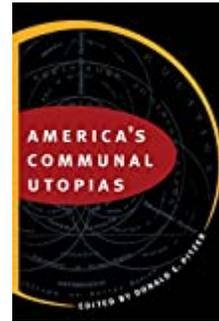


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Donald E. Pitzer, ed. *America's Communal Utopias*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xxi + 537 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4609-4; \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2299-9.



Reviewed by John E. Murray (University of Toledo)

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This book consists of 18 essays on American communal societies that were founded before the middle of the present century. The authors are well-known specialists in their fields and include several (Priscilla Brewer, Carl Guarneri, and Robert Sutton among them) who have written well-received monographs on particular groups. Each chapter contains an essay, endnotes, a chronology of events, and a bibliography. The essays vary in tone from the objective (Donald Durnbaugh on colonial communes) to the partisan (Lawrence Foster on Oneida and James Landing on the Koreshan Unity), but the level of scholarship is high throughout.

The volume has two goals, according to the editor: to provide an introduction to the interesting history of American communal experiments (some of which are thriving today) and to frame these histories within the editor's notion of "developmental communalism." This schema proposes that communalism is but a phase in a community's life, and after it passes the former commune remains worthy of study (xvii). Exactly why a place should continue to be considered a "communal utopia" after it becomes just another community is never made clear, and thankfully in a book weighing in at 550 pages, most contributors let the concept slide.

One improvement over most of the literature on American communalism is the inclusion of an essay

(the longest in the set, in fact) on Catholic religious orders, with emphasis on the monastic orders. The vow of poverty taken by male and female Catholic religious means that each such community operates just like any other communal society. Lawrence McCrank drily notes the absence of these groups from the communal studies canon (p. 241). Inadvertently, Jonathan Andelson's essay on Amana suggests a rationale for this traditional omission: support of the monasteries by "powerful institutions of the wider society places them in a slightly different category" (p. 202). Meaning what? That the only reason for the hundreds of such communities in America today is subsidies from the Vatican? McCrank's thorough essay represents one step in bringing such attitudes into the twentieth century.

The other extremely successful communal group, the Hutterites, is the subject of a fine chapter by Gertrude Huntington. She emphasizes their growth within a set of fixed ideological and economic constraints, quite in opposition to the "developmental communalism" framework. The inclusion of a piece by the late Karl J. R. Arndt is to be welcomed. Here is a scholar who devoted his life to translating, editing, and explicating the huge written record of the Harmonists, and his chapter here is a model one. Other essays fare less well. Foster's enthusiasm for Oneida's ideals lead him to overlook a fundamental moral

problem with “complex marriage”: the coercion of sexual activity from girls, some prepubescent, by older men in general and John Humphrey Noyes (Oneida’s founder) in particular. Landing’s otherwise charming piece on Cyrus Teed (“Koresh”) is just a little less purple than that of his subject in describing the reception by the “scientist” Teed (he was an alchemist) of his call to communal life.

The reader cannot help but wonder what separated such long lived groups as the Benedictines, the Hutterites, the Amana Inspirationists, the Harmonists, and the Shakers from the relative will-o’-the-wisps like most of the other groups considered here. That vital topic is not taken up here as intensively as it was in Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s sociological classic *Commitment and Community* (Harvard University Press, 1972). Religion, to be sure, seems to have been a critical variable, while celibacy seems not to have been (cf. the Hutterites). Ethnicity, that quicksilver among cultural concerns, clearly played a role, since so many of the successful groups had German origins: the Hutterites, the Harmonists, the

Amana Inspirationists, and the early Ephrata community (all considered here) as well as the Zoarites and St. Nazianz (not considered here).

Analytically, much research remains to be done on communal histories. Records of these experiments make them perfect laboratories for the social scientific historian. Issues of routinization of the founders’ charisms, conversion of the second generation to communal belief, and incentives driving the down-and-out into such groups pervade every chapter. This volume provides a valuable starting point for all those interested in the topic, whether as researcher, teacher, or curious general reader. Those interested in paths not taken in American history will find much that is worth thinking about in this volume.

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