

— a sociological view of communes today and a glance at their historical counterparts of yesterday.—Conclusion. —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.

... what are the most likely predictions one can make concerning the future of America's utopian communities?

Below: the tepee type structure at a contemporary commune near Taos, New Mexico. Photograph by Harvey Mudd II.



The "common sense" basis for prediction of the fate of communes is the concept that most Americans have, at some time in their youth, staged a rebellion of sorts and have later recanted and joined the system. Many people think of hippies and communards in terms of themselves and, consequently, predict the same future for the communes. They see the same causes and, therefore, the same results that

impinged on their own lives, as impinging on the lives of commune members.

However, two factors make the "common sense" prediction an unlikely one. The first is that, even were the kind of rebellion of the communards the same as that of previous adolescent rebellions, never before in history has there been such a high proportion of people in the young and rebellious age group.

The fact that over fifty per cent of the American population is under the age of twenty-six comprises a structural change in American society. The sheer number of people in this demographic category indicates that there probably will be some sort of effect from the change. In other words, it might be said that alternative structures are springing up due to a shortage of available slots in American society in comparison with the number of people needing to be placed in those slots.

The second factor is that the groups to which young people previously belonged tended in the past to have the sanction of the "elders." Fraternities and sororities, though tolerating rebellious behavior, functioned, in fact, as parentally-approved organizations for the purpose of limiting the associations of the members to socially acceptable social strata. The Boy Scouts and other groups served the interests of parents who were inclined to favor these organizations because they helped to socialize the young into their own cultural traditions. This cannot be said of the communes. If communal society contains elements of the cultural institutions in the larger society, the over-all effect is certainly not one to encourage participation in the American "system" in the usual sense. Rather, the communes exist outside the influence of adults. Further, due to the supportive nature of groups, practices that are strictly confined to youth are much more powerfully encouraged by the cohesiveness and totalism of the group life style than would the same practices if they came under the influence of parents and other adults. The power of the peer group, the institutionalization of value systems, and the rewarding nature of the primary group, as against existence in the competitive American economy, all militate against the prediction that accords with the experience of adults who returned to the "system" after a youthful fling.

The second most frequently made speculation is a single-cause account of the commune movement. It sees the source of the behavior of youth in permissiveness and permissive child rearing. Psychologicistic predictions based on psychologicistic causes of the personality traits of young people ignore the qualitative changes that occur when cohesive groups form.

Further, psychologicistic explanations fail to take into account the possibility that the economy may not be able to absorb the high proportion of college age youth *regardless* of their personality patterns. The political disenfranchisement of youth, and the educational system, which has yet to discover an adequate technique for educating in an era of mass society, both militate against accounting for hippy and commune movements in terms of individualized personality traits. In other words, permissive child rearing may have had an effect on the personalities of many middle-class young people, but it is more likely that a second social influence, the increasing dominance of the teenage peer group, has had a greater influ-

ence in the formation of communal structures. A closer look at the economic opportunity for middle-class youth needs to be taken. There is a very real possibility that psychological alienation from American institutions is not merely an emotional state, but rather that there is a concrete set of circumstances, such as, saturation of the middle-class occupational labor market at the root of this large-scale alienation.

An historical mode of prediction of the fate of communes might be based on what we know about the monastic movement of the middle ages. The monasteries gained the sanction and then the support of European societies, largely because they functioned for these societies as repositories for the technology and knowledge of earlier ages; they were refuges for second sons who did not inherit under the feudal laws of primogeniture, and they took widows and orphans who, otherwise, would have become paupers. They functioned as libraries, museums, social welfare agencies, and models for the religious ideology. Were communes to gain the support of the rest of society for some function such as this, their future would be assured.

Also the nineteenth century communes, in general, served as welfare agencies. The Shakers, the Hutterites, the Llanoites were self-supporting. They did not utilize state facilities, such as mental institutions or charity homes, and they took out of the labor market many people with skills which were not in demand in a day when the immigration of unskilled labor vastly outreached the number of unskilled jobs. They further had the full support of American society, except for the rare occasion when society forced the abolition of such practices as polygamy among the Mormons. Otherwise, utopian communities tended to be seen as groups of God-fearing, independent, and productive individuals who had taken themselves out of the competition for available jobs. In a few cases, they even managed to force adjustments in the American cultural tradition. The Shakers were responsible for forcing a change in the American legal code to accept the legality of communal property.

If communes come to be seen as illustrations of American ideals, or if they are recognized as desirable repositories for surplus people, or if they can be seen in any way to function to the benefit of American society, their future may be long indeed. The Hutterite communes lasted over four hundred years and are still extant. They, however, have not ignored the value of public relations, *vis á vis*, the larger society, and they have had a hand in shaping the positive view outsiders hold of their communities. At one time in their history, the Hutterites developed a high degree of skill in the production of medicines, in nursing, in canning and mechanics and, therefore, their services were much in demand by the local citizenry. It is not out of the realm of possibility that communes may find some set of services and functions roughly duplicating those of the monasteries or the Hutterites, which would gain them the support of society.

Regardless of the role communes may find to play in the American social structure, certain practices in the recent past have most certainly contributed to the commune movement. First of these has been our practice of keeping our young people in mothballs, so to speak, at universities for longer and longer periods of time in order to train them for the advanced technological skills necessary for careers in a technocracy. Further, the more complex knowledge becomes, the more there is to learn and the longer it takes to learn it. The man who makes the common sense prediction about the future of communes forgets that where a Bachelor's Degree would suffice in his day, a Ph. D. is now barely sufficient.

Further, changes in family structure over the past fifty years have reduced the cohesiveness and the authority of the family and increased the influence of the peer group. Young people have grown up more accustomed to others of their own age, than did their fathers.

Political impotence in a mass society has been an increasingly important factor in the defection from traditional parties. The combination of rejection from active participation in the economic life of the country during their most energetic years; the rejection from the possession of political influence and the inability to form effective interest groups like other demographic categories (such as labor unions) due to their disenfranchisement, indicates the possibility that the communards have not rejected American society as

much as American society has rejected them.

Further, the failure of the established churches and schools to support the family in its effort to inculcate traditional values in the young make them less closely tied to the cultural traditions than were their fathers. Thus, it may be true that the tendency of American society to refuse youth an active role is reinforced by the very tenuous bonds between youth and society in the first place.

In sum, then, we have to reject single-factor answers for both the cause and the future of communes. Historical parallels may shed light on some factors involved, but no previous age had the special element of the post-industrial society as its backdrop. Only one thing is certain. The number of communes is growing. They are the most numerous on the east coast, the west coast, and Canada. Communes are springing up in countries like Australia. There are rural and urban communes. There are mystical and political communes. No one knows the number of young people who are choosing this kind of life style, but it is growing every day. Although the ideologies and the institutions within these communities may vary, the common elements are first, a homogenous age group and second, the small, face-to-face nature of the communities. It may well be the smallness, the primary relationships, and the easy comprehensibility of the commune that is, in the last analysis, the thing that draws the young American individual into a commune.

—Curtiss Ewing.

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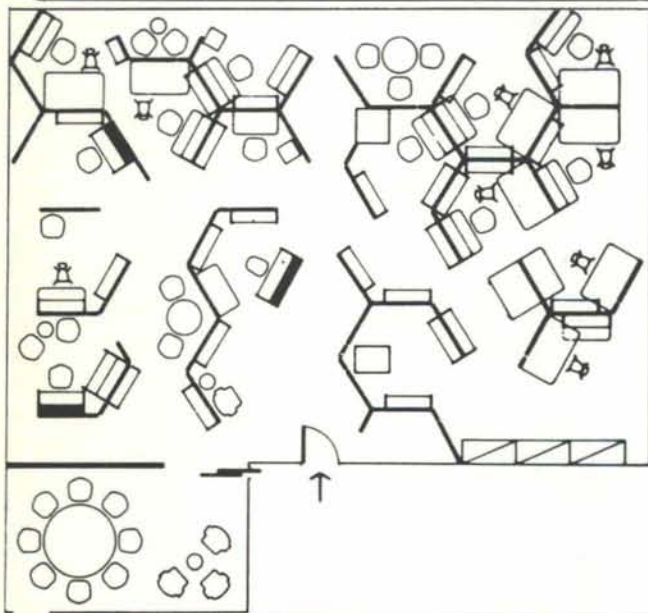
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