

## **Communal Utopias in America**

### **Matthew J. Grow**

**Institutional Context:** Founded in 1965, the University of Southern Indiana is a regional, teaching-focused public institution, with a student body of 10,500. Students overwhelmingly come from southern Indiana, southern Illinois, and northern Kentucky; a third of students are first-generation to attend college in their family. USI's campus in Evansville is roughly 25 miles from the town of New Harmony, Indiana, the site of two early-nineteenth-century communal utopias, one founded by a German millennialist group, the Harmonists, and the other founded by social reformer Robert Owen. Over the past fifty years, the town has been restored; Historic New Harmony is jointly administered by the university and by the state of Indiana. The university library's Special Collections has one of the best manuscript and book collections on communal groups anywhere, with information on over 700 separate communities. In addition, the university has a Center for Communal Studies (which I direct), which promotes the study of historic and contemporary communal groups, utopias, and intentional communities. As such, the History Department has long offered a course in Communal Utopias in America.

**Course Rationale and Strategy:** In this course, I raise several questions about communal groups and new religious movements and the cultural reactions to them. What have been the attractions of these groups? How have these groups challenged American society? How have they evolved over time? How do reactions to them reveal larger cultural values, including attitudes on gender, race, and religion?

I have structured the course chronologically. In the first week, we will look at broad themes in communal utopias which emerge from the Christian tradition and Greek and Roman influences. We will then proceed through U. S. history, beginning in the colonial era and continuing to the present. While the course material and my own inclination means that we will primarily study religious groups, we will also look at a variety of secular ones, including Robert Owen's New Harmony community, socialist utopias, and contemporary ecovillages.

We won't use a textbook as such, though we will use two books throughout the course: Philip Jenkins' *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* and Donald Pitzer's edited volume, *America's Communal Utopias*. We will also read Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* as well as books on the Shakers, 1960s communes, and a journalist's investigation into contemporary efforts to find utopia.

The two primary assignments call for students to use and contribute to the unique resources at USI. First, students will do a group project which requires them to collect data on the preservation and interpretation of New Harmony. In a previous course on Utopia, I led a similar project which investigated the history of preservation in New Harmony through a single building: the Lenz House (an original Harmonist home which was the first building restored in New Harmony in the 1950s). I have not yet selected the building we will use for our next class project, but the possibilities include the Workingmen's Institute (Indiana's oldest public library, founded in 1838). While New Harmony is unique, the opportunity to do a group project on a historic or contemporary communal site is not; the Federation for Intentional Community ([www.ic.org](http://www.ic.org)) lists over

700 contemporary communal groups in its most recent catalog. Many or most of these groups would welcome study by students. Second, students will complete a research paper on a historic or contemporary communal group using the resources in our library. Because this is such a vital component of the course, I am devoting four class periods to assisting the students: a visit to the archives early in the semester, a peer review session two weeks before the due date, and two days of class presentations for students to make a formal presentation of their research.

**COMMUNAL UTOPIAS IN AMERICA**  
**University of Southern Indiana**  
**Spring 2011**  
**Matthew J. Grow**

**Course Description:**

The United States has long been identified in the popular imagination as a land of rugged individualism and free market capitalism. The individualistic tendencies of American society have nevertheless been balanced by contrary impulses towards community which have led to the creation of utopias and communal societies. Communalism has been a consistent theme throughout American history and has manifested itself in a dizzying array of groups--religious and secular, immigrant and home-grown, conservative and radical, authoritarian and anarchist, celibate and free love--from the colonial era to the present. These groups have typically included some form of joint ownership of property and communal work arrangements, though the exact nature of each has varied tremendously.

From one perspective, these groups seem marginal to the American story. They have typically existed at the fringe of society, attracted only a tiny minority of America's population, and formed a counterculture (or, more accurately, countercultures) to the American mainstream. For most contemporary Americans, communalism conjures up images of Shaker historic communities, hippie communes, or the traces of communalism that remain in modern American material culture—Oneida silverware, Shaker furniture, and Amana appliances. Nevertheless, throughout American history, these groups have captivated, bemused, and infuriated the broader public. Their efforts have provoked deep controversy as they questioned some of the most fundamental ideals of society—private property, capitalism, republican government, traditional gender roles, mainstream clothing and diet mores, and monogamous marriages.

This course will examine attempts to implement utopias and communal societies in the American past and present. We will pay particular attention to nearby New Harmony, the site of two utopian experiments in the early 1800s.

**Office Hours/Access:**

I will promptly respond to e-mail (within 24 hours on weekdays), and I encourage you to see me outside of class or e-mail me if you have any questions or would like to discuss the material in more detail. My office hours will be Monday, 10:00-12:00, and Thursday, 12:00-1:00. If these hours do not work for you, we can schedule another appointment time.

**Required Books:**

These are at the USI bookstore. They may also be purchased from on-line distributors.

Bellamy, Edward. *Looking Backward*. 1888. (Any edition is fine.)

Hallman, J. C. *In Utopia: Six Kinds of Eden and the Search for a Better Paradise*. St. Martin's Press, 2010.

Jenkins, Philip. *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Miller, Timothy. *The 60s Communes: Hippies and Beyond*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999.

Pitzer, Donald E., ed. *America's Communal Utopias*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

Woo, Ilyon. *The Great Divorce: A Nineteenth-Century Mother's Extraordinary Fight Against Her Husband, the Shakers, and Her Times*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2010.

**Assignments:**

**Reading Quizzes (10%):**

Active participation will make up a significant component of both your individual grade and our classroom experience. I expect you to come to class having done the assigned reading, taken relevant notes, consulted your notes from previous sessions, developed a basic understanding of the historical issues, and prepared to engage with your colleagues. It is essential to take an interest in and show a respect for other students' opinions. Bring the assigned readings with you. Throughout the semester, I will give short quizzes to assess class preparation.

**Interpreting Utopia (20%):**

As a class, we will be conducting a research project titled, "Interpreting Utopia," which will examine the history of interpretation, preservation, and memory of Historic New Harmony. There will be two major components to this project. First, in small groups, you will participate in an oral interview of an individual who has participated in the preservation and interpretation of New Harmony. I will be setting up these interviews and accompanying many of the groups. You will be responsible to perform relevant research before the interview, write the questions, and conduct the interview. Second, using material from the archives in New Harmony and at the University of Southern Indiana as well as the oral interviews, you will be responsible for researching and writing a section of the final project. We will create a website that narrates, through text and photographs, the history of preservation in New Harmony.

**Research Paper and Presentation (30%):**

You will write a 12-page paper on either an utopian book or a communal group (either historic or contemporary). The Communal Studies Collection in Rice Library and the Center for Communal Studies located in LA 2009 have rich resources for research, particularly for twentieth-century and contemporary communal groups and utopias. Your paper should be based on primary sources and should be interpretive rather than merely descriptive. You should place the utopian book or communal group in its historic context

and in the various traditions of utopianism and communalism. A one-paragraph description of your topic should be brought to class on October 6 and a preliminary draft will be peer-reviewed in class on November 23. Each student will also give a ten-minute formal presentation of their research during the final week of class. The final paper is due December 9.

**Midterm (20%)**

The midterm will consist of short-answer objective questions, IDs, and an essay section. It will be held in class on October 19.

**Final Exam (20%):**

The final will have the same format as the midterm. It will be held on December 14, 3:00-5:00.

**Grading Scale:**

A	90-100
B+	87-89
B	80-86
C+	77-79
C	70-77
D+	67-69
D	60-66

**Late Papers:**

Papers will be penalized a full letter grade for each day they are late.

**Classroom Behavior:**

It is imperative that we create and maintain a respectful learning environment for all students. This means:

- \* Turn off all cell phones and other electronic devices.
- \* Use laptop computers only to take notes.
- \* Arrive in class on-time. If you arrive after I have taken attendance, you will be counted as absent.
- \* If you must leave early, do so as quietly as possible.
- \* Be respectful of other students' comments and opinions.

**Academic Honesty:**

Plagiarism and other forms of cheating are unacceptable and will result in a failing grade on the assignment and appropriate disciplinary action.

USI considers academic dishonesty (defined by the Dean of Students as cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, interference with another student's work, or facilitating academic dishonesty) to be a serious misconduct and subject to disciplinary measures up to and including expulsion from the university. These infractions and the penalties are explained further at the Dean of Students' website: [http://www.usi.edu/stl/section\\_changes.asp](http://www.usi.edu/stl/section_changes.asp). It is your responsibility to read this site and comply with its requirements.

**Withdrawals:**

If you complete the procedure for a Withdrawal from this class beginning with the first day of the term through the ninth week of the term (September 2 through October 31, 2008) you will receive a 'W' for the course. If you complete the procedure for a Withdrawal during the tenth week of class through the last day of classes before the final exam (October 31 through December 12, 2008) you will receive the grade 'W' if you are passing with a D or above at the time you drop the course. However, if you are failing at the time you drop the course, you will receive a grade of 'F.' It is in keeping with University policy that students who withdraw from a class after October 31, 2008 and have a failing grade in the class at time of withdrawal will receive an F, not a W.

**Disabilities:**

AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT COMPLIANCE: If you have a disability, you are encouraged to register for disability support services in the Counseling Center [Room 1051, Orr Center, (812) 464-1867]. If you require an accommodation, please advise the instructor by the end of the first week of class. You may be required to provide written documentation to support these accommodations. I will work with you to provide reasonable accommodations to ensure that you have a fair opportunity to perform and participate in class.

**Inclement Weather Policy:**

If a winter storm advisory or warning is in effect for this region and I am unable to attend class due to driving conditions, I will notify you by 8:30 a.m. via e-mail. It is your responsibility to check e-mail the morning of class for information about the class meeting.

**Schedule:**

(Note: I reserve the right to add occasional short readings.)

**Week 1:**

August 31: Introduction

September 2: Themes in Communal Utopias: The Christian Tradition

Selections from Genesis and Revelation, on Blackboard.

Lawrence J. McCrank, "Religious Orders and Monastic Communalism in America," in Pitzer, 204-252.

**Week 2:**

September 7: Themes in Communal Utopias: Greek and Roman Influences

Selections from Plato's *Republic* and Lycurgus's description of Sparta, on Blackboard.

September 9: The Question of Cults and the Study of New Religious Movements

Jenkins, 3-24

**Week 3:**

September 14: Visit to the Archives

September 16: Communal Societies in Colonial America

John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity,"

<http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity.html>

Donald F. Durnbaugh, "Communitarian Societies in Colonial America," in Pitzer, 14-36.

**Week 4:**

September 21: New Harmony, Harmonists

Karl J. R. Arndt, "George Rapp's Harmony Society," in Pitzer, 57-87

Lucy Jayne Kamau, "The Anthropology of Space in Harmonist and Owenite New Harmony," *Communal Societies* 12 (1992), 68-89.

September 23: New Harmony, Owenites

Donald E. Pitzer, "The New Moral World of Robert Owen and New Harmony," in Pitzer, 88-134

Primary documents on Robert Owen, on Blackboard.

**Week 5:**

September 28: Shakers

Prescilla J. Brewer, "The Shakers of Mother Ann Lee," in Pitzer, 37-56

[Primary source in-class exercise: Shaker hymns drawn from Christian Goodwillie and Jane F. Crosthwaite, *Millennial Praises: A Shaker Hymnal*.]

September 30: Shakers

Woo, *Great Divorce*

**Week 6:**

October 5: Mormons

Dean L. May, "One Heart and Mind: Communal Life and Values among the Mormons," in Pitzer, 135-158.

Joseph Smith, "History"

[Primary source in-class exercise: nineteenth-century cartoons on Mormonism]

October 7: Brook Farm and the Fourierists

Carl Guarneri, "Brook Farm," in Pitzer, 159-180.

**Week 7:**

October 12: Oneida

Lawrence Foster, "Free Love and Community: John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Perfectionists," in Pitzer, 253-278

Robert Fogarty, *Desire and Duty at Oneida* (Tirzah Miller's diary), 53-106 (on e-reserve)

October 14: Midterm

**Week 8:**

October 19: *Looking Backward*

Bellamy, *Looking Backward*

October 21: Responses to *Looking Backward*

J. Gordon Melton, "The Theosophical Communities and Their Ideal of Universal Brotherhood," in Pitzer, 396-418

Robert V. Hine, "California's Socialist Utopias," in Pitzer, 419-431

**Week 9:**

October 26: Communal Groups and New Religions in the Early Twentieth-Century

Robert S. Weisbrot, "Father Divine and the Peace Mission," in Pitzer, 432-448

Jenkins, 70-120

October 28: Boundaries in Utopia

Gertrude E. Huntington, "Living in the Ark: Four Centuries of Hutterite Faith and Community," 319-351.

Etta M. Madden and Martha L. Finch, "Introduction," in *Eating in Eden: Food and American Utopias* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 1-31.

Beverly Gordon, "Dress in American Communal Societies," *Communal Societies* 5 (1985): 122-136.

**Week 10:**

November 2: Mid-twentieth-century Cult Debates

Jenkins, 121-186

November 4: 1960s Communes: Hippies

Timothy Miller, *60s Communes*, 1-127

Film Screening: "It Takes a Cult" (on the Love Israel Family)

**Week 11:**

November 9: No class (Assessment Day)

November 11: 1960s Communes: The Jesus People

Timothy Miller, *60s Communes*, 128-246

[In-class primary source exercise: Selections from books on the Jesus People, such as William S. Cannon's *The Jesus Revolution: New Inspiration for Evangelicals*.]



**Week 12:**

November 16: Modern Dystopia: Jonestown

Film screening: "Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple" (PBS American Experience)

Explore the primary source documents on the website <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu/>

November 18: Modern dystopia? Fundamentalist Polygamist Groups

Selections from accounts of FLDS disaffiliation, Dorothy Allred Solomon's *Predators, Preys, and Other Kinfolk* and Carolyn Jessop's *Escape*. Also, explore the website, <http://principlevoices.org/>.

**Week 13:**

November 23: Peer Review of Research Papers

November 25: No class

**Week 14:**

November 30: Communalism in the Modern World

Hallman, *In Utopia*, first half

Film selections: *Visions of Utopia*

December 2: Communalism in the Modern World

Hallman, *In Utopia*, second half

**Week 15:**

December 7: Presentations of Research

December 9: Presentations of Research

Research Paper due

Final: December 14, 3:00-5:00