

# The Utopian Project in a Communal Experiment of the 1930's: The Sunrise Colony in Historical and Comparative Perspective

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## Introduction

The 1930's witnessed an upsurge of Utopian projects and communal experiments around the world from Russia to Palestine, India to Spain, and the United States to Latin America. While the economic crisis of this period was a natural breeding ground for such experiments and the Utopian visions that motivated them, the dislocation caused by increasing urbanization, political conflict, and industrial modernization created a broad epistemic context within which Utopian aspirations resonated.<sup>1</sup> These Utopian aspirations were not exempt from wistful, nostalgic, and even malevolent tendencies that engendered fascism in Germany and religious and political fundamentalism in the United States.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the Utopian impulse that sparked communal experiments such as the Sunrise Colony in Michigan and the kibbutz movement in Palestine shared what one interpreter of Utopian communities has designated as "the assumption that harmony, cooperation, and mutuality

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1. For an intriguing, albeit overdetermined, application of an economic analysis to the historical waves of Utopian thought and communal experiments, see Michael Barkun, "Communal Societies as Cyclical Phenomena," *Communal Societies*, 4 (1984), pp. 35-48. For an excellent overview of communal experiments in the 1920's & 30's in Russia, Palestine, Spain and Mexico, see Yaacov Oved, *Kibbutz Studies*, 22 (February, 1987), pp. 8-18.

2. On fascist Utopian visions in Germany, see George L. Mosse, *Nazism: A Historical and Comparative Analysis of National Socialism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1978). On the "Utopian" elements in American and religious fundamentalism in the 1920's and 1930's, see Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey long, Father Coughlin and the Great Depression*. (New York: Knopf, 1982).

of interests are natural to human existence rather than conflict, competition, and exploitation."<sup>3</sup>

Although the Utopian impulse in the 1930's fostered individual and voluntarist communal projects, the crisis of capitalism and the extension of the role of the state established a national and collective terrain where communal experiments could attempt to put Utopian ideals into practice.<sup>4</sup> In the United States the New Deal reformers worried about "overbuilt" civilization and proposed policies which were experiments in "deurbanization."<sup>5</sup> New Deal agencies from the Division of Subsistence Homesteads to the Federal Emergency Relief Administration to the Resettlement Administration (all of which touched Sunrise either directly or indirectly) were part of an effort to reconstruct American society according to communitarian plans.<sup>6</sup> In Palestine during the 1930's a "shadow nation state" was emerging with the kibbutzim acting not only as a strategic vanguard, but also as an institutionalization of Utopian communal living.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the story of the Sunrise Colony and its comparison to the kibbutz experience is more than just a comparative study of Utopian communities in the 1930's; it is an analysis of how such communal experiments translated and transformed the Utopian project in the modern world.

This paper will attempt to delineate the story of the Sunrise Colony in historical and comparative perspective. Part One of the paper will investigate the Utopian impulse and historical context behind the Sunrise Colony through an analysis of the constituent elements of that communal experiment, i.e., its leadership and group cohesion, the division of labor,

3. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 1.

4. For a discussion of voluntarist communal projects during the 1930's in America, see Donald Whisenhunt, "Utopians, Communalism, and the Great Depression," *Communal Societies*, 3 (1983), pp. 101-110. On how an antimodernist communitarian critique of capitalism in Europe and America formed part of national cultural and political movements, see Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), pp. 6, 95-6, and *passim*.

5. Barry Karl, *The Uneasy State: The United States from 1915-1945* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 129-30. Much of the ideological orientation on "deurbanization" shared common ground with the perspectives of Utopian communist Ralph Borsodi. For a representative example of Borsodi's ideas, see *This Ugly Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1929).

6. Paul K. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1959). Also, see Barkun, p. 37.

7. On the kibbutz as a "vanguard of the emergent society," see Yonina Talmon, *Family and Community in the Kibbutz* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 4. On the strategic role of the kibbutz in nation-building, see Paula Rayman, *The Kibbutz Community and Nation-Building* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), esp. p. 38. On the kibbutz as a Utopian project, see Henry Near, "Utopian and Post-Utopian Thought: The Kibbutz as Model," *Communal Societies*, 5 (1985), pp. 41-58.

and educational arrangements. Part Two will discuss the Utopian project in comparative perspective by focusing on the historical and social-psychological constraints on the Sunrise Colony and the kibbutz movement.

*1. The Sunrise Colony and the Utopian Project in America's Great Depression*

From 1933 to 1936 on 10,000 acres of farmland near Saginaw, Michigan, a communal experiment attempted to sustain itself in the midst of America's Great Depression and various internal conflicts. Not unlike the kibbutzim in Palestine of the same period, Sunrise drew upon the Utopian visions of Eastern European Jews and their children. In his account of this experiment, *In Quest of Heaven*, Joseph J. Cohen, Ferrer educator, long-time editor of the Yiddish anarchist newspaper, *Freyer Arbeter Shtime* (the *Voice of Free Labor*), and founder and virtual leader of the Sunrise Colony, cited the inspiration of modern communal experiments in Soviet Russia and the "Kvutzes" in Palestine. Cohen also recognized that the ideological impetus for Sunrise was more than "a desire to find a temporary solution" to the Depression; "it was also one of the recent... of a long series of historical communal experiments which played an important part in the development of American society."<sup>8</sup>

As a Utopian colony founded in June 1933, Sunrise brought together in three years over 350 people who were prepared to put down a \$500 investment in an experiment of communal production, consumption, and living. In working out these communal arrangements, the vast majority of colonists called upon their experiences as members of Jewish cultural and radical organizations from Workmen's Circle to various anarchist groups. Much like earlier efforts in Jewish agricultural Utopias in the United States and Palestine, these colonists were drawn from artisan, small business, and intellectual backgrounds.<sup>9</sup> It was those backgrounds and experiences that provided the base for the Utopian project.

Central to the Utopian project at Sunrise was Joseph J. Cohen. While he was, in many respects, representative of the life experiences of the colonists, he was clearly the most articulate and forceful advocate for Utopian and radical proposals. Cohen was a Russian Jew, born in 1878

8. Joseph J. Cohen, *In Quest of Heaven* (New York: Sunrise History Publishing Committee, 1959), pp. 1 and 27.

9. On the turn-of-the-century attempts at Jewish agricultural communes and their social composition, see Uri D. Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias in America, 1880-1910* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981), p. 19. On the social background of early kibbutz settlers, see Henrik Infield, *Cooperative Living in Palestine* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1944); and Melford E. Spiro, *Kibbutz: Venture in Utopia* (New York: Schocken, 1967).

in a small village in White Russia. Pushed into rabbinical studies at an early age, he abandoned such training as an adolescent and became involved in the radical circles that were developing throughout Russia at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1903 he joined the great wave of immigrants coming to the United States from Eastern Europe. After settling in Philadelphia, he became involved in the Jewish anarchist movement and eventually assumed an important leadership role in anarchist educational and communal experiments in America from the pre-World War I era through the Depression.<sup>10</sup>

In his role as editor of the *Frayer Arbeter Shtime*, which traced its beginnings back to 1890, Cohen undertook a tour in the fall of 1932 of cities in the United States where the newspaper had circles of subscribers (Philadelphia, Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles). Although the tour was intended to bolster circulation and to record the terrible effects of the Depression, Cohen was presented with a plan to start a communal experiment in Michigan by taking over a 9000 acre tract of land called Prairie Farm. Since the land was already cultivated and stocked with livestock, taking over such a venture excited Cohen and many of the paper's supporters. Cohen used the newspaper in the last part of 1932 to recruit members for this communal venture. While the economic and physical hardships were downplayed (including assuming an extensive mortgage and debts and facing unpredictable harvests on swampy land), Cohen fueled the Utopian visions that he and his fellow anarchists harbored.

As Cohen exuberantly contended: "We saw ourselves building a new world, a heaven on earth, a kingdom of justice for all who would join and do their share." " Yet, as Cohen also noted, the colonists "were constantly driven into rules which were based on some form of coercion ." <sup>12</sup> During the first summer Norman Thomas, Socialist leader and Presidential candidate, could say after visiting Sunrise: "Here we have a living and inspiring example of the coming socialist order that will liberate mankind from its bondage." However, many of the colonists would leave this paradise a few years later when the economy picked up. <sup>13</sup>

10. For a discussion of the development of radicalism among Jews in Russia and the United States, see Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967), esp. pp. 42-43; Robert J. Brym, *The Jewish Intelligentsia and Russian Marxism* (New York, Schocken, 1978); Nora Levin, *While Messiah Tarried: Jewish Socialist Movements 1871-1917* (New York: Schocken, 1977); Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Touchstone, 1976); and Gerald Sorin, *The Prophetic Minority: American Jewish Immigrant Radicals, 1880-1920* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1985).

11. Cohen, p. 69.

12. Ibid., p. 95.

13. Ibid., p. 72. The abandonment of Utopian colonies during up-turns in the economy can also be found in earlier communal experiments. See Charles Pierce LeWarne, *Utopias on Puget Sound, 1885-1915* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), p. 234.

In fact, without the financial support from the New Deal Farm and Resettlement agencies, Sunrise would have suffered more immediate economic ruin. Bailed out by the federal government, Sunrise became hopelessly ensnared in the federal bureaucracy. Cohen and some of his followers also became mired in a court battle over the Colony's finances. Although he was vindicated and cleared of any charges of malfeasance, Cohen was embittered at the end of it all.

Cohen's sense of defeat and bitterness reflected not only his evaluation of the lack of group cohesion at Sunrise, but also other frustrations with his leadership role. His earlier efforts at the communal experiment in Stelton, New Jersey, had elicited praise, and he was regarded as a "tower of strength with his tenacity and common sense" and as a person who combined "down-to-earth qualities with high-mindedly idealistic ones."<sup>14</sup> While there were those at Sunrise who viewed Cohen with awe and put their trust in him, others considered him cold and lacking in charisma. In particular, another leader at Sunrise evaluated Cohen's leadership in the following critical manner: "(He) never gave to Sunrise the harmony, the unity, and the oneness that it so badly needed. Because of this, Sunrise never became the collective community necessary for its survival."<sup>15</sup>

Whether Cohen could have pulled together the heterogeneous group of people who colonized Sunrise by asserting either a more nurturing or more forceful leadership style is speculative in light of the internal tensions and external pressures on Sunrise. Moreover, given the anarchist and secular orientation of Cohen and the Sunrise colonists, one could hardly imagine a charismatic authoritarian figure emerging to dominate the group. In fact, dissent riddled Sunrise almost from its inception because of the diverse ideological and social objectives of the colonists. While there were efforts to screen prospective members in order to maximize like-minded participants, there were, nonetheless, divergences from the broad norm that led to a number of splits within the first year and a half of operation.<sup>16</sup>

The internal divisions were primarily represented by three different groupings: 1.) militant Yiddishists; 2.) individualist anarchists; and 3.)

14. Paul Avrich, *The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 116; Laurence Veysey, *The Communal Experience: Anarchist and Mystical Communities in Twentieth Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), p. 108.

15. Philip Trupin, "Comments on *In Quest of Heaven*," unpublished manuscript. For a biographical portrait of Cohen which analyzes the complex interactions between an individual and the cultural and historical contexts, see my article, "Cultural Identity and Americanization: The Life History of a Jewish Anarchist," *Biography*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Fall 1986), pp. 324-46.

16. Cohen, p. 43. Only avowed Communists were excluded among the progressives.

opportunists. The militant Yiddishists arrived at Sunrise expecting cultural and linguistic homogeneity that was contradicted by the presence of other ethnic groups (in particular, Italians from Chicago and Detroit anarchist circles) and the movement towards de-ethnicization in the broader cultural context. In their insistence that all proceedings of the Colony's General Assembly be conducted in Yiddish, they tried to impose an exclusivist standard that Cohen and the majority of colonists successfully opposed.<sup>17</sup> This small group of Yiddish purists withdrew from the Colony after losing the vote on the use of Yiddish. A more contentious and longer-lasting dispute developed around the balance between the collective and the individual. While the majority of the colonists were anarchists, their tendency was toward an anarcho-communism which was tolerant and even desirous of collective solutions. The individualist anarchists wished to do away with the collective dining hall and other communal living arrangements that denied individual choice. The majority of the colonists, however, persisted in their efforts at realizing collective communal patterns until the Colony itself became overwhelmed with the bickering. Such squabbling was exacerbated by members of the Colony whose ideological commitments were outweighed by a situational and opportunistic orientation. Economic and political disputes became invested with charges and counter-charges of personal advancement as a partial consequence of the opportunism of particular members and the broader American environment where competition and pragmatism held sway.

Much of the focus for the on-going dissension within the Sunrise Colony was the question of the division of labor and work rules. Because of the lack of specific farming skills among the colonists and the pressures of planting and harvesting for the market, attempts at collective responsibility met with immediate problems over the assignments of tasks. From appointing a labor manager to electing a labor management board, Sunrise colonists wrestled with how to avoid coercive measures to induce a spirit of collective responsibility. While the first few months saw a festival-like enthusiasm, this initial burst of spontaneous energy soon was replaced with a grudging institutionalization of work rules. Such rules required a specific amount of work days per year (275 for the men; 225 for the women) and imposed a fine for those who shirked their duties (\$1.25 a day for those who left the Colony; \$2.50 for those who stayed and refused to work). There was particular resentment by women field workers against the employment of other women in the dining room as waitresses at the time of year when field work was most pressing. Although Sunrise managed to find skilled workers to fulfill specialized

17. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

tasks from plumbing to carpentry to dairy production without resorting to hiring outside labor, the division of labor within the Colony was plagued with finding a satisfactory vehicle to induce collective responsibility without coercive work rules.

The most successful effort at establishing a collective purpose at Sunrise was through the educational and communal arrangements for children. Because a number of colonists were veterans of earlier educational and communal experiments, they brought that experience and ideological commitment to Sunrise. This commitment created an educational orientation which stressed the development of the social consciousness of the child through practical, intellectual, and cultural activities. Along with this integrated education, a children's house was instituted. The largest house on the farm was selected to shelter children in a communal arrangement for care and education. Eventually, some 34 children, ranging in age from 4 to 14, lived in the children's house. A full-time staff of experienced teachers, including some with extensive child-care and educational training, provided an exciting ambience for the children. While the obvious benefits of freeing-up the mothers for productive work were acknowledged, along with the children's own satisfaction, the private parental role was too firmly rooted in the colonists and the surrounding culture to facilitate an unimpeded development of this Utopian element of the communal experiment. When the children's house was abandoned in 1936, Sunrise itself had reached the end of its efforts to sustain a Utopian communal project.

## *2. The Utopian Project in Comparative Perspective: Sunrise and the Kibbutz Experience*

Although the Sunrise Colony did not survive the 1930's, the kibbutzim in Palestine not only survived, they flourished. The communal experiments at Sunrise and in the kibbutz movement shared a Utopian quest "to establish a new social pattern based on a vision of the ideal society."<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, the realization of that ideal, and thus the Utopian project, was constrained by various historical, cultural, and social-psychological conditions. Through the articulation of a comparative framework, the various ideological similarities and differences between the Sunrise Colony and the kibbutz experience can be explored. Thus, the particular situations encountered by communal experiments can be illuminated within a broader setting. Furthermore, by investigating what can be called the polarities of the Utopian project, as they were embodied in the

18. Robert V. Hine, *California's Utopian Colonies* (San Marino, Calif.: The Huntington Library, 1953), p. 5.

communal experiments at Sunrise and in the kibbutz movement, this paper may offer the beginning of a heuristic approach to Utopian colonies that gets beyond simplistic judgements about success or failure.

There are three sets of polarities which present critical and contradictory problems for Utopian projects in the twentieth century. These polarities are: 1.) historical versus moral considerations; 2.) political versus cultural concerns; and 3.) collective versus individual responsibilities. Each of these sets has a subset that provides an organic and social-psychological link to the other sets. Thus, the interconnection among these polarities entails both a theoretical critique against those interpretations of Utopian communities that overvalue one factor or impose in an ahistorical manner sociological distinctions; and an historical recognition of the fact that while Utopian thought has become more diffuse, it has also become more focused in its attacks on modern western civilization.<sup>19</sup>

The Utopian project in the modern world entails in its essence a seeming incongruity between the demands of historical reality and trans-historical morality. As one interpreter of utopianism contends: "Utopia, the perfect future that men wish for, and history, the imperfect future that men are in the process of creating, do not correspond. And it is the consciousness of that lack of correspondence which gives Utopian thought its sense of moral pathos and historical ambiguity."<sup>20</sup> Thus, the polarity of historical versus moral considerations incites the founders of Utopian communal experiments with desires to realize a "good place" that may never come into full fruition, i.e., the "no place" of Utopia. While the philosophical reflections of Martin Buber and Paul Tillich suggest the convergence of history and morality in Utopian thinking,<sup>21</sup> Utopian communal experiments in the twentieth century often foundered over carrying out the moral vision of an historically-bounded Utopia.

In Sunrise and the kibbutz the desire for moral progress and the search for a redemptive life came up against the limitations of historical boundaries. As a limit-situation, the state in both instances influenced

19. See Ranter's separation of Utopian categories into the "religious, political-economic, and psychosocial" in Kanter, p. 3. In addition to reifying the historical complexity of Utopian motivations, her model tends to over-privilege religious factors. For a monumental tracking of Utopian thought in the West from the Greeks to the contemporary period, see Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge Mass.: Belknap Press, 1979).

20. Maurice Meisner, *Marxism, Maoism, and Utopianism* (Madison, Wise: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), p. 3.

21. Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), esp. pp. 7-15; and Paul Tillich, "Critique and Justification of Utopia" in *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, ed. Frank E. Manuel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), pp. 296-309.



the trajectory of Utopian aspirations. In the case of Sunrise, the growth of the welfare state represented a presence that tempered the commitment of the colonists and compromised its ultimate aims.<sup>22</sup> While in the kibbutz the pre-state institution of the Jewish National Fund provided necessary financial support, its ties to military-strategic concerns and the inevitable "cult of the state" undermined the moral probity of the Utopian visions of the kibbutz founders.<sup>23</sup> As a social-psychological subset, the contradictory nature of two goals—"material security" and "spiritual development"—was acknowledged at Sunrise.<sup>24</sup> Although Sunrise never lasted long enough for this to become a consuming problem, the development of the kibbutz from ascetic Utopia to a modernized and industrialized commune (with the critical transition period in this process beginning in the 1930's) led to the diminution of the moral fervor of the Utopian founders.<sup>25</sup> In effect, the fetish of historical progress embodied in the state and rendered by material security (promised by Utopian socialists from Fourier to Marx) was realized through social-psychological mechanisms which produced a form of spiritual impoverishment.

That spiritual impoverishment was intimately linked to the polarities of political and cultural concerns. In the case of Jewish radicals, the politics of culture and the culture of politics were bound together by the reality of political persecution and cultural marginality. While the experience and / or memory of those conditions motivated Jewish radicals to seek political redemption and cultural revitalization, the particular historical and ideological connections influenced the form that such political and cultural concerns would take. Both Sunrise and the kibbutz stressed the need for an organic relationship to the land. While Sunrise's ideological view of labor and land was related to Kropotkin's theories and populist expressions, the early *kibbutzniks* were motivated by Zionist thinkers. With an almost mystical conception of the "religion of labor" and land derived from such cultural Zionists as A.D. Gordon, the kibbutz became a place where Jews could construct Utopia as a political alternative, and yet return to so-called cultural normalization. If the spirit of Zionism helped facilitate the development of the kibbutz as a communal experiment, the

22. On the cultural and political influence of the welfare state in "New Deal" thought, see Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Cultural and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1973), esp. pp. 96-150.

23. For a critique of the military-strategic connections of the kibbutz, see Rayman, *passim*. On the "cult of the state," see Dan Leon, *The Kibbutz: A New Way of Life* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, Ltd., 1969), pp. 168-9.

24. *Sunrise News*, August 18, 1934, pp. 6-8.

25. For comments on this "moral" decline of the Utopian elements in the kibbutz, see Rayman and Spiro, *passim*. For an analysis of the transformation of an ascetic moral position into a greater tolerance for the ideology of consumption, see Yonina Talmon, pp. 203-39.

crystallization of Zionism as a political and cultural reality invalidated the kibbutz as a Utopian entity.<sup>26</sup>

The invalidation of the Utopian vision was a consequence in Sunrise and the kibbutz of the social-psychological tension of homogeneity versus diversity. In the case of Sunrise, the inability to construct a political and cultural forum for diversity within the Colony mirrored the closing-off of cultural and political diversity within the larger society. The 1930's in America, as cultural historians such as Warren Sussman and Richard Pells have pointed out, was a time of the coming of mass culture and politics where style replaced substance. Not being inclined to enforce a rigid standard and unsure of the ways to effectuate unity within diversity, Sunrise could not transcend the internal and external pressures that pulled it apart. It thus became a marginal note to the larger state-supported experiments of the period. On the other hand, the kibbutz, "as a vanguard of the emergent society," provided a communal setting that molded Jewish residents and immigrants in Palestine into an identifiable national entity.<sup>27</sup> In the process, the diversity of the society was truncated by the exclusion of the indigenous Palestinian population. Although there were individual efforts to reach out to the native neighbors, too much ethnocentrism (on all sides) existed for a recognition of any unity within diversity.

In a century where racism and national enmities have exploded into major wars, trying to build solidarity across ethnic and national barriers proved difficult even for the utopian-minded. Thus, the social-psychological tension of intimacy versus solidarity embedded in the Utopian project was overwhelmed by a particularist (as opposed to universalist) and self-enclosed intimacy. Such intimacy in Sunrise and the kibbutz entailed both a liberating and oppressive potential.<sup>28</sup> As intimacy become a way of reinforcing and expanding friendship in a communal setting, it also become a mechanism for defining strangers as threats within the larger society.<sup>29</sup> The development of solidarity across cultural, political, and self-defined boundaries called for a social-psychological maturity and flexibility that the broader environment could never sustain.

26. On Zionism, the "religion of labor," and cultural revitalization in the kibbutz, see Spiro, pp. 12-19. For criticism of the shortcomings of Zionism in the kibbutz, see Rayman, *passim*.

27. Talmon, p. 4.

28. On the kibbutz as an intimate community, see Joseph Blasi, *The Quality of Life in a Kibbutz Cooperative Community* (Cambridge, Mass.: Institute for Cooperative Community, 1978), pp. 43-50. Also, see Rayman, p. 146.

29. For a discussion of the role of intimacy, friendship, and communal development, see Philip Abrams, et. al., *Communes, Sociology, and Society* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 31 and 112. On the dangers and oppressiveness of the intimate society, see Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Vintage, 1978), pp. 259-340.

The polarity of collective versus individual responsibility further complicated the Utopian project in the case of Sunrise and the kibbutz. The process of increasing privatization has been recognized as a cultural tendency undermining collective life within Utopian communities such as the kibbutz. Charles Erasmus has identified the "process of individualization" as signaling a retreat from the collective life of the kibbutz into the intimate self-enclosure of the family.<sup>30</sup> Both in Sunrise and the kibbutz the family became the haven to escape the pressures of collective responsibility. Nonetheless, both the Sunrise Colony and the kibbutz experience tried to find ways to reconcile individual and collective responsibility in the construction of intentional communities. While such conciliatory efforts were overwhelmed at times by the polarities of the Utopian project, the legacies of these communal experiments of the 1930's carry beyond that era. Our understanding of Utopian ideology and communal projects in the twentieth century must contend not only with the comparative strengths and weakness of particular communal experiments but also our own reconciliation of Utopian ideals with individual and collective responsibilities.

No comparative study of Utopian ideals and communal experiments in the 1930's would be complete without some final comments about the question of success and failure. However, to raise such a question is not to indulge in utilitarian judgments, but to exercise a degree of understanding of the conditions that frame the question of why some Utopian communal experiments can flourish and others wither and die. While it is true that the kibbutz movement underwent changes in the 1930's, the kibbutzim not only survived the 1930's (unlike Sunrise) but they also grew. In order to focus on why this happened to the kibbutz and not to Sunrise, one must reconsider how external pressures, internal developments, and the polarities of the Utopian project influenced Sunrise and the kibbutz experience. This reconsideration must not only examine the context of the 1930's, but also the larger context of Utopian and communal experiments from the dawning of the modern era in the nineteenth century to its transformation in the twentieth century. Unfortunately, such a review will be necessarily brief and general.

Most Utopian communal experiments in the nineteenth century sought a degree of self-sufficiency on the margins of society. While there were differences on the matter of whether these experiments were attempts to escape from or to reconstruct society, they all developed with an eye towards stasis against the backdrop of rapid economic and social change. The polarities of the Utopian project were, in many cases,

30. Charles J. Erasmus, *In Search of the Common Good* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), pp. 190-1. Also, see Rayman, p. 146. For a presentation of the contradictory collective and individualistic tendencies in the kibbutz family, see Talmon, pp. 1-50.

overcome because of the nature of the closed code from which they operated, that is, one in which homogeneity, intimacy, and solidarity flowed from the sharing of doctrinaire cultural and religious belief systems. In fact, the transhistorical moral code, derived from a dissenting religion, helped Utopian communities to survive in a relatively unfriendly environment. A crisis often came when economic and social matters intruded on this closed system and the question of growth and adjustment forced all but the most tradition-bound to make accommodations to the outside world.<sup>31</sup>

In the twentieth century, particularly the 1930's, the ubiquitous secularized, urbanized, and bureaucratized environment made it difficult to practice most forms of cultural separation without encountering some intrusion by the dominant society. Belief in progress and material security became the major value system. In the United States during the 1930's the Sunrise Colony could not successfully counter the ideology of consumption even though there was much self-sacrifice. On the other hand, in Palestine an ascetic ideal in the kibbutz was congruent with elements of Zionist ideology and the general movement of cultural revitalization.<sup>32</sup> In Sunrise, it proved too difficult for many colonists to throw away the idea of a career, social betterment, and material advance in light of the dominant historical and cultural trends.

On another level, the kibbutz could prosper as a Utopian communal experiment in the 1930's because of an economic prosperity and, ironically, the investment policies of Jewish capitalists who would promote the kibbutz as a strategic carrier of Zionist culture.<sup>33</sup> For Sunrise, on the other hand, the drop in farm prices, particularly for commodities like sugar beets (the main crop at Sunrise), doomed their effort at economic growth. Saddled with debts and without full support from any New Deal agencies until the buyout in 1936, Sunrise stagnated.

Although the Sunrise Colony and the kibbutz shared many internal practices of Utopian communal experiments (communal dining halls, children's homes, governance by democratic general assemblies), there were a number of major differences that influenced the ability to sustain the Utopian communal ties. In Sunrise the traditional family remained intact and supreme, whereas in the kibbutz of the 1930's a "nonfamilistic" structure was able to prevail as a consequence of the *kibbutzniks'* early anti-bourgeois ideology and the semi-military and collective purposes

31. See, for example, Diane L. Barthel, *Amana: Front Pietist Sect to American Community* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); and Maren Lockwood Carden, *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969).

32. Spiro, esp. pp. 179-80, where he analyzes the kibbutz as a "religious sect."

33. Rayman. As an indication of the economic prosperity, she cites (p. 62) the fact that the kibbutz citrus crop helped to provide 4/5 of Palestine's export in the 1930's.

of kibbutz living.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, while the socialist orientation of the *kibbutzniks* reinforced Utopian communal beliefs and practices, the anarchists at Sunrise, even though they were strongly influenced by communist and collectivist ideals, could not overcome deep divisions over individualist versus collectivist models of living. Because of the ideological cohesions and supportive cultural environment, the kibbutz grew while an internally-divided and externally-hounded Sunrise withered and died.

### *Conclusion*

To look back on these communal experiments of the 1930's is to recognize that the Utopian project feeds on the historical and cultural conditions of the time. The modern belief in progress as the goal of history and culture could serve in one context (Sunrise) to undermine the Utopian communal experiment and in another (the kibbutz) to facilitate it. Ultimately, modern civilization reached both its apex and abyss in the 1930's and 40's with the industrial / urban transformations of everyday life, the crushing blows of the totalitarian state, and the Second World War. Progress and the modern world passed into history in the aftermath of World War II in the West and left the Utopian project reeling until the 1960's. Moving beyond the myth of progress and towards a renewal of Utopian ideals requires going back to the 1930's Utopian communal experiments to grasp their strengths and weaknesses in the long history of such Utopian projects.<sup>35</sup> If we are to understand the past and reconstruct a human community in the future, then we must judge Utopian communal experiments not on the basis of success or failure, but as a step on a variety of paths that link the species on this fragile planet. As Martin Buber so wisely pointed out about the human need for community in the context of the struggle to realize Utopian ideals: "The realization of community, like the realization of any idea, cannot occur once and for all time: always it must be the moment's answer to the moment's question, and nothing more."<sup>36</sup>

34. For the anti-bourgeois attitude of the *kibbutzniks*, see Spiro, *passim*. On the relationship between "nonfamilistic" structure and military / economic functions, see Talmon, p. 6.

35. As aids in reviewing the past and looking forwards the future, see Barkun; Erasmus; Manuel and Manuel; Elisabeth Hansot, *Perfection and Progress: Two Modes of Utopian Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1977); and Melvin J. Lasky, *Utopia and Revolution* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976).

36. Buber, p. 134.