Cooperative Utopias and Communalism of the 19th and 20th Centuries

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Introduction

Since the beginning of civilization, men have repeatedly attempted to build better societies than the ones they have known. Thomas Moore’s book *Utopia* was not so much a blueprint for a perfect community, but rather his understanding as to the ills of English society in his time. However, he did open the minds of his readers to what could be possible if men would but try. This was at the heart of the communal societies that began to appear in the 19th century. Efforts were made to create communities that looked to release humanity from the chains of social and economic bondage that many felt their contemporary society had enclosed them in. Others felt this stifled both the spirit of men and their productivity.

By the 19th century, general societies began to be seen as repressive institutions with little opportunity for the common man to advance beyond his or her station in life. This was nothing new, as the period of feudalism had been built upon the idea of the “Great Chain of Being” in which everyone had their place under God’s great plan. Monarchies and the Church had perpetuated this idea to maintain their power, control, and authority. As nation building, colonial expansion, and international trade began to replace the old system, many were left behind. The “Industrial Revolution” had transformed this by the 19th century and almost every facet of society and daily life had been affected. What had not change was the fact that the great majority of people felt trapped in leading lives over which they had little control, or hope of changing.

The industrial and agricultural revolutions had changed both the prospects and livelihoods of the majority of workers, and rather than increasing their opportunities, they had led to greater uncertainties. The earliest communitarian movements attempted to transform this by forming religious and secular communities with participatory governments and to produce an equilibrium between the private and common ownership of property and work.
Communes and Societies

Early co-operative societies can be found with the creation of the “guilds” of the middle-ages. These were unions of workers generally within the same occupation or trade. They looked to regulate or control their trades by setting standards of workmanship for their members, and limiting competition by setting prices. They also supervised membership by requiring apprenticeships to insure that the trade was learned properly and thus quality would be maintained. In most cases they lived and worked closely together within common neighborhoods and communities, assuring each other’s compliance to the guilds regulations. Members also willingly helped one another to insure their overall success.

The 19th century would see the start of communal enterprises designed to create communities that would allow all the participants to enjoy the complete fruits of their labors. At first, the term socialism was not used to describe these endeavors. The founders and participants in these new communities did not concern themselves with the political and social tags historians would later use to describe them. In fact, in most cases the members of these new communities did not share the same social, political, or economic perceptions. What they did share was the desire to create a new way of living by which each member would be able to realize their desires for a more fulfilling life.

The development of co-operatives began in Europe during the 18th century. Various groups began to work together in joint business ventures. The idea was simply to reduce competition among themselves by pooling their efforts so everyone would benefit to a greater degree. These early cooperatives were not communities in the true sense of the word, but rather groups of individuals with common business interests acting together in the marketplace to increase economic opportunity.

One of the earliest implementations of this idea was the Lennoxtown Friendly Victualling Society in Scotland, designed around the local corn mill and textile industries of the early 1800’s. The Society looked to provide staple goods at discount prices for its members. It would become one of the first efforts at co-operative organization and eventually fulfilled its objective. The co-operative would prosper and remain in existence into the 20th century.

New Lanark

One of the first moves toward the new experiment of self-sustaining communities was to take place at New Lanark, Scotland. In 1786, David Dale built a series of cotton mills along the Clyde River. These were later sold to his son-in-law Robert Owen and a
group of investors. Owen would become one of the earliest reformers in the cooperative movement and later be considered the “father of the cooperative movement”. Owen had become a successful businessman in the cotton trade in Manchester, and by the 1800’s he opened the first co-operative store in New Lanark and it became an immediate success. At the time many employers employed the “truck system” whereby employees were paid with tokens that only had value in their “company stores”. By this method, they could then charge high prices for cheap goods and make money off of both their employee’s labor and their consumption of goods. A series of “Truck Acts” passed by Parliament stopped this, but employers still made out handsomely as they controlled the stores in the areas around their mills. Owen’s store in New Lanark allowed people to begin to buy quality goods at little more than cost by buying in bulk. The difference in cost remained in the employee’s pocket. This idea continues to be in effect as the principle underlying the operation of co-operative shops in the United Kingdom and elsewhere to this day.

Owen then had the idea of forming cooperative townships whereby workers could grow their own food, produce their own clothes, and also be self-governing. He believed that people were the products of their environment. If that environment was changed for the better, then the result would be better workers and better citizens. This became the foundation of his move to support labor reform and opportunities for education. From here, he began to recruit his workforce from the poorhouses of Edinburgh and Glasgow. Many of these were children whose futures were bleak at best. For Owen, his township of New Lanark would conduct business on the ideals of creating a better life for all involved, rather than focusing on the commercial aspects of attaining wealth. This would eventually lead him to buy out these “men of wealth” and replace them with investors who held his own passions, such as Jeremy Bentham and William Allen. New Lanark soon became a manufacturing town that provided improved social, economic, and educational opportunities to its working men and women, and to their families.

Owen saw his greatest gift as being one of education. With this in mind, he set out to improve the educational opportunities of his employees, particularly the young. While he was not alone in this belief, Owen was instrumental in laying the groundwork for the development of elementary schools in Scotland and in England. His belief was that the primary education of children would set in motion a lifetime of learning and opportunity for those afforded the chance. At New Lanark, a primary school was established for the children of the workers. The success of this idea can be found today in public education systems throughout the world. For this, not a small amount of credit should be afforded Robert Owen.

Early on, Owen was a believer in liberalism and the utilitarian ideas of his business partner Jeremy Bentham. Central to Bentham’s philosophy was the idea that life should be organized around moral and ethical concepts whereby society produces the “greatest good for the greatest number” of people. In the simplest terms, the ultimate utility of society was that it should maximize the good by replacing sorrow with happiness. Whereas Bentham viewed this in terms of pure individual and economic freedom as they pertained to the market place and capitalist endeavors, Owen began to lean more and more toward ideals of a socialist community.

To this point, Owen’s efforts had been philanthropic in nature by using his time and assets to help the impoverished. He began to see his efforts as little more than a stop-gap effort which had but a small impact to the overall condition of workers at large. With
this in mind, Owen looked to find a cure to the misery of poverty that he blamed on the ever increasing competition of man against man, and man against machine. He came to the conclusion that the remedy could be found in uniting the actions of men within working communities. He proposed the formation of these communities around what had worked at New Lanark and incorporated new ideas as well. The idea was to provide equal opportunities of work and enjoyment of life as a common goal for all involved.

The communities would consist of around 3000 people (approximately the number at New Lanark) settling on parcels of land consisting of 1500 acres. While the community’s activities would center around agriculture, there would be a variety of work prospects and industry to allow the community to be self sufficient and self contained. This would limit competition within the communities and with the surrounding areas, allowing all to maximize their efforts to fulfill the promise of a prosperous and happy life. Once the principle was understood, the next step was to put the idea into full practice and make it a reality.

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**Orbiston Community**

The first attempt was going to take place under the direction of Owen’s disciple, Abram Combe. In 1825, he founded the Orbiston Community outside of Glasgow on 290 acres of land. Separate from Owen, Combe entered into the venture and purchased land in cooperation with John Hamilton with the help of a bond issued by a joint-stock company. The community did not see the immediate success that had taken place at New Lanark, nor did it predicate its existence on that model. In fact, Owen did not learn of its existence until months after the community was founded.

Orbiston was built around the ideals of liberty, security, and knowledge. Combe was to instill this in the membership from the beginning. The commune was constructed around a series of community buildings at its center along a running stream, with a school being central to this plan. As with Owen, Combe tied the idea of education to personal and economic advancement. The main building consisted of a large center building with two wings for living quarters, containing some 120 private rooms. The community also included a theater for cultural advancement, a foundry and forge, and a press for printing its newspaper, *The Register*. Everything was whitewashed with blue slate roofs. The pearl white community was surrounded by scenic hills and had the appearance of utopia, even if it may not have reached that goal. Combe would work himself to sickness to see its success.

Orbiston community never became truly solvent and survived precariously as it constantly ran short of capital due to the little success it had in production and manufacturing in all areas of endeavor. This had to do with some of the inhabitants it initially attracted, more than a few of which were unsuited for the hard work and others who were idlers by nature. Locals came to call the place “Babylon” referring to the collection of rabble that flocked to the community from the surrounding area. The community spent its second year ridding itself of these and consolidating its membership around those that truly wanted to work toward the commune’s success.

Orbiston’s internal government was a further trouble as the members were divided over the operation of the community. The division of income also became a matter of
contention as well. The community originally was founded on a system of individual reward for labor, with economic equality to follow later. By integrating agriculture and industrial manufacturing it was believed that this would encourage outside capitalists to invest in the venture. When this did not materialize, the community was hard pressed to survive on its own capitalization.

With the death of Combe in 1827, the single point of commonality for the community was lost and the proprietors soon suspended all further proceedings and disposed of the property after two years. The demise of the community at Orbiston was attributed more to a lack of interest and desire by its residence in its success, than to its economic failure. More to the truth was its problem with under capitalization. Profits could not overcome the community’s early over expenditures. At least one of Orbiston’s investors was placed in “debtors prison” for advances made to the community, and this fact cannot be discounted as a detriment to future undertakings. Still, Orbiston came closer to success than some later communities would.

New Harmony

Robert Owen had by this time moved to America to begin his own utopian community. Feeling it necessary to start with an established infrastructure, Owen purchased the town of Harmony in 1825 from the religious group known as the Harmony Society that had founded the town on 7,000 acres in 1814. By the time Owen made his purchase this had expanded to include some 30,000 acres of surrounding land and buildings. The name was changed to New Harmony and the New Harmony Society was formed as the initial overseers of the community. The new community then set about transforming the ideas that its inhabitants had about society and instituting a new set of community principles. The community first introduced equality for all its citizens with each responsible for contributing to the labor force. A system of “labor money” was introduced whereby the community’s currency was tied to the amount of work an individual performed. The currency could then be exchanged for commodities involving an equal amount of labor. This would seem to solve the problem of production, but it did not address the problem of commitment that had been the major stumbling block at Orbiston, and which would resurface at New Harmony.

While the desire to develop a communal economy was vital to New Harmony, the community lacked the strong central belief or ideal that could be found in religious communities that had begun to appear at the time. Owen had little faith in religion, believing that moral and ethical integrity were the true principles that influenced a person’s character and produced responsibility. The problem was that New Harmony did not attract enough people of like mind. For most of the inhabitants, the community did not provide sufficient individual autonomy, or enough personal property. This was indicated by the constant power struggles that the community lapsed into, and what one member called a “constant re-enactment of the French Revolution that killed the spirit of the members rather than their bodies.” Owen’s son would later describe the community as a gathered collection of radicals, lazy theorists, and unprincipled sharpers (opportunists).
In 1828, Owen broke all connections with the community and left its members to sort things out as they please. By 1829 the experiment had failed and the community went into receivership and was dissolved. It was claimed that the very diversity and freedom that the community looked to foster had led to the lack of “united interest” which was necessary for its success. In the end, self-preservation had taken over as the members moved to claim various assets of the community as their own. Whatever the exact reasons were, New Harmony had at the very least shown that the idea of combined communalism was feasible provided the members of the community committed themselves to the endeavor.

Queenwood Farm

In 1837, an integrated group of Owenites stemming from the larger Chartist movement formed the “Rational Society”, which then committed itself to creating a community in Hampshire England based on Owens’ principles and ideas. The Socialist Congress in England, of which Owen was a member, provided the financial backing for the project. By 1839 land was acquired near Tytherly and Queenwood Farm was started. John Baxter was elected as the president of the society and Robert Owen would be the community’s governor until 1842. Many where disappointed when Owen chose not to reside at Queenwood.

The “Congress” looked to make Queenwood the decisive experiment in communalism that would finally transform the country. The colony sat on 301 acres with an adjacent property holding another 232 acres. Some felt that the location was too remote and too removed from markets, and that the land was too poor in quality. Above these objections, the land was retained and buildings started going up in 1841. During its existence, Queenwood’s population would fluctuate between one-hundred and one-hundred and fifty members. Only when the Socialist Congress in England held its conferences there, would the numbers begin to increase, but then only for brief periods.

The grand central building would be called Queenwood Hall. It was designed in the style of a sprawling baron’s manor house, with three stories and a sub basement with large meeting rooms. Little expense was spared and the interior had mahogany wainscoting. The Hall was then surrounded by a series of lawns cut by promenades. Art and beauty were considered a part of its very construction. The idea was to allow the workingmen that came to make up the membership of Queenwood to experience part of a lifestyle that was generally reserved for the wealthy. An art gallery was started from the private works of one of the socialist congressman.

Tytherly Hall and Rose Hall followed, the later being used as quarters for visitors and more often as the residence for the governor of the community. On Tytherly Hall, Owen had the letters C.M. attached about the outside entrance to denote “Commencement of the Millennium” a slogan often used by socialists to denote the beginning of change, or a lasting change to pass into the next millennia in the year 2000. It was clear that these men felt they were involved in a world changing endeavor.

Subscription to membership at Queenwood came for all over England, Scotland, and Ireland as well. Farming was started, but the community had a slow financial beginning as these were economically depressed times. The community had to look to its
benefactors for support and operating capital. The enthusiasm of the members was
undaunted despite this. To show their support for the community, the Twelfth Socialist
Congress in England was held in Queenwood Hall in 1843. Owen was reappointed as
president of the Society and William Pare was made the new governor of Queenwood.

This move brought new life to the community and Pare came to be hailed as the
best governor the colony would know. His personal enthusiasm and openness to the
members endeared him to the workers. But even Pare could not overcome the poor
quality of the soil as agricultural production fell. The growing lack of funds hurt the
manufacturing and agricultural production of the farm, as both suffered from exactly
what some in the Socialist Congress had pointed out earlier, its remoteness from industry.

When the economic situation in England continued to worsen, an attempt to
revive the community was made by turning Queenwood Hall into a school. It was
believed that the community could be saved if its emphasis moved more toward
education. This had little positive economic success, and only worsened the situation for
the community by siphoning funds away from the needs of the farm. Debts would
continue to accumulate to the point that by 1844, Queenwood owed over £1000 pounds
to its creditors. This was the beginning of the end for the last of the Owen cooperative
communities. Turn over in membership was an ongoing problem that could be related
directly back to the poor soil at Tytherly.

Most of the smaller investors that made up the bulk of the colonies members, had
placed everything they had into the endeavor and had nothing left to give. The larger
investors from the Socialist Congress were unwilling to sink further funds into the
colony. Many protested what they saw as the extravagant cost of Queenwood Hall. The
Fourteenth Socialist Congress would hold their last conference 1846, this time again at
Queenwood, now little more than a school, and this mostly in name only. The hardiest of
the members at Queenwood showed their metal by holding out into the next year.

When the last of the funds finally ran out and no more were forthcoming, the
trustees assumed control of the property. The small investor members lost everything,
including livelihood and home. The trustees auctioned off the property piecemeal, with
Queenwood Hall being purchased and converted into Queenwood College in 1847. The
structure, which was the most impressive building at the farm, would burn down in 1902.
Mismanagement was the overriding problem at Queenwood. The community did have
early success farming despite the poor soil, but the turn over in the leadership of the
“Rational Society” and changes in the governorship left the community with little
continuity.

Eventually the whole affair would end up in the courts as the trustees “were not”,
and had attempted to make off with the proceeds from the sale of the property. When
trapped in their scheme, they resorted to an old trick that had been used against
communalist communities before. They declared that the colonists had engaged in wide
spread “immoral sexuality” and “free love” among its members, and these things being in
violation of the law voided any claim the members might have. This did not wash in the
courts and the trustees were forced to open their books and reimburse many of the
investors with at least partial payment. These events were the final chapter of the last
Owenite community to have direct connections with Owen himself.

The community at Queenwood had achieved success. The Farm had developed
new and improved practices for farming which had lessened waste and inefficiency, but
could never fully overcome the poor soil. The school had also improved learning techniques and replaced “rote learning” with visual stimulation of thought. Learning participation was the norm and the practices of “reward and punishment” were removed, but the turnover at Queenwood limited the effects of these efforts. Queenwood became the longest lasting of all the Owenite communities and its end was not found in the failure of its practices, but in the failure of their implementation and support.

While his attempts at creating a lasting co-operative community had failed, Robert Owen had sparked the imagination of others. He devoted his life to improving the conditions of the workingman and the poor in general and had proposed an “association of all classes and all nations”. He played out his social intentions by using his wealth in attempts to show that socialist communities could overcome the social inequalities that were produced by the Industrial Revolution. Owen was never able to transfer the economic success and practices that had worked at New Lanark to his socialist communal experiments in community building. This above all was the real tragedy in the communal failures. However, Owen’s ability to influence and motivate others to action would become his legacy beyond the communities he was personally involved in.

**Rahaline in County Clare**

The Rahaline commune was founded in Ireland as another socialist experiment. In 1831, land belonging to John Vandeleur was transformed to create the community and then rented to an “association” of members until they saw fit to purchase the land. These were made up of mostly poor and discontented Irishmen. With the help of the English socialist Edward Craig, Vandeleur established an insulated society on 618 acres. Here the inhabitants could improve their lives and opportunities and the futures of their children through education. The Association’s gained capital was to be held in a common treasury for future use by its members, and to pay any incurred debts. There was also accommodation to provide for sickness and old age. There was great hope for success among the “New Systemites’, as they came to be called.

The commune was structured around a set of written guidelines, which the members were required to adhere to. In an attempt to remove the vises of larger society, tobacco and alcohol were banned, as was gambling. Long hours of work were necessary from all the members in one form or another, save small children who substituted this with mandatory schooling. Work was paid in “labor notes” which then could be used to purchase items at the commune’s co-operative store. In this way the commune could remain nearly self-sufficient, with the members buying goods that were produced within the community. If they wished, they could exchange their labor notes for common currency to spend in the nearby town.

Vandeleur supplied the commune with the latest machinery, including one of the first agricultural mowing machines in Ireland. Governance would be administered by a nine member council, with elections held twice annually. The council assembled nightly and made appointments for the following days work through equitable distribution. There were no work masters or stewards, save Craig as the overseer. This was uncommon in Ireland, as from the time of the arrival of the English most workingmen had both masters
and stewards. Meals were taken as a community to save money and increase comradeship.

There was early discontent as the first overseer had been more of a task master of the type typically found in Ireland at the time. He would soon be shot and killed by an “errant” bullet by members who claimed to be hunting. When Craig took over, he was at first threatened as well, but was soon able to calm the waters. Another point of contention was that Vandeleur reserved the right to remove anyone from the community he might disapprove of, but there are no recorded instances of him ever doing so during the three and a half years the commune existed.

The basic conditions for success had been met, and early on the commune prospered. The Association was able to pay Vandeleur back for all his initial expenditures for wages, equipment, and construction. The first years have been referred to as the “enthusiastic period”, however, the long hours would eventually take their toll on the members and productivity began to suffer. Still, the community did well enough to make it into its third year and for the most part the members were more than content. By then the commune had grown to over eighty members, some thirty of which had joined after its inception.

The community’s survival was tied to the fortunes of Vandeleur as long as he owned the land, and when he ran into financial difficulties, the commune and its members would pay the price. Vandeleur lost the estate to his own vise of gambling, which he carried on outside the commune. Being ashamed of the loss, he hurriedly left County Clare never to be seen again. To pay his debtors, the land was seized and the community ceased to exist.

The Association and its council met in assembly for the last time in November of 1833. After two years of relative prosperity in which time the members experience what they referred to as “contentment, peace, and happiness”, the commune was ended and the Association was dissolved, with its members being evicted from the property. Ralahine had been a success, but became another failed attempt at utopia, albeit at no fault of the community’s. Outside pressures beyond their control led to its demise. Try as they might, in the end they could not escape the financial demands of greater society.

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**Charles Fourier and the Phalanx**

Not to be disheartened, others would try their own hand at creating communal utopias. The French philosopher Charles Fourier would set in motion the development of new socialist communities of shared wealth as well. He believed that the secret to social and economic success centered around concern for the endeavor and genuine cooperation. Fourier considered poverty to be the overriding cause of disorder in society. He felt much of society faced a debilitating lack of education which also inhibited human passion. He proposed paying sufficiently high wages to workers and a decent minimum for those that could not perform at normal expectations, or who could not work at all (a form of social security). He was also a champion of equal rights and opportunities for women. Therefore his communities would become centers of liberal thought about sexuality, gender, occupation, and welfare. The members could enjoy their lives unencumbered by the social morays of the outside world.
With this as the goal he proposed to develop communities around what he called the Phalanstere, or Phalanx. The phalanxes would encompass a main structure at their core known as the “Grand hotel” where the community’s members would live. These would consist of four story apartment complexes, with the wealthiest members living on the highest floors. Wealth would be distributed according to one's job, to be determined by a member’s individual interests and desires. To ensure that all labor in the community would be performed, the jobs that people might not be prone to accept paid the most. While he did not personally create any communities himself, Fourier’s writings would become the basis for associations founded in the United States.

The first community was founded at La Reunion, Texas in 1855. The Frenchmen Victor Considerant and Francois Cantegral would begin the colony on land purchased near present day Dallas with some 200 members who had arrived from France. Eventually the community would have over 350 European members. At La Reunion the members would advocate communal production and distribution of profits. Also, both men and women had a voting voice in the community, and individuals could own private property beyond personal affects.

The community would be beset with problems from the beginning. First off, the property was not good farmland. Secondly, for the most part the colonists were not farmers. They were mostly skilled craftsmen and storekeepers. These two factors were going to be constant liabilities. These were overcome to some degree, just in time for the Texas weather to doom the advances the commune did make. A blizzard in 1856 destroyed most of the community’s crops. What did survive was then wiped out that summer during a drought, followed by an invasion of locusts. The death nail came when the expanding town of Dallas incorporated La Reunion within its city limits. Some of the colonists returned to Europe and the remainder integrated into the general population.

An American populated Fourier community was founded near Red Bank, New Jersey in 1844 on 670 acres of land. This community of “associates” would last for over a decade and incorporate more of Fourier’s social principles than its predecessor. A three-story phalanx was built that included communal cooking and eating areas, with adjacent private apartments and a communal social area. The North American Phalanx (NAP) was successful for many years, even though the population never topped 200 associates. The commune was separated into divisions including ones for agriculture, livestock, manufacturing, and education. Still, the economy of the community began to slowly decline. By 1853 the community faced internal problems that it was not able to overcome. Disagreements over women’s rights, abolition, and plans to add a religious affiliation broke the community into factions. These issues forced many members to leave, and when a fire struck the next year, it was impossible for the community to recover. By 1857, the NAP had been dissolved and the property was sold. The Phalanx building itself would stand as a last testament to the community’s existence for over another one-hundred years before fire engulfed it in 1972.

**Familistere Community**

In France, Andre Godin, who had helped to finance La Reunion, would take a different road toward developing his vision for a utopian community. In 1859 he founded
the Familistere Community within the town of Guise. Building on the ideas of Fourier, Godin developed a large factory, and surrounded it with three housing units for the workers. These consisted of four-story rectangular buildings with covered interior courtyards were the children and families could play and socialize. The buildings were then jointed at their corners to create his version of a phalanx. An adjacent complex contained shops, stores, and a theater for entertainment purposes. There was also a primary school and a communal laundry.

The community was self-contained to a great degree, and looked to support itself from the production of its goods. The workers were allotted shares for their service to the cooperative and eventually took possession of the whole facility as a co-operative society, just as Godin had intended. This created a socialist society in the miniature that was still part of the larger community. The community’s members freely moved among the towns general population and even attended local churches, as Godin had not planned for or proposed to have one within the commune.

The success of Familistere Community was owed to the careful judgment of Godin. Realizing that the failure of previous communities might be found in their insistence on setting themselves apart as self-sustaining communes, he looked to build within the pre-existing town of Guise. He then used the larger society in the town and the surrounding community as a marketplace for the factory’s manufactured goods. After a stint in public service, Godin retired in 1876 to devote his efforts to managing Familistere until his death in 1888.

As late as the 1950’s the co-operative society of Familistere was functioning and producing goods. The idea to become part of the larger community had proven successful. It would continue to be owned by the workers before eventually being sold into private ownership for a substantial profit to the commune’s membership. As long as the communal movement continued to exist, forward thinkers such as Godin would persevere in their efforts to find effective ideas that would enable them to carry forward the ideas of community cooperation.

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**The Narodnik Movement**

Imperialist Russia would see the rise of the Narodnik Commune Movement in the 1870’s. Meaning “going to the people”, the movement started after the emancipation of serfs by Czar Alexander II in 1861. The Narodiks were mostly urban middle class revolutionaries responding to what they saw as the “wage slavery” that the bourgeoisie was imposing on the peasantry under capitalism. After serfdom was ended and feudalism was phasing out, new capitalist landowners had responded by paying little more than subsistence incomes to the previous serfs, intentionally trapping them in their jobs.

Rather than developing specific communities of their own, Narodiks moved into obshchina villages, which were traditional “peasant communes” that had naturally developed under serfdom. The obshchinas governed peasant life at the local level and it was here that the Narodniks looked to release the peasants from exploitation. Narodiks saw the Russian peasant village communes and their members as a microcosm of socialism and the key to social change. They believed that socialist economic trends were
more compatible with industrial development and looked to be the political force to bring this about.

By the spring of 1874, Narodniks had moved from the cities and began to live among the peasant population, hoping to lead them to revolt. The Narodnik commune movement was unsuccessful in bringing social change to Russia. The peasants never fully accepted the help of the Narodniks, seeing them as odd outsiders and even attacking them in some instances. The Imperial Secret Police responded to the Narodniks with extreme repression in the forms of imprisonment and deportation.

The Narodnik Commune Movement was unique in that it looked to use force to change the existing social structure, rather than trying to lead by example. They were able to start a mild revolt in 1877, but it was swiftly crushed by the state. The movement and its endorsement of revolt and revolutionary methods was a warning against the existing Russian society. This warning was ignored and violent change leading to Soviet communism would come to Russia within the next few decades.

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**Rochdale Co-operative Society**

The Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers was formed in 1844 by a group of workingmen as an economic plan to benefit its members with an ultimate goal of establishing a self-supporting community. A set of operating rules were drawn up calling for equitable investment and return among all the members. They looked to provide unadulterated goods at a fair price. While not a community in the sense of being a commune, the “Society” became a community of members who were also customers, members, and owners. Eventually the Pioneers would develop housing projects for both its members and their customers in and around Rochdale, England.

The society’s first store was opened on the first floor of a little used warehouse in December of 1845, with operating capital collected from its twenty-eight initial members. They all held low paying jobs outside the society and saw this as their opportunity to improve their living conditions. None were businessmen by trade, but several members were Chartists (Society of Workingmen) and had experience in organization. As their operating funds were small at first, the store offered only a few commodities for sale in the beginning.

The store attracted local workingmen and their families from the start. They looked to advance the opportunity to help others of their class succeed. Further, the store offered unadulterated commodities. Many businesses at the time sold goods that included additives to “stretch” the quantity, such as water added to milk and alum added to flour, or used scales that were weighted. This type of “thievery” was common in England at the time and justified by the motto of “buyer-beware”. The society advertised that its goods were “pure quality, good weight, honest measure, and sold without fraud”. This fact would eventually become one of the Pioneer’s strongest selling points. Customers quickly learned that they could get a fair deal at the society’s store. By the end of the first year of business the society had grown to eighty members. Within six years the membership had swelled to over 600, with operating capital in excess of £2000 pounds. The Pioneers would later open a successful co-operative mill to produce calico textiles.
The Pioneers next moved to provide equitable housing for its members. Many workingmen and their families lived in dilapidated tenement buildings and paid high rents for that “privilege”. The Housing Co-operative and Company was started in 1861 and was advertised as “superior dwellings for the workingman at a fair price”. Its first project was to build twenty-five small cottages in Rochdale. By 1867, the society had begun construction of an estate of 84 houses covering five blocks. By 1900, the Pioneers owned 300 housing units, and had formed the “Co-operative Building Society” to provide loans for purchasing a house, or for customers to build their own.

In all their endeavors, the Pioneers looked to maintain the basic operating principles of fairness, open membership, democratic control of its business affairs, limited return on capital (profit), and political and religious neutrality. Its policy of providing cash refunds to its customers endeared the society to the community above all. After expenses and profit shares were paid, the remaining capital was returned to the customers in proportion to their purchases. Those that bought more goods received a larger return. In this way everyone involved was a customer and a proprietor.

This ideal of taking customers in as partners has been the hallmark of co-operatives ever since. The Rochdale Pioneers as they have come to be called went on to spur thousands of like endeavors across England and Europe, and can be found throughout the United States as well. Cooperatives such as the Little River Co-Op in Hillsborough County, Florida operates under these same principles – quality products, sold at discount to members, in good measure, and with an open membership. This co-operative and all others can trace their beginnings back to the Rochdale Society.

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**Ruskin Communities in England**

England would again see the development of new utopian communities in the second half of the 19th century. John Ruskin was to become a leading social critic of the time and would sponsor several attempts to create workingman communities in England. Ruskin formed the Guild of St. George to bring philanthropic businessmen together to improve the conditions of the working-class by purchasing undeveloped land and turning it over to working-men of England for cultivation. He had set out his vision of a utopian society in *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Working-class*. Ruskin’s ideal was to reclaim from nature “those untamed lands of England’s ground and make them beautiful, peaceful, and fruitful.” The members known as “companions” would give a tithe of their income to raise monies for the purchase of more land.

At Barmouth, Wales in 1874, on acres of rocky ground, the Guild attempted to recreate Ruskin’s idea of a peaceful agrarian feudal community. There was to be no modern machinery “less what is absolutely necessary.” The community was to contain traditional trades and farmers, and Ruskin even envisioned the members of each profession to dress in distinct period clothing. The community would gain economic stability by holding folk festivals, where they would sell their crafts and goods to the surrounding public. The community would last several years before succumbing to lack of economic support and poor soil.

Another venture was started at Cloughton, England on a small plot of land purchased by the Guild and put under the control of a guild member by the name of John
Guy. Working for the Guild as a tenant farmer, Guy and his staff would till the “hard” soil for nearly five years with little success. Difficulties with the local marketplace authorities and the inconsistent produce helped to make the community unprofitable. By the end of the 1870’s the community farm had collapsed.

The Totley Colony was perhaps the best chance for success for the Guild. Founded in 1876, a dozen or so families took possession of 13 acres of land and took the name “Abbeyfield Allotments” after the fact that each family was given an allotment of land to work. The farmers were former Sheffield factory workers who held Ruskin’s ideal of returning to the land. Eventually Ruskin’s personal gardener was put in charge of the failing community and transformed it into a botanical garden to develop methods of raising fruit trees in northern England. Eventually this community failed as well and was sold to private interests. The place is known as St. George’s Farm today, named after the Guild. It is managed by the Parks and Woodlands Service (PWC) in England.

Not to be deterred, members of the Guild would try again near Worcestershire in the Wyre Forest. In 1880, a community began to grow that would be known as Atholgarth, or RuskinLand at Bewdley. On land owned by a Guild member, the idea was to create an agrarian community that would include an agricultural museum. The museum was never constructed, but by 1890, the community was managing an orchard of nearly 200 fruit trees of various varieties. As more families arrived, they established a growing community of smallholding farms and planted additional orchards on land they cleared in the surrounding forest. Ruskinland would become the Guild’s only truly successful community. Land acquisitions and settlement by Guild members carried on into the 1930’s. In the 1970’s the area was placed under protection as a National Nature Reserve and is managed to this day by the Guild and the National Conservancy Council.

An American connection would begin with the Ruskin Communities and Colleges in the United States. The first communal community was founded in Tennessee in 1894, followed by no less than four other communities. Most of the Ruskin communities looked to provide educational colleges as their centers of unity. In 1899, Walter Vrooman founded Ruskin Hall in Oxford, England and his affiliations with two of the Ruskin Colleges in the United States started the American Oxford Movement (Ruskin Hall Movement). The idea was the same as that of John Ruskin, to create workingman communities and colleges. Under Vrooman’s American Oxford Movement, two of the colleges would claim indirect relations with Ruskin Hall in Oxford.

The final Ruskin community and college was founded in 1908 by college president G.M. Miller, his wife, and her family the Dickman’s and come to be known as the Ruskin Commongood Society. The community in Ruskin would grow and expand up until World War One. Miller, who had been president of one of the previous Ruskin colleges, had devised an “industrial plan” whereby students could work for the college and community to fund their expenses and education. This inventive idea was an early forerunner of today’s federal and state student subsidy programs – Student Aid and Study Work programs.

The Ruskin College closed its doors in the aftermath of World War One, and the Ruskin Commongood Society officially ceased to exist in 1967. Its common held properties were turned over to Hillsborough County and to the city of Ruskin. Carrying on the ideals of John Ruskin and the Ruskin College, the Dickman family would later donate land for the construction of Hillsborough Community College’s “SouthShore
Campus”. Hillsborough Community College and the community college system in general carry forward John Ruskin’s ideals of providing education to the many that otherwise might not have the opportunity for “higher education”.

**Tolstoyans at Whiteway**

The writings of Leo Tolstoy, the celebrated Christian anarchist of the 19th century, would be the foundation of a different communitarian movement in England. Tolstoy had called for a pacifist revolution of “moral consciousness” in his rejection of government and its agencies. His ideas gained widespread acclaim throughout Europe and in 1898 a group of Tolstoyans would establish a community loosely organized around his ideals. With convictions in human fellowship, a love for the open country, and the rejection of industrial society and private property, these communitarians would find their utopia.

The community became known as Whiteway Colony, and would become noteworthy because of its wide-open structure and social experimentation. The philosophy of this new venture would revolve around the ideals of “freedom of action and goodwill towards all” regardless of their work ethic, or views toward sexuality. The colony immediately attracted a number of anarchists and socialists and well as a smattering of pacifists, all looking to rid themselves of what they saw as the outside repressive authoritarian society.

Whiteway was founded on forty-two acres of land in the Cotswolds, England. The commune was to derive its economic existence through small industries, farming, and trade with local villages. The community organized itself into two divisions, the village industries group, and the land group. The intention was that the two groups would support each other through trade, mostly by bartering as the use of money was seen as a vise by many in the commune. The land was worked by voluntary cooperation and meals were prepared and taken as a community.

Early on, to insure the commitment to the idea of community property, and as a symbolic gesture of togetherness, the deeds to the land were collectively burned. When this was challenged in the courts, the joint “land-holding” scheme was upheld by the English courts. Other possessions such as utensils and machinery would be held collectively as the “property of those that might need them at any time”, although houses became privately owned. This idea of communal property beyond the land would stay in place for the first several years.

The members also rejected marriage in favor of “free union”, and outsiders rebuked the colony as a den of “promiscuous fornication”. The “Whitewayans” as they were called were also pacifists and vegetarians for the most part. The community also practiced “free-entry”, whereby outsiders had complimentary access to the commune. Whiteway was unique in that its practices represented a purer sense of the idea of communism than the communitarian communities it followed. The ideas of collectivism and communalism would remain nearly completely in place during the first years. Those years also saw the “no money” period when the use of money was shunned in favor of bartering. However, as hard times approached, the commune would have to change to survive.
After two years, a reversal began in response to infiltration of the community by outsiders who saw its freedoms as a release from all constraints, including the need for hard work. The commune abandoned pure communalism in favor of a more individualistic approach. It was then decided that each family would take on the cultivation of as much land as they could work, generally a couple of acres. The end to communal meals soon followed, as did communal laundry. The colonists viewed these changes as the necessities of survival and a continuation in the spirit of freedom, which they believed insured the survival of the commune. They did retain the idea of a central governing general assembly that would determine decisions on community business in general meetings of the colonists.

Early in the 20th century, the English government began a campaign to close the colony. The Home Office of Britain (Justice Dept.) viewed the colony with its anarchists, socialists, and free thinkers, as a security risk. The Office then looked to infiltrate the colony with a pair of spies to uncover their subversive activities. No evidence was ever produced other than accusations of sexual deviance. The Home Office then tried to raise local agitation against the colony in the surrounding towns, also to no avail.

Whiteway Colony is still in existence today. It is still populated to a great degree by descendants of the original members and their families. The village has a jigsaw layout of twisting and winding roads and plots that exemplifies anarchy. The settlers still maintain and use several communal facilities to this day, and the colony attracts tourists who come to get a glimpse of the communitarian past.

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**Ruskin Communities and Colleges**

While not within the given scope of this course, it bears noting here, that nearing the end of the 19th century a communal society was formed and developed here in the Tampa Bay area. Ruskin, Florida was founded for the very purpose of establishing a communal society of cooperation and education. The name of the commune, the “Ruskin Commongood Society”, clearly expresses the intentions of the founders. The community would be the last of some five attempts to build an integrated community/college environment around the economic and educational principles developed by the renowned English art critic and social analyst, John Ruskin.

As stated earlier, John Ruskin was a leading social critic of the 19th century and would sponsor several attempts to create workingman communities in England. He first formed the Guild of St. George to bring philanthropic businessmen together to improve the conditions of the working-class by purchasing undeveloped land and turning it over to working-men of England for cultivation. He had set out his vision of a utopian society in *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Working-class*, and expounded upon them in his other literary works. His idea was that workingmen would live within a cooperative community that would provide them with both a livelihood, and an opportunity for an education.

The final Ruskin community and college was founded in 1908 by college president G.M. Miller, his wife, and her family the Dickmans, and came to be known as the Ruskin Commongood Society. The community in Ruskin would grow and expand up until World War One. Miller, who had been president of one of the previous Ruskin colleges, had
devised an “industrial plan” whereby students could work for the college and community to fund their expenses and education. This inventive idea was an early forerunner of today’s federal and state student subsidy programs – Student Aid and Study Work programs.

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Conclusions

Listed here are but a few of the dozens of communitarian communities that were founded between the 19th and 20th centuries. The communitarian movement can be seen in the light of being a protest against the prevailing societies of their time. The growth of industrialization had created societies that had begun to discard the importance of the individual in favor of economic prosperity. As capitalism expanded in the favor of wealthy capitalists, the working masses where continually and increasingly exploited. Marxist communism would germinate in this environment and find its greatest success in the creation of the Soviet Union.

When governments were slow to respond to the needs of their citizens, individuals and groups of peoples looked to address their own aspirations by forming communitarian societies and communities. For the greatest part, these people did not eschew violent revolution. Rather, they looked to take control of their own lives and destinies within their communes.

These communities were a form of protest against what was found to be wrong with greater society. All were attempts to find ways to show that society could be transformed and economically restructured to address the needs of all concerned. While most failed, for the duration of their existences they did provide a glimpse into what was possible when an effort was made toward cooperative change. The simple idea of communities of workers functioning together for the greater good of the society did show merit.

The following century would see reforms take place as governments began to restrain the abuses of industrial capitalism. The growth of trade unions and the fear of Soviet communism had much to do with the changing fortunes of the working-class. Worker activism and protest, and the violent reaction of business interests led governments to understand that constraints and reforms were in order. Change was slow, but it did take place over time.

Democratic governments moved to become more responsive and responsible to their citizens as a whole. Workers gained a greater voice in the workplace and in society, women were moved to a status of greater equality, and democracy was expanded toward greater inclusion. Communitarian societies had set an example of cooperation that greater society could not ignore. In their own way they helped lead a way toward social
change. Governments began to pass legislation to improve working conditions and unions gained a greater ability to improve the living standards of their workers. These communities live on in the spirit of cooperative endeavors throughout the world.

Further Reading and Credits
