

From the Tree House to the 2001 Center: The Renaissance Movement in the United States

KAROL H. BOROWSKI

We are out to unite the world through a spiritual Renaissance.... Basically we are a school created to learn and teach how to live the fullest life. . . . We are learning how to live tribally again, how to live simply in harmony with nature, how to take care of ourselves and each other, how to resolve our conflicts with love instead of laws, how to work for fun instead of greed, how to design a society that promotes trust, peace, and harmony, creating an environment of joy and spiritual transformations of mankind.

—From a Renaissance Movement pamphlet, 1974

I. Introduction

The literature on historic and modern communal movements is voluminous. Yet the Renaissance Movement, a contemporary communal-revitalization movement in the United States of America, with its center in western Massachusetts, has not received satisfactory scholarly treatment in spite of its sixteen-year career and extensive media attention.¹

Dr. Karol H. Borowski is Director of the Massachusetts Institute for Social Studies, an independent nonprofit educational and research institution based in Boston, Massachusetts. This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the Tenth Annual Conference of the NHCSA, October 1983.

1. For bibliography on historic and modern communal movements in the United States see Karol H. Borowski, *Attempting An Alternative Society: A Study of the Renaissance Movement in the United States of America* (Norwood, Pa.: Norwood Editions, 1984), a publication in Communal Societies and Utopian Studies Book Series, edited at Harvard University's Project for Kibbutz Studies in the Center for Jewish Studies; Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972); Kenneth Rexroth, *Communalism: From Us Origin to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974). As of this date no scholarly work has been published about the Renaissance Movement. Approximately 600 press articles, 100 television interviews and reports,

The virtual nonexistence of scholarly publications resulted from objections against academic endeavors raised by the leadership, especially during the early period of the Movement. "I don't want anything written down about what we are doing," asserted the founder, "because it's misdirecting people who are going to read it as law and doctrine, and they are going to try to live that doctrine."² Thus, several years passed between the initial study of this Movement (1973-1974), based on observation and informal interviews, and the undertaking of qualitative-quantitative formal research (1977-1982). This article, as well as a forthcoming book on the Renaissance Movement, are the results of these studies. Here I will primarily present the origin, developments, and current status of this movement and discuss its crucial elements, ideology, and leadership.

The late 1960's and early 1970's were marked by worldwide youth countercultural movements seeking cultural and social alternatives in virtually every realm. These phenomena reached their culmination in the United States, where various historical communal experiments, availability of cheap land, great institutional freedom, and an intense postindustrial alienation contributed to an explosive growth of numerous countercultural movements.³ Their most visible expression has been a variety of communal movements attempting to put countercultural theory into practice, thereby providing various sociocultural alternatives.

In analyzing these movements, in particular, their ideology, leadership, and tactics, I discovered a specific type of a communal movement marked by strong emphasis on revitalizing values and institutions ascribed to preindustrial tribal societies. These features became fundamental for creating prospective social and cultural alternatives, *Gemeinschaft-like* societies. Thus, I defined this particular type of communal movement as a communal-revitalization movement. A communal-revitalization movement is a spontaneous conscious and collective attempt to create an alternative society by revitalizing values and

including CBS specials, and numerous radio shows have been produced on the Renaissance Movement.

2. From an interview by the author with Michael Metelica, February 1973.

3. The counterculture movements of the 1960's and 1970's include various movements: protest movements, youth movements, and new religions. For further useful information see Peter L. Berger and Richard J. Neuhaus, *Movement and Revolution* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970); Keith Melville, *Communes in the Counterculture: Origins, Theories, Styles of Life* (New York: William Morrow, 1972); Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counterculture* (New York: Doubleday, 1968); Milton J. Yinger, *Countercultures: The Promise of Peril of a World Turned Upside Down* (Riverside, N.J.: The Free Press, 1982).

institutions of a *Gemeinschaft-like* society.⁴ The Renaissance Movement has been an ideal manifestation of such a movement.

2. Origin, Developments, and Current Status

The sociocultural conditions of the United States in the late 1960's, particularly the intensifying tensions among the alienated young generation, led to an unusual mushrooming of communal movements.

When the new youth counterculture wave reached Massachusetts, Michael J. Metelica, already influenced by spiritualists, and sensitive to surrounding contradictions of society at large, dropped out of high school and embarked upon an intense search for alternatives throughout the United States. Michael Metelica, born in Montague, Massachusetts, in 1950, was surrounded by spiritualists from his early childhood. His grandfather, an immigrant from Lithuania, was deeply involved in spiritualism. As a teenager, Metelica was befriended by a local medium, Elwood Babbitt, who deeply influenced his world view. Babbitt has acted as advisor to Metelica and the Renaissance Movement for many years.⁵

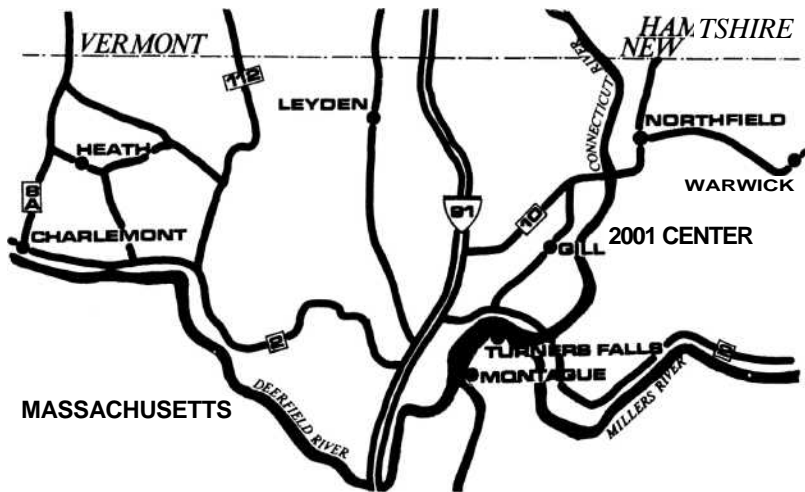
Between March and August, 1967, Metelica visited many significant countercultural centers, meeting several major groups, including Hippies, Hell's Angels, and Jesus Freaks. Although this trip provided him with enriching experiences, his search for "true brotherhood" was not fully successful. Thus, upon returning to Leyden, Massachusetts, he decided to live in seclusion. He built a treehouse adjacent to his family property, emerging occasionally to address neighbors and friends. His lifestyle drew sensational attention, especially among the local youth. Soon thereafter six of his closest friends joined him in the treehouse.

The sharing of tensions, ideas, and actions of the most alienated youth who gathered around Michael led to the beginning of the Renaissance Movement. Its original purpose was to provide an enclave for selected high-school dropouts. But it soon became an attempt at establishing a *Gemeinschaft-like* society based on brotherhood, creativity, and community.

4. Anthony F. C. Wallace's revitalization theory has been among the most fruitful in modern anthropology. His original statement of it was "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist* (1956): 264-281. See also Michael P. Carroll, "Revitalization Movements and Social Structure: Some Quantitative Tests," *American Sociological Review* 40 (1975): 389-401.

5. Elwood Babbitt, with the assistance of Charles Hapgood, a college professor, published *The God Within: A Testament of Vishnu* (Wendell Depot, Mass.: Opie Mountain Citadel, 1970); *Talks With Christ and His Teachers* (Turners Falls, Mass.: Threshold Books, 1981).

During its career, the Renaissance Movement went through several changes in its organization, from a simple commune through a business enterprise to a church-community organization. As a commune, the Renaissance Movement consecutively had its centers in Leyden, Charlemont, Guilford, and Warwick, all in the hill country of western Massachusetts. The Metelica Aquarian Concept, a rock music business established after the move to Turners Falls (1974), lasted only a short time. Since 1975, the church-community organization has prevailed with its current center in Gill. It is called the "2001 Center." (See Map i.)



MAPI Major Locations of Renaissance Movement Centers, 1968-1984

The Movement developed gradually. Membership grew from a small group of six friends who joined Michael Metelica in the Leyden treehouse in 1968 to approximately 300 members in 1972. This number remained fairly stable in spite of a constant turnover in membership and several internal crises. However, since 1978, the core group membership has decreased; currently approximately ninety adults and children reside at the 2001 Center.

Various strategies were implemented in order to strengthen the Renaissance Movement, attract new members, and affect society at large, the most effective method being youth-culture media. Several

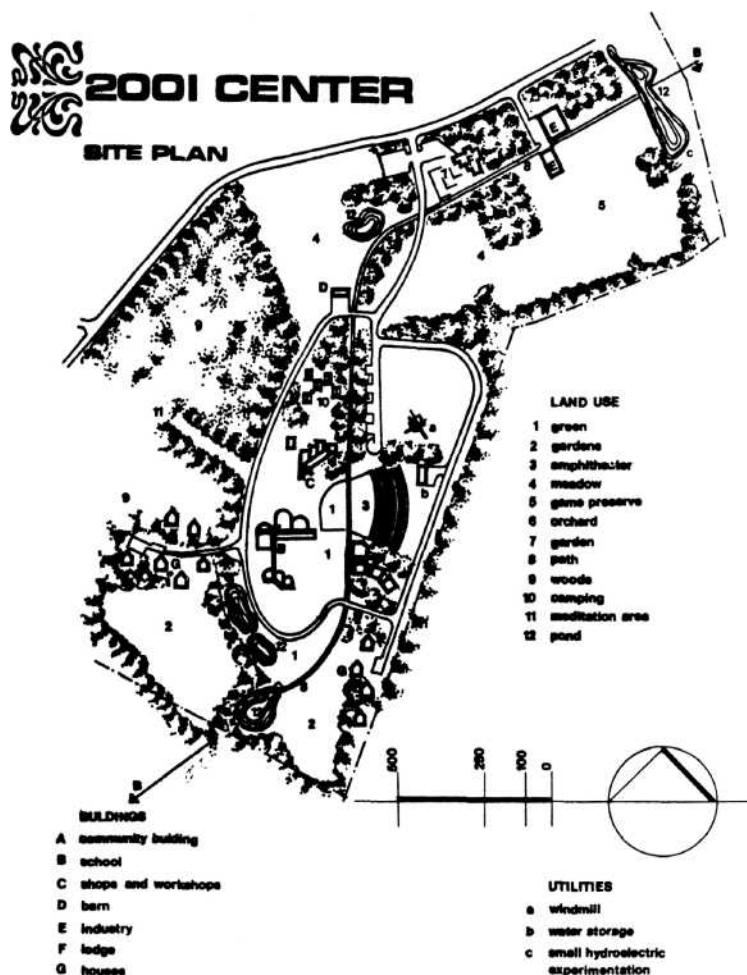
music bands, lecture teams, radio broadcasts, and a magazine publication widely publicized the Movement. James Baker was the editor of the Movement's magazine, *Free Spirit Press*, published from December 1971 through August 1974. Later, a special public-relations team periodically published brochures on the Movement. They also produced a number of radio shows broadcast throughout the United States. Most of this work was done by Gary Cohen, Robin Paris, and Daniel Brown. After its sensational appearance at Carnegie Hall, September 22, 1971, the Movement's band, Spirit in Flesh, became the Movement's symbol for many years.

Spirit in Flesh performed throughout the United States, mainly at youth centers and university campuses, manifesting the Renaissance ideology and emphasizing creativity to such a degree that, when it performed at Carnegie Hall, no program was planned because "the main purpose of Spirit in Flesh is to show people that a pure positive energy does exist and that this positive energy can be the mainstay of anyone's life if he but looks within himself." ⁶ The various outreach programs of the Movement and the continuing sociocultural tensions, resulted in an enormous influx of prospective members, especially before 1973.

The Movement's early success led to long-lasting conflicts with society at large, especially on the local level. For nearly twelve years the Movement was a target for spontaneous and organized attacks, court actions, and adverse publicity. Members were frequently accused of "immorality, lack of respect for their country, godlessness, and revolutionary intents." They were charged with abuse of welfare provisions, violation of zoning laws, disturbing the peace, and income tax evasion. Local people organized several coalitions opposing the presence of the Renaissance Movement in their communities. The Movement fought several court actions and published its philosophy. It also organized public events in order to diminish these conflicts.

During the many confrontations with society at large the Renaissance Movement made several adaptations necessary for its survival. The Movement organization accepted requirements for its legal identity and was incorporated under various names: Brotherhood of the Spirit, Metelica Aquarian Concept, Inc., Renaissance Church, and Renaissance Community. Since 1975, it has been known as Renaissance Church-Community with its headquarters at the 2001 Center in Gill, established upon the purchase of two buildings on eighty acres of farmland. (See Mapn.)

6. From a concert poster.



MAP II Site Plan of 2001 Center in Gill, Massachusetts (based on a 1977 Renaissance Church pamphlet as updated and corrected by the author).

Since 1977, members have worked toward the realization of the Master Plan, aimed at establishing of a self-sufficient community and a base for promoting Renaissance in the modern world. At the present time many projects are completed, including a barn serving as community center, five residential buildings, an orchard, fish and swimming pond, and several buildings used for industry and business. The

2001 Center continuously serves as a base for various Movement actions, especially related to spiritual, environmental, and world-peace issues.

Due to its ideology, diligent leadership, and flexible tactics the Renaissance Movement has survived for sixteen years both as the Renaissance Church-Community in Gill and in the "diaspora" of its many exmembers ("graduates"), living throughout the United States and abroad. Several members live in Great Britain, Eastern Europe, and Australia. It has progressed from rudimentary beginnings to creating a modern sociocultural alternative for at least a segment of alienated postindustrial American youth.

3. *Crucial Elements of the Renaissance Movement: Ideology and Leadership*

Despite organizational transformations the Renaissance Movement has been persistently vital throughout its sixteen-year career. What, then, have been the most important elements in its origin and sustenance? My own studies have shown that continuity and change in this movement were provided by its ideology and leadership.

Ideology—defined here as a system of beliefs and values reflecting, rationalizing, and defining actions—has played a vital role throughout the Movement's history. The beliefs are based on three fundamental sources: (1) *The Seven Immutable Laws of the Universe*, (2) *The Aquarian Gospel*, and (3) the members' personal inspiration. These have provided a framework for their self-perception as well as perception of humankind, world, and society. They constitute the Renaissance ideology.

Members claim that the *Seven Laws*—order, harmony, balance, growth, God-perception, love, and compassion—are counterparts of the physical laws governing the universe. Members of the Movement believe that by acting in accordance with these laws, they will gradually transform society at large. They will bring Renaissance to the entire modern world, and eventually improve the quality of social and individual lives.

The *Aquarian Gospel*, a nineteenth-century apocryphal work written in England by Levi H. Dowling (1834-1911), is acknowledged as the Movement's "only spiritual track corresponding to the truth we [members] believe in."⁷ These sources also served as references and substantiation when the Movement leaders applied for legal status as the Renaissance Church.

7. From an interview conducted by the author with a Movement member.

The group beliefs, derived from the *Seven Laws* and *The Aquarian Gospel* are highly unconventional but they seem to present a firm and complex system. However, due to emphasis on individual inspiration, members interpret and consequently implement their beliefs according to their own personal perceptions.

Among their basic beliefs, reincarnation has played an important role. In defining reincarnation, members stress a physical and spiritual dichotomy as well as stages to be followed for achieving personal development within a social context. Members claim that believing in reincarnation increases self-understanding and acting according to that understanding to benefit society in various dimensions; for example, recognizing the equality of all people and accepting them without prejudice. The Renaissance Movement's beliefs thus have strongly influenced its values by stressing equality, community, cooperation, and respect both for the individual and the community.

The attempt to create an alternative society has been the Movement's ultimate value. It has constituted the core of the Renaissance Movement culture around which the consensus and actions of its members have been integrated. Traditional Christian love, generally postulated honesty, genuine brotherhood, and oriental religious postulates for spirituality and self-perfection became the basis of the new Renaissance.

Ideology has been an important factor in the Movement's career. Although no new beliefs or values were discovered, the Movement's emphasis on creating a *Gemeinschaft*-like society with no discrepancy between values and ways of life is crucial in attempting sociocultural alternatives in postindustrial societies.

In recent years much has been written about leadership. But its role in contemporary communal movements has not received satisfactory scholarly attention. Therefore, in studying the Renaissance Movement, I also focused on the leadership. The main research issues were leadership perception, legitimization, function, continuity, and change.

In its early phase the Renaissance Movement was antihierarchical and anarchistic, but, as a result of demands for representation and for administrative changes, there emerged a set of officeholders, spokespersons, and major decision-makers. In the early stages of the Movement these roles were predominantly executed by the Movement's founder Michael J. Metelica, who later changed his name to Rapunzel. Later, other members assumed these positions.

The gradual evolution of Metelica's manifest leadership can be traced to the following factors: (1) members' expectations; (2) efforts by core-group members to legitimate his leadership; and (3) Michael Metelica's personality traits.

The concept of leadership in the Renaissance Movement corresponds to Weber's charismatic type of leadership.⁸ Members expected a special type of leadership contrasting with the bureaucratic leadership in society at large. They have stressed exceptional personality traits, especially moral attributes. Thus, they have tried to see in Metelica great intelligence, deep spirituality, and extraordinary concern for others, as well as firm task motivation, performance, competence, and other abilities. Several core-group members worked purposefully in order to present Metelica as an extraordinary individual. Thus, they further legitimated his leadership. As a result, for many years the Renaissance Movement was identified with Michael Metelica's charismatic traits, visions, and leadership. But between 1978 and 1981 internal conflicts led to organizational changes in the leadership structure. The leadership changed from a one-man orientation to a pluralistic orientation, and from a unifactional to a multifactional configuration. Consequently, Metelica's individualistic charismatic leadership has been transformed into a collective charismatic leadership. Authority became divided virtually among all members according to their diverse expertise as well as to their commitment to the Movement. Currently, almost all major formal leadership positions are filled by various members, predominantly by women. Metelica, however, still remains *primus inter pares*.

The career of the Renaissance Movement shows that it is doubtful that any group can establish and sustain an alternative sociocultural phenomenon without a firmly legitimated charismatic leadership, either individual or collective.

4. *Conclusions*

The vast amount of data I have gathered during nine years of research on the development of the Renaissance Movement, "from the Treehouse to the 2001 Center," has provided me with a challenging base for reflections upon this communal phenomenon. Attempts at creating an alternative society can occur whenever the dominant social system becomes dysfunctional, even to a part of its constituency. Research also suggests that the Renaissance Movement as a communal-revitalization movement is meant to be a social invention, a vital vehicle for social and cultural change in modern America.

8. Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1922/1947).

My general study, which provides detailed documentation not suitable for this overview, concludes that the historical development of the Renaissance Movement provides a clear illustration for two theses: (1) social innovations are brought about predominantly through conflict, and (2) every culture tends to have a competitor in a counterculture.