

COMMUNES AND AMERICAN SOCIETY ————— Part 2

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

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.

Man's relationship with the major institutions of his society are mediated through his relations with a small group of people with whom he is intimate and whose interests are similar to his. During the last decade, discoveries have been made in terms of the efficacy of this "primary group" as it affects the alcoholic, the drug addict, the juvenile delinquent, and the neurotically or psychotically alienated. The man who cannot contribute his creative effort to society because of dependence on alcohol or heroin, or because he does not have access to economic and political opportunity, has been found to respond favorably when he becomes a member of a group of people with whom he identifies. Alcoholics Anonymous has produced more cures for alcoholics than any other single form of treatment. Synanon has the highest rate of cures for the psychopath of any form of treatment. The small group of twenty or so individuals who support a strong belief (sometimes a cultishly strong belief) has brought more people back to a creative, self-respecting existence than any other form of social treatment.

Alcoholics, heroin addicts, psychopaths, and juvenile delinquents are people alienated from the norms and values of society. Membership in a primary group has been seen to have a positive effect that enables people to become productive and constructive. The sort of primary group under discussion here is led by an expert, is organized around the treatment of deviant behavior, and is oriented toward the restoration of the individual to the institutions of society.

Communes are primary groups. They differ from the institution-oriented group, in that they are not led by experts, they do not seek to re-direct deviant behavior, and they are not oriented toward returning the individual to society. Like the therapeutic group, communes are organized by people with a common goal or interest. In the case of communes that interest is comprised of the interest of young, middle-class men and women.

The most usual commune membership numbers about twenty, and the values and norms tend to have a cultish quality. The members tend to feel, as do members of Synanon, AA, and delinquent groups, that they are members of a "chosen" group. Commune members may or may not be alcoholics, addicts, psychopaths, or juvenile delinquents. The point is that they are members of a primary group that

supports the values, the identity, and the personality of the individual. Unlike other artificial primary groups, they do not rely on society's economic, political or educational institutions. Instead, they are groups who are attempting to organize, out of primary group relations, a total life style of their own. The commune takes over what once were the functions of the family, and more recently, the expert and the school. The population is homogeneous as to age group and seems to amount to a perpetuation of the adolescent peer group which had a strong influence in their earlier lives.

Within these groups, patterns of behavior are becoming institutionalized. These internal institutions are in some ways different from those of the larger society and in some ways identical. It is too simple to say that these institutions comprise a counter-culture, because many of the seeds of these institutions grew out of the larger society. What is interesting to examine is the relationship between the institutions in the communes as compared with those "outside." If the ones "outside" are not satisfying, what is the shape of the new ones being established in these "alternative societies"?

Communes are said to be reflections of society. This means that the component parts of these small social systems should bear some relationship to comparable units in the dominant society. Whether these units prove to be the obverse or the identical reflection of our social institutions is a subject that interests the sociologist.

In an age of mass societies, we are seeing the lessening of the influence of the small, kinship-based face-to-face group, the primary group. The primary group functions to socialize the individual, to support his conception of himself, and to provide social security for its members. The original primary group is, of course, the family or kinship group. This kind of group has tended to disintegrate as the result of the demands of urban life. The nuclear family of five or so members fits an industrial life style better than the unwieldy, extended family.

Other kinds of primary groups are organized around peer relationships, professional interests, deviant values, and so on. No matter what the fundamental organizing principle, the function is the same: to support the members in their self-concepts, their values, and their physical and psychical needs.

The commune is a primary group. The twenty to thirty members interact together, frequently and closely. The group mediates between the individual and the major institutions of society. Communes are different from other primary groups in that although other groups are collectivities which develop their own internal institutions, communes are relatively isolated from society. They are total social systems in themselves, and they support total life styles which include economic, political, educational, and ideological systems for their members.

On the surface, communes appear to be "countercultures." The tendency to label these societies in terms of youthful rebellion or rejection of society comes from the most superficial observations. Such observations account merely for the differences between a very few covial values which are current in the larger society, such as the Calvinistic standard of cleanliness and sobriety.

Observers tend to see first the dirt, drugs and non-sobriety and to conclude from these that communes are solely cultures of rebellion and defiance. These observations do not tell very much about communes, as they apply only to the most visible and overt behavior patterns. They tell nothing about the less visible social patterns which lie underneath.

It is these underlying and less visible patterns which these articles take up. If comunes are reflections of society, then a comparison of the dominant institutions in society with the most commonly-found institutions in communes should give some basis for understanding the status of communes vis á vis the culture out of which they grew.

One basic fact which characterizes the commune movement is the demographic composition of these social systems. The commune movement is a middle and upper-middle class phenomenon. It is a college age population that includes both sexes. The demographic characteristics of the members give some clues about them. They tend to be intelligent, they tend to have been raised in the suburbs, and their fathers tend to occupy positions among the professional and executive status levels of American society.

COMMUNE INSTITUTIONS

In contrast with the economic institutions found in the larger society, communes tend to reject the doctrines of economic competition, of conspicuous consumption, of the salesmanship that marks the manipulative methods of trade in American society. Barter is common in communes and between communes. Goods and services over and above the satisfaction of basic need are rejected, and hence, commune life is exceptionally economical. Goods made in communes tend to be of the handicraft type and are sold, if at all, with no fanfare and little working knowledge of the manipulation of the customer.

That foremost characteristic of modern industrial life, an increasingly affluent life style, is rejected in the communes; therefore, the necessity for a high degree of technological expertise, as a basis for the division of labor, is non-existent. Labor in communes is divided among the members generally, and since few technical processes are employed, no ranking in terms of expertness on this basis takes place. Because subsistence, not affluence, is the goal, farming, cooking, dishwashing, and cleaning up are simple tasks which are assigned on the basis of turns or according to who feels like doing the task at the moment. Since no reward accompanies the task, competition is rare. People with skills in mechanics or other necessary fields tend to perform commune tasks within those

fields, but, without an advanced technology, the heirarchical structuring of individual specialists does not occur.

Contrary to belief, many communes are owned by one individual. One person frequently owns the land and the buildings and, partly due to this fact, he may be forced by social agencies such as the police to assume a leadership role in the commune. Under legal regulations he is responsible for what happens on his property. Some communes are leased and some are even supported by funding from foundations. The form of ownership is not the reason these communities are called communes.

The political institutions within communes do not include representative government; leadership and patterns of decision-making may be termed regressive.

There are some communes that are run like monarchies, some based on anarchy, and some on informal negotiation. One commune of my acquaintance is a totalitarian state, while another is an extreme form of anarchy. The necessity for decision-making varies, too, in terms of the number of social questions seen as needing to be referred for decision. In most communes meetings are not held at scheduled times. There are no officers, and very few issues arise because most are not seen as necessary to come under the province of authority or of the group.

Four facts become clear in the area of the governance of communes. First, the process of recruitment of members tends to keep the membership a homogenous one in terms of values. Second, in a small, face-to-face group most conflicts and issues can be settled by the persons involved without adjudication by authority. Third, commune philosophy includes a high tolerance for deviance, and an individual enjoys a higher degree of freedom of behavior than in the rest of the culture. Fourth, peer pressure towards conformity, informally applied, is usually sufficient to enforce conformity, due to the fact that many communards resist abandoning the total life style of their communes in favor of other communes or society. The totalism of commune life in terms of associations, economic dependence, accustomed values and norms, etc. is difficult to describe to anyone who has not experienced it. The threat of withdrawal of the totality of one's accustomed environment is a large threat indeed.

Whether the political form is anarchistic or monarchical, the bureaucratic form is not found in communes. The basic components of bureaucracy: heirarchy, expertise as the basis for heirarchy, and consistent rationality are not found. Rather, many communal political systems resemble the charismatic order of authority. Whatever henchmen the leader gathers are gathered on the basis of empathy with the leader. The standards required of these henchmen are purely personal ones and they may be awarded a higher standard of respect than other members. Further, the members regard all but the head guru with a cynical eye. With charismatic leadership we

seem to see a model not unlike that of a cult or sect where, frequently, magical means are utilized as a basis for decision. No commune of my knowledge has to date provided itself with a written legal code, and the main standards for decision-making are either the will of the leader, face-to-face negotiation, or reference to predictive magic like the Tarot.

A second political pattern, that of face-to-face negotiation, democratically structured, most frequently achieves consensus through statements of personal feelings on the part of the members. The decision may not be reached on the basis of rationality and intellectual adherence to the ideology, but rather on the emotions of the individuals in the group.

The structuring of political patterns in present day communes appears, by and large, to adhere to simplistic and primitive forms reminiscent of prior periods in history. The charismatic leader and his aides comprise one common form and the democratic, face-to-face, emotionally based form is the second most commonly seen.

Educational institutions in communes are the most embryonic of all the structures being developed. Education is of no concern for most members because there are extremely few school-age children. The younger children are treated in most cases with the utmost permissiveness and, in many communes are considered to be the responsibility of all the adults. The picture that emerges is similar to that found in Indian societies where all adults consider the children to belong to the community as a whole.

Educational practices are most certainly borrowed from the most progressive models in American society. From the visible educational and child-rearing patterns in communes, one may reach the conclusion that socialization is being modeled after the patterns found in the most progressive schools. Progressive education has traditionally been the property of the upper middle and middle classes in America, and apparently this pattern has been transferred into the communes without much alteration. In other words, there seems to be no borrowing from the past in the case of educational patterns, but rather a direct transfer from the background of the experience of the members.

The area in education that is getting the most attention is that of the education of outsiders into the ways of the commune. Urbutzim (urban communes) are developing ways of spreading their political doctrines among the people in the neighborhood. Many rural communes are developing ways of educating outsiders, a situation growing out of the necessity of explaining themselves to alarmed local people. Some communes are beginning to invite outsiders to visit, to take classes, and to accept food in the communes. In both cases, the basic trend in terms of educational methods is permissive, unstructured, and student-centered. Traditional methods of education (the lecture, the exam, the polarization of student and authority) is not found.

The traditional functions of religious institutions

have been said to be: first, an area of faith or mystery which provides answers to questions of ultimate import; second, in the ethical area, the function of the articulation and transmission of the cultural ethics of the society. Commune ideologies which replace institutionalized religion and which vary from commune to commune, as do cults in society, have eliminated the ethical area and focused instead on the mystical. The source of many of the ideas current in communes was originally Asia, and since World War II many such fragments of Asian mysticism have been introduced into America where they flourish among the various youth cultures.

Magic frequently provides the basis for decision-making and for prediction. The ethical norms are separated from the mysticism of the commune cult, and the development of ethical traditions takes place in the area of the informal social interaction of the group. The mysticism was originally an innovation in terms of space. It is a borrowing from Asia and Africa, and the fragments have been adopted without full-scale religious doctrine from which the fragments were taken. Many elements were glued together from other cultures. Yoga came from India, Sufi from Arabia, I Ching from China. What, in traditional society, was relegated to religion and then to science—the dimension of *faith*—is in communes situated in the magical.

Further, Yoga and/or hallucinogenic drugs function in the communes as dogma used for the purpose of relief from anxiety, as well as for sensory experience. They perform a further service in that rituals grow up around these fragments which tend to bind people together, increase social cohesion, and comprise a support for the belief that the members belong to a special cult. They are elements which increase the sense of belonging to an "in-group", a dominant requirement for the survival of any small group which desires separation from the rest of society. Various other fragments from the cultural store of magic from Indian, Christian, and other ideologies are adopted. The rites of passage present in all mystery cults are celebrated. One's first acid trip is a celebration, and elaborate preparations are sometimes made for the taking of a special or new drug. In some communes, one's prestige is based not on one's occupation or income, but on the number of acid trips one has been on.

Another important institution, marriage, is rarely seen in the usual monogamous form in communes. The current form of serial monogamy seen in American society does not enjoy favor, but rather, experiments in sexual relations tend to take forms not formally recognized in America. One form is group marriage. Everyone is married to everyone else. Another form looks superficially like promiscuity, but actually contains a deeper, whole-person aspect that is not as casual as traditional promiscuous behavior. There are a few married couples in communes, and the sexual freedom accorded each partner varies according to the values of the commune. Partner-

switching may occur, but it is different from the traditional suburban model in that it is rarely done in secret and is not accompanied by the usual sense of excitement that attends norm-breaking.

Male-female relationships tend to be less differentiated than in the larger society. Exaggerated sexuality in terms of clothes or behavior is frowned on, and exploitation of sex is covered by the most extreme taboo of all commune taboos.

OVERVIEW

The pattern that emerges from a comparison of institutions in the larger society and those in communes can be arranged along a continuum of development. Whereas some *literary* utopias have at different times in history placed the community on a different time dimension from the era when they were written and others have placed them on a different spatial dimension, the actual utopian communities tend to borrow their ideas about organizing their functions in terms of different times. In other words, Campanella and Bacon placed their utopias on distant islands far away from the societies in which they were written. B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* was designed for the existing culture, but in the future. Science fiction utopias exist in both different time and different space.

The communes of the twentieth century, as well as the nineteenth, were designed for the same time and space in which they were conceptualized, but the current communities at least, range the form which their institutions take along a time continuum. Some are borrowed from the past and some are experimental forms which do not exist anywhere else at present.

The economic institutions in communes as described above are borrowed from the past. Nineteenth century utopias claimed descent from early Christianity in terms of their cooperative form of the division of labor. Current communes with cooperative labor practices rarely claim the early Church as their heritage. Rather, the communal arrangements are more often modeled after Fourier or Owen or they are vaguely legitimized by a semi-Marxian principle. No communal theory of organization is lifted in its entirety from any school of thought, but rather is loosely based on a broad, simplistic idea and the details are worked out in practice. Although at least one commune of my acquaintance was founded by an old-style Marxist, it is not, strictly speaking a Marxist commune.

The rejection of technology is clearly evident. Old cars, stoves, wash tubs and so forth remind one of pioneer society, and the pioneer-like clothes worn in many communes are clearly symbolic evidence of the period of reference of the communards themselves. It is further interesting to note that there is, as far as I can detect, a single exception to the rule that implies rejection of advanced technology, and that is medicine. The members of many communes have experienced, at the hands of expert medical per-

sonnel, a tendency to diagnose anyone who looks like a hippy as having venereal disease. This diagnosis has led in at least one case, to tragic results. The individual in question was diagnosed as having syphilis when he actually had bubonic plague. The significance of this event was not wasted, and a new tradition is growing in which members have begun studying medical books, diagnosing themselves and employing bootlegged pharmaceutical drugs with which they treat themselves. This is a commentary on their view of modern society; they reject expert personnel, but utilize the product of technology, however under their own control.

Aside from this one exception, the acceptance of modern medical drugs, the economic institutions in communes are probably the most archaic of all the internal structures. Labor is cooperative, labor-saving devices are eschewed and nineteenth century products, like homemade bread, have a high positive value.

The area of social interaction is the most advanced of all areas in communal life. Most often a Dionysian approach is taken to social relations. How one person *feels* about authority, work, money, sex, marriage, and so forth is a frequent basis on which people relate. New role relationships between men and women, leader and subject, teacher and pupil, individual and group are being experimented with.

Portions of the value system that underlies the new modes of relationships contain elements of American nineteenth century individualism. Many communes value total individualism above all other modes of existence. But since group living is also a powerful value, attempts are consistently made to discover ways of integrating individualism with the value of group primacy. One facet of this problem of integration is found to be the prohibition of privacy, possessiveness, and jealousy. Another is the problem created by the norm of individualism versus cooperative labor, group marriage, and communal responsibility for property, for defense against external attack, and for children.

The most exciting things that are happening in communes are in the latter area mentioned above. Communards are fully conscious of their pioneer efforts in the area of social relations, and they take pride in the fact that they are at once more daringly innovative and more experimental than most groups in American culture. This has a parallel in the group experiments of Synanon, the growth centers like Esalen and Kairos, and in juvenile homes, such as the experimental Provost Experiment. The communes are at one and the same time more "far out" in their willingness to experiment with human relations and they are the only groups who have evolved a totalistic life style independent of the larger society.

It is interesting to note that, in general, most communes have seen fit to organize their social experiments within types of institutions which functioned in pre-technocracy days and which exclude the American system of representative democracy. The holy

cows of American society (bureaucratic structure, expertise, conspicuous consumption, etc.) are not seen by communards as fitting institutional settings for experiments in social relations. The commune, as a primary group, attempts to reject all that is covered by the term secondary relationship: role relationships between salesman-customer, doctor-patient, mechanic-client. The term most commonly used to describe the model for the commune group is the family. In view of the state of marriage and the family in contemporary society this bears further attention from psychologists and sociologists.

Also, it should be said that the experiments in relationships which are being made in social organizations and corporations with "T-groups", in rehabilitation programs for delinquents, alcoholics and some growth centers are oriented around the desire to return to contemporary society a more productive, active individual. The means used are, traditionally, manipulation toward this end and the goal is, traditionally, a more rational, better integrated individual. In the communes, the goal is not the same. The drug experience is a sensory one. Emotional states resembling the ones experienced under the influence of acid or marijuana, are seen as highly desirable, precisely because they are sensory ones and bear little resemblance to rationality or other culturally-valued states in the dominant society. Further, manipulation is generally taboo in most communes, although it is doubtful that this goal is being attained.

In summary, then, utopian communities seem to have borrowed economic and political institutional patterns from previous ages. Educational institutions are borrowed from the middle-class contemporary American origin of the members. Religious or cultish institutions come from the middle-class youth culture of the present day. And the institutionalization of social relationships is thoroughly experimental and future-oriented. One provocative explanation for the varying characteristics of the economic and political versus the educational, religious and social patterns of communes might be posited. Since the communes

are populated by young people of approximately college age, who have been disfranchised from society's economic and political institutions, it follows that commune populations have had no experience with contemporary economic and political life. In other words, since they lack sophistication in the ways of party politics and political pressure groups and, as yet, have not participated in the complexities of life in the specialist-ridden corporate economy, they have no vision of alternative structures in these areas. Hence, they revert to more simple forms of economy and political structures.

This may also explain the presence in a large proportion of communes of a leader who is older than the other members. Most leaders tend to belong to the middle-age category and many are in their forties. Some have had highly successful careers before they joined the commune, and many have a higher degree of sophistication regarding economics and politics. Further, these leaders tend to subscribe to deviant economic and political ideologies, such as Marxism. There is a possibility that the presence of men with these characteristics may function in terms of interpretation of economic and political facts of life for the balance of the commune.

This premise is nothing more than speculation, but it bears investigation on the grounds that, if the premise is true, we have discovered an important link between alienated communards and the society out of which they came. In other words, educational, religious and social forms in communes may prove to be the result of conscious choice, while economic and political forms may be the result of lack of experience with comparable forms in American culture.

In view of this analysis, what are the most likely predictions one can make concerning America's utopian communities?

—Curtiss Ewing

To be concluded

. . . . March/April, 1972, NMA

Among the several 19th Century utopian societies were the "Perfectionists," who established successful communities at Oneida, New York and Wallingford, Connecticut. They held communism to be "the social state of the resurrection." Their account on the sides of life and death arranged itself thus:

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UNBELIEF,
Obedience to
Mammon,
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RESTORATION,
FAITH,
Obedience to
Christ,
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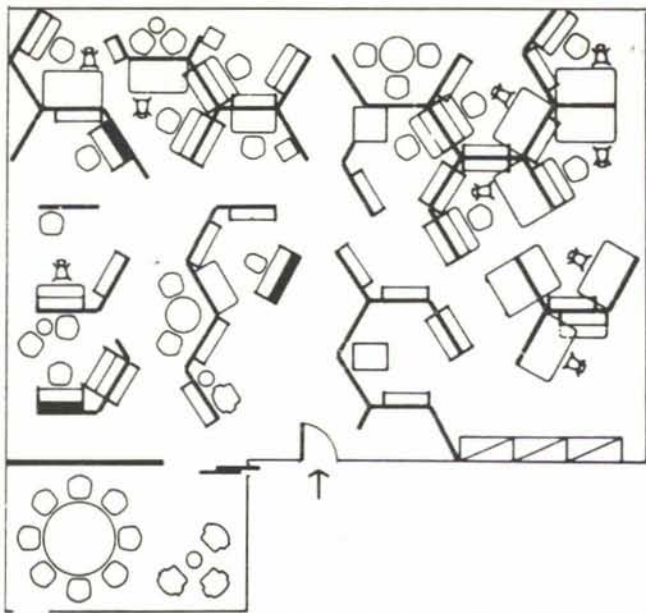
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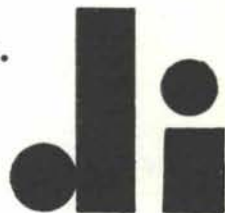


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