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Utopian Struggle: Preconceptions and Realities of Intentional Communities

I have been personally involved with and often living in intentional communities for 40 years, and I have been actively researching and writing about them for over 30 years. My interest started by looking at what worked, or didn't, within contemporary intentional communities. To that end, I have visited and conducted research in over one hundred intentional communities in Europe, North and South America, Asia, Australia, and New Zealand.

Over time, however, my research and writing has shifted to looking more at the history of these social experiments and the historical lessons to be learned from them. I have found that many people try to create or live within an intentional community but know nothing about the rich history of the movement. So they foolishly “reinvent the wheel.” While this history has been reasonably well researched and written up in the United States and the United Kingdom, it has not, until recently, been so well researched in other parts of the world, including my own country, Australia—and that is now my mission.

Intentional Communities Defined

Intentional community: *Five or more people, drawn from more than one family or kinship group, who have voluntarily come together for the purpose of ameliorating perceived social problems and inadequacies. They seek to live beyond the bounds of mainstream society by adopting a consciously devised and usually well thought-out social and cultural alternative. In the pursuit of their goals, they share significant aspects of their lives together. Participants are characterized by a “we-consciousness,” seeing themselves as a continuing group, separate from and in many ways better than the society from which they emerged.*

Ecovillage: *An intentional community where environmental sustainability is sought, along with social justice, equality, peace, and so forth.*

Definitions from Bill Metcalf, *The Findhorn Book of Community Living* (Findhorn: Findhorn Press, 2004), 9–10.

Throughout history, most political and religious leaders have opposed intentional communities, because they are seen, often correctly, to be a challenge to the status quo. At times, this opposition has led to their violent suppression. In other cases, governments have promoted intentional communities, such as in Australia in the 1890s, New Zealand in the 1970s, and Palestine/Israel for much of the past century. Many urban areas now promote “cohousing,” a popular form of intentional community. Most intentional communities, however, exist partly inside and partly outside the dominant culture and offer little direct political threat. Members living more empowered, comfortable, equitable, secure, and interesting lives with smaller ecological footprints are the real cultural and, therefore, political threat.

A Brief History

Intentional communities can be found throughout most of recorded history. The earliest was probably Homakoeion, developed by Pythagoras in about 525 BCE in what is now southern Italy. Several hundred members, inspired by intellectual and mystical paths, became strict vegetarians, eschewed private property, lived and ate together, and sought to create an ideal society. We know little about their governance, shared visions, and ideals, other than the importance of numerology.

Scholars suggest the Essenes, which started in the second century BCE near the Dead Sea, were an intentional community—and they suggest Jesus spent time there. What is certain is that, after Jesus died, his followers adopted communal living as a way to survive oppression and promote Christianity. Christian monasteries developed in the fourth century CE and persist today as one of the most common forms of intentional community.

Numerous heretical communal groups developed, including the Cathars in eleventh-century and the Waldenses in twelfth-century France, the Brethren of the Free Spirits in thirteenth-century and Anabaptists in sixteenth-century central Europe, and the Diggers in seventeenth-century England. All were violently persecuted by religious and political powers. In spite of that, Anabaptist intentional communities thrive today in North and South America, Europe, Japan, and Australia as Mennonites, Amish, Hutterites, and Bruderhofs. The first intentional community in the United States was probably Swanendael, established in 1663 by Mennonites fleeing persecution in Europe. Since

then, five hundred other historical intentional communities in North America have been researched by scholars such as Yaacov Oved and Foster Stockwell. Laird Schaub, of the Fellowship for Intentional Community, estimates that over three thousand intentional communities thrive in North America today.¹

During the nineteenth century, a flurry of people theorized and wrote about utopianism, imagining how to create intentional communities to solve a wide range of social, economic, and political problems resulting from rapid industrialization. Out of this intellectual foment, hundreds of intentional communities were formed across Europe, North and South America, Australia, and New Zealand. This international movement saw people moving between continents: New Australia members moved from Australia to Paraguay, Doukhobors moved from Russia to Canada, Moravians moved from Central Europe to England and the United States, and Kalevan Kansa moved from Finland to Australia.

In short, intentional communities have been recorded over two and a half millennia and are anything but a modern phenomenon.

Preconceptions and Realities

Most people know little about intentional communities, and what they think they know is often wrong. This could be because, while there have been many films and novels about intentional communities or ecovillages, most present grossly inaccurate pictures, which have no connection to the lifestyle or ideals of the majority of actual communities, either today or in the past.

As I write this in early 2012, two just-released popular movies portray intentional communities: *Wanderlust* shows a rural hippie commune obsessed with sex and banal clichés, while *Martha Marcy May Marlene* features a cult. There have been many other films showing versions of intentional communities, almost always inaccurately. A quick list that comes to mind includes *Black Bear Ranch*, *Bliss*, *Deckchair Danny*, *Easy Rider*, *Flashback*, *I Love You Alice B Toklas*, *Monkey Grip*, *Not Quite Paradise*, *Operation Grandma*, *Sweet Mud*, *Taking Woodstock*, *The Ballad of Jack and Rose*, *The Beach*, *Together*, and *Witness*. Only *Together*, set in a Swedish urban commune, bears any resemblance to reality.

¹ Laird Schaub, "Good News in Hard Times," in *Communities Directory*, ed. L. Schaub (Rutledge, MO: Fellowship for Intentional Community, 2010), 11–13. And email communications.

Numerous novels have also featured intentional communities, generally inaccurately. Some that come to mind are *After the Party*, *Child of the Wind*, *Curtain Creek Farm*, *Drop City*, *Ecotopia*, *Elsewhere*, *Free Amazons of Darkover*, *In Watermelon Sugar*, *Island*, *Names for Nothingness*, *Passing Remarks*, *Ripe Tomatoes*, *Spirit Wrestlers*, *The Bell*, *The Dispossessed*, *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, *The Hippie Trip*, *Walden Two*, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and *Young Hearts*. One could read all these novels but still have no accurate image of what real intentional communities are like.

I have often been interviewed about intentional communities, and I have faced weird questions based on bizarre preconceptions. Here, I will attempt to dispel these.

Preconception: Intentional community members are young.

In the mid-1980s, my colleague Frank Vanclay (now at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands) and I undertook a census of intentional community members in Australia. We found that the average age was late 30s and increasing by about half a year per year. We also found as many participants over 50 as under 30. Other research suggested this age profile applied worldwide in secular intentional communities. Of course, average age cannot increase forever, and we hypothesized that it would level off at about 55 years.

My recent, unpublished demographic research across several countries suggests that the ages of adults in intentional community range from early 20s to mid 90s. Mean ages vary from the low 30s to early 60s, depending on the group's longevity, with urban groups being younger than rural ones. The mean age in most long-lasting intentional communities is now either stable in the mid-50s or slowly decreasing. While this data is very rough and further research is needed, it confirms that the intentional community movement is for mature adults rather than young people.

Preconception: These groups last only a short time with high membership turnover.

I have observed that intentional communities follow a developmental pattern similar to that of small businesses: many more are imagined and planned than ever start. Of those that do start, about half collapse within two years, with perhaps half the remainder collapsing before the end of five years. Most small businesses and intentional communities that make it to five years prosper indefinitely. Just as some businesses become multi-national conglomerates, some intentional communities become large,

multi-million-dollar operations, such as Findhorn Foundation (UK), Damanhur (Italy), and Twin Oaks (United States).

Ben Zablocki found that “membership turnover is high, but not extraordinarily high, compared with that of other organizations. . . . Hospital nurses and factory workers both turnover a bit faster than commune members. University professors, civil servants, and prison warders, at the other extreme, turn over quite a bit more slowly.”² In my research, I observe intentional communities becoming ever more stable with more permanent memberships.

Preconception: Most are led by “gurus” who exploit members, and become cults.

During 30 years of research I have only encountered a few gurus, and only two or three created what is commonly called a “cult.” Many leaders are charismatic, but members rarely lose their critical faculties. In a few rare intentional communities, leaders exploit members, but this is probably less common as compared to in the general workplace.

Nevertheless, there have been so-called cult problems, including Jonestown in Guyana, where 918 members died in 1978; Branch Davidian Adventists in the United States, where 74 members died in 1993; Solar Temple in France, Switzerland, and Canada, where 74 people died between 1994 and 1997; and Heaven’s Gate in the United States, where 39 members died in 1997. Most of these deaths resulted from the direct or indirect actions of their charismatic, perhaps messianic, leaders.³

In any case, *cult* is a pejorative term with little basis in sociological reality, perhaps saying more about the describer than that described.

Preconception: Members engage in “free love.”

In *The Findhorn Book of Community Living*, I wrote, “People who approach an intentional community with voyeuristic hopes are generally disappointed.”⁴ While there used to be considerable sexual experimentation within intentional communities, this is now rare. Even in a well-known intentional community said to practice “free love,” most members are in long-term relationships, albeit often with several people. Intentional

2 Ben Zablocki, *Alienation and Charisma* (New York: Free Press, 1980), 155.

3 John Hall, *Apocalypse Observed* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

4 Bill Metcalf, *The Findhorn Book of Community Living* (Findhorn: Findhorn Press, 2004), 100.

communities may challenge social norms but, with some exceptions, are remarkably conventional in sexual matters and sometimes more moralistic than the wider society.

Rape and child abuse occasionally occur in intentional communities, but far less often than in the wider community. Often, if other members within an intentional community observe such behavior, they stop it. A rare exception is in communities where a charismatic leader has people so under her or his control that exploitation is tolerated and becomes the norm. Such activities can even be portrayed as part of God's plan or some such thing. While rare, when such cases come to the media's attention, all intentional communities are tarred with the same brush.

Preconception: Members are impoverished, living on lentils and brown rice; or they live rich lives, exploiting others.

The average income within intentional communities is almost always lower than that received by similar people in the wider society. Some intentional community members do live in poverty, but this is rare and often associated with factors such as mental health.

Also, some intentional community members receive welfare, to which they are legally entitled regardless of where and how they live. My research showed that the percentage of intentional community members on welfare is slightly higher than in the general population, but this is because people trying to live on a limited pension find that it goes much further within an intentional community. On a limited pension, one can enjoy a better lifestyle within an intentional community than would have been possible elsewhere, because sharing resources usually lowers living costs.

Moreover, while members generally consume less than those within the host society, they do not experience this as poverty. In fact, research, such as by Michael Corr and Dan MacLeod, shows that while people living in intentional communities have less disposable income, their access to and ability to enjoy material things is higher than in the general population.⁵ For example, an intentional community of 20 people might have five televisions. So, while each person "owns" only one quarter (five-twentieths) of a television, each has a choice of five TVs to watch.

5 Michael Corr and Dan MacLeod, "Getting it Together," *Environment* 14, no. 9 (1972): 2-10.

“Voluntary simplicity” is often a motivator for joining an intentional community, and members report richer and better lives even though (or perhaps because of) their reduced consumption and ecological footprints. Recent research by Graham Meltzer also found this to apply to cohousing groups, a particularly popular urban form of intentional community.⁶

Why Do Intentional Communities Succeed or Fail?

The majority of intentional communities, like the majority of other social organizations, do not last very long. When people invest so much time, passion, energy, and resources into a social experiment, why do they fail? And why do other intentional communities thrive for a very long time? Of course, we must also ask whether a group has “failed” just because it shut down.

The longest lasting intentional community in the world is Sabbathday Lake, a Shaker community established in New York State (USA) in 1783. Bon Homme, a Hutterite colony in South Dakota (USA), is 138 years old, while the oldest Kibbutz, Degania in Israel, is 102 years old. Besides these exceptionally long-lived intentional communities, many others are into their second or third generation. Scotland’s Findhorn Foundation celebrates its 50th birthday this year; Twin Oaks, in the United States, is 45; and several Australian intentional communities, such as Dharmananda and Moora Moora, are now celebrating 40th birthdays. So why do some persist and prosper?

In my earlier research (*From Utopian Dreaming and Shared Visions, Shared Lives*), I identified that the key factor was not that members agreed on everything, avoided conflict, or even liked each other, but that they shared a common vision. Intentional communities, like any other social form, experience conflict. There are two ways for an intentional community to successfully resolve conflict. A few have a strong, charismatic, often theocratic leader, who resolves matters on behalf of the group. Far more often, however, members will work through a form of consensus to come up with a solution that might not please everyone but with which everyone can live. In some places, such as at Findhorn Foundation, meditating members visualize the outcome; at ZEGG in Germany, members employ a method they call Forum; members in other

⁶ Graham Meltzer, *Sustainable Community: Learning from the Cohousing Model* (Victoria: Trafford, 2005).

intentional communities simply let an issue sit for a time, with people discussing and thinking about it, before reaching consensus.

Consensus does not mean that each member has a right of veto (although they do), but that everyone shares the vision and is committed to reaching the optimum decision for the group, rather than just for themselves. This process works remarkably well in most communities.

Conclusion

Several thousand intentional communities thrive around the globe, and the number is rapidly increasing. While some have a religious ethos, the vast majority are secular. A strong environmental ethic is held by most members of most intentional communities, and that is why some are called ecovillages. Intentional community members are demographically similar to people living conventional lifestyles, but they consume less energy and resources, and appear to be happier with their lifestyle. Members also experience similar problems faced by other people, but often are able to reach better solutions because of shared visions and strong communal bonds. Intentional communities are not “utopias,” but they are on a utopian quest in trying to achieve if not a perfect society, then at least a much better, more sustainable world in which to live.

We should offer support and wish them well.

and alternative approaches to dealing with crisis. Along with quantumphysicist Hans-Peter Dürr, he is board chair of the Munich-based NGO Global Challenges Network.

Anna Kovasna is a PhD candidate in social anthropology at Lund University in Sweden. Specializing in ecovillages and the creation of small-scale, sustainable economies and cultures in Europe, she is currently based in Findhorn, Scotland, carrying out long-term fieldwork for her dissertation. Anna is also the former president of the Swedish Ecovillage Network, where she continues to play an active role.

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Jenny Pickerill is a reader in environmental geography at the University of Leicester. Her research focuses on how we understand, value and (ab)use the environment, with a particular interest in inspiring grassroots solutions to environmental problems and in positive ways to change social practices. Her special interest in innovative eco-housing is based in her work with ecovillages and self-built eco-communities in Wales, England, Spain, Argentina, Australia, Thailand, and the United States. She has published three books: *Cyberprotest: Environmental Activism Online* (2003), *Anti-War Activism: New Media and Protest in the Information Age* (2008, with Kevin Gillan and Frank Webster) and *Low Impact Development* (2009, with Larch Maxey).