Views and Commentaries

Excavating Utopia: Why Archaeologists Should Study “Ideal” Communities of the Nineteenth Century

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The study of utopias is riddled with contradictions: we admire and fear them; they are a radical critique of the modernist societies that surround them, and yet they are in some ways the archetypal product of modernity. This paper suggests that studying Utopia could be of value in analyzing some of the complexities and contradictions of Western society and ideology in the nineteenth century, as well as causing us to question some of the preconceptions we regularly bring to the study of the archaeological past. Finally I will suggest that a different kind of nineteenth century, one which includes the radical dissent and resistance of utopian thinkers and experimenters, provides a strong basis for a critique of the social values of modern capitalism.

KEY WORDS: utopia; nineteenth century; political theory; America.

WHAT IS A UTOPIA?

The utopian has often been disregarded as a fool or feared as a dangerous madman, the contagion of whose fancies could lead his followers to destruction, particularly if the fantasist proceeded to act out his vision (Manuel, 1965, p. xiii)

The word “utopia,” coined by Thomas More in the sixteenth century, means either “good place” (eu-topia) or “no-place” (u-topia), a deliberate pun and one often used since invoked by utopian scholars. Despite its nonexistence, Utopia has a central location in the development of political and social thought in the west. Literature may be described as utopian; so may social and political theory (in fact, Kumar (1990, 1991) contends that, as it envisages some kind of idealized state,

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all social and political philosophy is utopian; Geoghegan (1987, pp. 3–7) makes a similar point. Some would see the local meanings of utopia to be so variable, so contextual, that the examination of “utopia” through time and space and in different manifestations is a pointless project (Skinner, 1969, pp. 37–39). Some (textual) scholars would not accept the designation “utopia” for any community which was actually realized by experiment, arguing that utopia, of necessity, cannot and does not exist except in the imagination: only products of the creative imagination such as literature and art could properly be called utopian (see Negley, 1977, for a survey of some of these). Nevertheless, Kumar has convincingly argued that it is appropriate to recognize something distinctive in the highly ordered, integrally conceived, and philosophically or religiously motivated (or “intentional”) communities of the early modern and particularly the modern period. He maintains that although ideas related to utopia, such as the Golden Age, or the place of excess (Cockayne), the Millennium and the Ideal City, are found in other periods and places, “utopia” is specifically Western (Kumar, 1987, p. 19) and limited to the period following the publication of More’s Utopia (Kumar, 1987, 1991).

The definition of a “utopian” community is not clear and the word is used differently by different people. Kumar (1990, 1991) maintains a division between what Manuel and Manuel (1979) have called “theoretical utopistics” (utopian literature and political philosophy) and “applied utopistics” (the foundation of community and other experiments aimed at producing an ideal society). This article mainly explores this second kind of utopia, and considers the value and potential of working towards “an archaeology of utopia.” “Utopian” communities have been established by religious and secular visionaries since at least the sixteenth century, or earlier if one includes monastic and similar communities, though this paper employs a more limited definition of the utopian community, discussed later.

The kind of utopias I am concerned with here are neither the purely imagined ones of fiction, social theory, or satire, nor the subtle influences of political philosophy or social theory involved in shaping the family, the domestic space, or the workplace at a general social level, but the communal experiments in the establishment of ideal societies undertaken by groups of disaffected people, or organized by individual visionaries in the early modern and modern west. These communities were founded according to both religious and secular philosophies and could be run according to authoritarian, hierarchical, liberal, or anarchist principles. They could include half a dozen people or many hundreds. With such variation in “utopian” practice, we might ask, in general terms, what are the characteristics of utopia?

Perhaps above all, Utopia, in its imaginative and its experimental forms, is characterized by a belief in the perfectibility of humanity—a basic goodness in human nature. Much other social and political theory assumes that humans are mostly motivated by greed and self-aggrandizement, and that the maintenance of social order is “a constant battle against selfishness and the plunge into anarchy” (Kumar, 1991, p. 29). Only if human nature is held in check by various legal
and political structures and sanctions, they assume, can we function as a society. By contrast, utopians believe that if the conditions were right, people would live happily and equitably together. They assume a basic human tendency towards cooperation and harmony. The only obstacles that impede the expression of these human traits concern the ordering of society. Competitive and individualistic capitalism is particularly inimical to the fulfillment of human nature. However, given the right kind of ordering, people would attain “a more or less permanent state of material plenty, social harmony and individual fulfillment” (Kumar, 1991, p. 29). Where utopian communism differs from a Marxist program is in the means by which this society will be brought about; utopians assume that when the truth of their view is understood, all people thus “illuminated” will work harmoniously to achieve it, a view that contrasts with both the Marxist rhetoric of class struggle (Ulam, 1965, p. 128), and the liberal individualist ethos of competition and personal achievement.

Utopian thinkers are programmatic and proactive in designing such a society. The communal experimenters (but not all utopians) believed that the new ideal society would be designed and engineered, rather than the product of organic, undirected cultural development or social evolution. Utopians have a highly developed, post-Enlightenment concept of “society,” in that they believe it to be “a human artefact open to rational improvement” (Goodwin, 1978, p. 1). Improvement was to be achieved through human agency. As Guarneri (1997, p.162) writes of Fourier’s utopian socialism: “a communal way of life did not develop; it was simply set up in full dress from a rational plan.” Engineering in utopia can be technological, social, eugenic, or several of these. The use of technological innovation to facilitate productive or domestic labor characterized some utopian communities. Shakers continue to be known for technological innovation as well as effecting large-scale transformations of the landscape (e.g., Janzen, 1981; McCool, 1963). Other later nineteenth-century utopias, particularly the rural communities influenced by thinkers like Morris and Ruskin in Britain or Thoreau and Emerson in North America, were wary of some recent developments in technology, seeing them as part of the process of dehumanization to which they stood in opposition. However, very few utopias opposed technology per se, and many made innovative use of developments to enable sustainable and pleasant work and leisure practices. Certainly social engineering was important in all utopias—this characteristically took the form of radical approaches to children’s education and attempts to channel social interaction in certain prescribed and approved ways. This involved the use of sometimes-elaborate codes and rules, the invention of social traditions and communal practices, and the organization of space and material culture to promote particular patterns of interaction. Some utopian thinkers, such as John Humphrey Noyes, the founder of the Oneida perfectionists, took the idea of engineering even further and advocated eugenics in pursuit of their perfect world (Carden, 1969, 1971; Klaw, 1993).
Utopian communal experimenters generally ignored or circumvented the State. Many utopian thinkers were on the political left, though some were not; many are hard to place on the scale of traditional politics. Moreover, even socialist utopians differed markedly from non-utopian political philosophers. Harrison (1989, p. 14) points out that utopian socialism contrasts with state socialism in that it typically ignores the existing parliament, local government, political parties, trade unions, and other structures of administration and law. Similarly, most religious utopians deliberately situated themselves outside the frameworks of mainstream established churches. Harrison (1989), in his assessment of the legacy of Robert Owen, draws out of Owenite thinking a fundamental belief in the capacity of humans to bring about their own destiny; such a belief is equally evident in most other utopian thought. Personal power, rather than the power of a benevolent state or the fulfillment of an obscure economic force, can bring about the ideal state.

More broadly, all utopian experiments—secular, religious, and political—involved an appropriation of control over one’s own life, one’s social relations, one’s labor, and time. In that way, for the individuals involved, it was an immediate and effective way of rejecting the State, and the values and practices of capitalism. One need not wait for one’s party to come into power, or for the masses to rise, or the millennium to come. In a world where people were increasingly aware of both the desirability of self-direction, and of their own personal powerlessness under the very capitalist system which espoused individualism as a moral value, utopia provided an attractive option, perhaps especially for women. A large number of women were involved in utopian experiments. There could be reasons for this: non-utopian socialism in the nineteenth century was very much focused on the alienated paid industrial workforce, which was remote from many women’s experiences. Its organization was adversarial, rough, and masculine, based on the idea of revolution or class antagonism. Utopian socialism, by contrast, was deliberately holistic; it involved reform in domestic and family arrangements and appeared to offer the possibility of real change for women trapped in or threatened by unhappy marriages, relentless childbirth, or domestic slavery. At the same time its means were cooperative rather than combative. Relationships within utopian communities were often expressed as familial relations and were thus closer to most women’s experience and expertise and were situated within the ideological parameters of acceptable feminine behavior. This does not only mean that men were more likely to tolerate women in a cooperative utopian socialist endeavor than in organizing the docks, but that utopian experimentation offered a negotiable expansion of women’s roles.

**CRITIQUING CAPITALISM**

Utopias with serious social intent are not merely spun out of fantasy, but emerge from a critique of existing imperfections. (Goodwin, 1978, p. 13)
One universally observable feature of nineteenth-century utopian communities is their dissatisfaction with aspects of nineteenth-century society and philosophy. In this way, utopias are places of dissent (or as Van Bueren and Hupp, 1999 prefer, “resistance”). All the communities considered in this paper could be considered anticapitalist in some way. Whether avowedly socialist or not, all were deeply disturbed by the social consequences of industrialization and capitalism. Some were also unhappy with the loss of old religious certainties entailed in the acceptance of new scientific understandings. The desire for order, comprehensibility, and fixity is widely evident in utopian ventures. It is almost always the case that utopian communities are envisioned statically, as an end. When the utopian world order has been realized, there is no further room for change and development. Perfection, or “Truth,” is not progressive (Olson, 1982, p. 230). The extremes of this view are represented by groups like the Shakers, who saw their utopia resulting from the end of earthly existence for humanity, and Teed’s Koreshans, whose cosmology and spirituality were distinguished, at a time of scientific uncertainties, by boundedness, finity, an integral, wholly comprehensible universe (Landing, 1997). Porter and Lukerman emphasize the static, closed, and ahistorical nature of Utopia in their survey of imaginary utopias and dystopias, and such a quality is also evident in the blueprints of ideal societies that the communitarian experimenters pursued (Porter and Lukerman, 1976). In part the static uniformity of utopian communities as they were conceived is related to millennialism—the belief that the thousand years of bliss predicted by early Christian mystics was at hand or, in some cases, had already commenced. Utopian societies often believed that they were preparing a new society for the millennium, conceived as a static state of perfection.

The communitarian impulse was galvanized by the longing that many people in the nineteenth century experienced for a sense of community. A decline in the wider sense of community was identified beyond utopian circles. Attempts to engineer politically unthreatening communities were made by philanthropic, but essentially paternalistic, capitalists (Hardy, 1979, p. 11). In Britain, Titus Salt’s workers’ town at Saltaire (constructed in the 1850s) was such a “community,” as was the Cadburys’ Bournville (1895), the Lever brothers’ Port Sunlight (1888), and arguably the earlier settlements at Josiah Wedgwood’s Etruria and Robert Owen’s New Lanark from about 1800. The American “factory town” might equally be organized along paternalistic lines (Beaudry, 1989; Mrozowski et al., 1996; Tomaso et al., 2001). Nineteenth-century movements in town planning also evidence a quasi-utopian quest for the reconstitution of small-scale society, such as the garden city movement which sought the salvation of society through architecture and planning (Buder, 1990; Ward, 1992). Ultimately, however, these attempted merely to ameliorate the poor conditions of communities and did not seriously threaten the essentially competitive and atomistic world view which had produced them. Even Robert Owen’s boasted utopian community at New Lanark, Scotland, was
a cotton mill. No matter what he did for his Scottish laborers, he continued to process cotton grown on American plantations under institutional slavery. This is the man who dedicated one of his books to William Wilberforce, the abolitionist, and was himself a forthright campaigner against slavery (Harrison, 1969, p. 22).

Porter and Lukerman (1976) divide utopias into those that look backwards to a rural Eden, eschew technology, centrality, and planning on the one hand; and on the other, “New Jerusalems,” cities of the future which are planned, ordered, technologically advanced, engineered, bounded, and centralized. Examination of the communal experimenters’ utopias make Porter and Lukerman’s division difficult to sustain. Many experimental communities combined “Edenic” features such as rural village settlement and decentralized economic production, often including a large element of self-sufficiency, with “future-oriented” traits such as the exploitation of new technology, a highly ordered social universe and a clear boundary between community and the outside world.

Because they involve an entire, radical transformation, utopian societies are necessarily concerned with all aspects of life: home and family as well as agriculture, industry, and politics. Utopian writing and planning is characterized also, then, by a preoccupation with the details of daily life: What should people’s houses look like? What clothes should they wear? At what age should the children be weaned? What should people eat and at what times? Guidelines even existed in specific communities to tell people how far apart they should stand, what their sexual practices should be, and what kind of underwear was appropriate in the ideal society. Charles Fourier, in particular, is notorious for the “quaintly precise specifications” (Beecher and Bienvenu, 1971, p. 64) with which he distinguished, for example, 8 types of pear grower, and 49 degrees of cuckoldry. Marx was dismissive of “recipes” for socialist society (Levitas, 1990, pp. 35–58), but in their belief that mundane things like houses, clothes, and daily practices were of key importance to building the new society, utopian thinkers look surprisingly modern. It also makes utopian experiments potentially very interesting to archaeologists.

Many features, therefore, are widely shared by communities designated as “utopian.” In particular, one may pick out the following characteristics:

1. They are practical critiques of the society that surrounds them. They are born out of profound dissatisfaction with the values and practices of their societies.
2. They challenge those values and practices at a fundamental level by pursuing alternatives to central aspects of normal social practice in the wider society, such as the family or the capitalist system.
3. They are both visionary and missionary. They believe that their way of life represents a better (in fact, the best possible) future for everybody and that if other people were to witness its advantages they would voluntarily abandon their accustomed ways and join the utopians.
Excavating Utopia

4. Utopian communards have made voluntary and conscious decisions to live differently and apart from the society around them.

5. Utopian communities are often highly designed, communally organized, and life in them is tightly ordered (although this is not true of all utopian communities; anarchistic ones, such as those that followed the beliefs of Tolstoy and Kropotkin (Marsh, 1982, pp. 99–111), would be an obvious exception).

6. They are communities of utopian thinkers: people who believe in the basic goodness of humankind and our innate capacity for harmonious social organization.

These criteria exclude a number of communal and sectarian groups as non-utopian. For a start, some highly designed communities may involve coercion and thus could not be called utopian. Such groups include charitable institutions, workhouses, prisons, borstals, and reformatories. Nevertheless, because such communities share with utopian endeavors an emphatic designedness, a separation from the rest of society and communal organization, archaeological work on such institutions is likely to illuminate our studies of utopian communities (e.g., Brodie et al., 1999; De Cunzo, 1995; Lucas, 1999; Morrison, 1999; Richardson, 1998). The criterion of voluntarism also excludes what Erasmus (1977) has called the “Leviathan” utopian experiments of the Soviet Union, Maoist China, and Nazi Germany, for example, although all those political systems have been understood as in some way realizing utopian ideals (e.g., Mannheim, 1991 [1936]), which has often led to a disillusionment and ultimately a rejection of utopianism (e.g., Ulam, 1965, and most authors of twentieth-century dystopian fiction).

Other groups of people who have adopted communal organization for expediency—some early colonial settlements for example, or a number of villages of religious minorities in colonial and postcolonial America, such as the Moravians, Hutterites, or Amish—would also probably fall outside the tighter definition of utopian community suggested here. Whether monastic communities could properly be called utopian is also debatable. They are both communal and voluntary, but since they did not arise as a critique of the lay world, but as a personal response to a religious vocation, and because they do not attempt to provide a pattern by which everybody should live, perhaps they are not really utopias. Another question prompted by these criteria is whether the second and subsequent generation to live as communards are still utopians, if they have not made a conscious and voluntary decision to live differently to the rest of society.

Why might we be interested—either as political individuals or as archaeologists—in Utopia? The rest of this essay is devoted to exploring that question, and particularly to the examination of the potential for an archaeology of Utopia.
WHAT ARCHAEOLOGISTS HAVE STUDIED AND WHAT THEY MIGHT STUDY

Utopia is a hot topic in academia. There are two very large international academic societies devoted to the subject (the Society for Utopian Studies and the Communal Studies Association), and hundreds of articles and books relating in some way to Utopia are published annually. Moreover, Utopia is a place where a number of disciplines have converged, including architecture, history, geography, art history, film criticism, and social and political philosophy. Archaeology has little to contribute to the essentially literary study of fictional utopias, but might help to examine the relationship between written utopias, including accounts of established communities, and the actual practice of living in utopian communities. At a basic level archaeological study can compensate for omissions and ambiguities in historical sources. Archaeology can reveal exact locations and layouts of community buildings, farms, and landscapes. Archaeological evidence also informs us about what was constructed at community sites, what activities took place, the extent of productive and other activities, the area of cultivation, and the extent to which local resources were exploited. All this could be useful information in compiling individual site histories. But the potential of archaeological research is much greater than merely filling in the gaps in textually derived historical knowledge, or even in confirming or challenging other historical knowledge. Archaeology can address with considerable sophistication questions about the experience of those who chose to live differently to most people in the society around them. I concede that this essay poses more questions than it answers, but I aim here to set out some of the research questions that an archaeology of Utopia might pursue.

Change and Transformation

One approach to the study of utopian communities has been, in the past, to evaluate their "success" according to criteria such as recruitment and endurance. However, in recent years a number of scholars have argued that the question of success, narrowly defined, is perhaps misleading. First, there are numerous other criteria—of influence and effect for example, against which the utopian community could be measured (Harrison, 1989; Kumar, 1991). Ideas developed in communitarian settings were often significant in wider society. For example, the educational methods pioneered in Owenite communities were widely influential and provided models for the establishment of national education programs in Europe and North America, even after the collapse or transformation of Owen’s own communities at New Lanark, New Harmony, and Queenswood (Kumar, 1991, p. 77). Secondly, as the American communitarian scholar Donald Pitzer has argued, the question of success or failure is a red herring which diverts attention from the interesting issues of "developmental communalism" (Pitzer, 1989, 1997). Pitzer
Excavating Utopia

argues that the communal can be seen as a developmental stage in the evolution of communities. The transformation of utopias, then, into other kinds of community should not necessarily be regarded as a failure.

For example, the Amana villages in eastern Iowa were the eventual American home of the Community of True Inspiration, a communal sect founded in Germany in the eighteenth century. From the time of their establishment in the mid-nineteenth century until the 1930s the colonies were organized according to strict communal principles: land and the means of production were jointly owned; labor was communally organized and the basic material needs of all members were met by the community (Andelson, 1997, pp. 188–189). Under such an organization the communities thrived for many years and developed economic strengths in agriculture and manufacture. Eventually, however, as worldly temptations began to seduce the young people of the villages, and the individual limitations imposed began to chafe others, the communities were in danger of falling apart altogether. After much discussion, the community made a decision to abandon communal ownership. The reorganized society pursued business activities as a joint-stock company, but maintained distinctive religious practices and outlooks. The transformation of the Amana colonies from a communal sect to one of America’s leading manufacturers of household appliances, Andelson has argued, does not represent the “failure of communism,” but part of the history of a dynamic group, many of whose distinctive social and religious views have survived for over 300 years (Andelson, 1997).

What is the Relationship Between the Communal and the Individual?

All communal societies need to negotiate the relationship between the communal and the individual, between the public and the private (and, of course, between the community and the wider world: a relationship considered in more detail later). We can ask what activities occurred privately and which were collectivized or communalized? How were the different spaces elaborated? Bates (1997) has noted that at Oneida, where communal, nonexclusive relationships were encouraged, private spaces were small, unelaborated, and marginal, reserved only for sleeping and toilet, in contrast to the elaborate, central, and spacious areas given over to interaction between community members (cf. Carden, 1971, [1969] p. 43). There is also evidence, at some communal sites, to suggest that the ownership and use of material objects was sometimes more individualistic than was laid down in the community rules. At Ephrata Cloister, a German Pietist community of devout individuals living under a quasi-monastic rule which embraced the holding of property in common, archaeological evidence has suggested an adherence by some of its members to the property values of the surrounding culture. A number of vessel fragments bear scratch marks on the base in the form of initials. These have been incised after firing and do not represent makers’ marks. Instead they
appear to be marks of ownership which, while unknown (by Warfel) on domestic sites of the period, are known to occur on vessels recovered from military sites and naval vessels (Warfel, 1995, p. 18). Their occurrence in the communal dormitories of the Cloister is unexpected and "signal[s] individualistic behavior within the communal society" (Warfel, 1995, p. 19). Similarly, the use of items of bodily beautification at Canterbury Shaker village (Starbuck, 1998, p. 11) might be interpreted to suggest that the selflessness of those communities was less complete than their founders had hoped.

Only in America?

Much scholarship of historical utopian communities has focused on the communities of North America (e.g., Arndt, 1973; Bestor, 1970; Hinds, 1975 [1875]; LeWarne, 1975; Lockwood, 1965; Nordhoff, 1993 [1875]; Pitzer, 1997). North America, and the United States in particular, was attractive to utopian communists; both American and European utopians purchased land in America to establish their communities. Even movements that had begun in Europe such as the Shakers (Brewer, 1997), Icarians (Sutton, 1997), Fourierists (Guarneri, 1991, 1997), and Owenites (Garnett, 1971) found their fullest communitarian expression in America (e.g., Bestor, 1970; Stein, 1992; Taylor, 1987).

Nevertheless, utopian thought and utopian communities were widespread in other parts of the world. British utopian communities, for example, were numerous, though mostly small-scale, poor, and short-lived (Hardy, 1979; Marsh, 1982). Much of the most influential utopian writing and thought in the nineteenth century—philosophy, social theory, and political science as well as fiction—was the work of Europeans, but experimental utopian communities were pursued more seriously in America. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries over 300 communities that could be called "utopian" were established in the United States (Pitzer, 1997), by new European immigrants as well as Americans by birth. Why was this?

First there were no doubt practical reasons. It was both possible and cheap to buy large contiguous blocks of land in the United States. As Porter and Lukerman have shown, utopian communities were most commonly established about 100 miles behind the western frontier (Porter and Lukerman, 1976, pp. 202–203), where official incentive schemes often existed to encourage Euro-American settlement. This meant that community resources would go further and that communards could start from scratch developing their settlement to their own design. Bestor argues that until the middle of the nineteenth century, the West was considered to be in a socially "plastic" state. Communitarians believed that there still existed the real possibility to shape the society of the future. Utopian communalism was in sympathy with the project of building America in the West, but the opportunity to have such an effect only existed when the new society was still embryonic.
Excavating Utopia

(Bestor, 1970). The American situation in the early nineteenth century was thus a rare moment in history offering perceived opportunities which were unavailable in Europe, or even in the settled Eastern states (p. 242).

Official and local attitudes to alternative communities were also generally more liberal in the States than in Europe (Sutton, 1885, p. x). Some individuals, such as the Frenchman Etienne Cabet, the founder of the socialist community of Icaria and a frequent critic of the French government, were probably motivated by a desire to escape the political oppression of the old world (Francis and Gontier, 1983; Prudhommeaux, 1907); some groups, such as the Shakers (Stein, 1992) or Moravians (Thomas, 1994), saw America as a place where they might practice their beliefs free from persecution. Bestor (1970, p. 262) has argued, however, that the tolerance and affordability of America, although superficially advantageous, were actually inimical to communal settlement, because they made individual settlement more easily possible for new arrivals and removed the communal bonds imposed by poverty and oppression in the Old World.

But there were additional, ideological factors at work. America represented, in the European as well as the American imagination, the future, possibility, and the opportunity for individuals to create for themselves the kind of world they desired, in contrast to the tired, crowded, dirty, backwards-looking cynicism of the Old World. America—for many of its inhabitants and visitors from Amerigo Vespucci onwards—is Utopia. America in the nineteenth century was to be celebrated. "It seems so easy for America to inspire and express the most expansive and humane spirit”; wrote Emerson in 1844, “newborn, free, healthful, strong, the land of the laborer, of the democrat, of the philanthropist, of the believer, of the saint, she should speak for the human race. America is the country of the Future” (Emerson, 1971 [1844], p. 230).

Studies of utopian communities have tended so far to confine themselves to a single country, but it would be interesting to compare the development of utopian communities in different countries. Was there a particularly “American” flavor to American utopias? In the transfer from one side of the Atlantic to the other, Fourierism, for example, acquired a distinctively “American” character. A nineteenth-century American zeal for practical action, married with a willingness to adjust plans, is perhaps why (modified) Fourierist phalanxes were established in America rather than France. Fourier himself had, according to legend, waited in his apartment every noon for a wealthy sponsor to fund the construction of a full phalanx with room for 1,620 people and, since this deus ex machina never materialized, failed to actually build his dream (Beecher and Bienvenu, 1971, p.19). By contrast, the Icarians, having moved from the Old World to the New, then became more exclusively French as time went by, and resisted incorporation into mainstream America (Sutton, 1997). The articulation of national or ethnic identity with community identity is a potentially fruitful area needing further exploration (although see Kozakavich, 2001; Thomas, 1994).
Artifacts and Identities

Technology played a significant role in communitarian visions of the future, both in neophile and neophobic ways. Some communities specifically rejected what they saw as alienated and alienating forms of production and sought a return to traditional methods and skills. Later nineteenth-century communities influenced by arts-and-crafts socialists like Ruskin and Morris on the one hand, or anarchists like Tolstoy and Kropotkin on the other, also sought in their adaptations of what they believed to be traditional agrarian lifestyles, "craftsmenlike" evaluations of material culture (Marsh, 1982). But many communities, despite their generally agrarian orientation, eagerly embraced technological innovation. Even religious communes such as the Shakers invested considerable energy in the design and manufacture of new and more efficient tools, furnishings, clothing, and so forth. Cyrus Teed's Koreshan Unity—a socialist and religious community founded in Florida at the end of the nineteenth century—used very modern technology, both in their productive activities (their printing press was one of the best available at the time) and in the management of their settlement (the community’s laundry was done by steam powered washing machines and a spin dryer which Teed claimed was capable of 3,000 revolutions per minute (Teed, n.d., cited in Herbert and Reeve, 1977, p. 81)). Some of the many-purpose built-machine sheds still survive on the site.

Distinctive and specially designed clothing was a feature of many utopias that promoted group cohesion and allowed communards to express their separation from mainstream society. The rejection of elaborate nineteenth-century dress and hairstyles in favor of short dresses and bobbed hair in Oneida, for example, not only scandalized the neighbors, but also expressed a different set of values (Klaw, 1993, pp. 136–137; Nordhoff, 1875/1993, pp. 282–283). Utopian clothing may be designed for comfort and utility, and often articulated a difference from mainstream society, as with the distinctive bonnets and berthas (capses) worn by Shaker women. Other items of material culture may be selectively consumed by a utopian community as part of the negotiation of a separate identity and to mark the boundary between utopian and mainstream society. Brian Thomas has examined the way that an eighteenth-century Moravian settlement in North Carolina used material culture such as pottery and the built environment in different strategies both to construct the exclusive and distinctive identity of the Moravians and, in other contexts, to appear as part of wider Euro-American society (Thomas, 1994). In other cases, the utopian community may be distinguished from mainstream not by the use of particular individual artifacts, but by a different assemblage. Van Wormer and Gross’s excavation of a dump used by a Theosophical Society commune in San Diego, CA, revealed a distinctive pattern of consumption which distinguished members of the Theosophical Institute from contemporary households in “mainstream” society, and related to the dietary and health practices of Institute members (Van Wormer and Gross, 2001).
How different was utopian material culture from that in use in the society that surrounded them? McBride and Starbuck, in separate investigations into Shaker sites in Kentucky and New Hampshire respectively, found little to distinguish the range and type of artifact found at Shaker sites from those of “the World’s People,” and on that basis have challenged the characterization of Shaker material culture as particularly “simple” (McBride, 1995; Starbuck, 1990, 1998). Shaker ideology, although anticapitalist, was not, as Starbuck and others have shown, opposed to industrial innovation or even the acquisition of consumer goods. Starbuck found abundant evidence that the Shakers were buying goods from the “world’s people,” and that their material culture was neither plain nor simple (Starbuck, 1998; cf. McBride, 1995). Instead of being characterized by their simplicity, McBride has suggested that real differences in the curation of the site and in the organization of structural, architectural, and landscape features suggest that the principle of order was of greater significance than either plainness or efficiency in the organization of Shaker life. Brother Arnold Hadd’s observation that the encroachment of forest onto cleared land during the labor shortages of the twentieth century was almost unendurable for the Sabbathday Lake Shakers supports this conclusion (Br. A. Hadd, personal communication, 1999). However, in another archaeological investigation into a Shaker site, the investigators suggested that the very small quantities of material culture recovered from the site might relate to the frugality of the Shakers (Cranmer, 1998, p. 52).

Many communes strived to be as self-sufficient as possible in production and manufacture. Archaeologists are well-placed to assess to what extent they succeeded. How far were communities dependent on buying in from external markets? Were they self-sufficient in skills and labor, or did that also need to be bought in? What was the nature of “bought-in” goods? Despite the Koreshan rejection of the capitalistic and commercial values of nineteenth-century America, for example, they ran a store at which they purchased goods produced outside their community and sold their own produce to non-Koreshans (Berrey, 1928). Did goods and products originating from the commune penetrate much beyond it? In some cases, notably the religious communes of Amana and Oneida in the United States, the goods produced there—textiles, household goods, and cutlery—attained a national reputation for quality. The popularity of “Shaker style” furniture in modern Europe and America also testifies to the popularity of their design skills beyond the community, and Shaker-produced goods were marketed to the “world’s people” from early in their history as a means of supporting the village communities.

Utopian Spaces

The different arrangement of public and private life is central and explicit in the ideologies of many utopias. Many used analogies of the family and the
domestic to describe the community (the Oneida Perfectionists and the Shakers, for example). What does this mean for the arrangement of space? What space is public and what is private? What went on in these spaces? Did the community meet informally, or were patterns of interaction strictly controlled? Some communities, like the Fourierist phalanxes, were designed with paths and courtyards and lots of space for informal encounters; others, like the Shakers, strictly forbade casual encounter and the occupation of space was highly regulated (Hayden, 1976). What was private space for? Was the inhabitation of private space to be encouraged or discouraged? In practice, how closely followed were the rules regarding how space was to be used?

The founders of utopian communities often had specific, programmatic descriptions of how the ideal settlement of the future should look. Owen’s New Harmony, Fourier’s Phalanxes, Cabet’s Icaria, Teed’s Guiding Star City were all described, and even depicted or modeled in detail. But it is noticeable that their settlements when established mostly did not begin construction according to these plans but rather used traditional, vernacular styles and techniques to create buildings, often considered to be only interim structures, which were not very different to those of the world around them. Utopia was often, it seems, deferred. Nevertheless, some differences were observable. Although the Koreshan Unity site as realized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was far from the ideal city envisaged by its founder (most of the settlement buildings were considered to be only temporary until such time as the New Jerusalem could be built; Berrey, 1928, p. 46), certain elements of the ideal city are evident in the Koreshan settlement. Its extensive and attractively planted gardens for example, beautified with ornaments, features and seats, resemble the parks of its founder’s vision. The circularity evident in Koresh’s planned “New Jerusalem” is faintly echoed in the semicircular porches attached to the Founder’s House (Herbert and Reeve, 1977) used during celebrations and pageants. It is interesting also to note the contrast between the planned nature of Koresh’s ideal city and the apparently more random distribution and variety of styles evident at the Koreshan site.

It was also envisaged that the socialist community at Llano del Rio should be constructed on a circular plan (Hayden, 1976), but there too, as at the Koreshan Unity site, the circular community did not materialize and the site never contained more than the temporary workshops, residences, and community buildings which served the early settlers (Van Bueren and Hupp, 1999).

The potential tension between the private and the communal is also negotiated through the use of space. Leone has demonstrated how Mormon settlements used fences, hedges, and boundaries to allocate spaces equitably, to ensure conformity with social norms, and to compartmentalize different aspects of Mormon existence (Leone, 1978). This compartmentalization, he claimed, was produced by and also reproduced a typically Mormon classificatory mindset (though Leone’s interpretation has been critiqued by Price-Beggerly, 1981).
Spatial control perhaps reached its zenith among utopian communities in the architecture and social codes of the Shakers. Hayden (1976) has discussed the highly ordered and rule-bound way that mid-nineteenth-century Shakers occupied space, moving only in straight lines, turning only at 90° angles, adopting only symmetrical posture. This regimented way of being in space was mirrored in the orthogonal, tidy, geometric settlement planning, architecture, and interior layouts of Shaker village sites. For the Shakers, neatness was an article of faith (Emlen, 1987). The ideological values of enforcing strict bodily discipline in this way were twofold. First, the severe, plain, and highly ordered material world of the Shakers contrasted with the frenzied, bountiful, imaginative, and much more loosely structured spiritual world which they inhabited. Hayden noted that the same space that served the Shakers’ worldly purposes also functioned as a spiritual space if different forms of movement and engagement were adopted. The notable distinction between worldly and heavenly spaces was maintained through strict codes of spatial and bodily discipline, especially during the revival period known as “Mother’s Work,” in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. So, for example, a hilltop could become the setting of a cornucopian heavenly banquet through acts of drama and imagination, involving different ways of moving and being (Hayden, 1976, p. 100). The meetinghouse, with its symmetrical and orthogonal construction, could become the place of divine rapture when the strict codes of movement were abandoned during the religious dancing which earned the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing their better-known soubriquet.

The second effect of the Shakers’ strict rules about quotidian use of space and movement was to inculcate a profound habit of personal discipline. Without constant reinforcement and practice of such discipline, it is unlikely that so many Shakers would have maintained their commitment to a life of arduous toil, lacking the solace of drink, drugs, romantic or sexual relationships. The discipline and severity required in the pursuit of Shaker life needed the order of their material environment as mnemonic, pattern, and expression.

Contradictions and Tensions

When I began thinking about studying utopias, one of my ideas was that archaeology could be valuable in exposing some of the contradictions of experimental utopian communities. Very soon I realized that exposing the contradictions in utopian communities was very easy; they are riddled with contradictions. Among them are inconsistencies in views of gender and class, and the inevitable involvement of utopian societies with the rest of the world. Utopias tried to be enclaves, or beacons to use one of the most popular metaphors, of harmonious social, cultural, and/or spiritual practice in a corrupt and doomed society. Obviously some degree of contact with that society was inevitable, but many utopias never really questioned some of the most disturbing aspects of the relations of labor and production...
in which they were participating. The socialist Icarians of Corning, Iowa, are interesting in this respect. Adopting Cabot’s slogan that goods should be distributed “à chacun suivant ses besoins” (to each according to their needs), the Icarians seem only to have applied that principle within their own community. Produce that was freely distributed to other Icarians was sold outside the community during the Civil War at inflated prices (Sutton, 1993, p. 7). As time passed the community became increasingly introspective, losing sight of the grand project of transforming the wider world (Wheeler, 1979, p. 36). Espousing an idea of universal fraternity, they ended by becoming exclusive and individualistic (Sutton, 1987, p. 38, 1994). By enforcing a strict French language requirement and requiring a near-perfect knowledge of Voyages en Icarie, the novel on which the community was based, the communards made it almost impossible for new, American members to join (Sutton, 1994, 1997).

Egalitarianism, in gender and class terms, was often a principle of utopian communities, yet the tensions between theory and practice, between the ideal and the real, and between the utopian enclave and the society that surrounded it, produced contradictions that often tore communities apart. In the nineteenth-century Ruskin colonies of Tennessee and Georgia, for example, there was a tension between the egalitarian ideals of the founders and the difficulties experienced by some communards in adjusting to the ethnically and socially heterogeneous society of the colony:

When he left Ruskin in 1899, one of the colonists, a Canadian sculptor of well-to-do and educated background, complained that the colony had welcomed “the lowest Dago,” “ignorant Irishmen,” and “low bred and untrained philistines, including, among others, “a family of hogs . . . who grunt and snicker [at meals]” and the “offspring of the Isles of degradation and commercialism” [Great Britain], who were “worse than animals.” He deeply resented having “to live on equality with people from the back alley slums of European and American cities.” (Brundage, 1996, p. 50)

Yet communitarianism often did not mean, even in principle, egalitarianism. Many utopias built into their structure a system of hierarchical organization. The Koreshans, for example, had three levels, the lowest of which was for those currently investigating the community, the middle rank for ordinary community members, and the highest level for those who adopted chastity and made a full commitment to Koreshan ideals in all their practices (Landing, 1997, pp. 381–383). Teed, like Cabot in his depiction of Icaria, did envision the continued need for elite leadership, but both men saw this leadership as arising meritocratically, without regard to sex, through widening education (Landing, 1997; Sutton, 1997). Yet in practice, the real power in both societies was mostly in the hands of men. Teed, having set up baroque systems of government, which placed all-female committees at the top, then failed to use them, preferring instead informal man-to-man communication and administration (Rainard, 1993). Similarly, the experience of women in Icaria was less liberating than what was suggested in the book Voyages en Icarie. They found themselves doing the same work they had performed in the outside world,
but lost control over their own households and families. In fact, a serious revolt was precipitated when the (all male) Assembly decided to remove children from their parents, who were only to see them once a week (Garno, 1998, pp. 494–496), a policy that certainly did not feature in the novel. The unhappiness of many of Icaria’s women probably contributed to the eventual collapse of their community (Garno, 1998, pp. iv–xii). The Shakers avowed in their literature that they were committed to gender equality. This was to be pursued through strict sexual segregation, yet Savulis (1992) has described the way that female spaces were more closely circumscribed and women’s relationships with the outside world less frequent than those of their brethren. The association between men, public and business affairs on the one hand, and women, domestic, and nurturing activities on the other, which characterized wider American society of the time, were reproduced in Shaker society.

Utopian communities are at a disadvantage compared to their purely textual counterparts in that they necessarily encountered both dissent and change. It is tempting, given the prevalent contemporary mistrust of utopian schemes, to seek out evidence which points to the hypocrisy and failure in any examination of utopian communities—whiskey, beer, and “medicine” bottles at the sites of supposedly teetotal communities, for example, or butchered bones at the sites of vegetarian communities. However, although such finds occur, much archaeological research on the sites of utopian communities has revealed considerable commitment to the principles set forth in their literature. Ephrata Cloister was notable for the frugality and austerity suggested by the material culture (Warfel, 1995, p.17, 1996, p. 19), for example; new styles of ceramics were not adopted until long after their use had become widespread outside the Cloister, and broken artifacts, even cheap ones, were repaired rather than thrown away (Warfel, 1995, p. 17, 1996, p. 19). If compared by quantity, rather than simply presence or absence, the artifacts of sin are far less frequent at the sites of utopian communities, which eschewed them, than elsewhere in society. Moreover, evidence that the rules were broken may be interpreted not as evidence for the failure of the plan, but as indicative of how the negotiation of practices within the community took place. Kozakavich (2001), for example, has discussed the way that many Russian Doukhobors in Canada chose to reject their leader’s instruction to avoid eating meat, although they still considered themselves Doukhobors and were able to openly challenge decisions of the leadership.

What is Challenged and What Goes Unchallenged?

Utopians had a radical view of social transformation. Rather than moving gradually to change society, they tried to begin where they wanted to end up, with a fully functional, perfect community. This involved having a vision of how the “finished” society should look, rather than a map of how to get there. What
were the limits of utopian imaginations? Although some aspects of life looked radically different in the new society, other aspects of Victorian moral ideology or cultural practice were transferred unchallenged into the new vision. Gender roles, for example, were often maintained, despite a philosophical commitment to “equality.” As discussed above, women often ended up repeating their role in wider society. Perhaps owing to a failure of imagination, gender equality, even to the imperfect degree that it exists in the modern west, was not attained by any nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century utopia (a phenomenon notable even in utopian fiction of the period).

**WONDERFUL AND STRANGE**

Utopias are different from the mainstream society of their time. Nevertheless, they are in many respects typical products of their age. This relationship of communal utopias to the rest of society potentially challenges our dominant and at times undernuanced understanding of modernity. Utopia can show us another nineteenth century. Historical archaeologists studying that period sometimes caricature it as one of class struggle, industrialization, alienation, and exploitation, to which the only possible response is compliance (for the bourgeoisie) or resistance (for the poor, and other subaltern groups). All those things are certainly important in understanding the period, and certainly we would not wish to return to the promotion of a whiggish view of nineteenth-century history as the triumph of progress, but at the same time we need to incorporate into our histories alternative views, and critiques of some widespread societal values, and to make room for the “other” nineteenth century of radicalism, reform, experiment, and active improvement. Nineteenth-century utopianism also reminds us that alternatives to, and critiques of, industrial capitalism came not only from Marx and Engels, but was already well established by the time of their writings and continued to take a variety of forms throughout the century.

The archaeology of Utopia also helps to question some common preconceptions common in the archaeology of all periods. We need to rethink the nature and meaning of such ubiquitous archaeological entities as “the household” and “the family.” Shaker family members had no genetic relationship to one another; Koreshan households were not centers of production, or family units, or clan groupings. Children at Oneida, and for a time, Icaria, were raised apart from their parents. Similarly, practices that are still occasionally represented as biological imperatives demand to be reconsidered in cultural terms. Sexual reproduction, for example, which is considered fundamental to cultural survival, demands to be reconsidered in the light of our knowledge of groups such as the Shakers who have survived as a society with strong cultural identity and broad continuity of practice for over 200 years, despite their celibacy.
UTOPIA IN A CYNICAL AGE

A number of scholars of Utopia have noted that during the twentieth century the idea of Utopia has been treated with more suspicion than enthusiasm; the imagination of the utopian artist, writer, or filmmaker has been dominated by the dystopia—the anti-utopia. This is characteristically the nightmare state of stifled individuality, forced participation in inhuman, and inhumane social and political systems. It is the trope of the rigid, unnatural, and authoritarian society depicted in the novels of Huxley and Orwell, for example, and evident in the modern myth of the cult. These stories are clearly influenced by the political experience of the last century, and in particular the two huge failures of social engineering: fascism and communism. Certainly the homogeneity and predictability of the “utopian” world depicted in Bellamy’s Looking Backward (Bellamy, 1888) or the nauseating simplicity of the characters in Morris’s News from Nowhere (Morris, 1890) now seem oppressive and unappealing. Skinner’s behaviorist utopia Walden 2 (Skinner, 1970) generated very different responses; what some readers recognized as a utopia, others considered an anti-utopia. Additionally the tragic culminations of twentieth-century sectarian communities such as Jonestown, where over 900 people died in a suicide-massacre in 1978, or Waco, the headquarters of the Branch Davidian movement, where several people lost their lives in a siege and a deliberate fire in 1993, have confirmed suspicions that some communities were subject to the delusions of dangerously and insanely autocratic individuals. Modern critique of Utopia in political philosophy thus focuses not on its dreamy removal from harsh political realities, but on the danger that the realization of a utopian vision might result in oppressive totalitarianism. It is interesting to note that later twentieth-century alternative communities tend to permit a lot of individual freedom to members in personal matters, and restrict regulation to the organization of communal space and activity (Weggemans, 1989).

What is the political potential of the archaeological study of nineteenth-century utopias? Obviously this would depend on the political commitment of the archaeologist. To those on the right they may show that alternatives to industrial capitalism are doomed. They do not, however, need to be read as failures. Instead of seeing the eventual closure of utopian settlements as evidence of the inevitability of western capitalism or the Christian practice of mainstream Protestantism, we can see them as maps of possibility. Perhaps most of all, utopias show us that society could be other than it is (Geoghegan, 1987, p. 2). Utopia is good to think: it satirizes and criticizes, undermines assumptions, and impels us towards the consideration of better or different futures. Utopia can be a way for us to think about the ways in which principles and processes of the modern world played out in ways other than industrial capitalism. Despite the rejection of mainstream Euro-American capitalist society, the members of utopian communities continued to value key features of modernity in the West, such as “improvement”
(through education, innovation, social engineering, and the arts, for example) and personal fulfillment. They also responded to the rationalist tendency towards ordering, structuring, and regimentation that characterized secular thought in the post-Enlightenment period. Utopia was born with modernity (Kumar, 1991, p. 51), both produced and repelled by the capitalist, individualistic, visionary culture by which it was surrounded.

CONCLUSION

With hindsight it is easy to see the specter of oppression and homogenization in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century utopian experiments. It is perhaps inevitable that any total system will risk totalitarianism (Kumar, 1987). However, in their historical context, the utopias of the nineteenth century represent something more than eccentric dead ends. Utopian socialism was—and is—not just an early and failed chapter in the history of the left, but a vibrant and continuing theoretical and practical approach. Nor, contra Shklar (1965), are utopias rendered redundant by democracy and science. Inspiring, courageous, and visionary utopias, especially the communal experiments, offered a way to prove personal commitment. In fact, the relationship between the communal and the individual is complex in these contexts, and perhaps the traditional opposition between individualism and communalism is not a helpful one. Personal fulfillment and self-denial for the sake of some common good are not natural enemies; numerous monastic traditions demand at once a large degree of introspection and knowledge of the self at the same time as requiring material sacrifice and assumption of prescribed roles for the good of the community. Although utopian communities often demanded some sacrifice of individualism in order to further the common good, they also offered considerable scope for personal and individual fulfillment. One could actually act out a personal commitment to socialism, help to shape a community, and, most communitarians believed, pioneer the future. For certain groups, notably women and the working classes, they offered environments where a different kind of self appeared to be actualizable. Nineteenth-century utopian experimenters, with their bizarre cosmologies, strange clothes, and improbable schemes may seem eccentric to us, or even mad, but when one considers the numerous social evils of their time, one can easily argue that they were the sanest of all.

As archaeologists, then, we learn from utopias:

1. To question our understanding of what makes a household, settlement, or farm.
2. To challenge the homogeneity of the nineteenth century. Historical archaeology shows us a diversity of beliefs and practices. Our understanding of the nineteenth century as a period of industrial and capitalistic triumph in the west needs to be qualified by the incorporation of dissent, difference, and resistance (cf. Frazer, 1999).
3. To question some of our understanding about the reproduction of practices and the nature of social reproduction. Utopian communities show us radical, voluntaristic change. For example, we see social reproduction (in cases such as the Shakers) entirely separate from sexual reproduction. The things people did were not always the extension of habitual practices, which should make us consider how far the vaguely unmotivated “practice,” which we as archaeologists have often attributed to people in the past, is always appropriate. Without a fairly strong concept of agency and intention, no profound understanding of utopian communities, or nineteenth-century demotic political critique is possible. At the same time, we must acknowledge that these features of radical social change are particularly prevalent in western modernity, and may not be appropriate for understanding all change at all periods. They do depend on a concept of the possibility of change, of perfectibility, and a system that permits some autonomous actions by agents (e.g., to leave one’s family and friends, reject mainstream society, and take up a new set of beliefs). Nineteenth-century Utopians needed self-awareness coupled with the sort of critical mind that is particularly associated with modernity. Modernity and its values have come in for something of a hard time recently from archaeological theorists. Utopias remind us that, in permitting us to think about and engineer change for the better, the legacy of modernity is not wholly to be despised.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was conducted with financial support from the University of Wales, Lampeter. Many thanks to all those who gave me great assistance in fieldwork and facilitated my textual research and site survey on a number of American sites: at the Koreshan Unity, all the park rangers, and especially Nancy Kilmartin; at Icaria, Mabel Schweers and the late Art Schweers; and at Sabbathday Lake Gay Marks and Br Arnold Hadd. Thad van Bueren gave me access to his and Jill Hupp’s unpublished proposal, and has freely shared ideas over the ether. Mark Pluciennik and Robert Preucel made helpful comments on a draft of this text. Thanks to all.

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