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The Interpretive Potential of Utopian Settlements

"Every daring attempt to make a great change in existing conditions, every lofty vision of new possibilities for the human race, has been labeled 'Utopian.'"
—Emma Goldman

Introduction

The term *utopia* was first coined by Thomas More in 1516 as a reference to an ideal place that does not really exist. The designation *utopian* has increasingly grown to encompass the efforts of real people pursuing visionary alternative lifestyles. It is in this latter sense that the term is employed here. *Utopianism* may be manifest as a fictional genre, a political philosophy, or, as in this volume, an attempt to create an ideal society. All utopian visionaries are critical of what is perceived as the flawed dominant cultural pattern, and they articulate that critique by modeling an ideal alternative.

Utopian settlements have long intrigued scholars and the public. Their alternative lifestyles are subjects of great curiosity or even derision, and much has been written about them by proponents, detractors, and interested observers. All settlements were founded on at least two fundamental precepts. The first was dissatisfaction with some aspect of the dominant culture. That dissatisfaction had a variety of sources rooted in industrial capitalism, urbanization, religious dissent, gender inequality, and other factors. The second ingredient was an idealistic faith that a better way of life was possible. This faith spurred the creation of hundreds of bold social experiments that are interesting for what they reveal about human nature, adaptability, and processes of social change. Beyond those common threads, utopian settlements were notably diverse in philosophy, organization, and way of life.

This volume focuses on several utopian and quasi-utopian communities founded on the North American continent between the 1790s and 1910s. Some articles in this volume evolved from papers presented at a symposium entitled "Dissenting Voices: Comparing the Visions and Realities of Life in Utopian Communities," held at the 2001 annual meeting of The Society for Historical Archaeology in Long Beach, California. Other articles were contributed by scholars pursuing archaeological studies at other utopian settlements. All of those studies have been energized by similar issues and challenges. A synopsis of the utopian movement in North America is provided here to introduce the common ground linking recent archaeological studies of such places.

Utopian Imagination

North America has attracted communitarian ventures from the earliest period of European colonization. The first communal endeavors were founded by sectarian groups seeking refuge in isolation. From those early roots, a tradition of idealistic social reform has grown and even become embedded in the political culture of the region. Successive waves of utopian enthusiasm have periodically captured the public imagination since that time. The most noteworthy surges of interest in utopian settlements occurred in the 1790s, 1840s, around the turn of the 20th century, and most recently during the 1960s and 1970s (Hayden 1976:8–13). As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote during one such episode in the mid-19th century, there was "not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket" (Rush 1939:353).

Disaffected utopian groups were attracted to the New World in part because of its position on the periphery of the known European world. The significance of the Western frontier as a locus for utopian settlement was widely recognized by early reformers (Considerant 1854) and has been explored by contemporary scholars such as P. Porter and F. Lukermann (1976). An important draw was the vast, untamed wilderness where large, inexpensive, or free tracts of land were available, and new beginnings could be made. There, unfettered by the constraints of a dominant culture and situated in a social

climate of diversity and relative tolerance, new forms of social organization could be established to improve upon or correct the shortcomings of the European or, later, the developing North American worlds. In many cases, the American wilderness was also envisioned as an earthly paradise. By demonstrating the benefits of such ideal forms of social organization, many utopians believed their communities would be emulated and eventually replicated across the globe.

As creative responses to unsatisfactory aspects of the dominant culture, all utopian ventures were acts of social resistance that explicitly criticized dominant group values and practices. Conditions associated with the growth of industrial capitalism, social and religious persecution, gender inequality, and rejection of the divine authority of the clergy were key issues spurring the creation of many 19th- and early-20th-century North American utopias. Utopians found fault not only with conditions such as poverty, exploitation, inequality, and conflict but also the beliefs considered responsible for such social ills. For example, many utopians expressly rejected the notion that business and morality were separate—a philosophy capitalists and the clergy promoted as a means to absolve themselves of responsibility for the suffering of the lower classes (Fine 1978).

Each utopian community took a different view on which problems and root causes were most significant. Competition, attachment to material goods, the divine authority of the church, exploitation, labor segmentation, sexual inequality, exploitative relations of production, immorality, and social discord were among the most important issues debated by utopians. The relative importance of these different social ills in turn influenced the ideological direction each group pursued. The communes examined in this volume span a continuum from those emphasizing religious values (Dukhobors, Quakers, Theosophists, and the Koreshan Unity Settlement) to communities that paid greater attention to secular solutions (Brook Farm, Feltville, and Llano del Rio). All were in fact strongly moralistic, and indeed many of the ostensibly secular ventures were embedded in a tradition of Christian ethical thought.

As social experiments, utopian communities are provocative, dissident, and even inspirational. This ability to provoke and inspire resides in the way they challenged mainstream values and explored social limits. Whether utopians sought isolation or close interaction with the outside world, they invariably incited debate between their proponents and detractors. For that reason, the lives of utopians are often among the most heavily scrutinized and documented of any modern group. So much has been written and said about most utopian communities that a fundamental issue for archaeology is the nature of the contribution archaeologists hope to make in the face of some fairly pithy existing interpretations. Is archaeology in such cases merely a redundant enterprise or can significant insights still be made?

Common Challenges

Despite a fair amount of existing historical documentation, there is little doubt that archaeology can offer a variety of important new insights regarding utopian communities. Those contributions stem from fundamental interest in how the material and historical records compare, from a diachronic perspective, and from evolving scholarly dialogs about what is worth interpreting and how those stories get told. Even years after they were abandoned, utopian communities remain compelling precisely because they continue to be challenging. Their outspoken agendas effectively make researchers confront their own agendas. Their struggles and lasting influence on mainstream culture continue to engage archaeologists in a critical examination of their own practices and motivations.

The most straightforward archaeological contribution to utopian scholarship involves filling gaps in the historical record. Despite the depth of the historical record for many utopian communities, there remain some noteworthy lacunae. Material remains often constitute the only record of certain activities considered too mundane or unbecoming to have been recorded. Yet such details are valuable because they may provide an unedited perspective on how utopian visions played out in daily life and decision making. By reading the material record at scales varying from focused activities to entire landscapes, new insights have been made concerning the working assumptions, lifestyles, social dynamics, and developmental history of utopian communities. Examples

of such contributions in this volume include an exploration of the relationship between Theosophical Society dietary and medical practices and worldview (Van Wormer and Gross), an exploration of class segmentation as an organizing principle in the engineered quasi-utopian settlement of Feltville (Tomaso et al.), and the ideological implications of landscapes at Brook Farm (Preucel and Pendery), the Koreshan Unity Settlement (Tarlow), and the Llano del Rio Cooperative (Van Bueren).

Archaeological contributions do more than simply fill holes in the historical record. When material evidence and documentary evidence are compared, resulting interpretations go deeper than either source on its own. Comparisons provide the basis for exploring ideological contradictions and testing one set of evidence against another. As provocateurs, the lives of utopian communards have always been heavily examined. The documentary and spoken records of such communities are typically charged with biases from within and without. The concept of "spin" was perhaps born in debates over such alternative lifestyles. For that very reason, the records are often replete with discrepancies and subject to purposeful distortion of one kind or another. By comparing the historical and archaeological records researchers can seek to understand the multiple ways in which utopian communities were experienced, presented, and discussed (both materially and discursively), forging integrated understandings of those communities.

The disparity between the archaeological record and what people wrote or said about themselves (or others) is profoundly intriguing; however, it involves special challenges and responsibilities. The challenge lies in how the information gathered is interpreted. The point of exposing discrepancies between aspiration and practice should not be to produce a mere catalog of human frailty and imperfection. Instead, it is the responsibility of researchers to respect and study the lives of utopian communards with honesty, accuracy, and a good dose of empathy, interpreting the artifacts, buildings, and trash pits of communards within the context of their lived experiences, struggles, and bold experimentation.

A central concern in this ethical deliberation is the researcher's own interpretive orientation. The history of many utopian communities has been sanitized, narrowed, or dismissed in a way that makes it palatable to dominant groups (Leone 1981; Tarlow, this volume). For example, the idea that such communities were "failures" is one way dominant groups have dismissed utopian contributions and overlooked their enduring influences (Pitzer 1989). Communities have also been trivialized by focusing solely on their appealing and unthreatening aspects. Clearly, historical archaeologists have important roles to play not only correcting such inaccuracies but also honestly appraising research agendas.

As authors, we wonder how researchers can make utopian struggles real with full acknowledgment of their humanity without becoming either apologists or judges? To gain deep insights into the lives of utopian communards, there is no substitute for diving deeply into their visions and struggles. If communards exist as mere objects of detached curiosity, as eccentric others, researchers may not be able to speak responsibly for them. We as archaeologists may not be the utopians studied, but they must in some sense get "under our skin" if justice is to be done to their radical legacy and interpretation made of their struggles and contradictions. Their proactive resistance to mainstream values and their fundamental idealism must animate interpretations, for utopians sought to challenge, to teach by example, to try brave new ways of living. Their success must be recast in terms of their ongoing ability to teach, provoke, and offer divergent alternatives to the status quo.

Fortunately, there are few places where the relationships among ideology, symbolism, and cultural material are more blatant. Utopian communities were governed by explicit ideological tenets that had a pervasive influence on how they manipulated the material world. While ideology underlies all human behavior, the tenets of alternative communities were far more consciously in the foreground than those of the dominant culture. Many aspects of dominant-culture behavior are motivated by what Clifford Geertz (1983:73–93) calls "common sense"—assumptions that do not even rise to a fully conscious level. In contrast, utopian behaviors and belief systems were more deliberately constructed. They departed from societal norms and were very consciously chosen, tested, and sometimes changed—often daily. Utopians lived what may well be called "the examined

life," and their deliberation imbued even many mundane facets of communal behavior with symbolic significance. At the same time, the communards' "odd" behaviors also beg for more critical scrutiny of society's own "common sense" practices.

The role played by symbolism in the construction of a common vision has considerable interest and is quite susceptible to archaeological analysis. Utopian groups focused great energy on defining and portraying their worldviews. The architecture of each community was often highly symbolic and related directly to the way community values were defined. For example, group housing and circular community designs were frequently used to convey principles of shared life, cooperation, and equality. It was common to equate utopian settlements with an earthly Eden, and exalted settings were often chosen. This included in some cases a philosophy of the body as a temple that should be honored by particular health practices and diet (Van Wormer and Gross, this volume).

All utopian ventures had some belief in communitarian values, but the way those beliefs were put in operation varied considerably. Some groups like the Oneida Perfectionists required a high level of community sharing and afforded little privacy, while others retained the private individual or nuclear family as a key building block of their new social order. The Oneida Perfectionists used a redefined "family," detached from any reproductive function, as the controlling metaphor of communal association. While democratic models of cooperation were fairly common among utopians, some groups had more authoritarian or paternalistic power structures based on the visions of inspired leaders. Feltville (Tomaso et al., this volume), the Oneida Perfectionists (H. Van Wormer, this volume), and, to a lesser extent, other places were strongly influenced by the views of inspired leaders. Despite these paternalistic influences, many utopian communities did improve gender equality—a theme explored in depth by Suzanne Spencer-Wood (this volume).

The physical organization of utopian communities often reflected how ownership and political control were negotiated. For example, the study of Brook Farm (Preucel and Pendery, this volume) is particularly revealing of how changes in the organization of the community are linked to an ideological shift from transcendentalist to Fourierist influences. Other principles such as antimaterialism and attitudes about private vs. communal ownership of material possessions also had strong behavioral correlates that are likely to be particularly visible in artifacts, architecture, and even the arrangement of landscapes.

The diachronic perspective of archaeology can also make important contributions to understandings of how utopian communities evolved and the reasons for those changes. This can counter the tendency toward static, monolithic interpretations that focus on the reasons groups "failed." While all of the utopian communities considered in this volume were eventually abandoned, studying their evolution can, and should, focus more on what they can teach about ideological adaptation, rather than why they fell apart (Pitzer 1989). There is clearly value to understanding what did not work and why, but what did work, how communities adapted and changed, and how their political organization influenced the way they approached social experimentation should also be exposed. Stacy Kozakavich's study of the evolution of Doukhobor identity and Robert Preucel and Steven Pendery's article about ideological changes at the Brook Farm are the strongest examples of this diachronic perspective, but transformations and ideological struggles within communities figure in several other volume contributions.

Finally, there are significant opportunities for professional self-reflection inherent in the examination of alternative communities. It is hard not to draw parallels between the deliberate way such communities sought to shape their worldviews and the inescapably interpretive role historical archaeologists play in reshaping visions of the past. By contemplating the outspoken ideologies espoused by alternative communities, researchers' roles as agents of spin must be faced. In a very fundamental way, research agendas and the way they influence interpretations must be confronted. This is not to suggest the discipline is hopelessly mired in subjectivity. Rather, it gives pause for careful reflection upon researchers' roles in the interpretive venture and the intellectual baggage brought to it. True to the idealistic visions of the utopian communities being interpreted, an important goal of future research is to humanize

their struggles, reveal what has been learned about social possibilities and the potential for fundamental change, and consider how their inherently provocative visions may serve as inspiration for current social change.

During the 20th century, utopianism has fallen from favor as an approach to the improvement of society, perhaps because of the great failures of social engineering represented by Fascism, Nazism, and state Communism. Prescriptions for the good society have come to be distrusted. Utopianism still has a role to play as something that is worth serious contemplation, encouraging breadth of possibility and questioning certainties. As this introduction was written, America's national political leaders went to war in order, they claim, to defend the Western, capitalist way of life against hostile others. One of the greatest contributions that Western modernity has made to the world is the notion that humans themselves can imagine, build, and strive for a better society here on earth. Now, more than ever, the utopian imagination has a role to play in building different futures than those based on war, terror, conflict, and inequality.

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