

Addenda

So many options, so little space.

How would I incorporate this content into my classes:

At a minimum, we cover, as the MCATs promise one day we will, USI in the High School, I will spend time on the concept of utopia with early colonization, ask students to create a contemporaneous utopian community of their own, based upon the attributes of the early American endeavors...In groups they will do it, developing a business plan as the joint stock fund raisers need then and entrepreneurs need today. In their power point or otherwise visual presentation, they will have to include a mission statement, goals, leadership/organization, geographical preferences, sustainability and philosophy. They will also create a tangible, visible replica of the utopia...using material such as clay, grass, paint, wood and miscellaneous crafts supplies. After the unit each group will put their project on one of the shelves in the room, so that variations of Utopia are never out of sight. They will do a summary written assignment describing their impressions of community planning and fulfillment. This assignment remains in their writing folders.

When we cover the Second Great Awakening and the Reform Era , probably two months after new school year jitters and energy have faded, each group will reassemble. They will have been introduced to a new wave of utopists and generally done a research project on an aspect of reform in society. It will interesting to see how relationships and group dynamics will have invariably changed, and how the original group deals with it. Tasting a bit of communal reality.. in the enduring group. They will revisit their utopia, and modify as they see fit for the changing times. For example, those who settled on a small plot and close to Boston may fell the strain on land and population pressure. Those with family based rice farms without slave labor in Georgia may question their longevity. They revise their original community and present it with explanations of the modifications.

As the year progresses, and we arrive at the sixties, sometime in the early spring, each original utopia reassembles and chooses from a lottery I create from the above research. They research and learn about the commune. We carefully discuss the meaning of the term, the causes of utopianism, and specific factors that led to a resurgence in the late 60s onward. Again they will have to work with the founding members they chose, unless they can deploy an exit strategy the group agrees upon. (after all it is the Spring...but ideally this was in their early planning..)

Each will research and present creatively their designated commune. In addition to substantive research and presentation, they will create a physical , hands on model. I have found that in my Anthropology class, hands on work as a group to build communities(in that case it's the whole show- civilization) the bonding and cooperation are exceptional and enduring. Students will again present to each other their findings. These assessments will be peer based.

Half a class spent meandering though and individually reflecting upon the compilation of utopian communities.

Next day, perhaps with advance notice, A final assessment- in class essay- of all the utopian communities, which would you live on and why?

Envisioning Another Now:

American Utopianism and the Next Great Awakening

Rachel Meunier was raised on The Farm in Tennessee. She admits that while she knew she grew up on a commune, she never quite knew what a commune was although reference to it invariably evoked concern that she was “commie” or belonged to a cult of some sort. More recently it was assumed that that she believes in free love and her parents are drug users. These stereotypes are indicative of mainstream culture’s understanding of a profound social movement that was reinvigorated in the late 1960s and continues today. The reality is that while most communes “share” communally, most also allow private property, income and enterprise. Few actually mandate collectivization of resources and property. Furthermore, the term commune as such can be used interchangeably with utopian society. Utopianism(here not intended as Thomas More did, to mean “Nowhere”, but rather in a very general sense, someplace *very other and very much better*. The vision is manifested in a deliberate effort to create a community with a shared ideology and commitment to pursue an alternative way of life that fosters better, healthier individual and human experiences or growth. The visions and executions were diverse and numerous. *The Directory of communes*(now in its fourth edition) listed just over 200 in 1970. This is an approximate not a complete number. I have spoken with a woman who co-founded a farm near Blueberry Point Maine and it was not recognized in the index. I suspect there are more than a few cases like Circle Farm. In any event, it is safe to say that like the Great Awakenings of the mid seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the resurgence of separatist communal groups was a deliberate and critical response to social, economic and even religious trends in American society. Three hundred years ago, pioneering Puritans established a counter modern community that would return men to purity, piety, godliness, “prosperity” and ultimately, salvation. These communal aspirations bear striking resemblance to their late nineteenth century counterparts and the hundreds, perhaps thousands, as some sociologists and historians such as Ron E. Robert, Rosabeth Moss-Kanter and Michael Feldman have suggested, of utopian communities in between.

While the utopian communities in American History bear multiple common characteristics, the most important distinction seems to be in the basic nature of the earlier as opposed to later movements. Those communes or utopian societies of the pre-civil war nation were fundamentally religious. After Reconstruction the acceleration of industrialization, dislocation, poverty and alienation accelerated the growth of politico-economic communes. Like their predecessors, they endeavored to provide a healthier and more fulfilling experience –socially, spiritually and materially, for the members. Bruce Schulman suggested that “Brown rice became the icon of anti-modernity.” **(Schulman page 90)** It also blossomed as a staple in the communal diet. As Puritan colonists endeavored to purify their lives, so did hundreds of communalists in the twentieth century. Disconnectedness, idealization and improvement have also been the hallmarks of the American experience since the inception of its colonies. It remains an ethos that has never evacuated the American conscience and the 1970s represent another resurgence of these factors.

In the late twentieth century the United States experienced and continues to experience a renaissance of utopian communities. Since the 1960s these movements have had a decidedly different nature than their historical counterparts. They are what sociologists call psycho-social, a trend that emerged during the Great Depression with the conception of urban lot cultivation. I would argue that this growing focus on the psycho-social has continued to blossom since the communal heyday of the 1970s. This is evidenced by the recent surge beginning with the continued exacerbation of environmental crisis and recession the early 1990s. In the mid 1970s the Catholic theologian Thomas Berry was one of the first to propose that there was a crisis of the earth stemming from a spiritual crisis. He suggested that humanity in general, but Americans in particular, suffer a type of “spiritual autism” in that we no longer felt a connectedness to other life on the planet. **(Sternfeld, page 42)** To this effect , the Dominican Sisters in Caldwell, New Jersey established Genesis Farm. With the land grant, Sister Miriam MacGillis spearheaded a community with a teaching center based on a commitment to the eco-theology, residences built with hay bales and solar panels, and a highly efficient working farm. Sister MacGillis had abundant counterparts in the previous centuries as persuasive leadership is often part and parcel of the utopian movement. Paolo Soleri’s “Arconsanti” in Cordes Junction Arizona is a classic embodiment of this late century trend. “Arconsanti” is an Italian word he takes to describe a harmonious marriage between architecture and ecology. Its intent is to counteract

the spiritual dispersal caused by physical dispersal. In the post-modern scenario, no culprit is greater than the automobile. Like his counterparts in other communal movements, Soleri countered his contemporaries. For example he loathed the architectural emphases of Frank Lloyd Wright, who celebrated the cultural trends of privacy, materialism and scale. As a result, he began a “futuristic city “ in 1980. In the space he acquired, he plans to accommodate 5,000 people in 2% of the space such a population would need in an average suburb. Not surprisingly, the impersonal and destructive automobile has a remote place. Residents live less than a ten minute walk from work. The spaces maximize socialization by utilizing piazzas, balconies and terraces. Despite the fact that Soleri’s vision has been a sporadic work in progress(as of 2006 there were 50 residents) its vision is reflective of the very spirit that catapulted countless communities across the American landscape during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

As Soleri is critical of excessive consumption and physical dispersal as the primary agents of spiritual and moral dissipation, the Puritans and Separatists chastised the materialism, pious decline and moral erosion of their fellow countrymen and the religious establishment (visa vis the temporal establishment as well). They too, ultimately left as a radical branch, and successive waves of Puritans sought to create a more harmonious idyll in God’s wilderness. While it is true that these utopists, like the subsequent Quakers, Catholics, Baptists, Hugenots, Jews and others sought refuge, the same can be said of their nineteenth and twentieth century counterparts. The village green and common grazing ground of Puritan New England have been replicated on hundreds of modern communal farms and even urban reclamation endeavors like City Farm in Chicago and the Green Guerillas of New York City. City Farm is the vision of Kenn Dunn, who has roots in the farmlands of Kansas. He also holds a P.H.D. in Philosophy from the University of Chicago. Chicago has 80,000 vacant lots. Dunn has coordinated a program to lease such lots, recondition them and cultivate them. City Farm abuts another of Chicago’s failed housing projects and the farm lot smacks of success. On it and others like it, Dunn encourages the unemployed and homeless to apply for work and internships. The harvests are sold at reduced costs to the local residents. The exotic fruits and vegetables are also sold to high end restaurants. These proceeds enable further acquisitions and cultivation. In 1973 in New York City, artist and activist Liz Christy launched a movement (soon to be spearheaded by a mascot dressed as a green gorilla) to turn small vacant land into city gardens. Over a thirty year time period 850 gardens have been established and about 54* have been transferred to the Parks Department’s custody as permanent compliments to the urban landscape.

. Land has invariably been a medium for utopian communities. What John Winthrop envisioned was replicated in the pioneering communities whose deliberate visions flowed from the shores of New England across the Great Plains to the far West. The archetype of the Puritan experiment was replicated in the visions and experiments of Mother Ann Lee and Father Joseph at Mt Lebanon, John Humphrey Noyes at Oneida, Brigham Young for Utah, George Rapp and his German followers outside Pittsburgh, Robert Owen at New Harmony, Arcadia Co-housing in North Carolina, Drop City in Colorado and Camphill Village in New York. ..The list is long and fascinating for its diversity. In its very essence the scale of this historical tribute to the democratic experiment. The vast continent seems to have provided the Bunsen Burner for the transplantation of hope and pioneering experimentation in the American experience.

One legitimate and ostensible distinction between the religious communes of the first two Great Awakenings especially in Massachusetts Bay is that the latter communes did not expect to change society, just their corner of it. Theirs was a retreat to redefine and recreate, not proselytize. Arguably, all utopian communities were/ are retreatist, but some are active and some are passive: the former wants to change society. Regardless of the strategy, all reject the prevailing established order in favor of one that will facilitate salvation in some facet- self actualization, personal growth, truth or divine grace. One also finds that the modern movements were considerably less controlling and authoritative than the religious utopias of previous centuries. However, in all instances, utopian communitarianism reflected a "desire to find and apply meaning in a chaotic world."(**Felman, pg xvi**).

*At the time of publication of Joel Sternfeld's " SweetEarth". Sadly enough Liz Christy succumbed to Breast Cancer in 1986 and the signature garden at Houston and Bowery is threatened by the construction of an upscale apartment complex

It is important to note that all such American communities were clearly historical by-products. Like their predecessors the commune members of the seventies and after rejected the establishment as “sinful”. They stressed the possibility of perfection via a restructuring of social institutions and they sought a recreation of the lost unity between man and man, man and god and man and himself. **(Kanter, pg. 8)** The continued failure in Vietnam further stained the American conscience with anger, frustration and disunity. In the case of the post Woodstock era, a litmus test reveals the same climate as one of the mid eighteenth or nineteenth centuries; persecution, disillusion, a spiritual yearning, disgust with cultural values and a distrust of the established authority. By the end of the Nixon presidency, American confidence in their leadership was at its (twentieth century) nadir. The continued failure in Vietnam further strained the American consciousness. An economic crisis sparked by the spending of the Vietnam and Great Society eras was spiked by the oil embargo and chronic creeping inflation and unemployment (stagflation) creating a record misery index for the remainder of the decade. Mass production, entertainment industries and suburban life compounded American cultural disillusion, especially with the youth. Thus the average age was 26 on the communes studied in the early 1970s. **(Aidala and Zablocki pg. 93)** A growing number of citizens saw an America that was increasingly plasticized, culturally vacuous and immoral.

The degradation of the earth was their tipping point. What is critical to note is that those utopian communities that emerged and endured the decade and longer, were not spontaneous acts of rebellion by college dropouts who depended on their parent’s financial allotments. They were not polyerotic houses, acid dens and nudist camps. Those were exactly the type of “communes” that failed. They lacked planning, a vision and a strategy to deliver the vision. They were not viable for they were infantile. Consequently, many of these members between the ages of 18-25 tended to roll to different communes. On the other hand, when one examines the deliberate efforts like Alpha Farm, Acorn Community, The Children of God, Twin Oaks or Heathcote, a blueprint existed, leadership was established, even if it rotated, and a schedule of productivity existed. While there were religious communes ranging from Buddhist to Hindu to mystic to yoga to transcendental to New Age to Orthodox Judaism, the majority were not based upon such an axiom. They were as Rosabeth Moss Kanter suggests, psychosocial critiques that rejected the established emphasis on achievement in favor of a “credo of self actualization” or “personal growth” **(Kanter pg 7)** Sociologists generally classify the decade’s communes as follows: Christian Religious, Eastern Religious, Political, Hippie or Countercultural, Alternative Family, Cooperative Household and Personal Growth. Benjamin Zablocki and Angela Aidala did a comprehensive study of communal populations and experiences that is worth

the perusal of an interested reader. At a minimum, it is a tribute to the diversity of the communes. The demographics are unsurprising but comprehensive. For example, in the Eastern religious communes surveyed, 54% of the members came from Democratic household and 26% came from Republican families. (**Aidala and Zablocki pg. 93**) 71% percent of commune members were not married and never had been. (**ibid., pg. 92**). Space does not allow a detailed elaboration on the various communes of the seventies and eighties, but Twin Oaks/ Acorn Community and Alpha Farm serve as excellent paradigms for the era.

In 1948 B.F. Skinner , a controversial but much respected Harvard professor published “Walden Two”. In this seminal publication he advocated that human behavior was is externally conditioned. From such a principle he projected a theory that punishment is ineffective. Thus the children of “Walden Two” were only rewarded for good behavior and they were not spanked. Group care was also encouraged. Twin Oaks near Louisa, Virginia emerged in the wake of several *Walden Two* efforts near Ann Arbor (SDS country). Somewhat ironically, moneyand planning were part of the strategizing meetings. Yet by 1970, there were nearly 25 communalists livi ng at Twin Oaks. Twin Oaks may have look hip- long hair, unshaven ,farm community-but it was not. They have embraced technology, raised pigs, chickens and calves etc. More importantly, they manufacture hammocks which have come to be the signature product of both Twin Oaks and Acorn, its progeny. Twin Oaks had a labor credit system, whereby all members participate in the allocation of jobs to be done each week. Each job has credits attached in inverse proportion to the desirability of the job(determined by how many people sign up to do it!): cleaning the septic system would have a high point count, weeding the garden or making hammocks would not. Each member has labor credits to complete, but that never precludes some standing and chatting while others work. Twin Oaks also made me laugh when I read about it. Fundamental was the “Generalized Bastard”. Engels and Marx could have used one in their *Manifesto*. This individual “ is to be officially nasty.”(**Roberts pg. 94**).If a team of workers is having an issue with the relative contributions of another worker, they can bring in a third party (the GB) who can deliver a more objective grievance to the offender. Twin Oaks members work to live, they do not “worship work.”(**ibid page 98**). There are no gender distinctions, as many of the hip communes were prone to. The work hierarchy fosters a climate of egalitarianism. Twin Oaks was more or less monogamous, as are its offspring like Acorn Community (no pun intended).Twin Oaks restricted drugs, with the possible exception of pot, which was less common than cigarettes. It also made deliberate efforts to kindle

relationships with the larger community. These factors helped kindle cordial relations with other neighboring Virginians, who adjusted their preconception of acid hippies next door. They readily accept new machinery and technology to facilitate production and many members drive to cities like n to earn money to support community endeavors. Twin Oaks accepted the price of stability, it was practical but also ideal, and its active legacy continues today.

Acorn Community, also in Virginia, was established in 1993. It outlines itself as “ a young community seeking ways of living that are cooperative, caring and ecologically sustainable.”(**Sternfeld, pg. 8**) Like its parent community, all members work in exchange for basic needs in a realistic but idealistic fashion. Today, the commune is financially based upon tinnery crafts, which may sound like a rural woman’s winter hobby but in fact it helps keep the commune well in the black. Apparently their rainbow lights, hanging candle holders and planters, in conjunction with their Southern Exposure feed exchange, which sells heirlooms and open pollinated *vegetables, herbs and flowers, generate s significant revenue* Twin Oaks and Acorn Community thrive as centers of communal commitment to human and moral values counter intuitive to most Americans. They are children of the sixties, but unlike many others, they did not “burn out and fade away”.

In 1971, Alpha Farm in Oregon was established by four Philadelphians. Like so many contemporary counterparts, they had made a deliberate decision not to protest but “to live ourselves into to future we seek.”(**Sternfeld pg. 10**) This could be the mantra for late Boomers, the Gen X and Y communes. The four bought 280 acres of open coats range. Nine of the original members are still there. The current population of 35 includes 15-20 adults and children who reside at the farm. The community continues to adhere to the Quaker principle that each person has some truth and all are trustworthy. All decisions are by consensus. They earn a collective living by farming and rural mail delivery. They also run a café bookstore “Alpha Bit” that is a gratifying and important source of revenue and interaction with the outside community. In addition, Alpha Farm almost entirely exits the paradigm with their consulting wing. One of the founding members, Caroline Estes, has become so experienced in the craft of cooperation that she has grown a firm and it provides a consulting service to train others or to mediate. Estes is so adept at consensus building that she has been hired to train or facilitate in organizations as diverse as Hewlett-Packard and the National Green Party. (**ibid pg. 10**)

*G MOs are singlehandedly a monumental threat to this industry, as they are uncontrolled and have 20x the outcrossing capacity of open pollinated(natural) seeds.

Communes like Alpha Farm have and always will rely heavily in group meetings to communicate on a regular(often daily) basis. This is a common strategy for productive, cooperative and harmonious It might be a prescription American society ought to carefully consider, especially given the longevity and complacency of such communes

There is no single formula for communes in the seventies. There has never been one in American History and there is not one now. Earthhaven(est. 1994) is an ecovillage in North Carolina. The residents have built earthships, dwellings of an in the earth, utilizing used tires, glass and cans. Each has solar panels, rain catchments and filtration systems. The residences are built into the hills of 320 plus acres they own in the mountains. The flatlands are utilized for agriculture, most of which sustains the residents- who work off site as well. Heathcote is a Maryland community based upon the principles of permaculture- permanent agriculture, permanent culture, as introduced by Ralph Borsodi's *School of Living* in the 1930s. Mildred Loomis bought a gristmill and surrounding lands in 1965, and the community has flourished since. In 2002, Eretz Ha Chaim was established as an organic Kosher farm in Sunderland Massachusetts in. While it may reflect a growing interest on the part of Jews, some orthodox, to return to traditional farming, it also effects the historical experience of utopian communities in American History. The commune plans self sufficiency, synagogue, family and school to be the pillars of the community. In Iowa, Mitzva Farms, a clever entrepreneurship, has developed on a similar ethos. These communalist produce Yetta's Chedda, A Bis'l Swiss'l and Mazel Rella. (**Sternfeld pg. 32**) They too, are realists in a capitalists society. Dr. Patch Adams moved with 19 other adults, 3 of whom were physicians, and kids to a six bedroom house. They called it a hospital. Between 1983 and 1995, they saw 15,000 patients. The initial doctor patient interview was 3-4 hours for each, so that they would "fall in love with eachother". (**Sternfeld page 44**) The founding principle, beyond communal living and cooperation, was the humanization of healthcare. Today the commune is fundraising to create hospital/house on 300 acres of land in West Virginia(the most medically underserved state in the nation)(**ibid page 44**). At the Hillsboro Institute, there is no charge to patients, no malpractice is accepted, massage, yoga and acupuncture are offered and the staff and patients stay together. There are an additional forty beds for anyone-from musician to electrician – seeking a service vacation. Biosphere was a radical endeavor initiated in 1992. The 7.2 million dollar project shatters the physical paradigm of communes. In Oracle Arizona, planners attempted to recreate human habitats, a rain forest, savanna, marsh and one million gallon ocean. They sent gathers around the globe to collect some

3,800 species. The humans, animal and plant species were sealed in the giant “spheredome” only to be victims to the first dreadful year of El Nino. Chaos erupted as plants failed to photosynthesize, animals ran amuck, people starved, hoarded and the experiment, like so many “scientific” endeavors before it, self imploded. It would be fabulous to do a comparative study with New Harmony. In any event, the point is that utopian communities-here understood to be communes in which a specific population rejects aspects of the prevailing culture share a common philosophy and goals, envision and deliberately create a separate community- have always existed in the American Democratic experience and probably always will. They are inherent in the fundamental nature of the temperament of Americans, immigrants and the laboratory we call democracy. Erich Fromm said mankind is the only species for whom his own existence is a problem. The history of utopian societies, stemming from Plato to New Urbanism would appear to be unquestionable evidence of this fact.