

COMMUNES AND THE AMERICAN SOCIETY — Part 1

— a sociological view of communes today and a glance at their historical counterparts of yesterday. — by Curtiss Ewing, M. A.

Communes, or utopian communities, are to social science what the weather was to Mark Twain: everyone talks about them, but nobody does anything about them.

The layman has four ways of finding out something about communes. First, he may read journalistic descriptions of communities where the author spent a day and which examine phenomena like excessive dirt, open sexual activity, and the like. Second, he may find fleeting reference to communes in the works of social critics who include the communities as examples of how far-out the younger generation has gotten. Thirdly, he may again find fleeting reference to communes in works by social scientists who use them as examples to illustrate a theory. Fourthly, he may go to a commune on his own and allow himself to be tolerated by the members, while he observes a form of social life that he finds difficult to understand.

However, there is another approach; one which focuses on the social background of communes, as well as their social structure and values. This is the first in a series of articles about communes in which the author hopes to adopt this approach.

One reason why the sociologist is interested in communes is that communal movements are phenomena which have repeated themselves twice in the United States during the last century and a half. When a social phenomenon arises twice in a culture, it indicates that conditions in the society in which it arises may be examined and may reveal things hitherto unknown. Therefore, the first task of these articles will be to communicate something about the social and cultural source of communal movements.

Another reason for taking communes seriously is that they are complete social systems in themselves, i.e., institutions like any other. The various facets of these small social systems are more easily discerned, however, than are the same dimensions in other institutions. They are communities that are small enough to be analyzed; they are isolated from other social institutions and, therefore, display a lower degree of influence from other institutions. In a sense they may be seen as social laboratories where one may make observations about how communities work.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND. The view that communes are institutions comprising a rebellion against society, or are a "counter culture," is not quite accurate. Instead, they are both stimuli and reflections of the society in which they grew. Utopian thought has been a recurrent phenomenon since Plato, and literary utopias reflect the major trends of the thought of the day. During certain periods in history



Assembly Hall at Economy, Penn. Founded in the mid-1820's by the Harmonists on the banks of the Ohio River 20 miles north of Pittsburgh.

utopia, or the perfect society, has been seen as existing in another land or on a distant continent. During other periods, the "heaven on earth" may be seen as existing here, but not now. In other words, depending on the social conditions of the culture in which the utopian work was written, the perfect society may exist in a different dimension which is either spatial or temporal.

Further, the great ideas of each century strongly influence the concept of the literary utopia. Rousseau conceptualized the solutions for man's problems as existing in the political sphere of society, and he wrote *The Social Contract* on the basis of the new view of human nature that was current during the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers saw man as good, not bad, as had the adherents of the doctrine of original sin. For Rousseau, man and human nature were good; it was the social institutions which he created which were bad. Political freedom was to be the cure for the ills of the world, and man was to be released from the bonds of the static institutions which prevailed during feudal days.

Darwin and Freud influenced utopian thinking. With Freud, man again took on the look of an animal who needed structured institutions to control his evil "id." This concept returned man to the garbage heap and social institutions to the pedestal. During the days when physicists believed in Newtonian principles, which saw the universe in a mechanical, deterministic way, the utopian plans took on a similar form. B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* shows that, as knowledge of the laws of human behavior grew, scientists saw this knowledge as a possible solution to the problems of society.

Hence, the idea of the perfect society has been influenced and colored by the ideas of the intellectual giants who lived during different periods. The pattern has varied over time. Utopian works always accompany new kinds of knowledge, as if life on

earth could be turned into a heaven by the acquisition of knowledge. Society and social forms are cultural phenomena, and views of man and his relationship to social institutions have been subject to changes in knowledge in the areas of science, political philosophy, and geography.

The influences giving rise to the concepts of the literary utopias are easy to detect in comparison with the complexities of the concrete societies which were the spawning beds of the actual utopian communities. Ideas alone do not create new societies. To find the explanation for the birth of hundreds of communes and utopian communities in the United States during the nineteenth century, it is necessary to look at the condition of the American institutions of the day. What did "the establishment" in American society look like when the Shakers, Hutterites, the Mormons and others decided to found their own communities and, hence, avoid participation in the established American institutional system?

America was in the throes of industrialization, urbanization, and democratization in the 1840's when many communes were founded. Industrialization changed the way a man earned a living. It demanded a personality that was machine-like in its obedience to the clock and to the machine he worked. The values needed to survive in an agricultural economy were not functional for the man who now worked the machine and who must live in an urban center where the jobs were. The urban industrial life made the old institutions dysfunctional. The extended, "multi-childed" family could not survive apartment living. Methods of socializing children, concepts about barter and trade, of marital stability, of authority all had to adapt to life built around the machine.

Besides his personality, his family patterns, his economic habits, his political beliefs, the man of the 1840's saw the end of the national banking system, the end of old ideas about the American class structure and other institutions, such as the original political parties which had grown up as America became a nation. Even his religion was not extant in the old form. The Anglican Church in the South and the Congregational Church in the North lost their old cohesion and gave way to sects and camp meetings which sprang up like ragweed.

The new democratization meant that many old American political institutions, previously dominated by the old trading elite, were now left vacant. This elite saw greater opportunities for profit in the new, growing industries; thus, they gave up politics as a source of income. In the presence of this vacuum, that old political institution of the American aristocracy, Tammany Hall, was taken over by immigrants from Europe. As its social base was changed, so also was its function. Tammany Hall became a political force for immigrant interests.

American intellectuals left their accustomed sanctuaries, the universities, and took to the small towns and to solitary life styles. The New England Trans-

cendentalists rejected the safety, support, and prestige that the universities offered. They preferred to work outside of the American institutional framework.

At the same time that the economic, political, educational and religious patterns were changing, floods of immigrants poured into the country bringing with them values, skills, and life styles from the villages of Europe. They lived in the worse slums America has ever known. They tried to change their cultural patterns of family, occupation, politics and education to conform with the new styles they met in America. Millions of people entered the social system with deeply held attitudes, habits, and cultures. They worked in the factories and on building construction. They began to aim for economic and political power and elected some of their own to political office. They began to take on the value system of the country which admired education, political participation, Protestantism and the machine.

While American intellectuals and the "mountain men" took to the hills and pioneer settlers took to the plains, groups of immigrants, as well as native Americans took to the countryside. They founded little societies and lived in groups organized around cultish ideas that ranged from ascetic Christianity to political anarchy. Some of these societies had a life span of four hundred years, counting the time they existed in Europe; some lasted less than four months. There were communes founded by blue collar workers, Transcendental intellectuals, middle-class Socialists, French Revolutionaries. Some were religious, some intellectual, and some were Socialist, Marxist or Fourierist. The nineteenth century communes contained people from all classes and nationalities.

Two trends in the development of nineteenth century American institutions were clear. First, the democratization of the political system, the mechanization of industry and the growth of factories, the disorganization of the established churches and the necessity of adapting to urban life caused radical changes in social institutions like the family.

Second, values, those culturally determined attitudes of mind which change to accommodate changing circumstances, developed to support the new social structure. America developed myths about independent action, the common man, the benefits of education and ambition. The man who saw opportunity in the needs of the new society, and took advantage of them, came to be admired as representing the new value system. Thus, the explorers, the industrialists, the capitalist barons—the men who put to use the vast resources, human and natural, of the continent—were idealized.

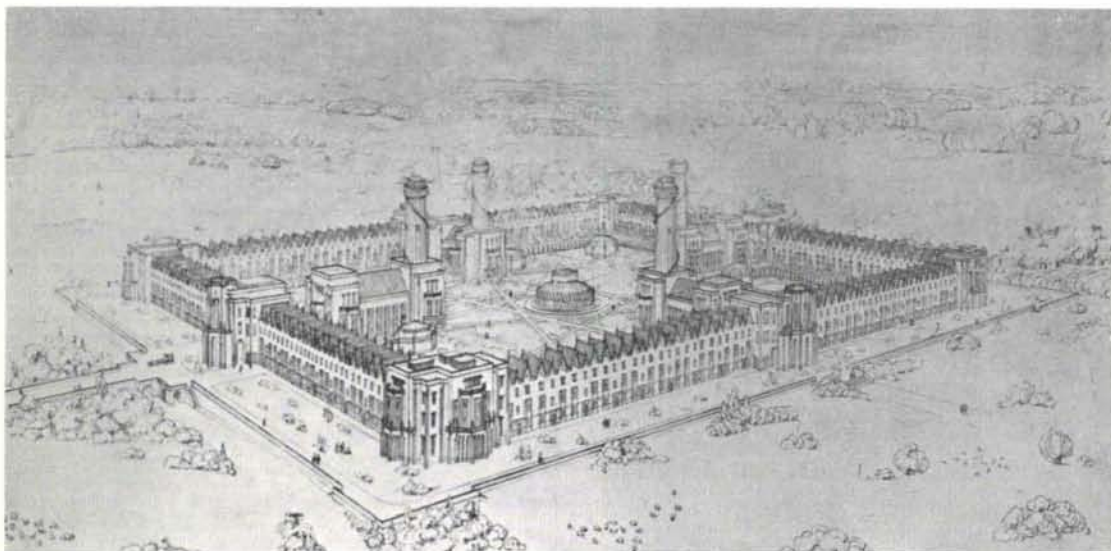
Although structures and values were largely determined by the trends toward industrialization and the accompanying urbanization, the influence of the traditions of rural life never left the scene. Idealization of the simplicity, healthfulness, idyllic peacefulness of rural life along with its virtues of frugality,

honesty, and stability continued to be the American ideal until the present. In fact, the influence of rural life had been at the root of over-representation in political institutions until the 1970's.

While the double-strand influences of urbanism and ruralism were the dominant trends, other minor influences were felt which derived from European customs, American village life, and frontier tradition. The situation might be said to have been "fluid." The shape of institutional structures and the nature of values were colored by facts of social class, regional district, stage of industrialization, and particular national groups. The whole country was a social experiment. It had been seen as a natural and social utopia ever since the first settlers had cleared the forests and reduced the Indian menace to manageable proportions. There were no legal or traditional restrictions, as there had been in Europe, to the formation of mini-societies. The society contained a multitude of cultures and rapidly changing institutions which all existed side by side in magnificent confusion.

nical and intellectual nature. Highly trained engineers, scientists, and administrators form status groups which control the production of goods and services and they jealously guard the boundaries of their group against encroachment of competition. The technocracy requires the presence of experts in the field of education, medicine, economics, industry, and government, who have been trained to operate on the basis of rationality and who can be trusted to take responsibility for the enormous sums of money invested in the technology of their field. Expertise brings with it social status, high income, membership in an elite group, and a vested interest in keeping a tight rein on the power of knowledge. It also brings an authoritarianism designed to maintain the mystique of the possession of secrets on which the maintenance of status depends.

In the area of politics, the single most important fact is that the single citizen no longer stands a chance of affecting even the smallest of the many bureaucracies under which he lives. The policies of the political party in power are difficult to dif-



Proposed new community at Harmony, Indiana. The dream of Robert Owen, ca. 1825

PROFILE OF CURRENT AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS. Industrialization, modernization, urbanization, and democratization were trends in nineteenth century America which produced values that existed side by side with rural, agricultural values. This combination culminated in a technocracy which was the ultimate result of earlier social and cultural changes.

The economy of the twentieth century is no longer based on production of goods to satisfy the needs of the population. Needs are manipulated for the purpose of selling the goods, and since the American population cannot possibly buy in quantity large enough to use up what the machines produce, foreign markets must be found where the need is greater.

Highly sophisticated products cannot be produced by unskilled labor, and the road to a high place in the economic system is seen to lie through the acquisition of a high degree of knowledge of a tech-

ferentiate from those of its opponents, due to the spread of the most stable and rigid social form ever invented—bureaucracy. The housekeeping functions of government are maintained by a giant bureaucratic corporate system which no political party, to say nothing of an individual, can shake.

Educational institutions, where students used to congregate in order to become cultured citizens, have been put to the service of the demands of the specialist economy. Higher education now has an instrumental function. The higher academic degree no longer indicates a broad range of knowledge and cultivation, but rather becomes an instrument serving to place the individual at some level in the social system. It determines his place in the hierarchical ranking of expertise. As the technocracy developed in America, the division of labor became based on the degree of specialization of one's knowledge; and following the successful flight of the So-

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viet Union's Sputnik, the field in which to specialize has become science. Preparation for this area of expertise begins in the lower school grades and continues through graduate school.

Churches have changed their function, as well as their structure. Protestant churches have become bureaucracies dedicated to the attraction of new members, not on the basis of an ideology, but rather, on the basis of provision of social settings for people on the move. Christian ideology has become too dangerous to preach from the pulpit. People are in church to meet other people, not to be taught the dogma of Christian faith and morals. Faith in science has replaced religion as the source of solutions to life's problems. Catholic churches increasingly have adopted a stance similar to that of the church in Brazil during slave days. Priests take up the cause of social justice and proceed to go to jail on behalf of downtrodden minority groups. They join the crusades being fought by the Blacks and the Chicanos.

The basic institution of society, the family, has lost all the characteristics of the stable, security-providing unit of the old days. Marriage is no longer a life-time matter, but rather, takes a new form: serial monogamy. Socialization of children in the family is a chancy thing; therefore, the schools take over the larger part of this activity from the family. What cultural norms should parents inculcate in their children? By the time a child is eighteen, times will have changed so much that what the family has taught will be obsolete. Whatever stance the parents take will no doubt be contradicted by one or another expert in child-rearing or by the influence of the peer group. The family no longer feels its own power and authority and, consequently, hands over children to experts in pediatrics, psychiatry, and education. In an era when the culture is so complex and such a high degree of complex knowledge is necessary to belong to a self-respecting status group, the family cannot by itself hope to train the child. Few fathers can contribute to their son's knowledge of nuclear physics or psychiatry. The schools must take over the functions that at one time in simpler technologies the family could provide.

Expertise reaches even into the area of a man's adult peer group—his circle of friends and companions—which used to be comprised of a spontaneously-gathered aggregate of people mixed with relatives. The middle-class man, armed with a college degree in some specialty, moves his family where he can find a job commensurate with his education. With every move, geographical or social, he once again leaves the familiar group and looks for churches and clubs established for the express purpose of providing him with a social group to which he may belong. The group is, of course, run by an expert in human relations.

If the instability of marriage and family life, occupational mobility, political impotence, the religious vacuum and the threat of educational obsolescence have tended to alienate contemporary man from his

institutions, as well as from himself, he can take advantage of that instrument of the middle class, the psychological therapy group. Here an expert in personality will help him to adjust his values to a philosophy which originated a hundred and fifty years ago in France and which was functional where individualism was a necessity. This philosophy encourages him to be a self-directing individual with a strong sense of the importance of his existence as a "natural man," a man with emotions he can learn to treat, just as the expert and the artificially-joined therapeutic peer group treats them. In an age where there is no stability in marriage, family, village, school life, or occupation, the ideas of the French Enlightenment are brought into the battle, to encourage the individual to live as though he really is in control of his own fate and, since he cannot affect his society, to manipulate his mind into a state of adjustment to it. In a day when there are no stable groups which support the individual's view of himself, Rousseau's vision of the goodness of "natural man" is brought to bear. Today the individual can find no support in institutions which might counteract his sense of isolation, depersonalization, dehumanization and his over-rationalized life-style. The solution: take the expert's word for it; resurrect the nineteenth century's value of atomistic individualism, as filtered through a peer group, organized by a personality expert, and artificially gathered around a common interest in personality disturbances.

In an era when we can see the culmination of all the earlier trends in American institutions, there is again a wave of utopianism. Again, communes are springing up and young people are taking themselves into the countryside and living in small, isolated groups.

In an era when a single social form, bureaucracy, has been shown to be the ultimate form of control for all functions of a modern society from government to medicine; when to participate in this social form requires that one possess expertise and uniform rationality; when the sole remaining institution where man can be irrational, the family, has become fragmented and unstable, why is utopian thinking enjoying a renaissance?

In an era when the old Calvinistic ideals of prosperity, rationality, and cleanliness are accomplished facts at least for the members of the middle-class; when French Enlightenment ideas about individualism, political democracy, and human nature have carried the day; when the utopian ideal of democratic representation, economic affluence, educational opportunity for all, and freedom of association have been accomplished for most citizens, why are new institutions growing up among the old ones that served the culture so well? —Curtiss Ewing

To be continued

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