

Industrial Experimentation

Communal ventures in the first two centuries of European settlement in America were uniformly religious in nature, mostly Puritan, Pietist, or Anabaptist sects fleeing persecution in their homelands. With the advance of the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century, utopian socialist movements emerged, condemning the exploitative nature of capitalism and the factory system and seeking to reform society through socialist communalism. They proposed alternative models of social, economic, and industrial organization, and implemented these models in a series of communal experiments.

Inspired by utopian socialist authors (*e.g.*, Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, and Etienne Cabet), these movements surged in popularity following economic crises, such as the Panics of 1837 and 1873. Following a few pioneers in the 1820s, the 1840s saw the first substantial wave of utopian socialist movements in America. This wave reached its peak in the mid 1840s – with a spike of over 40 communes founded in less than two years – and declined with the subsequent economic recovery. Even as the founding of their communal ventures waned, these movements left lasting effects on American culture and politics, especially in campaigns for social reform. They also inspired future attempts by the state to address crises of social organization, such as the socioeconomic integration of emancipated slaves or the resettlement of unemployed workers during the Great Depression.

[A] Utopian Experiments

[B] Owenism and New Harmony

Robert Owen, a Welsh industrialist and philanthropist, was an early advocate of labor reform, childcare, and public education. In the early 19th century, he reorganized and managed the mills at New Lanark, Scotland, aiming to create exemplary working and living conditions for employees and their families. He then began publishing more explicitly socialist ideas, arguing that an egalitarian social order would foster superior character and moral development, and that shared economic prosperity would eventually eliminate class distinctions. These writings ultimately inspired dozens of socialist communities in the United States, Canada, and Europe.

Owen's first attempt at implementing his designs was in 1825 when he purchased the property of the former Pietist Harmonie settlement in southern Indiana and established a socialist commune called New Harmony. In this community, education and healthcare were free for all members, whereas groceries and clothing were purchased from the community store with credit earned from working in the commune's enterprises – manufacturing soap, glue, shoes, textile, candles, and alcohol, as well as agriculture. Daily work was assigned a monetary value based on the type of work. At the end of the year, profits were distributed according to the labor that members contributed, reduced by the value of the goods they had taken from the community store. Unfortunately, the accounting process for this system was cumbersome, manual laborers complained about the value assigned to their work, and many members consumed community goods while contributing little to their production. The system was abandoned in the following year, when individuals began receiving credit based on the evaluation of their character by supervisors; however, this new system did not solve the labor problem. Several of New Harmony's operations were understaffed, and their textile, distillery, and candle plants hardly functioned. In 1827, the commune disbanded amid substantial debt.

[B] Fourierism and the North American Phalanx

Charles Fourier, a French intellectual, condemned the capitalist system as unjust, exploitative, and morally wrong. To unite people of all classes in an egalitarian society, Fourier envisioned a system of planned cooperative communities called phalanxes, each established on 6,000 acres of land with 1,620 members living in a six-story dormitory (called a ‘phalanstery’). In Fourier’s vision, phalanx members would divide themselves into specialized work groups focusing on tasks that they find enjoyable. He believed that such cooperative labor would lead to increased production and economic prosperity. Fourier’s ideas were popularized in America by Albert Brisbane and Horace Greeley in the 1840s. As editor of the *New York Tribune*, Greeley gave Brisbane his own column as a platform for promoting Fourierism.

Of the over 30 Fourierist communities established in America, the North American Phalanx, founded in 1843, was the longest-lived and most prominent. From 1847 to its demise in 1855, the community served as a hub for the Fourierist movement in America. Having learned from New Harmony the dangers of unproductive members, the North American Phalanx screened all prospective members. Those who passed the screening process served a one year probation period, after which members judged their performance to ensure that only productive individuals were allowed into the community. Such practices reduced the threat of loafers, but also limited the commune’s growth. The membership hardly exceeded one hundred members, living in a three-story phalanstery.

The North American Phalanx divided labor into six work “series”: agriculture, animal husbandry, industry and handcrafts, domestic service, education, and culture/entertainment. Consistent with Fourier’s vision, all members chose the series in which they would work. Groups were fairly sex segregated, with women responsible for most domestic service and education. Credits were awarded for work performed, with more credits awarded for less desirable work. Like at New Harmony, members disagreed over the value of their labor.

The North American Phalanx was among the most successful of many Fourierist communes. Its prime location in New Jersey made it easily accessible to visitors and facilitated the sale of their goods – produce, livestock, and flour – in New York City markets. In 1854, a fire destroyed two of their mills and a great deal of their wheat and corn. With damages totaling over 14,000 dollars and members unable to agree on how to proceed, the commune dissolved.

[B] Icarians and Icaria

Like Fourier and Owen, former French politician Etienne Cabet viewed conventional labor relations as exploitative and immoral. He was inspired by Owen’s writings and became acquainted with Owen’s son Robert Dale while exiled in London. In his utopian novel, *Un Voyage In Icarie*, Cabet envisioned an egalitarian society that prohibited money and private property and provided individuals with education, healthcare, food, and housing. In 1849, after an abortive attempt at settlement in Texas, Cabet founded Icaria in Nauvoo, Illinois, on land purchased from migrating Mormons.

The Icarians produced soap, shoes, candles, clothes, mattresses, and linens, which they sold to outsiders. Like most communes of this period, Icaria’s labor was divided by sex. Women took care of the domestic chores, whereas men were assigned to be mill or shop workers, farmers, or laundry washers. Children were also given work assignments. Work was highly regimented and monitored by supervisors. In 1856, a disgruntled majority of Icarians challenged Cabet’s leadership and forced him to leave the community. Cabet and a group of

‘True Icarians’ moved to St. Louis, Missouri, to rebuild the community, but he died a few days later. A series of schisms and migrations over the following four decades led to the founding (and folding) of Icarian communes in Iowa, Missouri, and California.

[B] Other Movements

After the Panic of 1873, another wave of utopian socialist communes emerged, several of which were inspired by the writings of Henry George and Edward Bellamy (*see* UTOPIAN SOCIALISM). In their respective books, *Progress and Poverty* and *Looking Backward*, George and Bellamy argued that industrialization leads to great wealth disparities between laborers and factory owners. George’s solution was to abolish all taxes except a steep tax on land, thus freeing labor, economic exchange, and land improvements from taxation. While George did not support communal living himself, several single-tax communities were inspired by his work, including the Fairhope Industrial Association (1895-present) in southern Alabama. Bellamy advocated government ownership of industry. His work inspired communities such as the Ruskin Cooperative Association (1894-1899) in Tennessee and the Llano del Rio Company (1914-1918) in California.

Even as the utopian socialists played a more prominent role in challenging capitalism and the factory system, the sectarian communal movements left more subtle footprints by engaging directly in industry. The Shakers (*see* LATER RELIGIOUS COMMUNITARIANISM) are credited with many inventions — the flat broom, a circular saw, a washing machine, the clothespin, a threshing machine, a pea sheller, a revolving oven shelf, and many other labor-saving devices. Pietists are also recognized for their industrial innovations. For example, the Harmonists and Amana Inspirationists were pioneers in the use of steam power. The Oneida Perfectionists, notorious for their non-monogamous ‘complex marriage’ (*see* LIFESTYLE EXPERIMENTATION), produced silk, furniture, and baskets, and worked in sawmilling, blacksmithing, and canning fruit. They are also known for their inventions including an improved washing machine, a lazy-susan, mop-wringer, potato peeler, and a line of steel animal traps that sold worldwide and remain in use today. Having since abandoned their communal structure, both Amana and Oneida remain prominent brands of consumer goods.

[A] Communal Legacy

The reform efforts of these utopian socialist movements did not end with the dissolution of their communities, but lived on in the careers and activism of their members. William Maclure, New Harmony’s school director, established Workingmen’s libraries in Indiana and Illinois, which set a precedent for free public libraries. Robert Dale Owen was elected to the Indiana House of representatives, to the US Congress, and to the Indiana Constitutional Convention. He played a pivotal role in creating Indiana’s free public education system and securing greater property rights for women. Owenite Frances Wright was among the first advocates of women’s suffrage in America and also a prominent abolitionist, envisioning communal settlements to educate and train slaves in preparation for freedom. In 1826, Wright founded Nashoba, a racially integrated commune in Tennessee.

Likewise, Fourierists founded mutual insurance groups, cooperative stores, and many clubs dedicated to reform causes such as abolitionism and women’s suffrage. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, co-founder and president of the National Women’s Suffrage Association, was greatly affected by Fourierist ideology and visited the North American Phalanx and other Fourierist communities (Brook Farm and Raritan Bay Union).

See also LATER RELIGIOUS COMMUNITARIANISM; LIFESTYLE EXPERIMENTATION; ROBERT OWEN ESTABLISHES NEW HARMONY (1825); UTOPIAN SOCIALISM.

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Further Reading

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