

Analyzing Communal Life-Spans: A Dynamic Structural Approach

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Social scientists across several disciplines have used historical records of communal movements to address broad theoretical questions about the social world. In doing so, they often ask why communes emerge, survive, and dissolve, using either of two lenses. The first lens views communes as field experiments in the social psychology of groups. Measuring the effects of group structure on commune longevity, these scholars explore the foundations of solidarity and social order.¹ The other lens views communes as reflections of historical processes. These scholars examine features of the world outside communes and use this contextual information to explain why communes appear to flourish in some years and founder in others.²

Both the *structural* and *contextual* scholars use historical data to test theoretical arguments, which they intend to generalize beyond the particular groups they study. Of course, using communes either as experimental laboratories or as indicators of social change requires researchers to step beyond the cases they observe and to explore general patterns across populations and over time. In disregarding the unique details of each place and moment, both approaches differ from much historical work on communal movements, which emphasizes accuracy of description.

In this article, I discuss contributions and limitations of the structural and contextual approaches to analyzing communal life spans. I propose some ways that the two approaches may be integrated theoretically and empirically, to analyze internal processes in social groups without divorcing them entirely from their social context. This perspective on the historical

record of communes may refine our view of both group processes and social change.

Communal Survival: Structural Factors

Scholars using what I call the structural approach examine internal features of communes, including social architecture (e.g. hierarchy, group size), norms and practices (e.g. celibacy, common meals), and ideologies (e.g. millennialism, pacifism). By comparing the features that differentiate long- and short-lived communes, these scholars specify ways that certain group characteristics may promote or impede survival.³

The structural literature focuses on questions of how communes *work*, how a group of unrelated individuals can accomplish the tasks of building and maintaining a community. In a seminal study, Rosabeth Moss Kanter proposed an answer to this question: *commitment*.⁴ According to Kanter, commitment leads members to stay in the group, live together harmoniously, and comply with group rules. Kanter argued that several internal features of communes could increase member commitment and found that these features differentiated long- and short-lived groups, from among thirty 19th century American communal movements.

Kanter explained that structural characteristics of communes could contribute to three forms of commitment: instrumental, affective, and moral. Communes that require members to sacrifice valued behaviors (e.g. drinking, sex) or invest savings and labor as a condition of recruitment will promote *instrumental* commitment, which leads members to remain in the group. Communes that require members to renounce old social ties and build dense and undifferentiated bonds within the group will be less prone to conflict and schism and more resistant to outside threats, due to *affective* commitment. Communes that make members abandon prior beliefs and internalize a comprehensive moral system will encourage conformity among members, through *moral* commitment. In all of these cases, internal characteristics of the group lead to concrete outcomes (member retention, social cohesion, and conformity) through fostering the three types of member commitment. In testing this theory, Kanter measured only the internal characteristics of communes and their longevity. Taking longevity as an indicator of a well-functioning group, she assumed the above commitment processes as latent causal mechanisms.

Of course, the observed correlation between group structure and longevity could also be explained by other theories. Michael Hechter reviewed Kanter's work through a "rational choice" lens, arguing that such internal features of communes are correlated with communal survival only because they make it easier for the group to control members' selfish behavior.⁵ In doing so, Hechter abandoned the concept of commitment

altogether, but retained the hypothesized relationships between group structure and commune survival. He explained that these same structural characteristics promote longevity because they facilitate *monitoring* and *sanctioning* of members, forcing them to comply with group norms.

Kanter's work has inspired several empirical studies of the effect of structure on survival in contemporary contexts. These later studies have neither consistently replicated her findings nor produced any other effects of group structure that hold universally across contexts. For example, using a sample of 13 rural western communes, Hugh Gardner found inconsistent effects of group structure on longevity between earlier and later stages of the communal wave of the 1960s and 1970s. Most surprising in light of Kanter's theory was an either negligible or negative effect of communion-inducing features, such as regularized group contact, common labor, and income sharing.⁶

While Kanter simply compared the proportions of "successful" and "unsuccessful" communes using each commitment mechanism, recent studies have used more sophisticated analytical techniques to explore the relationship between structure and survival. For example, scholars may now use factor-analytic methods, which derive general scales that summarize clusters of similar commune characteristics. Once these scales have been derived, they may be analyzed using statistical procedures such as multiple regression. This allows the effects of structure on survival to be explored more rigorously by examining the effect of each factor while holding other factors constant.⁷

Reanalyzing Kanter's data in this way, John Hall argued that only a few internal factors – ethnicity, spiritual hierarchy, confession, and homogeneity – explain most of the variation in communal longevity for Kanter's original sample. With these four factors (which Kanter assumed promote affective and moral commitment) held constant, other characteristics had little or no independent effect on longevity. Hall concluded that instrumental commitment mechanisms were not sufficient to promote survival for Kanter's sample of communes.

In a 1996 exploratory study, I used eleven structural characteristics of 408 American communities to predict the likelihood of dissolving between 1990 and 1995. I represented group structure as four independent factors: *centralization of power* (group leader, authority assigned to long-standing members, consensual decisions), *membership costs* (joining fee, rent/dues), *social density* (shared meals, shared labor, shared income), and *organizational maturity* (group size and age). Consistent with Kanter's moral commitment, I found a positive relationship between centralization of power and communal survival during this period. In contrast to Hall's study, imposing membership costs (which should lead to instrumental commitment) contributed to survival, even with all other factors held

constant. In agreement with Gardner's study of hippie communes, social density (corresponding to Kanter's communion mechanism of affective commitment) apparently diminished the probability of survival for these 1990s communities.

Benjamin Zablocki has provided what may be the most sophisticated analysis of social dynamics in American countercultural communes. Although he did not directly test Kanter's model, his detailed analysis of 60 urban communes in the mid-1970s addressed some of the mechanisms underlying her theory. For example, using surveys and observations of individual commune members, he was able to test relationships between attributes of individual members, their affective ties to other members, and their propensity to exit the commune. Using explicit relational measures rather than indicators of shared activities, Zablocki found that communes with the greatest density of loving bonds were generally the most unstable and vulnerable to dissolution.⁸ Along with Gardner's analysis of hippie communes and my own exploratory survey of 1990s communities, this suggests caution in generalizing Kanter's model of communion and affective commitment, particularly to groups in the late 20th century.

By comparing survival rates of various types of communes, all of the above structural studies analyze the communes outside their historical contexts. Static structural analyses implicitly assume that unmeasured contextual variables have no differentiating effect on the viability of communes in their samples. For example, Hall and Kanter must assume that the varying environments faced by 18th and 19th century communes do not affect survival differently. While structural scholars might justify this ahistorical approach with the assumption that communes intentionally isolate themselves from the outside world, Yaacov Oved shows that even isolationist communes generally fail to avoid outside influences.⁹

If changes in the outside world matter to communal survival, any comparison of communes drawn from different historical contexts runs the risk of identifying false effects of group structure on longevity. For example, if group structures vary systematically over time, then unmeasured changes in the outside world that affect the viability of communes will appear as correlation between group structure and longevity. To guard against these spurious effects, Gardner's case studies and my own exploratory analyses compared only communes that operated concurrently during a narrow historical period, thus controlling for some variation in social context over time.¹⁰

Communal Survival: Contextual Factors

The other approach to analyzing the lives and deaths of communes focuses on temporal variation in communal activity, such as cyclical patterns of

commune founding and folding. These scholars seek to explain the booms and busts of communal activity by relating them to broader economic and cultural cycles.

Michael Barkun showed that periods of heightened communal activity correspond to waves of millenarian movements in general. He argued that both utopianism and millenarianism were “responses to perceived disturbances in the moral order.”¹¹ Barkun suggested that economic troubles can trigger utopian-millenarian waves, pointing out that the first three of these waves occurred during periods of economic crisis.¹²

As most economists agreed that the late 1960s and early 1970s represented an upturn of economic long-waves, Barkun proposed that the renaissance of hip communes might represent a change in this historical pattern. However, Brian Berry carried the original thesis a step further, arguing that even the hip communes of the 1960s and 1970s and the recent wave of the 1990s are part of a “capitalist-socialist dialectic” that produces utopian surges in response to periodic economic downturns.¹³

Like the structural approaches, these various contextual arguments require a daunting set of assumptions. In order to compare economic trends to the rate of commune founding or folding, these scholars must assume that all communes are approximately interchangeable, in that contextual variables affect all communes in the same ways. Internal structure of communes is then unimportant to variation in longevity, as groups owe their existence to pervasive environmental cycles.

Although these assumptions undermine many theoretically interesting questions about organizational structure and group processes, the contextual approach offers evidence that communes’ dependence on the outside world for members and resources is consequential for collective survival. This cautions those who would study the effects of group structure on survival without controlling or accounting for influences of varying social contexts.

A Call for Integration

These two lines of research have complementary strengths and weaknesses. The structural approach is able to discriminate between the internal features of long-and short-lived communes, but assumes that historical context has no effect on commune viability. As a result, it has nothing to say about the apparent cycles of communal activity. The contextual approach seeks to explain why communes emerge or disappear *en masse*, but ignores the internal characteristics of communes and fails to explain why some groups last beyond the communal booms and others fall apart quickly.

Admittedly, the structural literature has not entirely ignored longitudinal variation in communal movements and environmental influences on survival. Indeed, structural scholars have provided numerous

illustrative accounts of the social context of the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁴ For example, Zablocki discussed the distribution of communal movements across nations and over historical contexts, in light of his psychological theory of alienation. He explained that if communes serve to collect those who are excluded from conventional society, then we may expect communitarian movements to flourish where and when there is a “breakdown in traditional meaning and value systems” or a “loss of larger-scale consensus.”¹⁵

While his primary analysis focused on the internal dynamics of communes, Zablocki showed that the 1965-75 explosion of communes corresponded to some widespread demographic trends. In particular, residential mobility opened access to urban housing and arable rural land suitable for communes. Meanwhile, new recruits were supplied by a “youth glut” that had overwhelmed opportunities for employment, marriage, and other avenues into traditional adult roles.¹⁶

Gardner’s discussion of contextual factors emphasized the influence of psychoactive drugs, political protest, and cultural diffusion through music, magazines, and film. In his book, *The Children of Prosperity*, he argued that the communal renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s was largely a result of the surplus resources and leisure time supplied by an affluent age.

While this discussion of context has added flavor to structural explanations, it has been limited to narratives or anecdotes, removed from the main analysis in separate chapters. Research designs and core hypotheses have examined either changes in the environment over time or structural variation between cases, but none have integrated the two perspectives analytically.

In fact, analytical integration of the two approaches is critically important if structure and context may have an interactive effect on communal outcomes. Indeed, we have seen evidence that these relationships are highly interactive, in that some communal forms have proved adaptive in certain historical contexts and maladaptive in other contexts. Some of the structures and strategies that Kanter found important for survival of 19th century communes, particularly the level of social density, have showed weak or reversed effects in all three studies of 20th century communes I have discussed.

The following quote from Gardner illustrates the problem of ignoring context, and appears as an early call for integration.

Examining different time frames, then, suggests strikingly different results for the theory of commitment and underlines the importance of taking historical context into account even over such a short period. In the prosperous early years of the movement, the most successful communes were the more open and unstructured ones, contrary to the theory of commitment. In the harder times following 1970, however, it became apparent that the more rigorously

organized groups were more likely to survive in the long run.¹⁷

Due to the limited data and methods available at the time, Gardner could only partially fulfill this mission by performing separate analyses on the earlier and later halves of his sample of communes. While such period comparisons can suggest directions for future research, they can hardly address the interaction of group structure and historical context. We must find analytical tools that are appropriate for exploring these questions.

Toward a Dynamic Structural Approach: Three New Directions

I propose an integration that combines the explanatory power of the structural analysis with core insights from the contextual view. This marriage would envision communes as dynamic systems, maintaining themselves in a shifting environment that includes historical trends as well as populations of other communes. Combining the structural and contextual approaches would abandon many of the restrictive assumptions of both views, allowing for variation between communes and across time.

A number of developments in survival analysis and formal modeling would allow us to explicitly include the social context in analyses of group structure and longevity. Three methodological strategies make this dynamic structural analysis possible.

First, there is room for integration of the contextual and structural approaches in dynamic regression models, such as those used in econometrics. This is an elaboration of the models that have already been used in most structural studies of communes. We need to add longitudinal variables and reframe the question of longevity as a varying probability of dissolution that depends on both structure and context. This parallels recent work examining the joint effects of environment and group characteristics on disbanding rates for non-communal organizations, such as labor unions.¹⁸

While previous work has generally assumed that a commune's structure is fixed from birth to death, this approach would allow any changes in structure to be included as explanatory variables and as variables to be explained. Dynamic models could explore the influence of contextual changes (e.g. religious trends, unemployment rates, protest campaigns) on group structure or outcomes, such as recruitment or apostasy rates.

In fact, recent analyses of internal dynamics of communes have begun to include some contextual factors that change over time. For example, Priscilla Brewer examined demographic trends in Shaker populations, showing how these trends led to breakdown of social control and ultimately to the dissolution of Shaker communes. She also observed connections between changes in the outside world and changes in profiles of Shaker recruits and apostates. In a detailed study of a single Shaker commune, John

Murray used econometric models to show that Shakers who joined during economic depressions were more likely to apostatize during economic recoveries.¹⁹

Although Murray and Brewer studied only Shaker communities and so could not examine significant variation in group structure, their longitudinal view of relationships between contextual factors and membership choices is promising. Unfortunately, these detailed person-level data are simply not available for most historical and contemporary communes. If we are to apply a dynamic approach to a diverse sample of other communes, we must do so without detailed person-level data.

Luckily, recent work in modeling natural, social, and economic systems has developed techniques that can depict complex phenomena without requiring micro-level data. Rather than setting a universal “success” criterion (such as longevity), a computer model could be used to represent complex interrelationships between structural characteristics, historical trends, and collective outcomes. Similar computational models predict outcomes for political and marketing campaigns, often without data on individual voters or consumers.

This type of dynamic model is essentially a macro-simulation, similar to contemporary computer games that emulate highly interactive systems, such as cities, civilizations, and ecosystems. Researchers build these computer models using large amounts of aggregated real-world data. The resulting models hypothesize relationships between various phenomena, while researchers statistically estimate the strength of these relationships by comparing predictions against observed outcomes.

Of course, building these models will require a substantial historical database, including group characteristics, economic and social trends, and estimates of founding and folding dates for communes. Although records for a large number of communes are needed, the records for each individual commune need not be precise or perfectly accurate. Because the object is not to provide exact descriptions of individual communes but to look for overall patterns, this method can accommodate some missing data and measurement error. A reasonable amount of arbitrarily missing data should only limit the model’s ability to make confident generalizations or predictions, but should not lead it to make patently false conclusions.

Like any model, this technique also has blind spots. For example, while a macrosimulation model allows both groups and contexts to vary, it must assume that individual members are approximately interchangeable. By examining aggregate flows of members into and out of the group, we would assume that all individual members of a given commune are equally cooperative or destructive. The historical record does not support this assumption. Gardner indicates that, although attracting members may be essential to survival during some periods, many of the early countercultural

communes collapsed under floods of antisocial dropouts who failed to contribute to group maintenance. Communal survival in the hippie era seemed to depend partly on excluding these freeloaders.²⁰ Further, this variable quality of incoming members may be correlated with cultural or economic trends, as is found in the Shaker studies by Murray and Brewer.

Explicitly measuring and modeling individuals' membership choices – to stay or leave, work or shirk, enforce rules or relax – seems like a logical next step. Ideally, this type of detailed analysis of members' choices would be nested in a model of group structures and environmental factors. Unfortunately, building this model inductively would require a massive supply of longitudinal data on individual commune members, which may never be available.

This suggests a more radical departure from previous structural and contextual studies of communes: dynamic micro-simulation. Rather than simply building and testing a model of aggregate phenomena, this method would simulate populations of actors making choices. Unlike the macro-simulations, this method could not compare the behavior of simulated agents against records of real-world cases, because no comparable data exists for choices of individual commune members over time. It would invent distributions of “virtual” people, who may vary in key attributes (such as productivity, conformity, and propensity to exit), to create an artificial world that may or may not reproduce the observed outcomes. Of course, these virtual beings would not represent specific people who joined and left communes, but only stylized agents that make choices based on simple decision or learning algorithms. This could allow a disciplined exploration of the dynamics being theorized. While it may never tell us any definite answers, this type of micro-simulation could at least help us refine our questions.

Measures for a Dynamic Structural Approach

All three dynamic methods generally reject a linear cause-and-effect framework in favor of a complex network of interrelationships. Of course, this breadth requires attention to multiple modes of observation and measurement. To begin, we might measure some of the following structural issues:

- *Organization of labor*
- *Centralization of power*
- *Centralization of economy*
- *Centralization of belief system*

We can then ask some questions about the social environment, to locate

the commune in its historical context. These questions would identify characteristics of the outside world that may affect the viability of communes, particularly through expanding or restricting the flow of members into or out of the commune over time. Possible longitudinal indicators include:

- *Inter-communal publications and conferences*
- *Repression or facilitation by the government*
- *Founding and folding of other communes*
- *Size of the total population of communes*
- *Media attention given to communes*
- *Unemployment rate*
- *Protest activity*

Because this approach would examine both internal and external factors, it could allow a special focus on the material, ideational, and relational interface between each commune and its environment. Indeed, examining this interface would be an important step toward understanding the interaction of structure and context. For example, we could measure some of the following boundary issues:

- *Participation of the group in inter-communal coalitions*
- *Economic interface of the group and its environment*
- *Informal contact of the group with its environment (distribution of social ties within and across group boundaries)*

These structural, contextual, and boundary characteristics may have ramifications for a broad range of concrete outcomes, beyond the simple survival/dissolution question. Rather than theoretically assuming the processes that underlie group “success,” we can directly model some of the important processes. Where adequate measures are available, we might observe some of the following outcomes:

- *Changes in membership size*
- *Membership turnover rate*
- *Internal conflict and schism*
- *Conflicts with the outside world*

Ultimately we may find that communes with certain combinations of internal characteristics tend to experience these outcomes with different frequencies and to different extents, given a set of environmental

conditions. We may also find that some internal structures enable communes to be more resilient to these outcomes. If we use analytical tools that can simultaneously consider these internal and contextual characteristics, as well as the interface between them, we may get a much finer picture of the lives and life cycles of communes. This will allow them to be better laboratories for scholars of social psychology and better measures for scholars of social change.

Conclusion

I have noted some threats of ignoring context in analyzing structure, and have showed two safeguards that some researchers have used to soften these threats. First, some have held longitudinal factors constant by comparing groups only during a narrow historical period. Second, when making comparisons across historical periods, others have at least provided anecdotal descriptions of contextual changes, to let readers imagine ways that different contexts may have affected communal outcomes.

I have discussed three other methods for handling contextual issues in a structural analysis of communes, none of which have appeared in the literature. First, we could include longitudinal measures of both context and structure in conventional statistical models predicting survival. This could rigorously assess both internal and environmental effects, as well as their interaction. Second, we could use macrosimulation to estimate complex interrelationships between structural and contextual factors. These models could also be evaluated with real-world data. Lastly, we could use microsimulation to theoretically specify these interrelationships in light of individual human choices.

While any dynamic structural analysis is certainly more complicated than studying either structure or context in isolation, it may reveal interactive processes that would be invisible to a simpler analysis. We can then see why various structures may help or hinder communes in different environments and why environmental conditions may help or hinder communes with different structures. We can see how groups learn from their own experiences, learn from the experiences of earlier generations, or respond to environmental changes as their environment changes in response to them.

Needless to say, the present structural and contextual approaches to studying communal movements have proved enormously fruitful, providing insights not only about historical communes but organizations and human groups in general. I have argued that incorporating aspects of the social context is a logical next step for future analyses of commune structure and longevity, and that environmental factors may account for the inconsistent findings of past work. This may also provide a method for the study of

organizational dynamics in general and social movement organizations in particular.

This approach need not require that researchers build arcane computer models for any further study. Although computers may provide the only way to integrate a large volume of real-world data holistically (rather than testing many individual hypotheses in isolation), they can never replace the rich detail of case histories and comparative studies. These dynamic analytical techniques simply provide a new vantage point, which is only now becoming available as emerging technologies meet scholars of various disciplines with the expertise and historical data to implement and evaluate the models.

NOTES

¹ Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972). Hugh Gardner, *The Children of Prosperity: Thirteen Modern American Communes* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978).

² Michael Barkun, "Communal Societies as Cyclical Phenomena," *Communal Societies*, 4 (1984): 35-48. Brian Berry, *America's Utopian Experiments: Communal Havens From Long-Wave Crises* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992).

³ Of course, births or deaths of communes do not necessarily give a representative picture of greater utopian movements. As Donald Pitzer notes, many communes were merely stages of such movements and were never designed to last indefinitely. See Pitzer, "Developmental Communalism: An Alternative Approach to Communal Studies," *Utopian Thought and Communal Experience* (Middlesex, England: Middlesex Polytechnic, 1989), 68-76. In this paper, I refer to survival of communes as persistence of an organizational form, not as "success" of the overall movements that adopt this form.

⁴ Rosabeth Moss Kanter, "Commitment and Social Organization: A Study of Commitment Mechanisms in Utopian Communities," *American Sociological Review*, 33 (1968): 499-519. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community* (1972).

⁵ Michael Hechter, *Principles of Group Solidarity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 146-167. Michael Hechter, "The Attainment of Solidarity in Intentional Communities," *Rationality and Society*, 2 (1990): 142-155.

⁶ Hugh Gardner, *The Children of Prosperity* (1978), 218-252.

⁷ John R. Hall, "Social Organization and Pathways of Commitment: Types of Communal Groups, Rational Choice Theory, and the Kanter Thesis," *American Sociological Review*, 53 (1989): 679-692. James A. Kitts, "Commitment and Collective Action: Structure, Strategy, and Survival of American Communes," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association at New York City (1996).

⁸ Benjamin Zablocki, *Alienation and Charisma: A Study of Contemporary American Communes* (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 147.

⁹ Yaacov Oved, "Communes and the Outside World: Seclusion and Involvement." *Communal Societies*, 3 (1983): 83-92.

¹⁰ Hugh Gardner, *The Children of Prosperity* (1978). James A. Kitts, "Commitment and Collective Action..." (1996), 14-15.

¹¹ Michael Barkun, "Communal Societies as Cyclical Phenomena" (1984), 47.

¹² Michael Barkun, "The Awakening Cycle Controversy," *Sociological Analysis*, 46 (1985): 425-443.

¹³ Brian Berry, *America's Utopian Experiments* (1992), 228.

¹⁴ For example, see: Rosabeth Moss Kanter, "Communes," *Psychology Today*, 4 (1970): 56-70. Hugh Gardner, *The Children of Prosperity* (1992), 5-21. Benjamin Zablocki, *Alienation and Charisma* (1980), 41-80.

¹⁵ Benjamin Zablocki, *Alienation and Charisma* (1980), 40.

¹⁶ Benjamin Zablocki, *Alienation and Charisma* (1980), 60.

¹⁷ Hugh Gardner, *The Children of Prosperity* (1978), 5-21; 219.

¹⁸ Michael T. Hannan and John Freeman, "The Ecology of Organizational Mortality: American Labor Unions, 1836-1985," *American Journal of Sociology*, 94 (1988): 25-52.

¹⁹ Priscilla Brewer, "Numbers are Not the Things for Us to Glory In: Demographic Perspectives on the Decline of the Shakers," *Communal Societies*, 7 (1987): 25-35. John Murray, "Determinants of Membership Levels and Duration in a Shaker Commune, 1780-1880," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 34(1995): 35-48.

²⁰ Hugh Gardner, *The Children of Prosperity* (1978), 37-38.

