteenth century models. The work-services type is generally not a back-to-the-land retreat from urbanization and outside society. The work-service commune is organized around a professional skill such as architecture, education, law, or engineering. Such a commune, unlike other communal experiments, is regarded as a means for a project or projects rather than an end. The communal ownership and communal cooperation are present, but the work-service commune tends to have its feet in both worlds to a greater degree than other twentieth century types.

The Portola Institute of Menlo Park, California, is the largest and best known educational commune. The Palo Alto Law Commune takes fee cases in order to support its non-profit legal projects. The Pacific Domes Institute and the Ant Farm are examples of architectural-design communes. Although all of these work-service communes are located in California, there are examples in other parts of the country also.

The urban-situated or urban-oriented work-service commune is a twentieth century entity and is in contrast to the rural-oriented nineteenth century utopian communal experiments.

The work-service communes do not completely subscribe to the four fundamental ideals held by the utopian communal experiments. Most of the other subtypes of twentieth century religious and secular utopian communal experiments

would hold the following ideals: 1. the simple, essential life of food, clothing, and shelter which can be attained by sharing in common and not wasting natural resources; 2. back to the simple, natural, and good life on the land, a variation of the old Agrarian Myth theme; 3. discovery of self and human qualities; and 4. setting the example of what a shift to communal life could do for all of society.

#### Testing society and examining alternatives

At a time in human history when a series of serious questions are being raised about the structure and functioning of American society, utopian communal experiments are testing how pluralistic American society really is and whether many Americans are genuinely interested in the alternatives afforded by the microsocosms of communalism.

The nineteenth century utopian communal groups, such as the Shakers, made some contributions to American culture in terms of agricultural science and other non-political areas, but the main stream of American society assimilated virtually nothing in terms of political or social structures or devices. The majority of American society ignored the alternatives posed by nineteenth century groups.

At this point in the twentieth century there is little or nothing to suggest that contemporary utopian communal groups have made any contributions to American culture beyond those made by nineteenth century groups. The work-service communes may be the single exception to this generalization. The main stream of American society has likewise assimilated virtually nothing in terms of political or social structures or devices and has ignored the alternatives offered by the twentieth century utopian communal groups.

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