Communes in the 21st Century

"Do you all sleep in the same room?"

Sunfrog (Andy "Sunfrog" Smith)

a review of

Communities Directory: A Guide to Intentional Communities and Cooperative Living, Third Edition, Jillian Downey and Elph Morgan, eds., 2000, $30 from the Fellowship for Intentional Community, www.ic.org, or RR 1, Box 156-D, Rutledge, MO 63563

"We tried living communally in the Sixties and it didn't work." "I didn't know communes still existed, except in California." "Do you all sleep in the same room?"

More than three decades after the contemporary wave of communal activity took root across North America, many people still harbor knee-jerk assumptions about the nature of cooperative life. Of its many functional and philosophical uses, The *Communities Directory,* now in its third edition, is a valuable tool for dispelling the myths, chronicling the successes, and celebrating the sheer diversity of collective living.

Of the more than 700 communities listed in this new encyclopedic catalog of communal culture, several boast long histories: dozens have survived since the 1960s, a handful since the 1930s and 1940s, and even one that began at the end of the nineteenth century. The popular media's incessant need to both romanticize and demonize hippie idealism as a throwback notion best reserved for classic rock radio, retro fashion, or made-for-TV docu-dramas (as opposed to a worthy political critique of capitalist daily life), directly contradicts the 'fact that the vast communal counter-tradition in America never disappeared and transcends trite temporal packaging.

Despite empty proclamations declaring the death of the cooperative counterculture, the contemporary communal movement continues to brew a balm of economic cooperation and ecological sustainability amid the jaded McCulture of rampant consumerism and technocratic individualism.

Perhaps the single most striking feature of this almost 500-page resource book is its 40 pages of maps and charts cataloging the diversity of the communal movement. From California to Connecticut, from Michigan to Montana, from Texas to Tennessee, the directory demonstrates, without doubt, the simple declaration: we are everywhere. From Catholic Workers to Radical Faeries, from vegan activists to separatist dykes, from New Age to old age, this Directory details the dynamic breadth and depth of a social, spiritual, and political phenomenon.

As with the two previous editions of the directory published in 1990 and 1995, the new version provides a comprehensive and indispensable resource for anyone considering visiting, joining, or starting a community, for people already living in community desiring an up-to-date networking tool, and for researchers wishing to study the communal movement at the turn-of-the-millennium.

In addition to the updated and expanded listings of specific communities, this edition features new sections like "The Many Flavors of Community" and "Living It," focusing on how different communities offer safe spaces and meet the needs of different groups, from Christians to queers, children to the elderly. Within these sections, I found Sandorfag's "Recruiting Queer Communards! Homophobia, Sexuality, and Community" to be a compelling reflection on the benefits of organizing community around erotic dissent.

However, in making room for many new articles, I noticed the absence of some of the better pieces from the last edition, with nothing comparable to replace them. In particular, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," "Buying Your Community Property," and "For the Next Seven Generations: Indigenous Americans and Communalism," all helpful and provocative essays in the 1995 edition, have been omitted, and none of the new inclusions cover similar territory.

Over the last several years, I've read challenging critiques of intentional communities from an anti-authoritarian perspective (and have written some of my own in Hobos and Homesteaders and Utopian Prospects, Communal Projects). For the critical reader looking for examples of how the communal movement has been absorbed by the techno-capitalist amoeba, one need look no further than Laird Schaub's introductory essay, "The State of the Communities Movement," for its unambiguous celebration of communities trying to appeal to the mainstream or participating in banking, e-commerce, and the Information Age.

Schaub implies that through education and outreach, communitarians will change the "wider culture" into a garden of nonviolence and cooperation; however, his glib remarks like "building community is

good business" suggest to me a watered-down, capitalistic version of communalism devoid of a radical spark and sadly recuperated by the dictates of the market.

While most of us, communitarian or not, must work for wages to survive in this society, I find it disturbing when success is equated with economic viability in ostensibly radical projects, and unfortunately, Schuab does just that in these otherwise down-to-earth remarks.

Despite the fact that everything marvelous, beautiful, risky, and revolutionary about libertarian commune-ism is too often discarded as naive idealism and youthful hubris, some communalists have not burned out their radical fire or sold out to counterculture-dot-com.

The Communities Directory includes examples of enough people who still believe we can truly change the world (and not just our commune's profit margin) to make it a worthy document and resource for creative transformation.

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