

The Three Phases of Modern Times- Communitarian, Reform, and Long Island

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Society must be so constructed as to preserve the SOVEREIGNTY OF EVERY INDIVIDUAL inviolate.

— Josiah Warren, *Practical Details of Equitable Commerce*.

MODERN TIMES, NEW YORK, a trial village of anarchism and a center for social reform, founded in 1851 by Josiah Warren and Stephen Pearl Andrews, was the only one of the ideal communities formed before the Civil War to be located on Long Island. Founded in 1851 by Josiah Warren and Stephen Pearl Andrews, it was located forty-one miles by rail from Brooklyn and four miles inland from the Great South Bay, a mere clearing in the wilderness of pitch pine and scrub oak that covered the interior of the Suffolk County town of Islip.

This paper explores the problems encountered by Modern Times for thirteen years, as it tested a polity unencumbered by state, church, or organized wealth. It attempts to explain why enthusiasm for testing waned until, in 1864, the settlers decided to change the name of their village to its present one of Brentwood. It considers this enclave of eccentrics as a three-phased phenomenon, affecting the history of the communitarian movement from which it evolved, the reform movement in which it took part, and the Long Island culture with which eventually it blended.

Each phase is a study in nonconformity. As an ideal village compared with its Shaker or Oneida counterparts, the family unit was nuclear rather than universal, the housing separate instead of collective, the holding of property private, not communal. As a generator of reform, Modern Times was harmed by its promiscuous image, due first to its indifference to whether its couples were legally married and then to the crusade for sexual liberation waged by a vanguard of free love activists. In its third and historically overlooked aspect as a factor in Long Island's development, Modern Times was an eastern frontier in the era of westward expansion,

a reverse movement of pioneers whose settlement proved the value of the pine barrens and the Long Island Railroad at a time when neither was appreciated.

Modern Times was created to demonstrate the twin precepts of Josiah Warren: sovereignty of the individual and cost the limit of price. Sovereignty of the individual meant that everyone had the right to live as he or she desired, so long as this did not impede the right of another to do the same. As a colonist at New Harmony, Warren had been inspired by Robert Owen's passion for social justice but repelled by his mentor's paternalism. Modern Times was the epitome of Warren's work as a catalyst for the association of free and equal sovereigns, interacting without coercion, authority, or any arrangement that

will not leave every individual at all times at liberty to dispose of his or her person, time, and property in any manner in which his or her own feelings or judgment may dictate, WITHOUT INVOLVING THE PERSONS OR INTERESTS OR OTHERS.¹

Cost the limit of price was an economic order of barter, with goods and services swapped at cost or paid for with labor notes, the self-coined circulating medium written by individual "sovereigns" and promising payment in hours of work in their given occupations. The hub of the system was the "time store," a cooperative method of retailing that Warren had tested successfully in Ohio and Indiana before coming to New York. Merchandise was sold at cost, plus a small mark-up for overhead and the clerk's time in making the sale. The time store was also a clearing-house and employment office, where posted offers by makers and wanters accomplished "adaptation of the supply to the demand."²

Warren and his writing and publishing partner Andrews called this synthesis of sovereignty of the individual and cost the limit of price "equitable commerce." Nothing was to change hands at a penny more than cost, preventing speculation, usury, inflation and what Warren called "the degrading scramble for money-making."³ Its objective was to provide a bulwark for self-employed artisans threatened by industrialism. In the spring of 1853, an advertisement in the *New York Tribune* soliciting settlers for Modern Times announced to all

who are desirous of bettering their conditions in life by escaping from hostile competition and obtaining and retaining for themselves the full results of their own labor, that an opportunity is presented, at this point, such as we believe exists nowhere else.⁴

1. Josiah Warren, *Practical Details of Equitable Commerce* (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1852), p. 13.

2. Warren, *Practical Details*, p. ix.

3. Warren, *Practical Applications of the Elementary Principles of True Civilization, Part III* (Princeton, Mass: the author, 1873), p. 28.

4. "A Card—To the Public," *New York Daily Tribune*, April 4, 1853, an advertisement, soliciting settlement at Modern Times.

Equitable commerce enabled pioneers short of cash to build houses but otherwise was a form of subsistence richer in ideas than output. Its weakness was that labor-for-labor exchange, by which a carpenter traded skills with a mason, was suited to small transactions in handmade products or self-performed services, not to the rising regime of commodity manufacture in factories, with machines, for a burgeoning national market.

Paradoxically, or perhaps logically, some Bible communists enjoyed the economy of scale and efficiency of operations so as to compete in and often dominate the markets they entered. Free labor could hardly contend with workers whose wages were room, board, and assurance that on the day of the second advent they would be numbered with the saints.⁵ Modern Times was not blessed with business managers of the genius of Frederick Rapp or John Humphrey Noyes. It was too small, under-financed, and ideologically addicted to free but profitless enterprise for its sovereigns to long accept its frugal standard of living.

The unworldly idealism of trading always at par, with no provision for capital gain, had no appeal to most of the skilled mechanics and food producers that Modern Times needed for its base. Equitable commerce, although it enabled settlers to own their own homes in fee simple, denied the equally prized American bent for selling the fruit of one's labor at market value, rather than at cost. To seekers of advancement bold enough to take a risk, the United States was the real Utopia, poised on the threshold of growth and abounding in opportunity. If, as Arthur Bestor put it, the ideal villages were "patent-office models of the good society,"⁶ then the patent, at least at Modern Times, remained pending.

Modern Times was a sounding board for what one of its patriarchs, Charles A. Codman, recalled as

every kind of reform . . . from that of Abolition of Chattel Slavery, Woman's Rights, Vegetarianism, Hydropathy (and all the pathies), Peace, Ante-Tobacco, Total Abstinence, to the Bloomer Costume.⁷

It was also a magnet for cranks and faddists, attracted by the permissiveness of individual sovereignty. Josiah Warren remembered the

5. Oneida and Amana exemplify communally operated societies that easily changed into capitalist corporations of the progressive sort for which they may have been prototypes. Other communist models of business acumen were the Shakers and Rappites.

6. Arthur Bestor, "Supplemental Essay I," in *Backwoods Utopias* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981 [1951]), p. 230.

7. Charles A. Codman, *A Brief History of the "City of Modern Times" hong Island, N.Y.* (Brentwood: unpub. ms., ca. 1898), p. 15. In collection of Suffolk County Historical Society, Riverhead, N.Y.

"rush of people, ignorant of the principles upon which the enterprise was projected," who flocked to the village after "one of the most active pioneers published an article in the Tribune." "A man thought that children ought not to wear clothes, and "inflicted some crazy experiments on his (own) children in the coldest weather!" Another was a nudist because he hoped it might improve his eyesight. According to Warren one young woman had

the diet mania to such a degree that she was said to live almost wholly on beans without salt . . . tottered about a living skeleton for about a year, and then sank down and died (if we can say there was enough of her left to die).⁸

The gaggle of "crotcheteers" that plagued Modern Times in its early years may have kept "some people of culture and sensibility from taking part,"⁹ but did not deter the gathering of a small but versatile band of reformers. Josiah Warren was "that remarkable American," thanked by John Stuart Mill in his *Autobiography* for "the borrowed phrase, sovereignty of the individual."¹⁰ Master of musicology, house-building, town-planning, and printing, Warren's inventions of rotary presses and stereotyping methods would have earned him a fortune had he not practiced the cost the limit of price motto that he preached. His co-founder, Stephen Pearl Andrews, was an abolitionist, linguist, a proponent of shorthand, and libertarian sociologist, who in later years edited *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* and wrote speeches for the spectacular Claflin sisters. He never resided at Modern Times, but his books, lectures and legal services were indispensable to its formation. Theron C. Leland and Mary Chilton, his wife-to-be, who lived together at Modern Times, were active in the rationalist movement, as was Charles A. Codman, the survivor whose unpublished memoir is one of the rare eye-witness accounts of a village whose slogan was mind-your-own-business.¹¹

A quite different sort of reformer was Henry Edger, who came to the United States from England to seek the ideal community. He found the North American Phalanx wanting and chose Modern Times for his family home. Becoming a citizen of his adopted land, Edger dedicated himself to turning Modern Times into the American base of Auguste Comte's Religion of Humanity.¹² This secularized and distorted version of

8. Warren, *Practical Applications*, p. 19.

9. Warren, *Practical Applications*, p. 20.

10. Leonard I. Krimerman and Lewis Perry, eds., *Patterns of Anarchy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), p. 312.

11. George L. Stearns, the abolitionist, stayed at Modern Times briefly in 1852. Edward N. Kellogg, who bought Lot #64, may have been the Edward Kellogg who was a currency reformer and posthumous "father of Greenbackism."

12. For the Comte-Edger correspondence, see Richmond Laurin Hawkins, *Positivism in the United States (1835-1861)* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938).

Catholicism, with Comte in the role of philosopher-pope, offended sovereigns opposed to hierarchy and dogma. Modern Timers were wont to believe in any religion or none, but in any case never to worship collectively. Few converted, but when Modern Times was rechristened in 1864, the name selected was Brentwood, the London suburb where Henry and Melliscent Edger married. It was a tribute to a couple honored not for the husband's message but for its service to the community.

Of more lasting impact was the crusade for reform of restrictive sexual-marital mores, launched from Modern Times in 1852. Contending that wives were legitimized prostitutes serving the sexual orders of husbands to whom they were legally inferior, reformers demanded an end to discrimination between the genders. One agitator for amative freedom was James Arrington Clay, the anarchistic abolitionist of marital, wage, and chattel slavery, but "Marriage slavery, first of all!"¹³ Another was Dr. Marx Edgeworth Lazarus, author of *Love vs. Marriage*, a book whose title gave the plot away but exposed the subject to public discussion.¹⁴ The leading champion of anti-marriage was Andrews, who debated in the *Tribune* for monogamy against Horace Greeley, for liberalization of divorce against Henry James, Sr.¹⁵ Teamed with Andrews were his allies, Dr. Thomas Low Nichols and his wife, the redoubtable Mary Gove, the fire-eating paladins of water-cure (hydropathy), of phrenology, of sex education, of Grahamism, and, in their short, flamboyant sojourn, of free love at Modern Times.

Free love meant variety of sexual partners to some, the union of equal lovers to more, but to all its adherents the aim of enabling women to marry, divorce, cohabit, and raise children in parity with men. The rhetoric of free love paralleled William Lloyd Garrison's. "I ask for the complete emancipation of woman, simply as I ask for the same for men," avowed Andrews in the *Tribune*.¹⁶ The Nicholsons echoed Clay in writing, "We oppose Marriage as Abolitionists oppose Slavery."¹⁷ "The woman who is truly emancipate," declared Mary Gove in a letter that the

13. Taylor Stoehr, *Free Love in America* (New York; AMS, 1979), p. 332.

14. Stoehr, *Free Love*, p. 78.

15. For the *Tribune* debate, see Stoehr, *Free Love*, for a summary. The complete text is in Stephen Pearl Andrews, *Love, Marriage, and Divorce and the Sovereignty of the Individual* (Weston, Mass.: M & S Press, 1975 [1853]), pp. 89-120, with a brilliant introduction by Charles Shively. Selections of the Nicholsons' work may be found in Stoehr, *Free Love*, or see their jointly written *Marriage* (Cincinnati: the authors, 1854); T.L. Nichols, *Forty Years of American Life, 1821-1861* (New York: Stackpole, 1937 [1864]), or Janet H. Noever, *Passionate Rebel: The Life of Mary Gove Nichols, 1810-1884* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1983), doctoral dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1983.

16. Andrews, *Love, Marriage, and Divorce*, p. 49.

17. Stoehr, *Free Love*, p. 272.

fastidious Greeley refused to print, "needs no human law for the protection of her chastity . . . Such a woman has a heaven-conferred right to choose the father of her babe."¹⁸

The schism at Modern Times between the Nicholsons and Josiah Warren was over the application of free love to the premise of individual sovereignty. John Humphrey Noyes may have hit the mark by defining free love as "Individual Sovereignty in sexual intercourse,"¹⁹ but to Warren the point was that to live in or out of wedlock was a decision for couples to make as each saw fit, never a rule to which all must adhere. He longed for quiet growth of the village as an incubator for equitable commerce, out of the limelight until it was strong enough to survive adverse publicity. Labor-swapping invited discussion but wife-swapping provoked scandal. Having witnessed the collapse of New Harmony, due in part to Robert Owen's cogent but gratuitous attack on the institution of marriage,²⁰ Warren dreaded antagonizing the outside world by the flaunting of sexual radicalism.

Not everyone agreed with this tactically defensible but ideologically timid position. Mary Gove Nichols spelled out free love as the search for cohabitational happiness, in monogamy or variety,

it is nothing to me. Whatever is really best for anyone, he must be at liberty to enjoy, so long as he does not infringe upon the equal right of any other.²¹

Andrews agreed that individual sovereignty presupposed the repeal of marriage; if state, church, and law be superfluous, why preserve a mummery that legalizes inequality? He predicted a world in which there would be

no legal or forceful institution of marriage to defend, when woman is recognized as belonging to herself and not to a husband, and, financially independent of man . . . admitted to the right of being an individual.²²

In the August, 1853, issue of *Nichols Journal of Health, Water-Cure, and Human Progress*, Mary Gove called for volunteers for martyrdom in the cause of sexual freedom:

Each person who wishes to go to Modern Times, must answer readily and affirmatively such questions as the following . . .

Have I the honesty and heroism to become of no reputation for the truth's sake?

18. Andrews, *Love, Marriage, and Divorce*, p. 71.

19. John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms* (New York: Hillary House, 1961 [1870]), p. 93.

20. Robert Owen, "Declaration of Mental Independence," in Oakley C. Johnson, ed., *Robert Owen in the United States* (New York: Humanities Press, 1970 [1826]), p. 70.

21. Stoehr, *Free Love*, p. 272.

22. Andrews, *Love, Marriage, and Divorce*, p. 46.

Am I willing to be considered licentious by the world, because of my obedience to a law, higher than worldlings can conceive of?²³

This was too much for the usually mild-mannered Warren. Furious at the suggestion that Modern Times endorsed free love, under the rubric of individual sovereignty, he dashed off *Positions Defined*, a broadside aimed at the Nicholoses. Sovereignty of the individual, far from endorsing a single form of mating

is as valid a warrant for retaining the present relations as for changing them; and it is equally good for refusing to be drawn into any controversy or even conversing on the subject.²⁴

Let those who want to, marry, and those who want to, cohabit. The village was open to any couple, with no questions asked. Census and deed records reveal that married couples outnumbered live-togethers six to one at Modern Times, confirmed by Codman's recollection that no matter what mudslingers said,

there were very little changes among our people—the married remained in the bonds of matrimony and the unmarried did not drop into immorality.

He remembered only two children born out of wedlock, one by choice of a "Lady who lost no credit among our people," the other to a "Mother who was later married."²⁵ Of seven unmarried couples in the manuscript census of 1860, four are known to have married later and remained married. On the other hand, in describing his visit to Modern Times in an article in the *Fortnightly Review*, Moncure Daniel Conway suggested that at least some of the sovereigns selected their bedmates casually.²⁶

The attitude of most Modern Timers toward marital and other reforms was probably best expressed in Codman's words— "'Twas a fruitful topic for discussion." The affable pioneers were more sociable than socialist, and more inclined to debate than to fight for reform. Talk was their surrogate for religion:

The truth is that while many of the "Sovereigns" upheld the Mother's choice of the Paternity of her child, yet 'twas a theory hardly ever put into practice but was a favorite text for many an argument for Freedom in all domains of thought and action.²⁷

23. Mary Gove Nichols, "The City of Modern Times," *Nichols Journal* 6 (August 1853): 15.

24. Josiah Warren, *Positions Defined* (Modern Times: August 1853), leaflet.

25. Codman, *A Brief History*, p. 17.

26. See Moncure Daniel Conway, "Modern Times, N.Y.," *Fortnightly Review* 1 (London: July 1865): 421-434, for an account of his visit in 1857, especially p. 425, asserting that "marriages" were made and dissolved at pleasure—a finding for which no corroboration is offered.

27. Codman, *A Brief History*, p. 17.

Warren won the battle but lost the war. The Nicholsons soon left, but Modern Times did not recover its reputation. The presence of zealots perceived as freaks, of women with short hair and men with long, and the practice of equitable commerce itself were enough to mark the village as outlandish. Its affiliation with cohabitation and free love became the brush with which outside moralists painted it scarlet. Modern Times faded away into Brentwood, its name a lurid burden that the settlers no longer were willing to bear.

The third phase of Modern Times was its relationship to its Long Island habitat, beginning with the railroad. The Long Island Railroad was built in the early 1840's as a link in the rail and ferry connection between New York City and Boston. To the promoters dismay, the New York and New Haven Railroad laid tracks in 1849 across the supposedly impassable rivers and hills of Connecticut through Westchester County to the Bronx, where the Harlem line completed the trip from Boston to Manhattan. The new line did not reduce running time, but was so much more convenient that according to D. R. George "the tide of traffic at once turned. By 1850, the Long Island Railroad had been forced into receivership."²⁸

Although the people of Long Island lived near the Sound or Bay, the railroad was built inland, to avoid villages and grade crossings in its rush to get to New England. Now forced to prove itself as a local instead of a through carrier, its problems were compounded by a series of fires ignited by sparks from the smokestacks of its woodburning puffer-bellies. Forests of oak, cherry, and walnut were ravaged, leaving only the tangle of hardy pitch pine and scrub oak known as the pine barrens.

This was the moment of Modern Times' formation, three-quarters of a mile east of Thompson's Station, a whistle-stop on the Long Island Railroad. It was the first new community on a line desperate for settlements along its empty right of way. By taking up land considered worthless and making it blossom as the rose, the sovereigns proved that "barrens" was a misnomer for soil. According to Dr. Peck, the soil "was not . . . and is not destitute of any of the supporters of vegetation and was and is suitable in every way for culture."²⁹

It took time. Without cattle, the settlers depended on manufactured fertilizer of "high cost and small results." "Ah!" wrote Codman, "those

28. David Robinson George, "A Brief History of the Long Island Railroad," in Paul Bailey, ed., *Long Island—A History of Two Great Counties*, Vol. II (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1949), p. 400.

29. "Letter from Dr. Edgar F. Peck," appendix to Richard M. Bayles, *Historical and Descriptive Sketches of Suffolk County* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Ira J. Friedman, 1962 [1873]), p. i. Dr. Peck, one of the few Long Islanders to understand the value of the pine barrens, was the "finder" of the site for Modern limes.

were the days of large hopes and scanty realization." Undaunted, the pioneers planted cherry and apple trees along their broad thoroughfares, so that a passer-by "could eat freely of their fruit, satisfy his hunger and slake his thirst without let or hindrance."³⁰ Henry Edger and James D. Blacker each planted a nursery of fruit trees. Isaac Gibson, who came on doctor's orders from Ohio to the salubrious pine plains, introduced the huge Sharpless strawberry to Long Island. Mary Jenkins, who arrived with her husband Zachariah in Gibson's covered wagon, brought along the ornamental evergreens that together with *arbor vitae* hedges became the trademark of Modern Times-Brentwood.³¹

Before coming to New York, Josiah Warren had started Utopia, an equity village deep in the backwoods of Ohio, far from any major city. He wanted now, in 1851, to test a model community close to, but not within, a metropolis: "If our efforts do not secure homes to the homeless, we work to no purpose: and these homes cannot be had in the cities now built."³² On the other hand, "the vicinity of the largest market in the country is of greatest importance as respects selling the product of the land and the workshops."³³

The plat of Modern Times was a grid of eight avenues running west to east crossed by seven streets from north to south, allowing for 209 one-acre lots and eleven that were smaller because of the angle of the railroad tracks at the northern boundary.³⁴ There were four lots to a square block, so that every house would be on a corner. Although 500 additional acres were optioned, the village never expanded beyond, nor even filled, the original plat. Some 130 lots were sold, many changing hands several times, always at the original cost of roughly \$22 an acre, including survey and streets. The charge for the backbreaking chore of grubbing roots was \$30 an acre, but sovereigns, concerned with their budgets, usually did it themselves. One lot was set aside for the schoolhouse, half of another for the time store and Warren's "Mechanical College," a model for manual training schools of the future.

The first fifteen acres were spoken for in January of 1851 by seven charter purchasers, including Fourieristic, anti-anarchist Horace Greeley, who took no part in Modern Times but whose heirs held property as late as 1906.³⁵ By November, 1852, a circular with "the signatures of every

30. Codman, *A Brief History*, p. 5.

31. Codman, *A Brief History*, p. 5, and Verne Dyson, *A Century of Brentivood* (Brentwood: Brentwood Village Press, 1950), pp. 52,117.

32. Josiah Warren, *Practical Applications*, p. 25.

33. "A Card-To the Public," *New York Tribune*, April 4, 1853.

34. The "Map of the City of Modern Times," by Ebenezer Hawkins, surveyor, was made in March, 1851, and filed January 22,1859, Office of the Suffolk County Clerk, Riverhead, N.Y.

35. *Liber of Deeds* 585, p. 526, Suffolk County Clerk, Riverhead, N.Y.

adult citizen on the ground" bore the names of fourteen women and twelve men.³⁶ The New York State census of 1855 showed a population of eighty-five, rising to 126 on the federal census taken five years later.³⁷ The author of the present paper can identify more than 200 people who lived in the village at some time, and another two dozen connected with it.

At first applicants had to be approved by one of the first ten pioneers, but this was dropped very soon because screening and sovereignty did not jibe. Another early stipulation limited settlers to purchases of no more than three acres each, "as the object is not agriculture on the large scale, but a town of diversified occupations."³⁸ Equitable commerce preferred truck gardens to big farms, and a closely knit community to the isolation of rural life. The three-acre limit did not last. By the end of the decade, many settlers increased their holdings to four, in order to round out a square block, and some to as many as twelve. For some time, mused Codman, the sovereigns were "lacking in the art of buying low and selling high. Our aim was to show by example that better conditions for living were possible."³⁹

By the 1860's times had changed. The ambience of the Town of Islip seemed to offer the best of two worlds to the sovereigns: one of pre-industrial homespun, in which squires, farmers, and baymen lived in an easy-going, independent style very much like their own; and the other presenting the promise of opportunity unshackled by cost the limit of price. Anti-government Modern Times sent fifteen of its sons to serve in the Union forces. As wealthy families from the city began to buy every lot they could get in Modern Times and around it, the cost principle broke against the power of the dollar. The tension at Modern Times was due not only to rivalry between reformers, but to the profoundly disparate aims of transients to whom the village was only a stopover on the way to societal reorganization, and pioneers to whom it meant homesteads and the companionship of fellow freethinkers.

In the annals of secular communitarianism, thirteen years was a long time for integrity to prevail over capital gain. It is not surprising that the increase in value of real estate and the prosperity spreading over Islip in the closing years of the Civil War led Modern Timers to forsake their dedication to "low living and high thinking."⁴⁰ What is unusual is that

36. Warren, *Practical Details*, p. viii.

37. The manuscript census of 1860 did not distinguish villages, lumping all 3,845 men, women, and children under the address of Islip. Modern Times must be isolated by counting from the first to the last recognizable name, giving only a tentative total.

38. Andrews, "Preface," Josiah Warren, *Practical Details*, p. vi.

39. Codman, *A Brief History*, p. 26.

40. Codman, *A Brief History*, p. 15.

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it lasted so long as an island of profitless cooperation adrift in the ocean of competition. Anarchic polity, enterprise shorn of financial reward, and individual sovereignty—these are proposals extremely elusive to put into practice. For all its defects, equitable commerce made it possible that "those who never had homes of their own before, suddenly had them."⁴¹ The importance of *Modern Times* is not that it failed, but that it tried.

41. Warren, *Practical Applications*, p. 17.