Commitment and Community
Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective

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*Men cannot play at communism. It is not
amateur work. It requires patience, submission;
self-sacrifice often in little matters where self-
sacrifice is peculiarly irksome . . .* "Bear ye one
another's burdens" *might well be written over
the gates of every commune.*
—Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies
of the United States*

3 Commitment: The Problem and the Theory

Experiments in communal living have always been part of the
American landscape; even the Puritans established a kind of
utopian community in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Yet
despite the large numbers of communes begun, few have lasted
more than a handful of years or attracted large numbers of
adherents. The idealized view of communal life held by utopians
is difficult to implement, and American communes have met
with varying success. An examination of the problems and
practices of communes of the past, both successful and un-
successful, can indicate what kinds of social organization are
important for viable communes.

Between the Revolutionary and Civil wars (approximately
1780–1860), almost a hundred known utopian communities
were founded, with the peak of activity and membership from
1840–1860. Some of these groups lasted well over one hundred
years (the Shakers), while others dissolved in less than a year
(Yellow Springs in Ohio). The communes established between
1780 and 1860 provide an ideal population in which to com-
pare successful and unsuccessful groups.

Communes in the Nineteenth Century

The United States in the first half of the nineteenth century
provided fertile soil for utopian aspirations. Social protest
movements and experiments of all kinds flourished. A series
of enthusiastic revivals in many locations kindled desires for
renewal that were easily channeled into communal move-

ments.[1] The frontier provided the opportunity to seek a new way of life. Immigrant groups found that by organizing utopian communities, they could maintain their distinctive culture even in the New World. Many of these groups, including Harmony, Zoar, and Amana, represented pietest, separatist churches in Europe, for whom utopian organization was a logical outgrowth of their values of primitive Christianity. Some of these groups, in fact, had maintained variants of utopian communities even before emigrating.

Political protest in this period was also funneled into attempts at utopia. As men were becoming conscious of economic and social inequities, the idea occurred naturally to establish small-scale social systems to remedy these ills of the larger society. Frances Wright, for example, created Nashoba for emancipated slaves. The United States had been founded on the basis of certain ideals, and in order to create a "more perfect union," its citizens often imported socialist theories from Europe, such as those of Owen and Fourier. The propensity for forming voluntary associations noted by de Tocqueville provided a medium for the rational planning of utopian communities, so that they did not require the particular conjunction of events involved in the spontaneous eruption of social movement.[2] During the 1840s, in fact, a national organization existed for the purpose of establishing utopian communities on the Fourier model, with its headquarters for a time at Brook Farm. Forty such groups were created.

This period also offered an essentially secular and optimistic culture. The feeling prevailed that the perfect society could be founded on earth and within the context of an established political order. Even among religious groups the notion held that God's kingdom was possible here and now. Among economically oriented reformers, such as Josiah Warren, who founded a commune called Utopia with a new monetary system, it was felt that economic improvements did not require major political upheaval. Since utopian communities had already been founded in America and the remnants of a colonial tradition of cooperative societies existed, religious and economic idealists readily converged on the communal order as a better way of life — if not for all of society, then at least for them-

selves. In one way or another, utopian communities of the 1800s participated in all major social movements of their time: revivalism, temperance, women's rights, free love, nonresistance, anarchism, and socialism of the Owenist, Fourierist, Icarian, and even Marxist varieties.[3]

Finally, the utopian communities of 1780–1860 were established under a fairly similar set of external social conditions or environment, for the U.S. at this time had yet to face the rapid social change of later decades. There was still enough wilderness for it to be possible to find an isolated location. Many communes moved to the outposts of civilization, which both minimized their contact with the outside and supported their subsistence economies. Thus, during the first period of the communities' existence, external problems were scant, and considerations of organizing a viable internal communal order were paramount.

Ninety-one distinct communal ventures from this period have left historical records. While most involved only a single commune, others consisted of many locations; the Shakers at one time had twenty-two villages. The communes of 1780–1860 similarly varied widely in longevity. Less than a dozen of the ninety-one known groups lasted more than sixteen years; for the majority, the average life-span was less than four years. Such well-known communes as New Harmony and Brook Farm were among the short-lived groups. New Harmony faced continual crises from its inception and after two years dissolved in disaster; Brook Farm ended after six years despite support from leading intellectuals of the time. Building viable utopian communities has proven to be difficult: translating the utopian dream into reality is fraught with issues that in time may even distort the original vision.

Yet the exceptions — those utopian communities that established the social basis for a long existence — are dramatic and noteworthy; much can be learned from them about the forms of social organization that make communes a living, viable, and practical arrangement. The Shakers, for example, formed their first community in 1787 and flourished for over a hundred years, at one time encompassing twenty-two villages and thousands of members; today a few believers still maintain the

remnants of Shaker communities in remote parts of New
England. The Amana community, or the Society of True
Inspiration, maintained seven communal villages in Iowa for
ninety years, and when it divided in 1933 into a church group
and an industrial group, it split more than $33,000,000 worth
of assets among its members. The Oneida Community flourished
as a commune for over thirty-three years.

The Shakers, Amana, and Oneida, along with Harmony (1804–
1904), Zoar (1817–1898), and Jerusalem (1788–1821), are
among nine "successful" nineteenth century utopian communi-
ties, lasting thirty-three years or more. They can be contrasted
with twenty-one "unsuccessful" groups lasting less than sixteen
years, including Brook Farm, New Harmony, and other Owenite
and Fourierite ventures.[4] The differences between the success
of these thirty groups lie in how stongly they built commit-
ment.

The Problem

The primary issue with which a utopian community must cope
in order to have the strength and solidarity to endure is its
human organization: how people arrange to do the work that
the community needs to survive as a group, and how the group
in turn manages to satisfy and involve its members over a long
period of time. The idealized version of communal life must
be meshed with the reality of the work to be done in a com-
munity, involving difficult problems of social organization.
In utopia, for instance, who takes out the garbage?

The organizational problems with which utopian communities
must grapple break down into several categories:

How to get the work done, but without coercion

How to ensure that decisions are made, but to everyone's
satisfaction

How to build close, fulfilling relationships, but without
exclusiveness

How to choose and socialize new members

How to include a degree of autonomy, individual uniqueness,
and even deviance

How to ensure agreement and shared perception around
community functioning and values

These issues can be summarized as one of commitment; that is,
they reflect how members become committed to the com-
munity's work, to its values, and to each other, and how much
of their former independence they are willing to suspend in
the interests of the group. Committed members work hard,
participate actively, derive love and affection from the com-
munal group, and believe strongly in what the group stands for.

For communes, the problem of commitment is crucial. Since
the community represents an attempt to establish an ideal
social order within the larger society, it must vie with the out-
side for the members' loyalties. It must ensure high member
involvement despite external competition without sacrificing
its distinctiveness or ideals. It must often contravene the
earlier socialization of its members in securing obedience to
new demands. It must calm internal dissension in order to
present a united front to the world. The problem of securing
total and complete commitment is central.

Because communes consciously separate from the established
order, their needs for the concentration of members' loyalty
and devotion are stronger than are those of groups operating
with the support of society and leaving members free to partici-
pate in the larger system. The commitment problems of utopian
communities resemble those of secret societies, as described by
Georg Simmel: "The secret society claims the whole individual
to a greater extent, connects its members in more of their
totality, and mutually obligates them more closely than does
an open society of identical content."[5] The essence of such
a community is in strong connections and mutual obligations.
Communal life depends on a continual flow of energy and
support among members, on their depth of shared relationships,
and on their continued attachment to each other and to the
joint endeavor.

Definitions

For communal relations to be maintained, what the person is
willing to give to the group, behaviorally and emotionally, and
what it in turn expects of him, must be coordinated and mutual-
ly reinforcing. This reciprocal relationship, in which both what
is given to the group and what is received from it are seen by

the person as expressing his true nature and as supporting his concept of self, is the core of commitment to a community. A person is committed to a group or to a relationship when he himself is fully invested in it, so that the maintenance of his own internal being requires behavior that supports the social order. A committed person is loyal and involved; he has a sense of belonging, a feeling that the group is an extension of himself and he is an extension of the group. Through commitment, person and group are inextricably linked.

Commitment arises as a consideration at the intersection between the organizational requisites of groups and the personal orientations and preferences of their members. On the one hand, social systems must organize to meet their systemic "needs"; on the other hand, people must orient themselves positively and negatively, emotionally and intellectually, to situations. While the system is making specific demands for participation, group relatedness, and control, the people in it are investing more or less of themselves, are deciding to stay or to leave, are concentrating varying degrees of their emotional lives in the group, and are fervently obeying or finding ways to sabotage basic principles and rules of the system. For the group to get what it needs for existence and growth at the same time that people become positively involved requires organizational solutions that are simultaneously mechanisms to ensure commitment by affecting people's orientations to the group.

Commitment thus refers to the willingness of people to do what will help maintain the group because it provides what they need. In sociological terms, commitment means the attachment of the self to the requirements of social relations that are seen as self-expressive.[6] Commitment links self-interest to social requirements. A person is committed to a relationship or to a group to the extent that he sees it as expressing or fulfilling some fundamental part of himself; he is committed to the degree that he perceives no conflict between its requirements and his own needs; he is committed to the degree that he can no longer meet his needs elsewhere. When a person is committed, what he wants to do (through internal feeling) is the same as what he has to do (according to external demands),

and thus he gives to the group what it needs to maintain itself at the same time that he gets what he needs to nourish his own sense of self. To a great extent, therefore, commitment is not only important for the survival of a community, but also is part of the essence of community. It forms the connection between self-interest and group interest. It is that identification of the self with a group which Charles Horton Cooley considered essential for self-realization.

To determine the links between person and system that forge the bonds of commitment, one must first distinguish the three major aspects of a social system that involve commitment: retention of members, group cohesiveness, and social control.[7] Retention refers to people's willingness to stay in the system, to continue to staff it and carry out their roles. Group cohesiveness denotes the ability of people to "stick together," to develop the mutual attraction and collective strength to withstand threats to the group's existence. And social control involves the readiness of people to obey the demands of the system, to conform to its values and beliefs and take seriously its dictates.

Continuance, cohesion, and control are three analytically distinct problems, with potentially independent solutions. A person may be committed to continuing his membership but be continually deviant within the group, disloyal and disobedient — that is, *uncommitted* to its control and unwilling to carry out the norms and values that represent system policy. A rebellious child may reject parental control but be unwilling or unable to withdraw from the family system; he may subvert the values of the system yet be committed to remain within it. Furthermore, a person may be highly attracted to a group within a social system but be uncommitted to continued participation in the system because of other circumstances. An office worker, for example, may take a better job even though his best friends work in his former office. The inmate of a prison may form close ties with fellow prisoners and even with guards, yet certainly wish to leave the system at the earliest opportunity. In specific social systems, one or another of these commitment problems may be of paramount importance. A business organization may concentrate on solving problems of continuance rather than cohesion; a T-group or encounter

group may be concerned solely about cohesion; a religious organization may stress control. In other cases the three may be causally related, with solutions to all three problems mutually reinforcing and multiply determined. In a utopian community, for instance, which emphasizes all three aspects of commitment, the more the members are attracted to one another, the more they also wish to continue their membership, and the more they are able to support wholeheartedly its values. Despite this possible overlap, however, for purposes of understanding the roots of commitment, continuance, cohesion, and control must be separated.

At the same time, a person orients himself to a social system instrumentally, affectively, and morally. That is, he orients himself with respect to the rewards and costs that are involved in participating in the system, with respect to his emotional attachment to the people in the system, and with respect to the moral compellingness of the norms and beliefs of the system. In the language of social action theory, he cognizes, cathects, and evaluates.[8] Cognitive orientations discriminate among objects, describing their possibilities for gratification or deprivation, and distinguishing their location and characteristics. Cathectic orientations represent an emotional state with respect to objects, the kind and amount of feeling they generate. Evaluative orientations refer to standards of judgment: good or bad, right or wrong. As a person relates to the world around him, he gives each element a "rating" on these three dimensions, and he chooses to behave toward it in accordance with his rating, the degree of its positive or negative value for him.

People orient themselves to social systems in the same way, and the value of a system in each of the three dimensions defines a person's behavior toward it. The system can organize in such a way as to ensure its positive value for the person around each orientation, and if it does, it gains commitment in the three areas that are essential to maintain the system. Each of the personal orientations has the potential to support one particular concern of the social system. Positive cognition can support continuance, positive cathexis can support group cohesion, and positive evaluation can support social control.

Commitment to continued participation in a system involves

primarily a person's cognitive or instrumental orientations. When profits and costs are considered, participants find that the cost of leaving the system would be greater than the cost of remaining; "profit," in a net psychic sense, compels continued participation. In a more general sense, this kind of commitment can be conceptualized as commitment to a social system role. It may be called instrumental commitment. Commitment to relationships, to group solidarity, involves primarily a person's cathectic orientations; ties of emotion bind members to each other and to the community they form, and gratifications stem from involvement with all members of the group. Solidarity should be high; infighting and jealousy low. A cohesive group has strong emotional bonds and can withstand threats to its existence; members "stick together." This quality may be called affective commitment. Commitment to uphold norms, obey the authority of the group, and support its values, involves primarily a person's evaluative orientations. When demands made by the system are evaluated as right, moral, just, or expressing one's own values, obedience to these demands becomes a normative necessity, and sanctioning by the system is regarded as appropriate.[9] This quality is here designated moral commitment. In some respects, commitment to norms and values resembles the concept of a superego, which binds the evaluative components of the self to the norms of a system through an internalized authority.

Each of the three kinds of commitment has different consequences for the system and for the individual. Ignoring for the moment all the other diverse sources of influence on group life, groups in which people have formed instrumental commitments should manage to hold their members. Groups in which people have formed affective commitments should report more mutual attraction and interpersonal satisfaction and should be able to withstand threats to their existence. Groups in which members have formed moral commitments should have less deviance, challenge to authority, or ideological controversy. Groups with all three kinds of commitment, that is, with total commitment, should be more successful in their maintenance than those without it.

At the same time, there are consequences for the person in

making these commitments. If the group is such that a person feels he can make an instrumental commitment, he becomes invested in it and finds his membership rewarding. If the group is such that he can make an affective commitment, he gains strong social ties, relatedness, and a sense of belonging. If the group is such that he can make a moral commitment, he gains purpose, direction, and meaning, a sense that his acts stem from essential values. To some extent, a person's identity is composed of his commitments.

Commitment-Building Processes

A group has a number of ways in which to organize so as to promote and sustain the three kinds of commitment. For each commitment, it needs to set in motion processes that reduce the value of other possible commitments and increase the value of commitment to the communal group — that is, processes both detaching the person from other options and at-taching him to the community. The person must give up some-thing as well as get something in order to be committed to a community; communes, like all other social systems, have their costs of membership. The person must invest himself in the community rather than elsewhere and commit his resources and energy there, removing them from wherever else they may be invested, or from whatever alternatives exist for commitment. Commitment thus involves choice — discrimination and selection of possible courses of action. It rests on a person's awareness of excluded options, on the knowledge of the virtues of his choice over others. A person becomes increasingly committed both as more of his own internal satisfaction becomes dependent on the group, and as his chance to make other choices or pursue other options declines. This is commitment in Howard Becker's sense.[10] A course of action may involve more of a person's resources, reputation, or choices than he consciously chose to commit, with the result that the line of action simultaneously cuts him off from the chance to commit himself elsewhere. This process is similar, according to Becker, to the making of side bets, gambling on the fact that each step toward complete commitment will pay off. If the commitment is not sustained,

and the line of action is not continued, the person then loses more than his original investment. Side bets, therefore, deriving from the fact that any choice may reduce the chances of ever taking up excluded choices, help to bring about commit-ment. These processes of giving up and getting make the group a clearly focused object for commitment. The clearer and more defined a group becomes to a person, the easier it is for him to concentrate his commitment there. This process contains the first principles of a "gestalt sociology": to develop maximum commitment in its members, a group must form a unity or a whole, coherent and sharply differentiated from its environ-ment — a figure clearly distinguished from the ground, whether the ground is the outside society or excluded options for behavior. Commitment to social systems, concentrating the psychic energy in a group, may operate according to the same gestalt principles as object perception. According to these principles, the issue of commitment would occur primarily around the boundaries of a group. The group builds commit-ment to the extent that it clearly cuts off other possible objects of commitment, becomes an integrated unity tying together all aspects of life within its borders, develops its own uniqueness and specialness, and becomes capable, by itself, of continuing the person's gratification. The strength of com-mitment, then, depends on the extent to which groups institute processes that increase the unity, coherence, and possible gratification of the group itself, at the same time that they reduce the value of other possibilities. The six commitment-building processes proposed do just that.

Commitment to continued participation involves securing a person's positive instrumental orientations, inducing the individual to cognize participation in the organization as profitable when considered in terms of rewards and costs. Cognitive orientations are those that rationally determine the positive or negative valences of relationships, perceiving their worth in energy and resources. In a purely cognitive judgment, no notion of emotional gratification (cathexis) or of morality (evaluation) is attached to the group. For positive cognition to be acquired by a community, the system must organize so that participation is viewed as rewarding. The individual who makes

an instrumental commitment finds that what is profitable to him is bound up with his position in the organization and is contingent on his participating in the system; he commits himself to a role. For the person there is a "profit" associated with continued participation and a "cost" connected with leaving. Thus, sacrifice (detaching) and investment (attaching) are among the components of instrumental commitments. Sacrifice involves the giving up of something considered valuable or pleasurable in order to belong to the organization; it stresses the importance of the role of member to the individual. Sacrifice means that membership becomes more costly and is therefore not lightly regarded nor likely to be given up easily. Investment is a process whereby the individual gains a stake in the group, commits current and future profits to it, so that he must continue to participate if he is going to realize those profits. Investment generally involves the giving up of control over some of the person's resources to the community.

Community is based in part on the desire for strong relations within a collectivity, for intense emotional feeling among all members, for brotherhood and sharing. Utopia is the place where a person's fundamental emotional needs can be expressed and met through the communal group. The community seeks to become a family in itself, replacing or subsuming all other family loyalties. It is this kind of relating, involving commitment to group cohesion, that enables the community to withstand threats to its existence, both as pressure from the outside and as tension and dissent from inside.

Commitment to group cohesion and solidarity requires the attachment of a person's entire fund of emotion and affectivity to the group; emotional gratification stems from participation in and identification with a collective whole. Emotional commitment becomes commitment to a set of social relationships. The individual commits himself to the group as his primary set of relations; his loyalty and allegiance are offered to all the members of the group, who together comprise a community. The group thus has tight social bonds cementing it together. In cases where strong ingroup loyalty is present, a community can stick together even though it is forcibly removed from its home, loses its crop, or is threatened with a lawsuit. Such

intense family-like involvement also makes members more willing to work out whatever conflicts and tensions may arise among them. This kind of commitment is aided by renunciation (a detaching process) and communion (an attaching process). Renunciation involves giving up competing relationships outside the communal group and individualistic, exclusive attachments within. Whatever fund of emotion the individuals possess becomes concentrated in the group itself, glueing all members together, creating a cohesive unit. It is to this unit alone that members look for emotional satisfaction and to which they give their loyalty and commitment. Communion involves bringing members into meaningful contact with the collective whole, so that they experience the fact of oneness with the group and develop a "we-feeling."

The search for community is also a quest for direction and purpose in a collective anchoring of the individual life. Investment of self in a community, acceptance of its authority and willingness to support its values, is dependent in part on the extent to which group life can offer identity, personal meaning, and the opportunity to grow in terms of standards and guiding principles that the member feels are expressive of his own inner being. Commitment to community norms and values, or moral commitment, involves securing a person's positive evaluative orientations, redefining his sense of values and priorities so that he considers the system's demands right and just in terms of his self-identity and supporting the group's authority becomes a moral necessity. The person making a moral commitment to his community should see himself as carrying out the dictates of a higher system, which orders and gives meaning to his life. He internalizes community standards and values and accepts its control, because it provides him with something transcendent. This commitment requires, first, that the person reformulate and re-evaluate his identity in terms of meeting the ideals set by the community. For this to occur, the group must first provide ways for an individual to reassess his previous life, to undo those parts of himself he wishes to change, and to perceive that identity and meaning for him lie not in an individualistic, private existence but in acceptance of the stronger influence of the utopian group.

At the same time, the person must experience the greater power and meaning represented by the community, so that he will attach his sense of identity and worth to carrying out its demands and requirements. Thus, mortification (a detaching process) and transcendence (an attaching process) promote evaluative, moral commitments. Mortification involves the submission of private states to social control, the exchanging of a former identity for one defined and formulated by the community. Transcendence is a process whereby an individual attaches his decision-making prerogative to a power greater than himself, surrendering to the higher meaning contained by the group and submitting to something beyond himself. Mortification opens the person to new directions and new growth; transcendence defines those directions. Mortification causes the person to "lose himself"; transcendence permits him to find himself anew in something larger and greater.

   Six processes are thus available to build commitment to communal groups. To the extent that groups develop concrete organizational strategies around these processes — commitment mechanisms — they should generate a stronger commitment than can those without such strategies. The number and kind of commitment mechanisms instituted should contribute to a community's success — its ability to endure and continue to satisfy its members.

The healthy mixture of manual and intellectual labor, the kindly and unaffected social relations, the absence of everything like assumption or servility, the amusements, the discussions, the ideal and poetical atmosphere which gave a charm to life, all these combined to create a picture towards which the mind turns back as to something distant and beautiful, and not elsewhere met with amid the routine of this world.
   —Charles Dana, in Lindsay Swift, *Brook Farm*

4   Live in Love and Union: Commitment Mechanisms in Nineteenth Century Communes

In long-lived communes of the nineteenth century, group life was organized in such a way as to support the six commitment-building processes. The nine successful groups tended to have, at some time in their histories, a large number of concrete social practices that helped generate and sustain the commitment of their members. They survived crises, persecution, debt, and internal dissension that proved the undoing of unsuccessful groups. The twenty-one unsuccessful communes, by contrast, tended to have fewer such commitment mechanisms and in weakened form.

   Commitment mechanisms are specific ways of ordering and defining the existence of a group. Every aspect of group life has implications for commitment, including property, work, boundaries, recruitment, intimate relationships, group contact, leadership, and ideology. These pieces of social organization can be arranged so as to promote collective unity, provide a sense of belonging and meaning, or they can have no value for commitment. The strength of a group and the commitment of its members will be a function of the specific ways the group is put together. Abstract ideals of brotherhood and harmony, of love and union, must be translated into concrete social practices.

   For example, among the successful nineteenth-century communes, much more than the unsuccessful ones, their abstinence