

American utopias



Utopia is a perfect place, for some it is an attempt to realize heaven here on earth. For Sir Thomas More's Utopia, it is a fictional island in the Atlantic Ocean with a perfect social, legal and political system. Several utopian ideas arose in the history of mankind, they may slightly differ from each other, but they are similar in the effort to create a perfect society.

In American History, the communal movement in the 16th century to 17th century, and the similar attempt to establish the Utopian America of the 1960s to 1970s, was both a response to the social ills brought about by the development of capitalism and commercialism. While the communal movement of the 16th century can trace its roots from Europe, the Utopian movement of the 1960's was homegrown with the relatively young members of the population leading the way. Both, however, have the similar vision of establishing a perfect community of harmony and brotherly love.

While Utopian experiments in Europe were made as far back as the early 16th century, such as the Paris Commune or the Fouriesrist Phalanxes, it was only in America that the Europeans were successful in their attempt to found their New Jeruzalem characterized with idealism, zeal and moral fervor (Mizrach). Early Christian communists in Europe, propelled by the belief that America was a place free guile, deception and corruption, had decided to withdraw from the perceived sinful and corrupt world to establish new communities.

Most of these communities saw themselves as islands of redemption in a world of temptation, sin and avarice (Mizrach). This belief in America as the "new" world where further proliferated by the famous literary writers of that time such as Thomas More in his Utopia and Francis Bacon in New Atlantis

that suggested America was heir to the traditions of the first civilization, Atlantis, and a new “philosophic continent” within whose outlines lay modernity and freedom (Mizrach). The most interesting of these communities were founded in the 17th and early 18th centuries.

Included here are those known as the Woman in the Wilderness founded by German Pietist in 1694, The Irenia founded by Moravians in 1695, the Bohemia Manor founded by the Labadists in 1683, the Ephrata Cloister founded by Sabbatarians in 1732, Bethlehem founded by Anabaptists in 1740 and the Mount Lebanon founded by the Shakers in 1787 (Mizrach). All of these communities share the common feature of being founded by sects who at that time were considered as heretical by the Lutheran or the Calvinist Protestant Churches of Germany and Central Europe.

Most of these also were located or founded around Pennsylvania which was William Penn’s Quaker “experiment of toleration”. Another feature of these communities were most of the members are European migrants who followed a charismatic founder. The Utopian American of the 60s and 70s flourished in about the same time when industrialization was in full swing. Soon after the World War II, the American economy prospered but it left many young people feeling estranged and isolated.

While the older generation who grew up during the Great Depression was focused on material accumulation, the young people felt there was something missing in their lives (Meunier 1994). The dissatisfaction with capitalism grew and many young adults expressed this through their rejection of materialism and renewed interest in spirituality (Meunier 1994).

Aside from this, the technological advances of this period made young people feel detached from their environment.

The same advances that produced the atomic bomb and the television made the people feel that they are not in control or beyond understanding their environment (Meunier 1994). The political situation of this period also added to the propagation of the communal movement. The Vietnam War was not favored by majority of the American people and yet it dragged on. Aside from this, the Watergate scandal, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King further lead to the disillusionment of young people.

It was a combination of all this political, social and economic factors that brought the young people from Haight-Ashbury movement of visionary psychedelia and politically defiant college students together to flee to rural utopian communes in attempt to escape the Establishment and take control of their own physical, cultural and spiritual environment (Meunier 1994). Known to some as the “flower people” or the “hippies”, the people who lived in communes in the 1960s were often stereotype as those who practiced free love and drug experimentation.

The primary purpose of communal living in the late 1960s and early 1970s was to create a society where person to person relations is the core of existence, promoting greater intimacy and fuller human development (Meunier 1994). It rejects the established order of capitalism of competitiveness and production and turns to unity and cooperative work. People living in communes pool their resources and work together and the

emphasis is no longer placed on competing for material goods but instead on friendship and family (Meunier 1994).

The communes formed during the 1960s and 1970s were mostly in rural areas where people sought to return to the land. Agriculture made them self-sufficient and growing off food gave them a feeling of connection with each other and with the land. The search for a “perfect society” for both movements who happens to be centuries apart is are founded on similar assumptions of bringing change from the unrest and alienation that human beings felt as the society develops.

Perhaps the utopian ideal will not cease as humans have the intrinsic need to commune, and that even the modern man sought for solace, peace and brotherhood. BIBLIOGRAPHY Meunier, Rachel. Communal Living in the Late 60s and Early 70s. Human Issues Project. 17 December 1994. Mizrach, Steve. The Symbolic Invention of America-as-Utopia. Academia Website.