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# Socialist Utopian Communities in the U.S. and Reasons for their Failures

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Elizabeth Nako

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Near mid-nineteenth century, dozens of groups of men and women in both North America and Europe at this time saw “forming communities as the best opportunity for social progress” (Clark 1). The nineteenth century experienced an industrial revolution which brought the world together into one vast international market from the invention of the steamboat, telegraph, and railroad. Also, the industrial revolution brought a mass amount of wealth with machines now powered by both electricity and steam that increased productivity. Of course while all of these new inventions and ideas were great, they also created a great amount of social problems and unrest. While a small number of men enjoyed the luxuries and riches with the benefits of the Industrial Revolution, the majority of people comprised of the working class found themselves in suffering and misery from this new system. Also, among “captains of industry” and their production and competition among other companies, there were alternate seasons of intense work and activity, and then seasons of idleness and reoccurring periods of an “industrial depression” (Hilliquit 37). The unhappiness amongst civilization at this time period led to social philosophers and reformers to find new systems to cope with these social problems of the working class. One of these reform ideas and probably the most radical of all theories proposed that which “discerns the root of all evils in competitive industry and wage labor, and advocates the reconstruction of our entire economic system on the basis of cooperative production” (Quint 10). This theory is referred to by the name of Socialism. This scheme of theory of newly social organization was supposed to be liberated from the abuses of modern society and invited humanity to adopt this happy country, a *Utopia* (Greek for “nowhere”) (Clark 24). Utopian socialists believed that they could gradually convert the entire world to their system “by a practical demonstration of its feasibility and benefits in a miniature society” (Hilliquit 78). During the nineteenth century, historians estimate that about several hundred

socialist utopia communities existed in various parts of the United States, and that the number of people whom participated in these experiments were hundreds of thousands (Hilliquit 38). Thus although these socialist utopian communities seemed ideal for a group of people living together for the betterment of a whole, unfortunately these ideas were lost in a capitalist American society. These socialistic utopias could not survive in a country with a competitive industry, and eventually social and economic problems within the communities would contribute to the demise of these utopias.

Early socialism thought focused more on humanitarian ideas rather than acting as a “political movement” (Hilliquit 18). Early socialists did not analyze the new system of production as researchers do today, but attempted to form a scheme “free from the abuses of modern civilization” and the current “malicious contrivances of the dominant powers in society” (Hilliquit 18). Groups of people came together to form communities whether either religious or secular “consecrated to harmony, solidarity, and happiness” (Hilliquit vi) in a world that has unfortunately culminated into a “hopelessly deliquescent where nothing could be taken for granted anymore” (Hilliquit vi). But did these “utopian socialistic” communities actually survive? According to Morris Hilliquit, he claims that these socialistic communities were in trouble from the start because these ideal socialistic communities “could not create a society all-sufficient in itself; they were forced into constant dealings with the outside world” (Hilliquit vii). The main reason of the failure of two Massachusetts ideal based communities, Brook Farm and the Northampton Association, is because they both lacked the financial means to stay alive in a capitalist society with “communal” and “cooperative” values of socialist thought. These social and economic factors are evident in both the failings of these socialist utopian communities. When talking about both of these communities, their high points, and what led to their demises in

capitalist America, it is important to discuss how these communities came to be. They came into existence from the notions of “Fourierism”.

Charles Fourier was born on February 7, 1772 in Besancon, France. His father was a wealthy merchant so it was imminent that he would follow the same path although he tried the business in his younger years and he was too much of an “honest man” for this business that involves both “the noble art of lying and the skill to sell” (Hilloquit 70). At the age of eighteen, he traveled through France, Holland, Belgium, and Germany where he took the opportunity to study the politics of these countries, the architecture of the important cities of these countries, and finally, he took the advantage to study the social conditions and the “mode of life” of the citizens of these countries (Hilloquit 70). It was after his travels that he became interested in social problems and he soon decided to forget about becoming a mercantile like his father and devoted himself to investigating these social dilemmas. Hilloquit states that “Fourier is the apostle of social harmony”, and how Fourier’s “system was a compromise, a scheme of harmony between capital and labor” (Hilloquit 78). Different from other utopias, his criticism in how things were at the time is not from the sufferings of the poor or the non- distribution of social wealth between the higher and lower classes, but from “the rebarbative conditions of labor and the uneconomical of modern production” (Hilloquit 79). Fourier wanted to solve these issues by establishing a social unit called the Phalanx which would “provide a field broad enough to allow everyone to exercise usefully his varied inclinations by means of Groups and Series, a large number of individuals...must associate together” (Hilloquit 74). The enormous economies and the great wealth of the Phalanxes would benefit all members working together and all the work done for this one cooperative, hence the socialist utopian community. It is important to note that by no means did Fourier identify himself as a communist because he did not want there to be any

community property in the Phalanx. He believed that “A diversity of wealth and enjoyments is essential to universal harmony” (Hilliquit 78). Charles Fourier wanted to establish a “trial phalanx” to try out his ideas, but he passed away before the establishment of both Brook Farm and the Northampton Association.

The Fourierist Movement was brought to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century when the American intellectual, Albert Brisbane, who was attracted to the humanitarian systems of the socialist utopias at this times, published in 1840 his “Social Destiny of Man” that had a great success in the U.S. and was read by all different socioeconomic classes of people who were interested in social conditions (Hilliquit 81). Other contributions to the spread of Fourierism in the U.S. were: the publications of the magazines the *Phalanx* and the *Harbinger*, frequent public lectures given by pioneers of the movement, and when the previously established utopian community in the U.S., Brook Farm, adopted the Fourierist values. The lectures was one way that led to big growth in the U.S. because the U.S. at this point in time was going through some of its own periodic crises such as the near cease of production and the sky-rocket in unemployment that led to an alarming amount of vagrants (Hilliquit 85). Fourierism in the United States promised to bring “permanent order and harmony into industry and mutual independence into the social relations of men” (Hilliquit 86). Although after both the phalanxes Brook Farm and the Northampton Association were established is when problems would be seen that would lead to their demises.

The Fourierist communities had many similar problems in general that led to their demise in capitalist America. One general problem was their size. Fourier had foreseen during his lifetime that a Phalanx would not be successful unless the phalanx had between one thousand five hundred to two thousand members, and that the phalanx contained a capital of about one

million francs (Hilliquit 87). Fourierists always idealized a large and wealthy association and warned against “hasty experiments” with insufficient members and funds (i.e. capital).

Unfortunately though, Fourierism had swept across the masses of the population and people were eager to form communities without knowing whether they had enough capital and/or people to form a beneficent community. In the Northampton Association, heavy debts and shortage of capital played a major role in the failure of this specific association (Clark 3). These were two of the major social and economic problems with socialist utopian communities.

Another general failure of Fourier’s plan of social organization was the imperfections of Fourier’s plan once the socialist communities were in existence (Hilliquit 88). “The supposed strength of the scheme, the compromise between the interests of capital and labor, between cooperation and exploitation, was, in fact, a source of great weakness” (Hilliquit 88). This notion is what was supposed to hold these socialist utopias together when emerging during industrial capitalistic society America at the time: the unity of the interests and endeavors of the people living in them. But instead it had a negative effect. Some of the people whom lived in these communities it was said by Fourierist’s most influential and eloquent man, Horace Greely, that the men in these communities were “destitute alike of capacity, public confidence, energy, and means—especially of means” (Hilliquit 89). The founders of the Fourierist movement advised that they use a big sum of capital to purchase the fertile and beautiful land in the vicinity of a populated city which proved difficult when the people of the communities did not have the money they needed to start these communities. Since most of these phalanxes were a distance from the city, the people living in these communities had no choice but to pursue farming although very few of them had any experience in farming and turned out to be “a pathetic and wearisome struggle of unskilled and awkward hands against the obstinate forces of a sterile and

unyielding soil” (Hilliquit 89). Besides the soil not being well to have farms, the mortgage was never paid off on the land purchased for these utopian socialist communities because since their crops failed, the communities did not have the means to pay off their debts of what they owed to the capitalist country in which they inhabited, the U.S. The average life of most of the Fourierist communities was about fifteen months. Besides a list of general reasons of the failure of Fourierist phalanxes, both Brook Farm and the Northampton Association had different specific reasons for why they did not survive in capitalist American society.

One of the main founders of Brook Farm was George Ripley. He was a key member of an informal humanitarian and philosophical club located in New England known as the “Transcendental Club”. The Transcendental Club discussed all the “possible and impossible problems of philosophy, politics, and religion” (Hilliquit 96), and their leading notion was the supremacy of “mind over matter” (Hilliquit 96). In 1840, George Ripley decided to leave this club, and instead put the Transcendentalism ideas into practices. In 1841, he established a community based on the ideas of the Transcendentalists in the town of West Roxbury, Massachusetts located approximately nine miles away from Boston. He bought the two hundred acre picturesque (but not the best for farming) land from Mr. Ellis which had formerly been a milk farm before. Ripley raised the money to buy the land from the sale of stock in his joint-stock proprietor community. The small community was originally comprised of twenty people including Ripley, his wife, Sophia Ripley, and other former members from the Transcendental Club such as writer Nathaniel Hawthorne. The community’s official name was “The Brook Farm Institute for Agriculture and Education”. One of its main principles in their Articles of Association was “to substitute a system of brotherly cooperation for one of selfish competition” (Hilliquit 97). They did not want to live by the capitalist principle of “competitive market”, and



instead wished for a “market socialism” by which the means of production or cooperatively or commonly owned. Also, another socialistic aspect of this community was “the property of the community should be represented by shares of stock and that all members be provided with employment according to their abilities and tastes” (Hilliquit 97). The system of this community had free education, free access to the library and bath, and free medical attendance. Finally, another socialistic ideal that Brook Farm had was “equal compensation” in which everyone earned the same set wage, and the community did not discriminate against gender, age, or social class. The principal feature of Brook Farm was the school which actually still stands today (a large white house). The school, overseen by Mrs. Ripley, ranged in educating infants, to men who were preparing for college. The school was a huge part of Brook Farm and established “a community feel” that brought all its members together (Hilliquit 97). Also, the school brought the utopian community the highest amount of income in which each child or adult was charged for his or her education. Overall, Brook Farm was composed of a delightful and pleasant community of men and women while existing in a capitalist country.

At Brook Farm’s beginning, education flourished, but the financial success was only moderate which possibly led to the demise of this socialistic utopia. In the following three years the community grew to about seventy people, but the community sought to cover its poverty and “the life of its members full of toil and devoid of earthly comforts” (Hilliquit 98) by showing tranquility and poetry, and of course their well-established school. Brook Farm converted to the popular Fourierist ideas at the beginning of 1844 thus changing their name to the “Brook Farm Phalanx” which led to Brook Farm to be the center of Fourierist propaganda.

Another demise of this socialist utopia in a capitalist country was that people became bored with their jobs because farming chores were not for everyone. An example would be

Nathaniel Hawthorne who actually ended up leaving the community because he became tired of helping Ripley shovel manure for a number of years. “It was no ‘picnic’ or ‘romantic episode’ or chance meeting ‘in a ship’s cabin’ to him (Hawthorne)” (Noyes 108). Hawthorne actually reflected some of his personal Brook Farm experiences in his novel the *Blithedale Romance* (Mcbee 33). The work on Brook Farm was not for the faint of heart which may have led to the demise of this utopian community, and the “lack of cooperation” of everyone not performing their jobs to their fullest potential.

Also, another problem posed by this utopian community was that other than the school which did well, most of the other jobs did not bring in enough income. The school brought in a steady income but it could not afford to pay off the debts of the farm and the other expenses that involved the construction of other building projects such as the Phalanx. The Brook Farm community was in debt which they could never pay off. Also, another source of Brook Farm’s debt in income was that some new people who joined (typical “visualists”) never fulfilled their pledges on their investments. Since some of the members of the community never paid to live there, the Farm itself had to pay for their accommodations which led to less capital for the Farm and thus an increase in income failures for the Brook Farm community. Also, in 1845, there was a smallpox epidemic from a young Brook Farm boy visiting his relatives in Boston who then brought the infection back to the Farm (Noyes 550). One-third of the Brook Farm population had to be sent into quarantine and the schools and all work shut down in which the people spent time caring for the sick. The break-out of smallpox cost the Farm another few thousand dollars in debt.

One of the issues that would also lead to the demise of this socialistic utopian community would have to do with the “main interest” of Brook Farm members which was the unitary

Phalanx building or what was referred to as the “Palace” (Hilliquit 100). The Palace was close to completion which would allow the community to admit more applications. This would allow more accommodations and to hopefully allow more resources which would hopefully strengthen the working capacity of the settlement. On a spring evening in 1846, the members of Brook Farm were having one of their traditional weekly nights of dancing when the Phalanx building accidentally caught on fire from the workmen who were putting the finishing touches on the building. The fire was a total destruction of resources on which the people of the community relied on. Also, “The fire proved fatal from the debts incurred during its construction of the large central living quarters” (Cavanaugh 558). In 1846, the movement was already on its way out, and the enthusiasm of its people was weakened. The disintegration of the people working together as a community, and the destruction of the Phalanx (represented as a notable social and economic icon of the community), both proved fatal to the further existence of the Brook Farm community (Hilliquit 100).

Overall, what led to Brook Farm’s demise was because it lacked the financial means to stay alive in a capitalist society. Brook Farm may have been a community of “discontented souls” and “dreamers” that could not operate sufficiently as a small cooperative community relying on their farm for food, shelter, and income while trying to survive in a capitalist system country. After the failing of the Brook Farm socialist utopia, it converted into a Martin Luther orphanage (Hilliquit 101).

The next utopian socialism community that also failed was the four hundred seventy acre land Northampton Association of Education and Industry (1842-1846). The Northampton Association, like Brook Farm, established during the 1840’s. The Northampton Association’s members “sought to build an American society in which the inequalities of class, race, and

gender would be destroyed” (Clark vii). The Northampton Association was founded on April 8, 1842 by a group of social reformers and abolitionists such as George William Benson (who served as President) and David Mack, whom organized a community around a collectively owned silk mill and wished to create a society in which “the rights of all are equal without distinction of sex, color or condition, sect or religion” (Clark & Buckley 3). The Northampton Association that grew from the Northampton Silk Company, was comprised of a stock company and an Industrial community, which would both conduct the “management and affairs” of the community in hopes of creating a “better state of society” based on a dualistic control of labor and capital (Mcbee 20). The Northampton Association strove to destroy the previously held conceived notions and barriers and operated on the socialist principle, that all people in the community are equal to one another. This is similar to how both children and adults no matter what occupation they performed on Brook Farm earned the same wages. Similarly to Brook Farm, the most important factor that led to the demise of the Northampton Association was that they did not have the financial means to keep operating as a socialistic utopian community in capitalistic America. Also, the Northampton Association, like Brook Farm, had a notable school system in their community (Mcbee 21). But in many ways, Brook Farm and the Northampton Association were very different from one another and including in the factors that led to their demises.

One key difference between Brook Farm and the Northampton Association is that Northampton was not a typical Fourierist Phalanx. The Northampton Association held greater resources and was more “industrialized” than Brook Farm ever was (Smart 372). The people of the Northampton Association received food and lodging at a public expense, and like Brook Farm, it was required that members work at least sixty hours per week (Smart 374). First, the

Northampton Association only started with a handful of members rather than what Fourier envisioned between one thousand five hundred, to one thousand six hundred as the minimum (Mcbee 29). Also, unlike Brook Farm and other Phalanx communities, the Northampton Association centered its life rather on manufacturing than agricultural (Mcbee 30). The presence of the established industry was founded upon the philosophy of Robert Owen who claimed that “MECHANISM AND SCIENCE will be extensively introduced to execute all the work that is over-laborious, disagreeable, or in any way injurious to human nature” (Mcbee 30). This is one reason that the Northampton Association focused its economic and social organization around manufacturing. The Northampton Association wanted to replace labor from which the drudgery of the outside world caused it to be the “degradation of a necessary means of education, health, and happiness” (Mcbee 21), with Fourier’s plan of associative labor in which “the members of the Association were to be free to select which branch of labor...they wished to work in, and the members of each division were to choose their own leader to keep account of the work and skill of every individual” (Mcbee 21). Also, the Northampton Association closely resembled Fourier’s plan of an “ideal society” in which the heavier parts of labor were performed by the stronger, and the lighter by the more “delicate individuals” (Mcbee 22). This system was thought to believe that it would produce greater happiness amongst people living at the Northampton Association, although it did struggle with some issues among the community.

One problem of the Northampton Association was that one of the greatest oversights when creating the community was an issue in communal living. There was a failure “to make specific provision at the time of organization for the accommodation of any large number of members and their families” (Mcbee 34). Also, with the influx of new members joining the association, some were not attached to family groups and had trouble adjusting to this new

communal lifestyle with multiple families living in the same quarters as one another. This situation prevented the community from functioning smoothly and collectively so the Association attempted to fix this issue by building an inexpensive Factory Boarding House. Although, this building meant to accommodate for more families and give them more space, one of the main problems is that it had a “very unfinished appearance” and the “entire building was lacking in the conveniences to which most of the members had been accustomed at home” (Mcbee 34). The community did not have the financial means to build the best homes like the ones outside their community in capitalist America.

Also, another issue of the utopian Northampton Association society was regarding the issue on religion. The Association was built on the belief without any distinction of religion, but “the carrying out of different religious views was, perhaps, the occasion of more disagreement than any other subject” (Noyes 158-159). The Association tried to convene by saying that “all had the right and opportunity of expressing their opinions or personal feelings” (Noyes 158). Unfortunately, the disagreement among the people living in the Association caused many worthy people to withdraw and go back to living in capitalist society America.

Also, another reason why the failing of the Northampton Association occurred because the work required of the community was often tedious and demanding. Staying in this socialist utopian community required many sacrifices that were demanded of the individuals for the “common good” of everyone living together. Also, much hard labor was required working for the manufacture of silk and “those whose hearts were not in the work withdrew” (Noyes 158). The ten-hour work day, tedious at times, was not for everyone.

Also, the association did not have too plentiful a supply of cash which resulted in a large debt. “People interested in the object of social reform were solicited to invest money in this

enterprise, no subscription to be binding unless the sum of \$25,000 was raised” (Noyes 158).

Unfortunately, the sum of \$25,000 was never raised and no one in the community contributed to help out the debt.

Another issue that resulted in the failing of this socialist utopian community was there was disagreement among some of business the leaders on the topic of communal control versus capital control, and how the community should be run (Noyes 159). There was a difference of opinion, principally among the trustees. This was evident in the Stetson Family correspondence. In Dolly Stetson’s first letter to her husband, James Stetson on June 26, 1844, she was very optimistic about the new Association in saying, “With regard to our staying in the Association with an Accumulating debt ...business at present seems looking up Lumber sells well and they have a lot of very good stock for the silk factory on hand” (Clark & Buckley 48). But looking at a letter from June 1, 1845, Dolly wrote to her husband that, “I know not when my spirits have been so depressed. I fear I have lost all confidence in God and man” (Clark & Buckley 116). Both of these letters differ in the tones that Dolly conveys to James. Her letter in 1845 is more pessimistic compared to her letter in 1844, that she had lost hope for the community. This was another reason why this socialist community failed, because people gave up trying to make it the best ideal community possible. This was evident when later in her 1845 letter, she discusses how George Benson and David Mack, two of the founders of this community, had decided that they were resigning and going back into the “outside world”. Mrs. Stetson and her children ended up leaving the community as well. Also important to note, the members whom were actually part of the association never exceeded one hundred and thirty, so the Association had a low membership which resulted in fewer capital and more debts. The dissolution of the Northampton Association took place on November 1, 1846 (Smart 374).

A great debt and the problems with financial means would be the main reasons why both of these socialistic utopias failed. What could this tell people today who are looking back at history? Maybe one can see more clearly now that when the idea of the Fourier Phalanx was proposed, there were many problems with it that the people in the nineteenth century did not see at the time. Also, someone can interpret that a capitalist system is far superior than a socialist system, and that it was not possible for these communities to rely totally on their communities for everything. They still sometimes had to leave and leave the community to buy certain goods and resources that the Brook Farm's agricultural system or the Northampton Association's silk company could not produce completely of its own accords. Socialism most likely failed in the U.S. "because of continuing internal disagreements over the nature and purposes of the movement, which prevented it from translating its essentially revolutionary ideology into meaningful political action" (Laslett 30). Although socialism utopias in the U.S. did fail, one should not downplay the notion socialism utopias completely. After the Fourier socialism utopian era came to a close, new ideas involving the creation of utopias started to form. An example would be William James Bliss and his idea to form a rural Christian socialist community near Boston in which the people of this community would live in unity and freedom. He claimed his idea of a socialistic utopia had no similarity to Brook Farm whatsoever (Quint 118). Also after the era of establishing socialist utopian communities, the spirit of socialism in America never died. An example would be in twentieth century America, Eugene V. Debs ran for president of the United States under the Socialist Party several times and gained six percent of the nation's vote in the election of 1912. Clearly America did and may still even today have supporters of socialism (Laslett 517). Even though both Brook Farm and the Northampton Association cease to exist today, the "spirit" and principles in which these communities were



created never died such as “their spirit of good-will and benevolence, that all embracing charity” (Noyes 160). Therefore Americans socialism utopias should not be completely remembered as a failed experiment in the U.S., but rather remembered as a “learning experience” in which under its influence, the utopias worked for a good cause with the hopes of bringing people in a community together in which the inhabitants could live in peace and harmony with one another.

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