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Chapter 4: Communitarianism

Intersection of Communitarianism and Abolitionism, Environmentalism, Health Care Reform, Public Education, Socialism and Political Radicalism, and Women's Rights

Throughout their long history in the United States, communes have drawn membership because of their willingness to support experimentation of a wide variety of lifestyles. They shared a belief that social as well as personal failings were the by-product of flawed institutions and value systems that could be eliminated through the support members derived from communal living. While some communes were overtly religious, all shared a belief or philosophy of the perfectibility of human behavior and institutions.

The antebellum American communes aimed at restructuring economic relationships to combat the disruptive forces of the nascent Industrial Revolution. Many of this era's communes sought to create a form of socialism in a capitalist society, believing that materialism marred a person's inner goodness. They sought to restore a sense of community and social harmony in the face of the growing stratification caused by the market economy. At communes like New Harmony, Indiana, jobs were designed to be aesthetically and intellectually fulfilling. Communes influenced by French philosopher Charles Fourier were organized as joint-stock companies and attempted to place men and women in jobs most suited to their talents. Shaker communes practiced a rigid form of "Christian socialism," rejecting personal material possessions. Early anarchists such as Josiah Warren Stephen Pearl Andrew experimented in mutualist economics at Modern Times commune on Long Island in the late 1850s. Sporadic attempts occurred at forming industrial communes after the Civil War, some inspired by utopian writer Edward Bellamy. In the early 20th century, pacifist Scott Nearing and his wife Helen Knothe Nearing

established a commune in Maine, pioneering cooperative farming and lumbering practices. In the 1960s a new wave of communes rejected capitalism and frequently urban life as well and turned to cooperative farm living. Many of today's "intentional communities" feature high levels of economic cooperation.

American communes throughout history have frequently sponsored experiments in living and family arrangements. This was not the rule in most religiously motivated communes, although the Shaker's and some religious pietistic communes' commitment to celibacy challenged conventions. Most antebellum communitarians believed that marriage and family obligations distracted persons from their duty to serve humanity. Oneida practiced communal child-rearing and "complex marriage," in which members had numerous sexual partners. Oneida also experimented in birth control and early versions of eugenics practices. Some other communes practiced forms of sexual anarchism or free-love arrangements.

Many nineteenth-century American communitarians believed that conventional gender roles hindered women's intellectual and spiritual development. While there were exceptions, most communes of this era promoted the liberation of women. The Shakers' founder Mother Ann Lee believed that God was both male and female and therefore, the genders were at least spiritually equal. Both sexes were represented in each Shaker commune's ruling hierarchy as elders and deacons. It was Charles Fourier who actually coined the term "feminism" in 1837, and sought to incorporate it into his model for communal living. In Fourierist phalanxes in the 1840s and 1850s, women were supposed to have equal employment opportunities and receive equal compensation for their labor. Women also were to be accorded an equal say with men in the running of the phalanxes. After the Civil War, a small all-female commune or "Commonwealth" functioned for several decades first in Belton, Texas, and then near Washington, D.C. The

revived feminist movement since the 1960s also has fostered many new experiments in politically motivated communal living among women.

Recent years have witnessed a revitalization of religiously inspired communitarianism. Critics have branded communities with charismatic authoritarian leadership as “cults,” because followers are intentionally isolated from much of modern society. In many cases, these modern religious communes have practiced polygamy or treated females as inferior members. While similar practices have roots in some earlier communities, such as Oneida, the recent trend is out of line with gender equality experimentation practiced by most nineteenth century communes.

Experiments in education occurred at many communes but at none as prominently as Brook Farm near Roxbury, Massachusetts, in the mid-19th century. Brook Farm proved unable to sustain itself through agriculture or handicraft industry, but its educational operations attracted students from across the country and provided the commune with most of its revenue. This commune hosted what would today be labeled a “pre-school,” an elementary or “primary” school, and a six-year college preparatory course. The school was directed by Sophia Ripley, wife of Brook Farm’s founder, George Ripley. The curriculum contained all of the expected classical elements—Greek, Latin, philosophy, mathematics, literature and history—but Brook Farm’s educational philosophy also anticipated John Dewey’s progressive-education concepts in the early 20th century of learning from experience. While there was no set schedule for study, each student as well as each faculty member was required to devote two hours daily to manual labor, mainly in the commune’s agricultural operations. Brook Farm Communitarians also sought to establish “perfect freedom of relations between students and teaching body.” Teachers refrained from corporal punishment of students and instead strove to instill self-discipline and a love of learning. Students were encouraged to actively debate with their instructors.

Some communes pioneered in health care reforms. Bronson Alcott's commune of Fruitlands in the mid-1840s practiced a vegetarian diet of grains, herbs, and fruits. Many female inhabitants of Brook Farm took up wearing loose-fitting "Bloomers." Other antebellum communes promoted hydropathy. Almost all antebellum communes observed variants of "manual labor" practices, not solely on economic principles, but also in the belief that regular physical exercise was a healthy balance for intellectual activities. In the 20th century, communal living experiments frequently incorporated vegetarian or vegan diets, as well as undertaking organic farming.

Many of the most modern communes in the late 20th and early 21st centuries practice back-to-the land radical environmentalism as well as some form of collectivist or anarchist-inspired economics. In such communities, dwellings are built with ecologically clean materials, which are designed to minimize their use of fossil fuels and other resources that could harm the environment. Often charged with attempting to unmake civilization, such eco-communes like earlier communitarian efforts argue that they are experimenting in reinventing economic and social practices so that humans can live in complete harmony with nature.

One not well-remembered intersection of the communitarian movement with other reforms concerns abolitionism. Abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison maintained great interest in utopian communities in New England, visiting them and reporting on their activities to antislavery readers. In the early 1840s the famous abolitionist Sojourner Truth resided for a time in a religious perfectionist commune in New York City and then the more secular Northampton Association of Education and Industry in western Massachusetts. Early feminist Frances Wright briefly converted her plantation Nashoba in western Tennessee into an experiment in cooperative interracial living in the 1820s. The most significant overlap of these two antebellum reforms

were the series of communities founded by and for African Americans with the purpose of providing them vocational and academic training. Launched in the Midwest and Canada with the financial support of sympathetic but occasionally paternalistic whites, many of these communities functioned from the 1840s until Emancipation as living demonstrations of the capacities of African Americans.

The history of the American communitarian movement reveals a persistent interaction with contemporary reform activities. While seeming to desire refuge from the perceived social and economic problems of society, communitarians often sought to make their new societies working models of reformed human interaction. Secularly inspired communitarians evidenced a high degree of non-conformity. Members celebrated the “freedom” in their communes to experiment in a wide range of individual and collective behaviors aimed at improving human life. Outsiders regularly visited communes to witness the success of such experiments and most communes actively publicized such reformist activity. Communitarians therefore have always held a central position in America’s reform movements.

See also EUGENICS; RELIGIOUS BENEVOLENCE CONFRONTS MODERN URBAN PROBLEMS; WORKERS’ REPOSE TO EARLY INDUSTRIALIZATION

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Further Reading

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