

The Quest for Utopia in Twentieth-Century America: Volume I: 1900-1960

TIMOTHY MILLER

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Noted for once uttering that no map without a utopia on it was worthy of a glance, Oscar Wilde surely would have been delighted by the number of communities Timothy Miller has identified that stretched across the twentieth-century American landscape. Anyone questioning the vibrancy and continuing tradition of communal projects of this era need look no further. *The Quest for Utopia in Twentieth-Century America: 1900-1960*, the first published of a two-volume set, provides readers with information on an incredible number of famous and obscure communal endeavors. The breadth of communities listed in Miller's book convincingly demonstrates that the century's religious and secular communes were a "part of a small, ongoing theme in American life" (xiii) rather than a series of unrelated historical anomalies.

Cataloging communities is not without challenges. Attempts to offer a precise definition of "intentional community" is subject to criticism. Efforts to organize various and diverse groups into categories is problematic, and setting limits as to which communities are to be included or not invites criticism. In recognition of these obstacles, rather than imposing many standards for inclusion Miller sets minimal requirements, including "residentially based cooperation" and an initial impulse and motivation to create a community (xix). While some might object to the exclusion of the Amish, which fail by the first criterion, or college Greek societies, which fail by the second, Miller's decision to avoid some of the gray areas of community is necessitated by space limitations. Also excluded from this work are religious societies and orders, owing to their sheer number, and communities that lack sufficient documentation. Considering the breadth of the topic, the author has set practical limits.

That some scholars of the communitarian movement failed to recognize

the multitude and diversity of twentieth-century communal projects comes as little surprise. A search for nineteenth-century styled communities reveals few, as most new societies adapted to changing social problems by developing alternative organizational patterns and more limited goals. Professor Miller writes, “communal patterns have varied considerably as communitarian ideas and forms have evolved over the years” (xxiii). With the exception of the Bruderhof and Hutterites there were no large communities in the pattern of the Shakers, Inspirationists, or the Oneida Perfectionists. Hierarchical and charismatic leadership appeared less frequently as modern communities generally adopted more democratic styles of governance. Even the degree to which communities participated in a communal economic system declined as organizations of the past century adapted to the growing emphasis on individualism. Many twentieth-century intentional communities allowed individual ownership of small adjacent lots, private income, and reduced the demand on total economic and personal commitment to the organization. These changes notwithstanding, communal endeavors continued to reflect dissatisfaction with life within the dominant society and were driven by an impulse to create more personal, community-oriented and satisfying lifestyles.

Thus, the notions that the tradition of communal societies had vanished, and that the few that did emerge were not part of the communal tradition, have been soundly put to rest by the impressive scholarship in *The Quest for Utopia*.

Miller demonstrates the changing nature of intentional community with an extensive range of organizations ranging from artist and ethnic societies to religious and secular ones. The more reknown groups, including the Roycroft artist community, receive extensive attention. Lesser-known communities, such as Saline Valley Farms, are presented in brief vignettes. While the number of small, short-lived communal efforts receiving attention offers a glimpse of Miller’s mastery of his topic, there are so many obscure communities discussed and referenced that one is left longing for an appendix providing a list of communal societies, along with dates of origin and demise (where available). Similarly, a chart aiding the reader in visualizing the dates of greatest communal activity and the chronological overlap of many of the organizations would be of immense help. Still, the information provided by the author leaves *The Quest for Utopia* the primary starting point for young scholars searching for topics and established scholars wishing to better understand the extent of communal activity during the twentieth century. The book will also appeal to the general public interested in social criticism and communal activities. With impeccable scholarship and breadth not likely to be matched, Professor Miller’s work is essential reading.

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