

Sexuality and Gender Roles in Utopian Communities: A Critical Survey of Scholarly Work

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IN COMMUNAL STUDIES, the subject of sexuality and gender roles has only recently begun to get the attention it deserves. These aspects of communal social life merit study for several reasons. Utopian theorists and practitioners from the beginning have often been inclined to view radical innovations in sexual conduct, gender roles, marriage and family arrangements as indispensable to the creation of Utopia; therefore an understanding of their positions on these matters is central to any study of Utopian ideologies. Furthermore, the modern reader is naturally drawn to the issue of how these architects of human improvement addressed the very problems that presently occupy such a central place in our own social discourse: the varieties, freedom, and regulation of sexual expression; the social status and role differentiation of men and women; and the form and vitality of family life. Not only are we legitimately interested in what the Utopians attempted, but we are equally concerned with the resulting successes, failures, conflicts, and sociostructural consequences. In sexuality and gender roles more than in any other facet of social life, Utopian communities are "laboratories" for experimental institutions that even traditional societies in their astonishing diversity have not encompassed; furthermore they are "controlled" experiments insofar as they depart from a roughly common and relatively well documented cultural base.

Communal sexuality and gender roles, then, are important as elements of Utopian ideology, as issues connected with contemporary social change, and as experiments in social structure and dynamics. Yet, despite the strong justification for studying these aspects of communalism, it is only in the last dozen years, with the increasing sophistication

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and interplay of communal studies and "women's" studies, that the scholarly literature on the subject has begun to flower. This writer has found the progress in the field particularly noticeable, having searched in vain for good comparative data and analysis to elucidate his own 1972-73 field study of a contemporary group whose revealed religion employed a radically patriarchal and antifeminist vision of history and theology, and whose vision of Utopia placed sexuality, sex symbolism and gender roles on center stage.¹ A current researcher would find the relevant literature considerably richer and more sophisticated; it is the task of this essay to examine the general trends and specific works that have enabled scholarship on communal sexuality and gender roles to come of age.

1. The Early Literature

Prior to about 1970 the literature on communal societies consisted mostly of general surveys and scattered single-community studies, tending in either case to be more descriptive than analytical. As description these works were often lacking in the sort of social and cultural detail necessary for meaningful comparison, and they generally failed to distinguish among communal ideologies, communal practices, "mainstream" ideologies, and the authors' own assumptions, much less to treat the nuances and contradictions within each of these or the relations among them. Not surprisingly, then, the treatment of sexuality in these works is often vague, confusing, or biased. For example, Mark Holloway, in *Heavens on Earth*,² a respected work of this period, acknowledges the importance of sex and gender in communal ideologies but accords them limited treatment and seems oblivious to the contradiction between his claim that communalists generally favored sexual equality both in theory and in practice, and his statement that the German sectarians (who comprise two-thirds of the most long-lived groups he cites) showed no interest in the emancipation of "women" or any other departure from "the conventional relationship of the sexes."³ (We shall return presently to the reluctance of some scholars to confront sex-role conservatism in communal societies.) Webber's popularized account of nineteenth-century

1. Jon Wagner, *Haran: Charisma and Ideology in a Contemporary American Commune* (doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 1975), and "A Midwestern Patriarchy," in Jon Wagner, ed., *Sex Roles in Contemporary American Communes* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1982).

2. Mark Holloway, *Heavens on Earth: Utopian Communities in America, 1680-1880* (New York: Library Publishers, 1951).

3. Holloway, pp. 54, 159, and 223.

groups in *Escape to Utopia*⁴ is also symptomatic of the times, but in a different way. While Webber compiles a considerable body of information on diverse sexual practices, he consistently emphasized the "sex-ridden" nature of these communities in an apparent effort to amuse and titillate the reader. Webber's witty, cutting, and ironic presentation based mostly on secondary works, prepares the reader for his confident conclusion that the folly of communalism had—as of 1951—disappeared forever from American life. Yet, as the only work at the time dealing extensively and comparatively with sexual practices, it served to draw attention to some genuine ironies of Utopian ideology, including the convoluted relationship between theories of celibacy and of free love.

Raymond Lee Muncy's 1973 work, *Sex and Marriage in Utopian Communities: Nineteenth-Century America* is the first serious scholarly attempt to deal with the subject. It is thorough in its coverage, documenting a wide range of communal ideologies and touching on a broad spectrum of secular groups (for example, Owenites, Fourierists, Icaria, Fruitlands) as well as religious sectarians (Bishop Hill, Amana, the Hutterites, and others). Among the groups receiving the most attention are the Mormons, the Oneida community, and the celibate groups, particularly the Shakers. Although it is fairly well written and researched, Muncy's book offers little in the way of abstract analysis and rarely penetrates beneath the surface. Part of the reason for these shortcomings is undoubtedly the ideological burden under which the book labors, for it is intended in part as a cautionary tale for (or rather against) the "collections of establishment dropouts" responsible for the commune boom of the 1970's.⁵

Starting from the premise that the nineteenth-century communes were "failures" in terms of both their own objectives and their influence on the larger society, Muncy sets out to find the reason why. He does not have far to look. Communes, it seems, are obliged to do away with the traditional family and its accompanying emotional bonds in order to channel members' loyalties to the community as a whole. Free love, celibacy, and Mormon polygamy, although superficially different, each accomplished the objective of doing away with the traditional family as the locus of personal loyalty and emotional fulfillment. (Muncy seems unruffled by such monogamous communalists as the Hutterites and Amana colonists.) But departures from traditional motherhood and family roles, we are told, conflict directly with women's "maternal instincts," leading women to resist communalism. Muncy states categorically that most women in communes were there against their own will, "forced into

4. Everett Webber, *Escape to Utopia: The Communal Movement in America* (New York: Hastings House, 1951).

5. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 1.

the novel societies by the decision of their husbands, who were unable to find happiness in the normal society order."⁶ (This undocumented claim is at odds with the occurrence of female majorities in many communes,⁷ and is in any case inapplicable to virgin celibates or to persons reared in communal societies.) In return for their "thwarted fulfillment" as wives and mothers, the argument goes, these women received the promise of sexual equality—a bad trade in Muncy's view and, we are led to believe, in the view of the women involved. Indeed, the association of communalism with "women's rights" figures into Muncy's indictment of communalism: such feminist communards as Francis Wright and Margaret Fuller were, we are told, "pathetic creatures in search of fulfillment in life" who found communes "perfectly adapted to bolster their egos," but who "eventually bowed to the urge to marry and have children, thereby contradicting by their actions their earlier tirades against marriage."⁸ Communal leaders are portrayed as "wily," self-serving "dictators" whose sinister motives are glimpsed through constant innuendo. Muncy in his conclusion equates individualism with "freedom" and communalism with "slavery," and as if this were not enough to account for the failure of communes, adds that "possessiveness" is "a trait of human nature" that militates inexorably against every form of socialism.⁹ Muncy's work, though deeply biased, offers a stimulating body of descriptive information and draws attention to some central questions, including (1) the supposed incompatibility of communalism and familism, (2) the underlying sociostructural similarities among such apparently diverse practices as celibacy and free love, and (3) the relationship between communalism and sexual equality. Each of these issues, indeed, appears to be perennial in discussions of Utopian sex arrangements, and it might therefore be useful to consider the development of thought around each of these points before turning to a detailed consideration of more recent work.

2. *Perennial Issues*

Muncy was by no means the first to consider the potential antagonism between communal and familistic loyalties. Lewis Mumford noted that

6. Muncy, *Sex and Marriage*, pp. 216, 215.

7. See, for example, Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965 [original 1875]), pp. 256, 263; Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles in and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias—The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1981), pp. 95, 160; and Louis J. Kern, "Ideology and Reality: Sexuality and Women's Status in the Oneida Community," *Radical History Review* 20 (Spring/Summer 1979): 181-205, esp. 195.

8. Muncy, *Sex and Marriage*, p. 216.

9. Muncy, *Sex and Marriage*, p. 234.

Utopians since antiquity have viewed "the little Utopia of the family" as the "principal enemy. . . . of the beloved community."¹⁰ John Humphrey Noyes, leader of the Oneida community, had made the same point several generations before. Noyes, an able theorist in his own right, presaged modern sociologists in pointing out that celibacy, as practiced by such communalists as the Shakers, had something in common with Oneidan "free love" at the sociostructural level: each did away with exclusive sexual and familial bonds, thus enabling individuals to invest more loyalty in the community as a whole.¹¹ Sociologist Rosabeth Kanter's *Commitment and Community*¹² incorporated these insights into a general theory of "commitment." According to Kanter, the most long-lived groups were those that adopted "commitment mechanisms," or practices which operated to bring individual behavior and motivation into line with the functional needs of the community. Prominent among these mechanisms was "dyadic renunciation," or the elimination of exclusive sexual loyalties. Like Noyes, she argued that free love and celibacy were equivalent means of achieving this end. Kanter may have been inclined to overstate the universality of dyadic renunciation among successful groups: in her first presentation of the hypothesis¹³ she claimed that *all* the nineteenth-century groups that survived more than twenty-five years practiced either free love or celibacy; she later¹⁴ modified her position to say that all but one "successful" group had practiced one of these two forms of marriage *at some time* during its existence—a statement still subject to debate and based on an incomplete sample.¹⁵ In fact there were successful nineteenth-century communities, such as the Amana colonists and the Hutterites, that practiced monogamous marriage; nevertheless, the frequent appearance of these two seemingly divergent forms among communes of the same era may well have something to do with their common subordination of familism to communal loyalty, a possibility often suggested by communalists themselves. There may, however, be other ways to accomplish dyadic renunciation; the author has argued that the contemporary monogamous communalists of Haran achieve similar

10. Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), pp. 49-50.

11. John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms* (New York: Hillary House, 1961 [original 1870]).

12. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972).

13. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, "Commitment and Social Organization: a Study of Commitment Mechanisms in Utopian Communities," *American Sociological Review* 33 (1968): 499-517.

14. Kanter, *Commitment and Community*.

15. For a detailed critique of pre-1981 literature on communal sex roles, see Jon Wagner, "Sex Roles in Communal Societies: an Overview," in Wagner, ed., *Sex Roles in Contemporary American Communes*.

results by devaluing the emotional significance of family ties,¹⁶ and others, like Muncy, have made a parallel argument concerning Mormon polygamy.

Of all the issues connected with sex and gender roles in communes, none has generated more controversy and confusion than the question of whether communal Utopias are inherently disposed toward equality of the sexes. Perhaps it is because there is such an undeniable logic in the notion that communalists, as egalitarians, might be expected to favor sexual equality, that so many writers have been willing to overlook contrary evidence in order to credit communalists categorically with a commitment to this ideal. Yet even those who affirm the relationship between communalism and gender equality seem to recognize that the "facts" are ambiguous. We have already noted that Holloway attributed to communalists in general a belief in complete sexual equality while at the same time denying that the German sectarians—the majority of his longest-lived groups—had any such learnings. Muncy specifically claims that the celibate groups (among others) sought to advance the rights of women, but on the next page denies that "sectarian" groups—which would appear to account for most of the celibate communes—did so.¹⁷ Nordhoff concludes from his visits to nineteenth-century communes that sexual equality is "a great point gained for success," even though a small minority of the successful communities he visited were described as having promoted such equality.¹⁸ More recently Jeanette and Robert Lauer have contended that "male-female equality" was "implicit or explicit in the various communistic ideologies"¹⁹ of nineteenth-century Utopians, and that women's "political rights" in such groups were in advance of those in the larger society; however, they cite as many "exceptions" as examples at the ideological level, and then go on to concede that communal practice rarely if ever lived up to theoretical promises of equality. More problematical still, their claim that the Shakers believed in complete sexual equality and "denied that there is such a thing as a 'woman's sphere' that is radically different from the sphere of man,"²⁰ and the assertion that "the Oneidians affirmed equality of capabilities between the sexes,"²¹ might be misleading unless placed in the context of countervailing elements in these respective ideologies (more on this later.).

16. Wagner, "A Midwestern Patriarchy."

17. Muncy, *Sex and Marriage*, pp. 216-217.

18. Jeanette C. Lauer and Robert H. Lauer, "Sex Roles in Nineteenth-Century American Communal Societies," *Communal Societies* 3 (1983): 16-28, esp. 16.

19. The Lauers, "Sex Roles," p. 19.

20. The Lauers, "Sex Roles," p. 19.

21. The Lauers, "Sex Roles," p. 20.

A similar problem exists in the assessment of contemporary groups. Conover, generalizing from Twin Oaks community, cites a strong pattern of sexual equality in modern groups, but is obliged to concede that most "religious" groups do not conform to this purported trend, and that even some "alternative culture" groups, including the Farm, are "exceptions" 22 Hypothesizing a structural tendency of communal defamilization to enhance women's direct participation in communities, Kanter also posits a strong tendency for both contemporary and historical groups to move substantially toward equality. Although evidently uncomfortable with the difficulty of fitting either nineteenth-century German sectarians or modern "hippie" groups to this norm, she nevertheless concludes that groups with sexual inequality "are neither very communal nor very cohesive." 23 Having studied a cohesive sexually egalitarian community at first hand and gathered together a compendium of recent fieldwork in other communities, the author finds it difficult to accept this as an empirically valid statement.²⁴ Yet Kanter is not the only one to see inherent structural linkages between communalism and sexual equality; according to an argument traceable in various forms to Engels, Noyes, Fourier, Owen and others, sexual inequality is grounded in the exclusive, monogamous patriarchal family, which in turn is an expression of the capitalist idea of "private property;" thus the abolition of patriarchy, sexual exclusivity, and private property are said to be inextricably tied.²⁵ The record of traditional societies, however, actually demonstrates that both male dominance and monogamy often occur in societies with economic sharing and material equality. The relationship of gender roles and sexual equality to communalism is an important but complex matter that we are just beginning to untangle; *a priori* statements based on what logically or morally "ought to be" cannot cut the Gordian knot.

22. Patrick W. Conover, "An Analysis of Communes and Intentional Communities with Particular Attention to Sexual and Gender Relations," *The Family Coordinator* (October 1975): 453-63.

23. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, "Family Organization and Sex Roles in American Communes," in Kanter, ed., *Communes: Creating and Managing the Collective Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 305. On the other side, Leigh Mintum's article on "Sex Role Differentiation in Contemporary Communes," in *Sex Roles* 10, nos. 1-2, pp. 73-85, hypothesizes that structural characteristics of communal societies will lead, as in traditional extended families, to *greater* sex role differentiation than is found in nuclear families. She admits that her research yielded equivocal support, at best, for the hypothesis.

24. Wagner, *Sex Roles in Contemporary American Communes*; Kanter's argument is specifically addressed in the chapter, "Sex Roles in American Communal Utopias: An Overview," on pp. 10-12.

25. See for example Noyes, quoted in Nordhoff, p. 272; Frederick Engels' *Origin of the Family Private Property, and the State: In the Light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan* (Reprint, New York: International Publishers, n.d.; original 1884).

3. *Trends in the History of Sexuality*

Scholarship on communal societies has improved greatly over the last decade and a half, due in part to the use of methodological and analytic concepts borrowed from modern anthropologists, sociologists, and historians. In order to understand recent work on communal gender roles and sexuality, therefore, it is necessary to take a brief look at some trends in that immense and dynamic but loosely-defined field that deals with sex and gender in the context of cultural history—an area of investigation variously called "women's studies," "gender studies," or "history of sexuality," although it is rather more than any of these labels suggests.

Current scholarship on gender and sexuality has distanced itself from the static conceptions of "human nature" employed by Muncy and earlier writers, treating such conceptions themselves as artifacts of cultural ideology, objects to be studied and explained rather than immutable "givens" of human existence. It has also moved away from the concept of "traditional" society as a primordial, undifferentiated entity, uniformly benighted, oppressive, and prudish. Instead, it is inclined to view sexuality and gender—not only the attitudes toward these but the very categories by which we conceptualize and communicate about them—as culturally constituted, historically dynamic, and lending themselves to diverse interpretations, contradictions, and dialogue within cultures.²⁶

No work better exemplifies this shift in thinking than Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*.²⁷ Foucault rejects the notion that Victorian culture attempted to suppress discourse about sex and to restrict its existence to procreation; rather, he argues, the period from the end of the sixteenth through the beginning of the twentieth centuries saw a proliferation of discourse about sexuality, a "plurisecular injunction to talk about sex" in all its forms. The canons of discretion and prohibition in the language we employed to talk about sex were, Foucault maintains, "a tactical diversion in the process of transforming sex into discourse,"²⁸ of making it into a subject of endless scientific and medical investigation, of confessing, typologizing and institutionalizing its perversions, of attributing to it a nefarious omnipresence capable of bringing about every manner of pathology from hysteria and degenerative disease to the fall of civilizations, able to conceal or reveal the deepest secrets of the individual and

26. For examples of this general approach see Robert A. Padgug, "Sexual Matters: On Conceptualizing Sexuality in History," Joseph Interrante and Carol Lasser "Victims of the Very Songs They Sing: A Critique of Recent Work on Patriarchal Culture and the Social Construction of Gender," and other articles in the "sexuality in history" issue of *Radical History Review* 20 (Spring/ Summer 1979).

27. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

28. Foucault, p. 22.

the species. The "deployment of sex" in cultural discourse, according to Foucault is not a matter of idle fear or curiosity, but a strategy through which power is cultivated and expressed:

Sexuality must not be described as a stubborn drive, by nature alien and of necessity disobedient to a power which exhausts itself trying to subdue it and often fails to control it entirely. It appears rather as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women, young people and old people, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priests and laity, an administration and a population. Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies.²⁹

Since Foucault sees power as flowing from innumerable points and serving diverse, often conflicting, ends, he recognizes no monolithic ideological edifice within a society and therefore can offer no single cause or purpose. He does, however, suggest a reason why sex has replaced "blood" and death in the discourse of power: modern society has moved toward a form of power "bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding forces, making them submit, or destroying them." 30 According to Foucault, a significant element in the bourgeois Victorian sexual ideology was a "technology of sex" whose purpose was to maintain the hegemony of ruling classes and peoples, individually and collectively, through the careful conservation and discipline of their propogative powers accompanied by constant vigilance against "pollution" and "degeneracy."

Detailed analysis of Western sexual history emerging over the last dozen years are generally consistent with Foucault's notion of an intense discourse whose terms are anything but static. There appear to have been not one but two major shifts in sexual ideology during the past few centuries: the first, occurring in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and coinciding with rise of Protestantism and commercial capitalism, reinforced the conjugal family unit and the ideal of similar (if not equal) virtues of the two sexes, as opposed to the earlier notions of separate spheres and qualitative differences. Sexual satisfaction continued, as before, to be recognized as a valuable concomitant of procreative marital sex.³¹ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, during the rise of evangelical religion and industrialism, we see development of the "Victorian" sexual ideology. With the separation, at least for members of the

29. Foucault, p. 103.

30. Foucault, p. 136.

31. Ruth M. Bloch, "Untangling the Roots of Modern Sex Roles: A Survey of Four Centuries of Change," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4 (1978): 237-52.

urban middle class, of the business and industrial work settings from the domestic family setting, the ideal of separate "spheres" of male and female activity again came to the fore; and not only different values, virtues, and even the attribution of different innate qualities. While men were expected to excel in hard-headed rationality and to devote themselves to virtually unbridled competition, women became the guardians of the "gentle" virtues of compassion, nurturance, aesthetic sensitivity, and spirituality, the locus of which was the home—a haven against the chaos, fragmentation and exploitation that animated the world of rising capitalism.³²

Perhaps because sex was symbolic of the forces of growth and dominion, as Fbucault would have it, or perhaps because the growing spectre of erotic, nonprocreative sex threatened to unleash the dark and unplumbed forces of hedonism and anarchy that haunted early capitalist society,³³ there developed an ideology linking sexual restraint with the vigor of the individual and progeny, and excess with deterioration of the body and mind and degeneration of the genetic line. A doctrine of "spermatic economy" held that a man's body contained a limited amount of vital force, so that energy expended in the ejaculation of sperm was subtracted from the mental and physical vigor available for other pursuits.³⁴ Women, as guardians of purity, were expected to do more than control their desires; they were expected to be "passionless," virtually lacking in erotic desire and attracted to sex only for procreative reasons.³⁵ While medieval women were religiously suspect because of their presumed carnality, Victorian women, as exemplars of benevolence and spirituality, came to dominate many aspects of religious life in what some writers call a "feminization" of theology and even of the Godhead.³⁶ Going beyond this dominant "bourgeois" Victorian ideology,

32. Bloch: "Untangling the Roots of Modern Sex Roles"; Estelle B. Freedman, "Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America: Behavior, Ideology, and Politics," *Reviews in American History* 10 (December 1983): 196-215; Kirk Jeffrey, "The Family as Utopian Retreat from the City: The Nineteenth Century Contribution," in Sallie Teselle, ed., *The Family, Communes, and Utopian Societies* (New York, Harper and Row, 1972). For general treatments of the period see Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians* (New York: Basic Books, 1966); Graham J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

33. Freedman, "Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America."

34. Barkekr-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life*.

35. Nancy Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4 (1978).

36. Barbara Welter, "The Feminization of American Religion, 1800-1860" in William L. O'Neill, ed., *Insights and Parallels: Problems and Issues in American History* (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Co., 1973).

some scholars have further stressed the themes of discourse and power by pointing out the need for more recognition of diversity, conflict, resistance and ideological counteroffensive along lines of class, sexual, sectarian or other divisions.³⁷ Studies of Utopian communities are therefore beginning to attract more attention from historians of sexuality.

4. *Recent Works*

Four book-length comparative treatments of sexuality and gender roles in Utopian and communal societies have appeared since Muncy's volume, all between the years 1981 and 1983. Louis J. Kern's *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias—the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* happens to treat three of the communities most emphasized in Muncy's study, and the same three covered in Lawrence Foster's *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century*,³⁸ although each study employs a unique approach. Robert H. and Jeanette C. Lauer's *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sex in Utopian Communities*³⁹ is organized by topic rather than community and is more broadly comparative, covering a considerable range of historical and contemporary groups. The author's *Sex Roles in Contemporary American Communes*, an edited compendium of recent field reports, will receive passing comment later in this essay.

Of the first three works, the Lauers' is the most ambitious in coverage, dealing as it does with the entire range of nineteenth- and twentieth-century groups. Focusing on sexuality rather than gender roles, the book amply illustrates the thesis that "If variety is the spice of life, the Utopian communalists offer us a delectable field of study, for they are no less diverse than humankind itself in the range of sexual practices that they have approved."⁴⁰ The book offers up an intriguing sampler of tidbits from the smorgasbord of Utopian sexual practices; yet the palate is likely to become confused by the constant juxtaposition of groups, often within the same paragraph or the same sentence, whose ideas, practices, and place in history were fundamentally different. The resulting phantasmagorical collage of the communal experience is good for stirring up the imagination, and the profuse bibliographical references will start the student down the path of further investigation. For the generalist or communal neophyte simply interested in the range, but not the nuances or the historical contexts, of Utopian sexual practices, the book will prove

37. Interrante and Lasser, "Victims of the Very Songs They Sing."

38. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

39. (Metuchen, N.J. and London: Scarecrow Press, 1983).

40. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

useful. It differs from Muncy's and Webber's works not only in its inclusion of modern groups but also in its inclination to treat Utopian ideas sympathetically. Readers unfamiliar with those earlier works will undoubtedly be surprised by some paradoxical twists, such as the pervasive erotic element in most theologies of celibacy, or the coexistence of quasi-feminist and "misogynist" elements within a given system of thought. There is, however, little that is new for the serious scholar in this work.

Although Louis Kern avows a Freudian psychological approach to his subject, *An Ordered Love* is a fairly straightforward intellectual and social history laced with a provocative tendency to speculate about people's feelings, conflicts and hidden motives—a tendency that constitutes a fundamental strength and weakness of the book. Despite sporadic attempts to trace sexual innovations to the inner psychological conflicts of communal founders, the overall thrust of the book is to treat Utopian sexual ideas not as personal aberrations but as radical attempts to address the problems and contradictions in Victorian sexual ideology.

The dominant ideology, Kern argues, had attempted to come to terms with the conflict between selfishness and community, as well as the parallel conflict between the increasing visibility of erotic, non-procreative sex and the fear of eroticism's potential to undermine the procreative function of sex. In response to these concerns there had developed an ideology, discussed above, that separated men's and women's spheres and promoted a "cult" of domestic life dominated by women "purified" of erotic desires, where procreation, nurturance, romantic love and religiosity would serve the ultimate elevation of humankind. Kern sees the Utopian schemes as attempts to resolve the contradictions inherent in idealizing romantic love while denouncing erotic enjoyment, of realizing the value of community only in the most private setting, and—most significantly—of placing the spiritual and moral development of the species in the hands of women, the very ones traditionally suspected of moral and mental weakness and whose sexuality (now suddenly banished from view) had been dreaded by men for centuries as a force more likely to destroy than to preserve the moral order. Each of the Utopian groups saw the need to deal more effectively with eroticism: The Shakers linked procreative with erotic sex and rejected them both; the Oneidans separated the "amative" from the procreative function in their system of "complex" or group marriage, and put the amative function to use in cementing the universal bonds of Christian fellowship and communal solidarity while refraining (through *coitus reservatus*) from procreative sex except in the context of communally supervised eugenic matches. Mormon polygamy, on the other hand, provided for male sexual gratification while restricting sexual intercourse with each wife to those times necessary for procreation. In each case, erotic sexuality was made visible,

contained, and subordinated to communal ends. Each of these groups also, as previous commentators have noted, rejected the personalized romantic and sentimental ties, so essential to conventional Victorian marriage, in favor of a concern for the collectivity.

Kern's most original and controversial argument, however, is that these Utopians, their concessions to sexual equality notwithstanding, were all involved in deliberate attempts to restore the "time-honored traditions" of patriarchy by attacking the cult of womanhood/motherhood and its accompanying feminine realm of authority together with the spiritual status claimed for etherialized, purified womanhood. Motivated by a "visceral fear of female sexual drives and needs" and a desire to restore male authority, the Utopian societies (that is, their male leaderships) "usurped" the moral prestige of motherhood and family in order to restore males as the "chief agents" of moral progress.

Lawrence Foster's *Religion and Sexuality* provides a foil for some of Kern's more ambitious interpretations. Foster's anthropological training show itself less in the use of specialized anthropological theory than in his effort to present the Utopian societies as their own participants saw them, and to emphasize the way in which elements of Utopian practice functioned to serve the needs of the societies and the individuals in them.

Both Foster and Kern emphasize the historical dialogue between "mainstream" and Utopian ideologies, although Kern gives more treatment to the cultural contradictions and the antiutopian reactions of the larger society. Both see utopianism as a response to the "cult" of domesticity and the problems of individualism and sexual anarchy. Both pay particular attention to powerful leader-founders, and both are inclined to identify radical as well as conservative elements in the respective ideologies. The differences in their findings, however, are substantial. In a very telling exchange in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*,^{4*} Kern accuses Foster of having been too "sanguine" and "indulgent" in his portrayal of the groups and their founders, while Foster (after challenging Kern's command of some of the primary sources) complains of Kern's psychological speculations, the "self-righteous superiority" of his judgments, and his alleged lack of interest in getting an "inside" view.

Foster's and Kern's assessments of specific groups diverge along fairly consistent lines. Foster, while recognizing conservative elements in Shaker belief and practice, emphasizes the Shakers' openly stated support of feminism, their concern over the sexual exploitation of women, their critique of male-centered theology and their adoption of a sexually dualistic godhead, and their commitment to a male-female symmetry in

41. *Dialogue*, 14 (Winter 1981): 204-212.

their leadership hierarchy. Kern acknowledges these and other advantages that the Shakers offered women (for example, women's prominent and evidently satisfying role as the recipients of visions), but sees an active commitment to male superiority in the Shakers' strictly traditional division of labor, the dominance of males at the highest levels of leadership, their acceptance of the male-centered family for non-Shakers, their conservative stance on divorce among prospective members, and their attack on women's fashions.

Both Foster and Kern are inclined to avoid the prevalent stereotype which characterizes Mormonism as regressive in its treatment of women compared with Oneida and the Shakers, but Foster goes to far greater lengths in crediting the Mormons with (largely unintentionally) advancing women's rights. Cautioning the reader against the ethnocentric assumption that Mormon polygamy could not have appealed to women or offered them any worthwhile rewards, Foster points out the advantages that resulted from the diffusion of reproductive and sexual demands, as well as household chores, among several wives; he notes the possibility of greater female independence, and cites the high incidence of women physicians and other professionals in the Mormon community, the ability of women to choose mates independently of the men's marital status, their progressive situation as regards divorce rights and suffrage, and their publication of the "almost feminist" *Women's Exponent*.⁴² Kern, on the other hand, places greater importance on the Mormons' explicitly male-centered theology, in which religious leadership is denied to women and their status even in the afterlife is tied to that of their husbands; he also points out that the legal "rights" that Foster speaks of resulted from Mormon political maneuvers in the struggle against a hostile outside world, and were not undertaken for the sake of improving women's status as such.⁴³

Oneida's unique institutions also lend themselves to these author's conflicting interpretations.⁴⁴ The dualism of male (God) and female (Christ) in Noyes' theology may be taken as an integration of the female principle into the Godhead or as a model of the "female" as submissive. A look at the "ascending fellowship" of Oneidan social hierarchy reveals

42. See also Lawrence Foster, "From Frontier Activism to Neo-Victorian Domesticity: Mormon Women in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Journal of Mormon History* 6 (1979): 3-21, and "Polygamy and the Frontier: Mormon Women in Early Utah," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 50 (Summer 1982): 268-289.

43. Louis J. Kern, "Review of *Religion and Sexuality*," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14 (Winter 1981): 204-206, esp. 205.

44. See also Kern, "Ideology and Reality: Sexuality and Women's Status in the Oneida Community"; Foster, "Free Love and Feminism: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community," *Journal of the Early Republic* (Summer 1981): 165-183.

both an overall pattern of male social superiority and a context in some cases (for example, the sexual association of young men with older women) for placing individual women in a position of superiority over certain men. One may point to the community's stated desire to free women from various forms of social subjugation and to allow them a greater participation in society, or to their assertion, in opposition to feminists of the day, that man is naturally woman's superior. Oneida's system of group marriage and birth control, and the accompanying critique of conventional motherhood and family arrangements, may be taken as an attempt to free women from the tyranny of childbirth and domestic life or as an aggressive "male attack on femininity and women's position in society." Similarly, the criticism of women's fashions and the adoption of short hair, short skirts and bloomers for women may be viewed either as a statement against women's status as sex objects in the larger society, or misogynist assault on women's sexuality. While both Foster and Kern recognize the inherent ambiguity of these issues, Kern consistently takes the more extreme position, linking Oneidan practices to an underlying fear of women and a desire to control them. Particularly interesting is his interpretation of "male continence," the practice of male restraint from ejaculation that most authors have attributed to Noyes' concern to spare women the dangers of childbirth and assure their enjoyment of orgasm. Kern sees its dark side: male continence places the supreme moral virtues of control and restraint in the hands of men, and rewards them with a presumed conservation of vital energy, the very thing that women are robbed of when "forced" to have orgasms!⁴⁵

Foster, though inclined to portray these groups sympathetically, is fundamentally modest and cautious in his interpretations. Kern, on the other hand, forges ahead where his data cannot quite carry him, making leaps that the reader may find alternately gratifying or annoying. This reader saw Kern's "capsule psychobiographies" of communal founders as somewhat contrived, and was put off by Kern's insistence on distilling misogyny from the most equivocal bits of evidence. The evidence presented for the Shakers, in particular, seemed to provide a flimsy basis for portraying them as inveterate male-supremacists; indeed, Kern seems to present as much evidence against his conclusion as for it. A more recent study of Shaker women⁴⁶ mentions the controversy between Kern and Foster and agrees with both authors concerning some of the conservative aspects of Shaker sexual arrangements; but ultimately it endorses neither Kern's portrayal of the Shakers as ideologues of female inferiority nor the

45. Kern, p. 230.

46. Marjorie Proctor-Smith, *Women in Shaker Community and Worship: A Feminist Analysis of the Uses of Religious Symbolism*. Studies in Women and Religion, Volume 16 (Lewiston and Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985).

opposite view of Shaker sex roles as "separate but equal."⁴⁷ Similarly, an earlier detailed study of the sexual order at Oneida describes such institutions as hierarchical fellowship (which for Kern is unremittingly male-dominated) as allowing for more female influence than Kern seems to admit.⁴⁸ At the same time, this author is struck by the astonishing subtlety with which Kern's description of nineteenth-century Utopian "misogyny" parallels the ideology of the contemporary commune of Haran. Kern's inspired hunches may reverberate through the field of communal studies for some time to come.

Whatever the ultimate merits of Foster's and Kern's arguments, both needed to be made; their contrasting views have exposed problems in matters that had been reassuringly simplified for too long. Indeed, we need a similarly hard-headed exchange concerning the German sectarian groups, who have consistently been swept under the rug in discussions of communal sexual equality, and for the nineteenth-century "secular" groups⁴⁹—a formidably various lot whose commitment to equality has been taken generally for granted. We have not attempted here to deal with the long-standing controversy over whether gender-role conservatism has gained the upper hand in the Israeli Kibbutz movement;⁵⁰ it is well to be cautious in generalizing from the experience of one communal movement to another despite the similar structural problems and intellectual heritage which so many Utopian ventures share, and perhaps a better understanding of particular groups is necessary before meaningful comparisons between such diverse movements are in order.

Sexuality in contemporary American communal groups is perhaps the most elusive subject of all. Modern communes are characterized by extreme variability in every matter including size, accessibility and willingness to be studied. Since many of those knowledgeable enough to write about these groups have a personal relationship with the idea, if not actual groups and individuals, of the communal movement, descriptive statements often become merged with criticism and advocacy. Conover's and Ranter's statements on the sexual equality inherent in modern communalism, cited earlier, may be more meaningful as recommendations than as descriptive generalizations. It is true that descriptions of

47. D'Ann Campbell, "Women's Life in Utopia: The Shaker Experiment in Sexual Equality Reappraised—1810 to 1860," *New England Quarterly* 51 (1978): 23-38.

48. Richard DeMaria, *Communal Love at Oneida: A Perfectionist Vision of Authority, Property, and Sexual Order* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1978).

49. See for example Dolores Hayden, "Two Utopian Feminists and Their Campaigns for Kitchenless Houses," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4 (1978): 274-290.

50. For a good summary of the controversy see Michal Palgi, Joseph Blasi, Menachem Rosner, and Marilyn Afir, eds., *Sexual Equality: The Israeli KiWutz Tests the Theories* (Norwood, Pennsylvania: Norwood Editions, 1982).

"The Ranch" and the Federation of Egalitarian Communes (including Twin Oaks)⁵¹ document a strong commitment to sexual equality. However, other detailed studies of modern groups, including James Grace's *Sex and Marriage in the Unification Movement: A Sociological Study*, and the field reports in the author's *Sex Roles in Contemporary American Communes*, point to a different pattern: male-centered theology and leadership structure combined with a somewhat "conservative" retention of marriage and family that nonetheless subordinates romantic attachment to the ideology and goals of the communities. Many other writers have observed a tendency toward sex-role conservatism in modern communes;⁵² yet it would probably be premature to attempt an overall characterization of modern communalism.

The study of communal sexuality, like communal studies in general, is leaving its infancy behind, and with it the propensity to make premature generalizations according to simplistic, value-laden or poorly articulated criteria. In some of the recent work we may see an attempt to reformulate issues and variables in ways that promise a richer accounting of the phenomena. Recent approaches tend to break down the old categories of egalitarian versus inegalitarian, traditional versus liberated, etc., and to offer more complex analyses in their place. There is an increasing recognition that communal statements and practices may harbor interesting but non-obvious meanings that go beyond, or even contradict, the surface meanings (analyses of this sort will rightly provoke not only thought, but healthy skepticism as well). The potential for studying Utopian and communal sexual patterns as complex and dynamic products of human discourse, involving dimensions of value and motivation not always reducible to our own, is precisely what makes the prospects of this field so intriguing.

51. Bennett M. Berger, *The Survival of a Counterculture: Ideological Work and Everyday Life Among Rural Communitards* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1981); Ingrid Komar, *Living the Dream: A Documentary Study of the Twin Oaks Community* (Norwood, Pennsylvania; Norwood Editions, 1983).

52. See for example Benjamin Zablocki, *Alienation and Charisma: A Study of Contemporary American Communes* (New York: Free Press, 1980), pp. 318-320; Gilbert Zicklin, *Countercultural Communes: A Sociological Perspective* (Westport, Connecticut, and London, England: Greenwood Press, 1983), pp. 126-129; many earlier examples cited and discussed in Wagner, *Sex Roles in Contemporary American Communes*, pp. 33-41.