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# 19th century American utopias as de-stratification experiments

by

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## ABSTRACT

The de-stratification experiences of a number of the more important 19th century American utopias, with emphasis on the Oneida and Shaker communities, are described and are evaluated as to individual and communal costs and benefits. While these utopian ventures were often quite successful as de-stratification experiments, at least for brief periods of time, the factors that contributed to this success, and the factors that contributed to the longterm viability of the communities as social systems, were often antithetical. The implications of this study concerning a number of important issues in stratification theory are discussed.

## I. introduction

The great seal of the United States is inscribed with the words "Novus Ordo Seclorum"—a new order of the ages. After nearly 200 years of service perhaps that epigram might be revised to read more correctly—«new orders of the ages.» For a most remarkable quality of the new order has been its willingness to permit so many other relatively autonomous and often abrasive orders the opportunity to secede from it while yet remaining within it.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the best and the most extreme examples of this unique tolerance are the 19th century American communal experiments. For many of these experiments not only attempted to devise and implement new orders of ideology, behavior, and social structure, but they purposefully attempted new orders that were antithetical to the order of the greater society. These were often counter-orders, or, counter-cultures, in modern parlance. The idea of a rather unique tolerance between the greater society and its discontents is important for another reason, however. In analyzing the factors behind the very limited duration of most of these experiments it becomes apparent that this tolerance was a primary factor in contributing to their demise. To use a biological concept, toleration acted somewhat like a permeable membrane, or a rather open exchange system, that not only permitted the communities to implement their social designs with little intimidation, but concurrently enabled the greater society to profit and learn from those exercises and to reabsorb those experiments (and experimenters) that became disenchanted with their own discontent.

By and large, these communities failed to endure not so much because of internal problems or because of a confrontation with the greater society,

1. With but one exception, these secessions were less than complete since the new orders continued to recognize the sovereignty of the United States government over them. The secessions were generally seen as secessions from the society rather than from the government. The exception, of course, was the secession of the Southern states. The consequence was the Civil War.

but because they could not compete, in the long run, with a society that provided greater tolerance and individual opportunity than themselves. This was as true of the ideology and the social structure as it was of the distributive processes they attempted to establish.

The voluntary re-affiliation of many of the radical social experiments and experimenters with the larger society is one of the most unique features of the 19th century American communal experiments. They were certainly not unique social phenomena in many other ways, since they were informed by utopian thinking and experimentation dating back to at least Plato's *Republic* (Holloway, 1951:23). More immediate roots, however, date back to the sectarian movements in France, England, and Germany that followed on the heels of the Protestant Reformation. Frustrated by political and religious intolerance in Europe, many of these sects emigrated to North America starting about the middle of the 17th century (Bestor, 1970: Chapter 2). Although a number of these sects attempted to establish at least partially communistic societies rather than be integrated into the colonial social system, it was not until late in the 18th century that a discernible *movement* towards communal experimentation began.<sup>1</sup> Within this movement, sometimes called the rise of communitarian socialism in America (Bestor, 1970), the experiments were as diverse in form as they were in goals and success, so that classification according to some unit characteristic is nearly impossible except for time (19th century), place (America), distributive orientation (socialistic/communistic), and, to a certain extent, a shared cultural tradition. The emergence of this movement at this point in time has been attributed to a number of factors which either made this kind of social experimentation more attractive, or which made other alternatives, such as the status quo, more repulsive. Factors that attracted groups and individuals to communal experimentation were: the general optimism of the era, the supposed success of the English Revolution of 1648 and the French Revolution of 1789, the widespread encouragement of social experimentation by such luminaries as Rousseau, Descartes, and St. Simone, the elevation of democratic and radical egalitarian ideals, the impact of Romanticism, and the availability of the American frontier at bargain prices. Factors that repulsed them from existing societies were: the expansion of industrialization and urbanization (particularly in England), the increase in conscriptive government service and internecine warfare in many European states, increasing religious and political intoler-

ance, the pervasiveness of capitalistic and commercialistic pursuits, and the harshness of an underdeveloped, underpopulated, and underprotected frontier (Kanter, 1967: 39; Andrews, 1963: xii; Nordhoff, 1965: xxiii). Additionally, there were fewer attractive forces at play in the greater society. Achievement and success were more easily measured by one's accomplishments on the periphery of established society than within it. Men were encouraged to «go West», individually, in order to build their own society (or, more typically, their own fortunes).

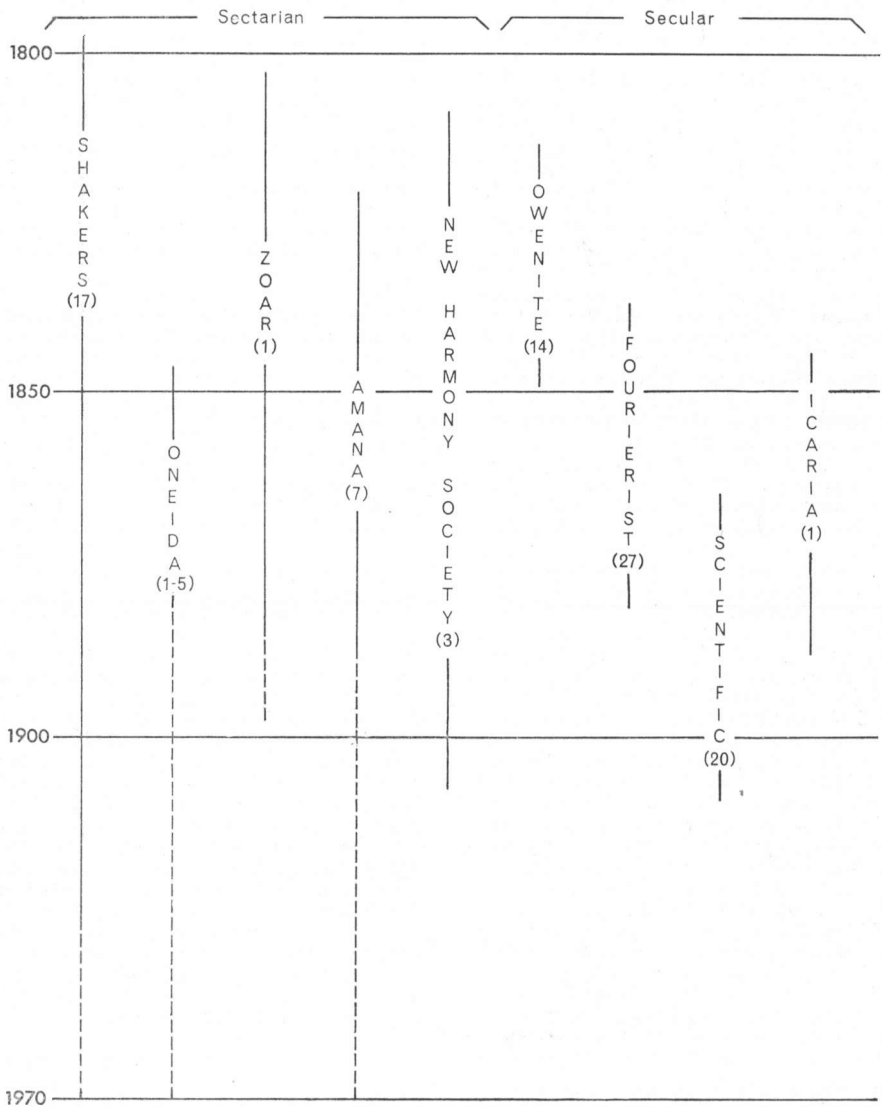
For the purposes of this paper, however, the most important characteristic of these experiments is their communistic distributive orientation. Although in many of them communism was far more a fleeting ideal than an actuality, all of them did at some time or another commit themselves to such an ambition. Given this hiatus and the many differences in ideology, structure, and success of the numerous utopian communities, attempts to compare and to generalize from them are often frustrating and unsuccessful (cf. Carden, 1969: xviii; Kanter, 1967: 40). In order to give some indication of both the *range* and the *central tendency* (to the extent that a central tendency can be assumed to exist) of the distributive processes in these communities, two of the more important and well documented of them, the Shaker communities and the Oneida community, will be considered along with the communal movement as a whole. In order to understand these stratification experiments more fully, the social organization of the communities in which they occurred and the factors related to the overall success of the experiments will be considered. Since the stratification systems are of primary concern, however, only a most cursory review of the components of social organization that bear most directly on the distributive systems will be made. Following that, the goals and the achievements of the stratification experiments will be discussed along with the costs and benefits that were realized by individual members of the experiments and by the greater society as a result of these experiments. Finally, the importance of these experiments to stratification theory and to knowledge about stratification processes will be considered. One editorial comment is in order. Since a wealth of descriptive information exists on the more historically interesting aspects of these experiments, and since there is a rather high degree of correspondence in these descriptions, the use of references will be limited to the more important and controversial assertions.

## II. social organization

During the 19th century over 100 communal experiments involving in excess of 100,000 people were

1. It was at about this time that secular communes emerged. Prior to this, efforts at communal living were primarily sectarian.

FIGURE 1: Chronology of the more important 19th century communal experiments



attempted in the United States. Few of the experiments lasted more than a decade although there were notable exceptions such as Amana and some of the Shaker communities, which continue to exist at the present time, although in either a radically different form, or as dying survivals.<sup>1</sup> Figure 1 provides a chronological review of the more important experiments as reported by Bushee (1905). The sectarian-secular classification reflected in Figure 1 was a very real and important one that most historians agree distinguishes between two very different approaches to communal experimentation and often to the success (measured by longevity) achieved. On the average, the sectarian experiments of the century lasted 24 years while the secular ones lasted less than 4 years (Bushee, 1905: 650). Only the more prominent religious experiments are indicated in the figure along with the number of communities belonging to each type, listed in parentheses. With the exception of Icaria, which was a single experiment, Bushee aggregated the secular experiments into three groups based on their prevailing ideologies.

Concerning the histories of Shakerism and the Oneida community, the former was brought to the United States from England by Ann Lee and a handful of disciples in 1774, while Oneida community was founded in upstate New York by John Humphrey Noyes in 1848. Shaker communities were founded throughout the United States with increasing frequency until the Civil War, thereafter Shakerism gradually declined to its present status of 3 destitute «families» of less than 50 members. Oneida existed very robustly until 1879, at which time it was transformed into a joint stock company by its remaining members. It has continued to exist as a corporation community up to the present time, although not without considerable difficulty.

The demographic characteristics of the communal experiments considered as a whole almost defy specification since the differences between individual communities were so extreme. It does appear, however, that in the absence of a radical family or sexual ideology, most of the experiments attempted to achieve, and were fairly successful in achieving memberships with distributions of demographic characteristics approximating those of the greater society although with slightly higher proportions of females and the aged, and particularly, of aged females. As those agrarian communities with traditional family organization endured, the distribution of population approached that of a rather model population pyramid. This was far less the case in most of the Shaker

communities, where celibacy limited the young to those that could be recruited along with a parent or guardian, or to those that could be joined by other means, at times bordering on the illegal. Apparently the communities remained interested in having children within the fold despite their marginal productivity and the high attrition through voluntary separation once the children reached adult status (Andrews, 1963: 228). The Oneida population tended to have a slightly disproportionate number of young adults and children until Noyes and the original members aged and until they perfected their own system of «planned parenthood» and population control through complex marriage, «coitus interruptus» (via withdrawal), and eugenics.

Considering the social characteristics of the participants in the communal movement it is apparent that while the majority of them were at least descended from white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, usually of the lower class, and were themselves often only semi-skilled and semi-educated, there were many important exceptions, particularly among the sectarian communities, where quite often the entire community would be of lower-middle or of middle class German or French descent. Many historians report that the ideal type agrarian communalists (and often the most successful ones) were of German peasant stock because these people were particularly suited for the wholesome but tedious, uneventful, and mindless sort of labor and life that maintained the experiments. There were noteworthy exceptions of course. Brook Farm, a Fourierist experiment composed almost entirely of intelligentsia, existed in remarkable harmony—but for only three years (Holloway, 1951: 53). The original communalists of Oneida were generally middle and upper-middle class, often with some university or professional training or at least several skills that could be profitably employed to the benefit of the community. On the other hand, the original Shakers, along with most of their converts, were of a distinctly lower class origin, often unskilled, poorly educated, and not infrequently impoverished.

The social origins of the communalists and the experiments they instigated, no matter how diverse, were reflected in the ideologies that undergirded and gave legitimacy to their practices and social structures. Their ideologies, therefore, were as varied as they were critical to the success of the undertakings. To a certain extent they all embraced some form of social equality more extreme than the greater society. And, for at least some brief period, most of them embraced some form of communism, although in practice this ideal varied from pure communism (the original Shakers) to collectivism (the Scientific experiments) to near capitalism (the later Zoar Separatists). A more important consideration than the

1. The factual information in this section is based on historical data provided by most of the sources listed in the Bibliography.

extensivity of a communist ideology in an experiment was the primacy of the ideology. Generally in the *sectarian* experiments the communist ideology was second to some general system of religious belief. It was a means rather than an end in itself. This was very much the case in the Shaker communities, where the goal of most members was individual Christian salvation, not communism (Andrews, 1963: 27). And yet they professed, practiced, and almost achieved a total state of pure communism (Hinds, 1961: 6). The Shakers also believed in total celibacy, total segregation but the *equality* of the sexes, withdrawal from worldly pursuits and the greater society, and the spiritual and purgative value of physical labor.

The Oneida community ideology initially balanced religious and communistic orientations. The religion was an abstract unwritten code of spiritual behavior called perfectionism that struck a favorable and flexible balance between the individual and the communal good by requiring individual members to perfect themselves through sacrifice to the community. For all practical purposes the Oneida ideology was a manifestation of the personal ideology of its founder and autocrat, John Humphrey Noyes, whose personal brand of total communism came to include complex marriage (marriage to the community rather than to individuals), male continence, eugenics and a unique concept called «spiritual ascendancy» that served as the basis for the distribution of spiritual and material privileges.

The social structures of the communal experiments were at least as diverse as the ideologies they professed. Community size ranged from 20 to 2000 members of all ages with the average size at around 200. A community approaching either of these extremes would generally either attach itself to a larger ideologically similar community or it would divide—one element establishing a new community with the assistance of the parent community. Most often the new community would locate within 10 miles of the parent unit although there were many notable exceptions in which the distance covered several states. This pattern of growth by division is particularly descriptive of the expansion of Shakerism across the United States.

Most of the experiments retained the traditional family form as the basic social unit, although a considerable number at least attempted alternative forms during part of their existence (Kanter, 1967: 88). Whenever the family structure was retained it was usually the primary, and most often the only, organizational unit within the community besides the governing body of the community. In the case of communities where the traditional family form was disbanded, such as in the Shaker and Oneida communities, alternate «family» forms were devised wherein

a group of 20 to 100 individuals of both sexes and of all ages were formed into a social and residential unit often called a «family» (the Shakers), or the entire community was considered to be one large family, sometimes living together under the same roof (Oneida). In some cases, particularly with the more successful religious experiments, individual communities were organized and were governed through some extra-local authority system most often based in the original community of the sect and considered to be the sect headquarters. This was the case with the Shakers—where an extremely powerful, nationally centralized and coordinated power structure developed. More often, the regulatory influence of extra-local authority units tended to diminish with time and with the demise of the original members of the movement. Most often the communities admitted little more than an ideological or spiritual debt to extralocal structures and existed as autonomous units.

Authority relations within the communities varied considerably. Often, while democratic principles were espoused or while written formal ordinances and codes of law existed, authority nonetheless rested with the original founder (i.e., Oneida), a handful of his disciples, or with successors selected by the founder or founders (i.e., the Shakers). In the religious communities, religious and political functions and structures were often combined.

The economic organization of the more successful communities was usually centrally controlled and coordinated by the community itself, and was based on both agriculture and manufacturing. Often the communities engaged in retail sale of their products and provided services, in the form of schools, hotels, transportation, and equipment maintenance. The Shaker communities restricted their economic activity more to farming and handicraft, furniture, and clothing manufacturing than to other pursuits that would require greater contact with the outside world. Oneida community was just the opposite, for its members gradually came to own and operate a number of manufacturing, commercial, and service activities (such as a noteworthy preparatory school) that employed several hundred employees (Carden, 1969: 42).

Perhaps, in conclusion, some mention needs to be made about the very crucial recruitment and expulsion practices of the communal experiments. While, typically, the practices varied greatly, it appears that the ability and willingness of a community to recruit members with ideologies and behavior consistent with its own, and to expel them neatly should that not prove to be the case, was crucial to the preservation of the community. Very few of the communities tried to compel dissatisfied members to remain. Often they were provided with sufficient funds to enable

them to relocate in the outside world without fear of immediate deprivation. The Shaker communities experienced increasing difficulty from the 1820's in recruiting «qualified» members. They resorted to all sorts of recruitment mechanisms from traveling revivals, to advertisements, to the procurement of orphans—often at the cost of rupturing relations with surrounding villages (Holloway, 1951: 69). Their indoctrination program subjected the novitiates to the scrutiny and often the torment of the entire community for more than a year while the novitiates gave evidence of a complete ideological conversion and renounced all allegiance to the outside world. Shaker expulsion and mortification mechanisms were equally harsh and effective.

Recruitment was far less a problem at Oneida where there were many attractive and somewhat unique economic, cultural, and «social» incentives. Selection of new members was primarily handled by Noyes himself, who apparently exercised considerable discretion in choosing only those who could contribute something of value (either wealth, talent, or «culture») to the community (Carden, 1969: 26, 37). Apparently his selection criteria were excellent since there is little evidence of expulsions or secessions from Oneida (Carden, 1969: 80).

### III. the stratification experiment in the Shaker communities

The formal distributive goal of the Shaker experiment was total communism, as evidenced in this excerpt from the original Shaker covenant signed in 1795:

All the members that should be received into the Church, should possess one Joint Interest, as a Religious right, that is, that all should have Just and Equal rights and Privileges, according to their needs, in the use of all things in the Church, without Any difference being made on account of what any of us brought in, so long as we remained in Obedience to the Order and Government of the Church, and are holden in relation as members. All of the members are likewise Equally holden, according to their abilities, to maintain and support one Joint Interest in union, in Conformity to the order and Government of the Church (Andrews, 1963: 62, emphasis added).

Other covenants reaffirmed the official position of the order concerning the total social equalization of differences based on age, sex, race, education and wealth. All privileges were to be equalized through sharing and charity.

Many historians agree that a number of the Shaker communities came closer to achieving a pure functional communism than any of the communities that endured for any significant length of time (cf. Andrews, 1963: xiii; Hinds, 1961: 115). This estimate certainly applies to the level of economic equality a-

chieved in the Shaker communities. There is little evidence of any noteworthy inequality concerning personal property or income among the members. This is one of the few examples of a communal experiment in which the «real» did, in fact, approximate the «ideal.» All property and income belonged to the community. All candidates for admittance to the community were required to sign over all personal property (and inheritance) to the community. And although they were permitted to retract the same property should they resign from the brotherhood, they could not claim interest or returns for their labor. These restrictions were supported by federal and state court decisions (Andrews, 1963: Chapter IV). Apparently there was complete communality of *surplus* as well as property across all status levels (Andrews, 1963: 106). There was very little occupational stratification except for the two levels of the church hierarchy, and these were considered to be roles more than occupations. Every member of the Shaker society was skilled in at least one trade—even the bishop—and there was an ordinance that required that jobs be rotated and that all members perform manual labor with some regularity (Andrews, 1963: 106). In actuality, however, it appears that these regulations were more or less subverted through a semi-official practice called the «deacon system» which assured that the deacons did precious little of the manual labor, among other things. While there was considerable differentiation of occupations, there is no evidence that differentiated occupations received differential rewards, except, perhaps for some increased prestige.

There is no evidence of significant sex or educational inequality among the Shakers. The more talented students received slightly more attention, but since the schooling was limited to applied subjects, and since all education outside the community was considered superfluous, very little educational stratification resulted. Apparently sexual equality was achieved and was maintained although there is some question as to how well represented women were in the religious hierarchy.

Status group differences were minimized. In fact the Shakers emphasized the equality of all races and nationalities in their religious ceremonies. While the historical record is incomplete and sometimes slightly contradictory on the matter, the Shakers were active in the anti-slavery movement, they encouraged blacks to join the society as members, and they apparently treated them equally in most respects (Andrews, 1963: 169).

The most significant aspect of the Shaker's distributive system, from a cynical standpoint, at least, was the substantial religious-political inequality that existed. Although authority was based on the many Shaker covenants as well as on an incredibly restric-



tive set of ordinances called the Millennial Laws, a religious-political hierarchy emerged whose members could exercise almost absolute power and privilege. This system at times almost approximated a religious elite despite the fact that Shaker government was originally founded as a participatory democracy.

Another source of disunity, doubtless inevitable in a theocracy, was the tendency of the system to produce two classes, those who governed and consequently had opportunities for individual initiative and development, and those who were governed and lacked the same facilities for self-expression. All were subjects to the same religious discipline. In theory the leaders were the greatest servants. But in practice it must be admitted that the assumption of responsibilities carried with it privileges, powers, and freedoms denied to the commonalty. Signs of discontent among the governed, particularly the youthful members, first appeared in the western communities. Surrender of property and confinement to small areas of land,<sup>4</sup> one observer wrote, were not western ideals; irritation was felt over the rule of strict obedience (Andrews, 1963: 236, emphasis added).

The authority of this self-perpetuating ministry was absolute, without appeal. It appointed its own successors, without election, and exacted implicit obedience. The leading elders, or 'leading characters' as they were sometimes called, heard all confessions, knew the whereabouts and occupations of every Shaker in their family, conducted the initiation of novices, controlled the movements of trustees in their dealings with the world, and exercised their power in numerous other ways (Holloway, 1951: 68).

To a certain extent the seeds for this aggrandizement of power and privilege were to be found in the Millennial Laws which first restricted the amount and kinds of criticism that could be directed against a community's officials and permitted officials more personal privacy from the brethren and more personal contact with the world outside.

The Shaker experiment was therefore far more successful in achieving economic and social equality than it was in achieving political equality. Yet, considering the social class origins of the majority of its members, it can be said that most of them experienced considerably more equality within the communities than they had known—or would have known—had they not joined. There was an almost unbelievable amount of equalization accomplished and maintained. And it was, perhaps, against this backdrop of generalized equality, and because of it, that the very restricted and closely scrutinized power and privilege differentials of the religious hierarchy seemed so great. There is little evidence of genuine dissatisfaction (in the form of protests, impeachments, etc.) within the ranks concerning excesses on the part of the hierarchy. Perhaps this is because prestige was fairly evenly distributed throughout the membership of the community. There is no indication that many members aspired to become deacons or officials of the order, nor was there any great veneration

or vexation over those who did. While the Shakers are, of course, a unique case, this example calls into question the assumption made by some current theorists that prestige is primarily a function of power and privilege (cf. Lenski, 1966: Chapters 2-3).

The factors that contributed to the successes and the failures of the Shaker stratification experiments are similar to those factors that explain the successes and failures of the American communal experiments in general. A discussion of those factors will be presented in section VI. By way of concluding this analysis of the Shaker stratification experiment, the benefits and the costs of the experiment might be summarized as follows:

1. Costs to the individual:
  - a. Extreme restrictions on personal freedom.
  - b. Loss of the opportunity for sustained intimate relationships including family life.
  - c. Celibacy and torment.
  - d. Lack of privacy and emotional support.
  - e. Some restrictions on individual legal rights (to sue the community, etc.).
  - f. Loss of all personal property and inheritance.
  - g. Some loss of honor through public criticism.
2. Benefits to the individual:
  - a. Security, sense of purpose, welfare benefits. Considerable social mobility for most members.
  - b. Opportunity to select, master, and improve on several trades.
  - c. Considerable personal prestige in the greater society, and equality of prestige within the community.
3. Costs to the greater society:
  - a. Legal and ethical challenges, and some community level conflict.
4. Benefits to the greater society:
  - a. High quality consumer and producer goods. Charity, welfare, tourism, increased property values. Economic stabilization. Land development. Inventions. Assistance in reducing the intensity of certain social problems: slavery, poverty, public dependency, and discrimination against minority groups.

Since most of the items listed above are self-explanatory, only a few additional remarks are in order. There is no evidence that a Shaker experience ever «ruined anyone's life,» nor, for that matter, is there much evidence to suggest that it disillusioned or deprived any of its *adult* members. There was considerable dissatisfaction among many of those who were raised in Shakerism—particularly once they realized that there were other alternatives and that such a disciplined existence was, in fact, voluntary for the *adults*. Dissatisfaction of the young increased throughout the 19th century until, it might be guessed, the majority of the young rejected membership upon reaching adulthood (cf. Andrews, 1963: Chapter XI).

On the other hand there is every indication that Shaker life was at least fulfilling and free of unhappiness for most members:



At first sight, this seems a spartan and even a stultifying life; but it is worth remembering that the rules and regulations of any society seem more fierce on paper than they do in practice, when they are not always observed absolutely to the letter. It is also worth remembering that membership, even of the Church Order, was voluntary, and could be renounced, as Elkins renounced it, at any time. We should not assume, therefore, that the Shakers were unhappy because they were subject to restrictions and repressions that might seem to us to be unbearable. The facts of Shaker craftsmanship alone, deny unhappiness (Holloway, 1951: 74).

Whatever psychologists might make of the peculiar religious attitude of the Shakers, the Shakers themselves found fulfillment in it (Holloway, 1951: 74).

The phenomenal success of the societies, rising from poverty, scorn, and persecution to positions commanding respect, proved to the former that there was no natural desire for private property. In these village families there was no want, no need for charitable institutions. All lived in peace and harmony without violence or crime of any kind (Andrews, 1963: 134).

Apparently the first Shaker communities were a source of considerable antagonism to the indigenous population wherever they located, for there are several reports of confrontations staged by irate and well-armed villagers protesting everything from the Shakers' celibacy, to their procurement of children, to their very presence (Andrews, 1963: 91). During the first quarter of the century, however, a legal precedent had been established and Shaker ordinances and practices were adjusted accordingly so that there was remarkably little overt conflict between not only the Shaker communities and the greater society, but between most other communal adventures and the greater society.

The Shakers became known as good and charitable (if reserved) neighbors both to the greater society at large and to other sects, minorities, and experiments across the United States (Andrews, 1963: 221). They were active and apparently quite effective in their antislavery and antipoverty campaigns.

The liberal attitude of the Kentucky Believers toward the racial question doubtlessly complicated their relations with the world: the Kentuckians 'speak evil of them without cause,' Finch noticed in 1844, for 'the Shakers in their midst, all free, wealthy and happy, are an everlasting reproach upon them and their accursed slavery system' (Andrew, 1963: 215).

As with many of the other communal experiments that followed them, the Shakers were as inventive as they were persevering. A list of their many mechanical improvements and inventions ranges from the screw propeller to the common clothes pin (Andrews, 1963: 113). The most important «invention» of the Shakers, however, was in *founding* and maintaining, with marked success, a form of communistic society that inspired so many other experiments in radical social existence.

... and if their demands upon life were few, if they employed hired labour on a small scale, if they owned property in land, if their communism did not extend beyond the confines of a single society, they nevertheless held together through the cohesive force of these very limitations. By thus maintaining a stabilised society, the ordering of which was so successfully conducted, the Shakers made their greatest contribution to the community movement.

They were the first to show that communities could be prosperous, neat, orderly, and of long duration. Their fame spread far. Robert Owen studied first-hand reports of them in Scotland, and was thus encouraged to make his own experiments; they were visited, for advice and observation, by founders of communities throughout the nineteenth century (Holloway, 1951: 79).

#### IV. the stratification experiment in the Oneida community

The «goal» of the Oneida stratification experiment was similar to that of the Shaker community. One of the principles stated by the original members instituted the practice of communism while it concurrently implanted what was to be the seed of inequality—an autocrat:

They agreed to an absolute community of property, including people as well as material possessions. Further, they recognized the ultimate authority of God in all things, and they submitted to the will of John Humphrey Noyes as «the father and overseer whom the Holy Ghost has set over the family thus constituted» (Carden, 1969: 21).

As was also the case with the Shakers, it appears that the Oneida Communists were concerned more with economic and social equality than with political equality because there is very little evidence of their dissatisfaction with the distribution of power through at least 20 of the 30 years the community existed—and yet there was considerable political inequality. In the case of Oneida, however, authority was vested not in a body of law but almost exclusively in one man—the founder, John Humphrey Noyes. Although Noyes professed democratic principles and authorized numerous committees to study and administer various community functions, he alone decided what issues would be voted upon and who would chair the committees; and he retained and exercised the right to reject most suggestions or protests. He experienced very little opposition until the last few years of the community's existence not only because he surrounded himself with a circle of efficient and loyal disciples but also because he apparently was a very skilled charismatic, a shrewd businessman, and a rather just and compassionate fellow (Carden, 1969: 29-30). Besides that, if not because of it, Oneida was a «booming» success. After its first 10 years it grew increasingly more wealthy and prestigious. And the wealth, as well as much of the prestige, was quite equally distributed within the

community. From all indications there was complete communalism of property and income. And while there was extensive occupational differentiation, rewards were not distributed on the basis of occupational differences (Carden, 1969: 66). Although there was some rotation of members into the various menial jobs, financial prosperity enabled the community to employ outside labor for most of this work. As a result, the community members usually served as managers, foremen, or as skilled laborers in Oneida's many small farming and manufacturing enterprises. Members were permitted to work in those activities where they demonstrated the most talent and motivation (Carden, 1969: 66).

While the Oneida members experienced considerably greater social equality than they would have known in the outside world, social values were in part distributed according to a very subtle mechanism called the order of «ascending fellowship.» All of the community members could be ranked in an ascending order according to the level of spiritual perfection they had achieved (Carden, 1969: 52). And, of course, it was only natural for those who had been «perfecting» for the longest time, and for those who had «ascended» closest to the patriarch Noyes to be furthest along in the fellowship. It was on the basis of the ascending fellowship that certain mild forms of social inequality came to exist. There was some age stratification, with the older male members usually having the privilege of first choice in food, clothing, and sex partners. While women were liberated from many of the more subordinating roles and jobs because of birth control, communal marriage, a nursery, and outside labor, the natural superiority of men was accepted in principle (Carden, 1969: 67). However, some authors conclude that, for all practical purposes, women were on an equal footing with men (cf. Holloway, 1951: 191).

There was no institutionalized educational stratification practiced. Children were educated by the community up through the age of 26, depending primarily on each student's own interest in academics. A considerable number of Oneida children went on to the better colleges and universities to continue their education at the expense of the community. Many of them returned to Oneida afterwards and took up professional, scholarly, and managerial pursuits.

In summarizing Oneida's stratification successes it is apparent that the *extent* of equality achieved cannot be discussed independently from the *kind* of equality being considered. There is no doubt that there was very substantial economic equality, and to a lesser extent, also substantial social equality at Oneida. Only in the final years of the experiment were there any important internal differences concerning social inequalities. And while there were considera-

ble differences in power and prestige based on one's «spiritual» relationship with John Humphrey Noyes, these differences often were not exercised—or at least they were not exercised in a whimsical manner. The inequalities were legitimized both by tradition and by Noyes' charismatic personality. And the differences were relative rather than absolute. A member was not denied access to a scarce resource, he was just denied priority over it. And since very few resources at Oneida were scarce, there were very few protestations. Members might not have exercised much authority with other members, but they certainly exercised considerable power in dealing with an outside world of laborers and tradesmen.

An analysis of the factors related to Oneida's stratification successes will be delayed until the next section. The costs and benefits of the Oneida experiment would be as follows:

1. Costs to the individual:
  - a. Limited freedom in the areas noted.
  - b. Threat of rejection by the greater society (for sexual practices).
  - c. The loss of the opportunity for sustained intimate relationships, conventional family life, etc.
  - d. Some loss of honor through public criticism within the community.
2. Benefits to the individual:
  - a. Security, considerable wealth, desirable job, sexual freedom, some increased social mobility, happiness, broad and excellent education, welfare, professional advancement.
3. Costs to the greater society:
  - a. Legal and ethical challenges.
4. Benefits to the greater society:
  - a. Economic and cultural improvement. Industrial and agricultural development and innovation. Increased property values. Tourism, charity, and plentiful employment.

Perhaps the only comments necessary concerning the costs and benefits would be to note that prior to the dissolution of the community in 1879 a number of the members had intermarried, and a considerable number of them married shortly after Oneida disbanded. Many of the members went into private or corporate enterprise (Carden, 1969: Chapter III). While this might have been expected, given their experience as managers and the fact that many of them had been married before joining the order, both of these «reversions» might indicate the ascendance of individualistic over communalistic values. Or at least they indicate, along with the demise of Oneida itself, that the individual benefits did not greatly exceed the individual costs involved in the experiment. It is also important to note that since many of the Oneida communalists were of middle class origin and were fairly well educated and skilled when they *joined* the community, they were less dependent on the community for providing them with a livelihood and a way of life.

### V. stratification and the American communal experiments

Given the diversity of the American communal experiments, it is not at all surprising that there was considerable diversity in their goals, particularly their «real» stratification goals. To the extent that the concept «goals» applies to these experiments, it might be said that most of them assumed from the outset that they had established a communist society. Their goal, then, was to endure. If this is too great an assumption, then it might be more safely assumed that, in general, the communities did attempt to subordinate individual self-interest and behavior to the common good of the order (Nordhoff, 1965: 390), and that this usually required, at the least, communal use and control of individual property (Nordhoff, 1965: xvii).

In evaluating the successes and failures of these stratification experiments, it is perhaps somewhat tautological to conclude that they generally achieved a very considerable degree of economic equality; for had they not done so, then they might never have been considered to be communistic endeavors in the first place, or they might have disintegrated before being recorded. At any rate, it is apparent that most of the experiments were able to equalize economic differences substantially for at least more than a fleeting moment. Bushee argues that they reduced the range of economic differences among members considerably and that they improved the quality of life for almost all members (1905: 654). In almost all cases stratification based on occupational differences was reduced. There is some indication that occupational stratification in these communities was positively correlated to occupational differentiation and to the economic value of non-agrarian over agrarian income. Communities generally upgraded the quality as well as the importance of labor so that previously unskilled (male and female) workers became skilled, and the skilled became multi-skilled. The skills were definitely appreciated both in the community and in the greater society. At least one author reports that while communalists were willing to learn and to assume a variety of jobs, there was usually widespread dissatisfaction with policies of equal rewards for what was, intrinsically, unequal work (Bushee, 1905: 650).

There was generally appreciably greater social equality in the communities than in the social settings in which the members originated, but the equalization of social differences seldom approximated the equalization of economic differences. In almost all cases sex and age differences in the distribution of

values were reduced—but never eliminated.<sup>1</sup> Far greater (and more easily measured) equality of education existed than in the greater society. In almost all cases the communities established and operated their own education system and either required equal schooling for all children (and not infrequently the adults as well), or required a certain level of schooling for all children, with some children permitted to continue on with their studies based on their own motivation, and, occasionally, their performance. It is particularly hard to gauge the success of these experiments in reducing status group differences since so many of them were founded on the basis of ethnic, religious, political, or class homogeneity, and since so many of them recruited in such a manner as to preserve their homogeneity. Most communities were at least ideologically committed to status group equality. But, once again, their recruitment mechanisms generally insured that their egalitarian ideologies went unscathed.

The political inequalities or the potential for political inequalities that existed at Oneida and at most of the Shaker communities were not atypical of the inequalities that existed in many other experiments. There were pure democracies, such as Icaria, that were very successful (Nordhoff, 1965: 393)—but there were far more that were not. Based on an excellent recent study of the importance of commitment mechanisms to communal success (longevity) there is reason to believe that considerable political inequality existed in many, if not most, communities and that the extent of political inequality in a community was positively associated with the community's success—all other factors held constant (Kanter, 1967: Chapter III). Most historians of the period reported the presence of undemocratic authority structures (often approximating Weber's charismatic authority structures) that often resulted in quite widespread and intensive political inequalities. And it seems fair to conclude that in most cases the major differentials in power and privilege within these communities were based primarily on the *political* systems they legitimated, if only because the economic and social systems they legitimated often approached the egalitarian. And to repeat a viewpoint introduced earlier in this paper, it seems that the actual importance and extent of political inequality in these experiments has been distorted for several reasons. First, political inequalities seemed more severe than they really were simply because they existed in systems where there were relatively few other significant inequalities. Second, while the *potential* for ex-

1. A possible exception to this assertion would be the Shakers, who may have, in fact, approximated an absolute state of sexual equality. See the discussion in Section III.

treme political inequality was very real, in actuality the political systems generally chose to be quite egalitarian. The autocrats, the charismatics, and members of the religious and political hierarchies simply did not exercise many of their options, or they did not exercise them very often, or very fully. Third, potential inequalities existed mainly *between*, not *within*, two, or at most four levels—and the vast majority of the community members were at one of these levels. That is to say that if there were class systems within these communities, then, they were either two-class systems (the governors and the governed) or four-class systems (the autocrat, his chosen coterie, the brethren, and the novitiates and children). *Within* these classes there was very substantial equality—of every type. And it was this generalized equality that made tolerable the political (and to a more limited extent, social) inequalities that existed between classes. In summary then, the American communal experiments were in fact quite communal—if not at the community level—then certainly at the sub-community (social-political class) level.

The costs and benefits of the communal experiments include most of the costs and benefits that characterized the Shaker and Oneida experiments. To supplement the previous discussion of those costs and benefits, it might be added that communal existence reduced the potential range of individual wealth and worldly success—a fact that became increasingly more bothersome to communalists of the latter half of the 19th century (Bushee, 1905: 655), and that *sustained* communal existence reduced an individual's chances of ever becoming wealthy or «successful.» This kind of an insight, of course, would be of greater concern to a community whose members were of middle class origins (such as Oneida) and were therefore more success oriented and potentially upwardly mobile. A number of historians claim that the security of established communal life dampened individual creativity along with high physical and mental achievement. Bushee dismisses many of their mechanical inventions as having utility only within communal settings and as being the products of fertile minds that were recruited into the communities rather than developed there (1905: 657).

There is greater certainty concerning the individual benefits. Nordhoff estimated that in 1875 the average communalist in America was worth \$2,000.00 and possessed the equivalent of over 36 acres of farmland (1965: 385). However these statistics were determined, and whatever they really mean, Nordhoff's point is that the communal member was worth a lot more than his counterpart in society. Nordhoff also argues that the communal workplace was steady but unhurried because work was considered to be ethically and spiritually important. He reports that commu-

nal life on the whole was comfortable and satisfying (1965: 400). Most authors tend to agree that the benefits of communal life for the individual member surpassed the benefits of an alternative existence in the greater society.

Every observer agrees that life in the successful communities was far superior to industrial or agricultural life in "the world". The labourers and artisans were freed from poverty and insecure dependence upon the whims and caprices of employers and stock markets. Associative effort prevented wasted energy, produced many labour-saving devices, and resulted in a higher standard of living than that of the isolated working-man (Holloway, 1951: 222).

A thorough discussion of the costs and benefits realized by the greater society from the communal experiments would require a separate volume. It would be hard to argue, however, that the benefits did not far exceed the costs, for many of the reasons already mentioned. At a much greater level of analysis (and speculation) there is every reason to believe that these communal experiments not only inspired many other better informed (yet not necessarily more successful) experiments that followed, and that they whetted the imaginations and passions of such global social thinkers as Karl Marx (Kanter, 1967: Chapter 1), but that they had a direct and immediate influence on the governments and the societies that spawned them (Bestor, 1970: 230-271). For these experiments in communism on a limited scale were only as successful as one's concept of communism is restrictive.

If he is satisfied by a social ownership of production, at least a partial social ownership of all property, an equitable system of distribution, and equal opportunity for all, then communism, without any doubt, flourished peacefully and harmoniously in a number of societies for a sufficient number of years to prove its feasibility. But the reader who is particular about the social machinery, the motives, and the ultimate basis of communism may refuse to acknowledge that it ever proved itself in these community experiments (Holloway, 1951: 221).

#### VI. factors related to the success of American communal de-stratification experiments and to stratification theory

In order to best understand some of the factors related to the success of the American communal de-stratification experiments, it is helpful to review first the primary factors that contributed to the success of the communities in general (measured by their longevity) based on the consensus of a number of historians of the period.<sup>1</sup> These factors, all of which were positively associated with the success of a given community are:

1. These historians are listed in the Bibliography.

- 1) A strong leadership structure and replacement mechanism that precludes succession crises;
- 2) A strong flexible authority system across most institutional areas (but often centralized in one institution such as the religious institution);
- 3) A comprehensive ideology, particularly a more traditional form of religious or familial ideology, that subsumes, or at least supplements, the communist ideology and which permits some form of individual recognition and identity;
- 4) A perceptive and effective recruitment procedure, a rigorous and lengthy indoctrination-conversion procedure that assures the compatibility or homogeneity of values and behavior, and a summary dismissal or expulsion procedure;
- 5) An ability to train, motivate, and retain young members and to integrate them effectively into the social structure of the community;
- 6) A greater social and physical environment that does not provide sufficient individual equality or fulfillment but that is conducive to collective attempts to do so.

It is important to understand that while these might have been the primary factors contributing to the success of the communal experiments, there is no necessary relationship between these factors and the success of the *de-stratification* experiments. In fact, if it is assumed that the goal of the stratification experiments was to achieve distributive equality, then three of these factors might have been detrimental to the realization of that goal. For if factors such as a strong successive leadership structure, a strong cross-institutional authority system, and an ideology that supercedes communism do not imply some form of inequality by definition, or if they do not imply at least a partial subversion of communist principles, then at least they call into mind a very lengthy historical record that has found them to be empirically associated with inequality. It might be argued (along Marxist lines) that factors such as these are only temporary expedients through which communism will eventually be achieved. But, once again, the historical record (or at least an interpretation of the historical record according to Michels) finds this argument to be unconvincing. Authority structures tend to become self-perpetuating. And, of course, for Mosca, a two-class system composed of the governing and the governed is a basic fact of socio-political existence.

More convincing is the argument that the other three factors were extremely important in determining the *success* of the de-stratification experiments. And the relationship of these factors to the success of de-stratification experiments, at least at the community level, is particularly important to stratification theory. The relationship of the fourth factor,

the effectiveness of a recruitment-indoctrination-expulsion procedure, to a community's success demonstrates that a community need not *change* the self-interested nature of man in order to assure the primacy of communal over personal goals—if, assuming that the degree of individual self-interestedness is normally distributed, it can *recruit* those individuals who are least self-interested! And it appears that the American communal experiments did attract and assimilate many individuals with rather unique personalities and ideologies (Nordhoff, 1965: 388, 400; Carden, 1969: xviii). Bushee reports that communalists tended to drift from one experiment to another (1905: 652), although this mobility might have been more a product of the high-failure and low-longevity rate of communal endeavors than of a vagabond spirit among communalists. Of course there is some merit to the argument that the personality types that gravitated to communal adventures were not so much less self-interested than others, but that they were simply peculiar (cf. Bushee, 1905: 652).

The fifth factor, a community's ability to hold its young members once they reached adulthood, is related to both the fourth and the sixth factor, the failure of the greater social and physical environment to provide sufficient individual equality or fulfillment while remaining conducive to collective attempt to do so. By being able to retain its young, a community reduces its dependence on recruitment for manpower replacement and provides social and cultural continuity for the community. Yet as the 19th century progressed, it became increasingly more difficult for communities to retain their young. Perhaps, contrary to the sociological imagination, this was because self-interestedness of the young was normally distributed, and therefore, the less self-interested were the most strongly attached to the community. Of course, numerous rhetorical questions arise such as, «why, then, did the defections *increase* during the century?» Even disregarding the population genetics of self-interestedness, the fact that defections of the young seemed to have increased at something of an exponential rate after mid-century indicates that communal life was becoming less palatable either because it was becoming *more* harsh (therefore «pushing» the young out) or because the external social and physical environment was becoming *less* harsh (thereby «pulling» the young out). There is every indication, once again based on consensus of the authors listed in the Bibliography, that it was the latter.

Frederick A. Bushee, one of the more astute scholars of the communes, concluded that the primary factors related to the dissolution of many of the communities had little to do with the application of com-

munism, for that was relatively successful, although he mentions that there was generally widespread dissatisfaction with policies of equal rewards for what was intrinsically unequal work (Bushee, 1905: 650). The primary factors centered around the disharmony within the communities concerning future goals and policy (1905: 649-660). After mid-century, almost all evidence points to the presence of *liberalist*—not reformist—protestations within the communities. Almost without exception, dissensus was based on the success and the appeal of collectivism and individualism in the greater society rather than on the failure of communism within the communities. And, not surprisingly, the appeal was greatest and the appeals were loudest among the young.<sup>1</sup>

The point of all of this is that the primary factor that contributed to the success and then to the «failure» of the American communal de-stratification experiment was the *American de-stratification experiment!* By the third quarter of the century the United States was becoming unmistakably and inexorably industrial. Accelerating technological change accelerated social change—particularly in the economic and political spheres. Drawing on the social evolutionary proposition that social inequality seems to be less prevalent in industrial societies than in their immediate technological predecessors (Lenski, 1970: 406-409), then it might also be proposed that the amount of inequality is somewhat negatively associated with the extent of industrialization in near-industrialized or in industrializing societies. The American experience would seem to support this argument.

At a less theoretical level it can be argued that the American distributive system was becoming increasingly more attractive in both relative and absolute terms. And it was the inability of the communal experiments to *adapt*, in order to compete socially, culturally, and economically with the greater society, that led to their demise. This argument supports the evolutionary postulate that specialization is achieved at the expense of adaptability; for the communal experiments were both ideologically and socially (and all too often economically) specialized. Specialization was a product of their homogeneity. To succeed internally they depended on the homogeneity of beliefs, values, goals, ethnicity, class, and property to hold them together; and yet, to succeed externally they needed, *increasingly*, the heterogeneity with which to compete with an increasingly heterogeneous social environment—and an environment that of-

fered, among other things, increasingly more opportunity and freedom for the *individual*.

Some of the more important socio-political environmental factors that contributed to the demise of the American communal experiments were:

- 1) The increase of national consciousness after the Civil War;
- 2) The rapid development of an industrial economy;
- 3) The rapid development of a nationwide transportation and communication system;
- 4) A spiraling increase in land prices, particularly in Western arable land;
- 5) The emergence of federal legislation and of laws that formalized the relationship between individual citizens and the national government such as compulsory schooling, military service, and increased tax obligations;
- 6) The dissolution of foreign language enclaves (particularly in rural areas);
- 7) The extension of constitutional liberties and of popular sovereignty to most American citizens;
- 8) An increase in social mobility (particularly in urban social mobility) and in the power of popular government;
- 9) A major transformation in the religious institution towards secularism and service;
- 10) An emergence of government interest and activity in matters of public welfare, thereby reducing the primacy of church-related charities;
- 11) A resurgence of the individualist ethic promoted by the California goldrush, the Civil War, and a final frenzied rush to close the Frontier.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, most of these factors are directly related to changes in the distributive processes of society, and almost all of them can be understood as factors that have contributed to increasing distributive equality.

A few additional remarks may be in order concerning the importance of the American communal stratification experiments to stratification theory. Knowledge of these experiments tend to support, at least partially, the elitist response to the root stratification question concerning the primary basis of inequality. That is to say that in so many of these experiments the more significant forms of inequality resulted from a need for social control of the social systems. Or, to be less functionalistic in phraseology, it might be said that in order to assure themselves of communal order and direction, communalists generally were willing to accept a very considerable amount of political inequality.

Second, a considerable level of sustained (and institutionalized?) altruism in human behavior is pos-

1. The 19th century communes were not nearly so isolated, either physically, socially, or economically as is often assumed to be the case. Nordhoff argues that the image of these experiments as remote and obscure escapist undertakings is in need of revision (1965: xv).

2. These factors were given by various authors listed in the Bibliography. See, in particular, Nordhoff (1965: xxiii).



sible, at least on the limited scale of a community, if the environment is held constant at a high but unchallenging level of productivity.

Third, a surprising number of historians of the communes posit, along with certain social theorists, the self-interested nature of human beings as a basic assumption of all human social thinking (cf. Bushee, 1905: 658; Holloway, 1951: 221; Hinds, 1961: 159; Wrong, 1961; Lenski, 1970: 32-34).

And finally, the importance of ideology as a variable related to the amount and the kind of inequality in a social system becomes all the more apparent based on an analysis of these communal experiments. For ideology was far more than just «after the fact justification» in these experiments. It was, in fact, the motivation and the direction in them. For without ideology, utopia could never happen.

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Whatever their persuasion (communitarian, Marxist, Christian, etc.), all Socialists regarded the opposition of self and society as a false one, reflecting the prevailing ethic of greed and domination. All envisioned an end, really a return to the beginning, in the form either of the perfect community, or the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, or the cooperative commonwealth, each the realization of the promise of America.

Albert Fried, *Socialism in America*, 1970.