

Communes in the Twentieth Century

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The end of the twentieth century is fast approaching. This will probably be the last conference to be held in it. It is therefore appropriate that we look back and examine what has characterized communal history in the present century.

We can state, without a shadow of a doubt, that the twentieth century was the richest of all for voluntary communes. In an overall review of the history of communes we can discern a number of characteristic lines:

1. From the first years of the present century, large communal movements, which developed over the years, have existed continuously. The first of these is the Israeli kibbutz movement which had its beginnings in the first decade of the century and which at present has a total population of 125,000 souls living in 270 settlements.

2. The second-largest communal group is the Hutterite movement, which is also the oldest communal order, and which was established in Central Europe in the sixteenth century. At the beginning of the twentieth century its communities in the United States had a population of approximately 2,000 souls, while today the number some 40,000 people living in 400 communes.

3. A smaller movement that has maintained its stability and growth is the Burderhof, which had its beginning in Germany in 1920 and which today has a population of 2,500 souls in eight settlements in the United States and Great Britain.

4. In the present century there has been an uninterrupted series of emergences of communes. Not a decade has gone by without the appearance of new communes. While in previous centuries, new communes were mostly

isolated communities, and mainly in the United States, in the present century we have witnessed the extensive establishment of communes in numerous countries on different continents. These waves appeared against the background of significant historical events.

In the second decade of the century, for example, immediately after the Russian Revolution, thousands of communes appeared in the rural areas of that country.

In the early 1920s, some 3,000 communes sprung up in Russia, mainly as a result of the spontaneous coalescence of workers and farmers groups, without government support. In 1929 the number of those communes rose to 7,000 but this increase came to a dramatic stop in 1930 as a result of Joseph Stalin's policy of forced collectivization. It should be noted that from the outset both Stalin and his government were unsympathetic towards communes. Despite this attitude the Soviet communes continued to exist.

In the mid-1920s the foundations were laid for the establishment of the kibbutz movements in what was then Palestine, and within a short time period these encompassed scores of settlements with thousands of members. Their founders were young, idealistic Jews whose motivation was to establish agricultural communes. They were inspired by the Zionist-socialist vision of a new society based upon social justice under the historic circumstances of the modern national Jewish revival, and the return of the Jews to their historical homeland.

In the 1930s two new waves arose. In 1936, with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, there was a social revolution in that country led by Anarchists and Socialists who supported the Republican Government. In the geographical areas held by that government, approximately 1,700 agricultural communes were established with a population of some 3,200,000 souls. These communes were short-lived. They were persecuted by their Communist allies during the Civil War and were later eliminated by the Franco regime after the fall of the Republican Government.

In the same year (1936), in Mexico, the foundations were laid for cooperative agricultural settlements called *Ejidat Colectivas*. This was part of the agrarian reform policy instituted by the progressive Mexican president, Lázaro Cárdenas, which was designed to complement the aims of the 1917 Mexican Revolution, and to fill the need for modernizing agricultural production by the establishment of integrated cooperatives. The latter were based on voluntary farmers' associations.

After World War II, there was a wave of searching for communal life in various parts of the world. In the United States, the Fellowship of Intentional Communities was founded. In Japan the Yamagishi Kai communes appeared, while Europe saw the arrival of the Communities of Work and Mondragon in Spain. Towards the end of the 1950s thousands of communes also appeared in China. The scope was large but differed from everything that had occurred in

the West, as these communes were non-voluntary and initiated by government policy. These collectives constitute a different chapter in the history of modern communes.

Undoubtedly the biggest and most significant wave in the history of twentieth-century communes began in the United States in the 1960s. Its influence rapidly crossed the frontiers of that country, spreading across European countries and Australia, marking the beginning of the globalization of modern communalism.

The beginnings of this wave were in the American hippie movement. This generation (the "baby boomers") which had witnessed the civil rights struggle in the United States, later fought against the Vietnam War, was shocked by a wave of political assassinations, and rebelled against traditional politics and the politicians' materialistic and cynical approaches to governance. In the course of the agitation and rebellion, there appeared a spiritual searching which laid the foundations for a counterculture. A great many people who were part of this movement gave expression to their protest and their desire to create an alternative society by establishing communes. However, they had neither a theoretical nor a practical perspective on how to organize such societies. Although the majority of the hippie communes established by that generation fell apart after a year or so, a few dozen survived and underwent a process of maturation and stability. During those years there was also a wave of searching for spiritual meaning among the young hippies. Many became "Jesus People" or "Jesus Freaks." This wave encompassed tens of thousands of young people, particularly on the West Coast of the United States. During this period of agitation, a number of communal movements were formed that demonstrated long-lasting existence.

The spiritual search for mystical meaning during this period also led to the embracing of Oriental religions and the flourishing of Buddhist, Hindu and Taoist sects that gathered communes of believers around their charismatic gurus. A number of these sects founded communal movements that were relatively stable, and these were recently joined by communes that have defined themselves as "New Age," a movement that seems to be based on a mixture of mystical Oriental sources and Western religious currents.

We cannot ignore the fact that in the second half of the century, there were also some shocking cases of violence and crime in groups that were organized as communes. We shall mention the notorious Manson Family that was involved in murder and licentiousness, and the People's Temple sect whose members committed mass suicide in Jonestown, Guyana. There were also other communes that aroused much hostility, contention and attacks by the outside society. Communes that were presented as "cults" were brought to trial and charged with brainwashing, kidnapping, promiscuity and child abuse. All of this cast a stigma on the term "commune." In a large number of trials the accusations were in fact refuted and the charges dropped, but the stigma

remained.

Even though in most cases the accusations were not proven, the charges cannot be ignored. The causes of this decadence and its origins must be examined. Was it a result of total submission to a charismatic and crazy leader, of the brainwashing of the believers to a point at which they completely lost their human and moral judgment? Or were there inherent forces at work that derived from dangerous dogmas and beliefs, and the manipulative use of the communal way of life? There is no group of people more suited to objectively examine these phenomena than those assembled here. It must neither be left to sensation-seeking journalists nor to the followers who are interested in concealing the truth.

But at the same time, these matters must be put into proportion and it should be noted that there was only a small, insignificant number of negative episodes such as the aforementioned.

Yet despite these negative episodes and the rapid break-up of numerous communes, communal life itself has remained on the agenda of the modern world over the course of the last generation. The impression left by the communes of the 1960s has not been erased from the awareness of younger generations in America and throughout the world, and the following decades have seen the continued establishment of new, more stable communes that have sought ways of instituting an alternative way of life based on sound foundations. Moreover, from the 1970s onward, the communal phenomena has become much more variegated. The philosophical roots and spiritual sources have become much more complex, encompassing different and varied worlds; from the fundamentalist Christians, to the disciples of Oriental religions, anthroposophists, back-to-nature followers, ecologists, pacifists, anarchists, and many others.

Beyond the diversity of their spiritual sources, there are a number of attributes that characterize the communes of our time:

1. The majority of the communes of the 1990s are more realistic and economically well established. Their realism provides them with greater stability and opens up channels of communication with the outside society.

2. There is increasing interest in the communes for the fostering of inter-communal relations. Communication networks and federations have resulted.

3. The second half of the twentieth century has witnessed the emergence of urban communes of a scope and magnitude almost unknown to previous generations. The majority of these are small and enable intimacy in societal relations.

4. In the modern communes of the twentieth century there is a heightened awareness of the status of women in the community, even though only some of them have succeeded in suitably achieving it.

5. Ecological awareness characterizes the majority of modern communes. Many have established training centers for sustainable agriculture and tech-

nologies suitable for organic agriculture.

Also noteworthy is that over the last two decades we have seen signs of change in modern communes in the direction of a balance between collectivism and individualism, and a departure from integral communal structures. At the basis of these changes lies a broadening of individual freedom and the individual's responsibility for his life and livelihood.

The Farm (near Summertown, Tennessee) is a good example of a commune that has undergone such changes. It was established in 1971 and at its communal height, in 1980, its population numbered 1,400 souls. Today, however, only 200 members live at the Farm property. Its integral communal structure was overturned when its members were given the choice between a cooperative and an individual framework.

This kind of trend is also currently evident in the oldest and biggest secular communal movement — the kibbutz movement. A bitter internal struggle is ongoing within the movement between the supporters of change (which started with the aim of achieving economic solvency and proceeded with the purpose of adapting kibbutz society to the outside world) and the supporters of full communal life, who are seeking ways of adopting the lessons of the new era to deepen and consolidate communal fundamentals. At present a pluralistic reality exists in the kibbutz movement and several trends are maintained in it. The institutions of the movement and the majority of the kibbutzim stand against the currents of change. The struggle is at its height today and its outcome will have serious consequences for the world communal movement. It should be noted that this trend towards change which is notable in the secular communes is not noticeable in the religious communes like the Bruderhof and the Hutterites.

Trends towards change have come into being together with the increase in semi-communal cooperative communities, such as co-housing and ecological villages. In this context, we can mention the Rainbow movement (a kind of nomad Utopia), which gathers thousands of supporters at its annual cooperative gatherings in the heart of nature. It should be emphasized that there is a significant difference between these intermediate, semi-communal ways of life — which should be viewed as a step forward from privacy to cooperation — and the trend towards changes which constitute a retreat from communalism.

The plethora of communal ways of life raises the need to adopt a pluralistic approach that will enable communes to coexist with semi-communal communities without the fear of assimilation. The communes will have to learn how to live with intermediate semi-communal groups while preserving their own exclusivity.

Over the last three decades, the number of people engaged in the study of communes has become organized and well established. This will affect future awareness of the subject and this in turn will contribute to both communal

and general society. The experiments in social innovation taking place in the communes are leading towards applications that are likely to benefit outside society; promoting ways of enhancing life within it. It is against this background that the theory of developmental communalism has emerged. This theory attempts to give meaning to the communal experience in general, beyond the limited sphere of life in a commune.

We can also take encouragement from recent trends in the intellectual world. Since the 1950s, there has been increasing interest in community as both a social ideal and a subject of social policy. This development is notable in social science departments of universities, mainly against the background of disillusionment with the welfare state in the Western world.

Over the last generation we have also seen a growing interest in communities in post-modern intellectual discourse, for example, an interest in the Utopian pluralist philosophy. This philosophy has an interest in alternative communities existing within general society. Perhaps it can build a bridge between Utopian thought and the communal experience.

Against the backdrop of increasing interest in the fostering of community values during the second half of the twentieth century, the communal phenomenon in all of its forms cannot be ignored. The cumulative communal experience encompasses an all-inclusive human value. To ignore it would enfeeble the spiritual and social abundance that our century will bequeath to the next.

In conclusion, I beg to add a personal note as both a historian of communes and a kibbutz member for the past fifty years. I have no doubt at all that the communal movement will cross the threshold of the twenty-first century. It will not do so along the main highway, but rather along a multitude of narrower paths. The communal movement will not be a uniform camp, but large and variegated, which will be comprised of numerous communal streams.

I hope that when the communal movement does cross the threshold into the twenty-first century, that the greater part of it will have adopted a way of life that will combine integral economic cooperation, collective responsibility and mutual aid, with freedom for personal aspirations and development of the individual.

If it passes thus into the next century communalism will bring with it not only a rich past but also a message for the future. For the commune has the potential of being a source of hope for the fulfillment of social relations of human brotherhood, interpersonal harmony and peace.