

BUILDING A NEW FUTURE? WOMEN IN PHALANSTERIES

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Les amours au phalanstère was the title of a pamphlet, written by Victor Hennequin and translated by Henry James Sr. in 1849. The tract outlined the sexual theories of the French utopian Charles Fourier and his attacks on society's vices and hypocrisy; it sketched as well love in harmony, evoking a sexually liberated future where coerced monogamy would be replaced by progressively freer love relations, in a well ordered scheme of graded levels, appropriate to each person. The pamphlet opened to women new perspectives in the future society :

In harmony, every dignity reserved to man will be set off by a like dignity, the reward of female merit ... she is what her works make her... In the loves of harmony, woman is really a mistress ... she is courted, and her decision and choice respected.¹

Fourier's extensive critique of marriage and the family system and his explicit thesis that "the extension of the privileges of women is the fundamental cause of all social progress"² raised interest among early feminists and captivated phalansterians who in a Fourierist future saw the end of all social evils, woman's oppression included. This utopian vision of changed relations between the sexes was based on two bold arguments: woman's sexual freedom and economic independence. Obviously both issues – though they did not fail to attract sympathy and to inspire projects – were controversial and contributed to create a sulphureous air of transgression and scandal around Fourierist experiments.

The attempt to bring to concrete and stable realization Fourier's detailed project of joyful life, lively with activity, rich in well-being and pleasure was not an easy task. The phalanstery, with its complex architecture and its ideal number of 1620 participants for a full-scale experiment, was an unattainable model for the young American Fourierist movement, yet, unlike their more prudent French condisciples, the active and pragmatic phalansterians of the New World established with a rush, between 1842 and 1846, twenty-four small scale experiments.

"American people", wrote Fourier's popularizer Albert Brisbane in 1844, "are so impelled to realize in practise any idea that strikes them as true and advantageous, that it will of course be useless to preach moderation in organizing Associations."³

1. *Love in the Phalanstery*, translated by and with a preface by Henry James, Sr., New York, Dewitt and Davenport, 1849, p. 24. A richer and more detailed description of the amorous innovations of the future society is proposed by Fourier in *Le Nouveau Monde Amoureux*, a then unpublished manuscript, edited and presented by Simone Debout-Oleskiewicz, Editions Anthropos, Paris, 1967.

2. *Oeuvres complètes de Charles Fourier*, vol. I, Editions Anthropos, Paris, 1966, p. 133.

3. The most comprehensive and sensitive study of American Fourierism is Carl Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative. Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1991. Brisbane's words are quoted in John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, J. B. Lippincott & C., Philadelphia, 1870, p. 270. On Albert Brisbane, see Bestor, Arthur, "Albert Brisbane, Propagandist for Socialism in the 1840s", *New York History*, 28 (April 1947), pp. 128-158.

In fact, as early as 1823, Fourier himself had a visionary view of the success his ideas would meet in the United States and he sent to the American Consul at Paris a copy of his *Traité de l'association domestique-agricole* including a letter to inform him that "no country is more interested than yours in the rapid experimentation of discovery I recently published".⁴

When *Love in the Phalanstery* was published, in 1849, the short life of most Fourierist experiments was already closed. In these first experiments, both timidity and desire for respectability, united to the need to conquer new recruits for the cause, had suggested the tactical choice of putting aside the radical sexual principles, stressing instead less controversial aspects of Fourier's theories.⁵ In spite of their efforts, phalansterians' way of life appeared to their contemporaries too eccentric and contrary to the mores of usual conduct; it aroused the malevolent attention of the press and charges of immorality: recurrent pangs troubling the already difficult existence of the communities.

This paper uses reports from visitors, letters and records of phalansterians to discuss women's experiences in two Fourierist communities, Brook Farm and the North American Phalanx, established in the 1840s, and in the Unitary Household, an urban commune based in New York in the late 1850s and more loosely inspired by Fourier's theories.⁶ Few women left personal accounts of their lives in the communities where they lived and if we want to examine to what extent the changes in woman's position foreseen in the Fourierist future found fulfilment in American phalansteries, other sources must be used. In fact, as the "old Fourierist" N. C. Meeker noted with regret in the *Tribune* in 1866, "it is singular that none of the many thousand Fourierists have related their experience".⁷ Still, phalanxes attracted visitors and excited the curiosity of the press, which offered vivid portraits of life in the American phalansteries.

4. The letter contained unusual remarks, for example the forecast — inspired by Eighteenth-century theories on climate and temperatures — that the American climate would be softened by the numerous future flow of immigrants attracted by the perspective of association. The Consul noted down dubiously that Fourier's work appeared as "either a genuine curiosity or the emanation of a disturbed brain." See Maurice Buchs, "Le fouriérisme aux Etats-Unis. Contribution à l'étude du socialisme américain", Appendix, Thèse de doctorat, Faculté de Droit, Paris, 1948. Cfr. Jeremy Beecher, *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986, pp. 362-64.

5. Among the many studies on Fourier's thought, see Hubert Bourgin, *Fourier. Contribution à l'étude du socialisme français*, Société Nouvelle de Librairie et d'Édition, Paris, 1905; Simone Debout, *L'utopie de Charles Fourier*, Payot, Paris, 1978; Arrigo Colombo and Laura Tundo, *Fourier. La passione dell'utopia*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 1988; Roberto Massari, *Fourier*, erreemme edizioni, Roma, 1989. For an accurate biography and analysis of Fourier's thought, see Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier*. Michel Cordillot, in "Bibliographie Fourieriste: travaux récentes", *Cahiers Charles Fourier*; n.2, 1991, and n.3, 1992, lists the most recent studies.

6. On women in utopian communities, see Carol A. Kolmerten, *Women in Utopia: the Ideology of Gender in the American Owenite Communities*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1990; Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Women in Utopian Movements", in Rosemary Skimmer Keller, ed., *Women and Religion in America*, vol. I, Harper and Row, New York, 1981; Jeannette C. and Robert H. Lauer, "Sex Roles in Nineteenth-Century American Communal Society", *Communal Societies*, 3 (1983), pp. 16-28; Jon Wagner, "Sexuality and Gender Roles in Utopian Communities: A Critical Survey of Scholarly Work", *Communal Societies* 6 (1986), pp. 172-188; Seymour R. Kesten, *Utopian Episodes: Daily Life in Experimental Colonies Dedicated to Changing the World*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, N.Y., 1993, Ch 5. Specifically on women in Fourierist communities, Carl Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative*, pp. 203-11; pp. 244-47; 395-98. On the Unitary Household, see Luisa Cetti, *Un falansterio a New York. L'Unitary Household (1885-1860) e il riformismo prebellico americano*, Sellerio, Palermo, 1992, ch. 3.

7. John H. Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, op. cit., p. 500. Nathaniel Hawthorne in the Preface to *The Blithedale Romance* — "a pale and not totally true image of Brook Farm" — expresses "a most earnest wish that some one of the many cultivated and philosophic minds which took an interest in that enterprise might now give the world its history."

Describing an ideal Fourierist community, Albert Brisbane invites his readers to imagine

a fine Domain, covering an area of three miles square, beautifully and scientifically cultivated, diversified with gardens, fields, fruit-orchards, vineyards, meadows and woodlands; in the center a large and elegant Edifice, with spacious, commodious outhouses, combining architectural beauty with convenience and economy.⁸

This romantic picture of an Arcadian, well-ordered community, offering all comforts and a pleasant life, was indeed a difficult model to translate into reality. In fact, American phalanxes were more modestly located, often in old farmhouses and temporary makeshift dwellings adapted from pre-existing farm buildings. The North American Phalanx, near Red Banks, New Jersey, with its thirteen years of existence, was the longest-lived Fourierist community and, more than other shorter-lived and frailer experiments, succeeded in, building a definite internal organization in the attempt at realizing Fourier's plans. On a farm of 673 acres, which had originally, in 1843, only "two or three very dilapidated farm buildings", wrote Horace Greeley,⁹ one of its generous subscribers, "a capacious wooden dwelling, one or two barns, and a fruit house were erected, thousands of loads of marl dug and applied to the land, large orchards were planted and reared to maturity, and a mile square of sterile, exhausted land converted into a thrifty and productive domain."¹⁰ John H. Noyes, the founder of Oneida, sharply pointed out that "attractive industry"¹¹ in Fourier's illustrations is generally portrayed as "delicious pictures of fruit-raising and romantic agriculture", while manufacture is generally neglected. This was not the case with the Red Banks experiment. Although farming was the leading occupation of the North American Phalanx, "milling was successfully introduced"¹² as well: four groups attended respectively to carpentry, iron work, tin work and fruit preserving.¹³ With its large wooden main building, the phalanstery, offering comfortable central steam heating and gaslight, and with a few small cottages around, its well-cultivated orchards and cleared land, its fine little streams and natural woodlands surrounding the domain, the North American Phalanx was described from the early visits as a picturesque Eden, the realization on a small scale of Fourier's grandiose model. Situated about thirty miles from New York City, the Phalanx could be reached by steamboat and then by coach on a sandy road and it seemed far away from the evils

8. Albert Brisbane, *A Concise Exposition of the Doctrine of Association*, J.B. Redfield, New York, 1844, p. 16.

9. Carl Guarneri, in *The Utopian Alternative*, pp. 36-44 does justice to Horace Greeley's commitment to Fourierism.

10. Horace Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life*, J.B. Ford, New York, 1868, p. 153.

11. Fourier's theory of attractive industry was based on the idea that work had to be organized so as to dignify it and render it gratifying.

12. From Charles Sear's historical sketch of the North American Phalanx, cited by Noyes, p. 463. On the Phalanx see Dolores Hayden, *Seven America Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-1975*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1976, Ch. 6. In accordance with Fourier's theories, at the Phalanx division of labor took the form of "serial organization of labor" with six "series": agricultural, livestock, mechanical, domestic, educational and festive. Members would choose their series freely according to their personal "attractions".

13. In the 1850's the Phalanx established the first commercial cannery in New Jersey and developed the commercial milling of hominy. See Dolores Hayden, *op. cit.*, p. 184, n27.

of "civilized" society.¹⁴ Visitors and observers were impressed by "the cheerfulness and elasticity of spirit", "the genial countenances" of the members, "the right good will, quickness, and thoroughness with which they completed their task",¹⁵ thus favouring a reassuring ideal image, a pastoral portrait of life in Harmony.

Though no female voice left a direct, personal account of women's experiences at the North American Phalanx, still various sources offer glimpses of what life was there.¹⁶ Numbering 115 in early 1853,¹⁷ the members comprised thirty-seven women whose active, important role in starting the community is stressed by Swedish author Frederika Bremer after her first visit to the North American Phalanx in 1849.

It was beautiful and affecting to hear what fatigues and labor in the commencement the women subjected themselves to, women who had been but little accustomed to any thing of this kind; how steadfastly and with what noble courage they endured it.¹⁸

Those exceptional sacrifices had been shared equally by the members, noted the visitor, who reported that "the men, in this spirit of brotherhood did their part in any kind of work as well as the women, merely looking at the honor and the necessity of the work, and never asking whether it was the employment for men or women."

While efforts seemed to be rather equally shared in the delicate phase of starting the community, Bremer noted during her visit that things had already changed: a heavier charge of work and duties weighed on women. Lydia Arnold, the wife of George Arnold, president of the Phalanx, openly admitted that the equal rights recognized in the community to women – who had the right to "vote and share in the administration of law and justice" – were seldom exercised by them: "We have had so much to do with our domestic affairs, that we have hitherto troubled ourselves very little about those things".¹⁹ Women worked outside the circle of their family – a benefit offered by associative life –, but they had in addition the burden of their family duties to hinder their active participation in meetings and discussions: the Phalanx in its small-scale experiment of Fourier's theories offered only contradictory glimpses of woman's emancipation.

In 1866, more than ten years after the failure of the Phalanx, N. C. Meeker visited the grounds of the Phalanx; he met the old members who had decided to remain on part of the property and he published in the *Tribune* a brief history of the Phalanx and an account of his conversation with the old members. As regards women's

14. The term "civilized" had a pejorative meaning in Fourier's lexicon and it is the epitome of the numerous evils and defects of the society of his age.

15. John H. Noyes, *op. cit.*, pp. 468, 470, 471.

16. Three chapters of John H. Noyes' *History of American Socialisms* are devoted to this experiment; through records of visitors and members of the community Noyes describes the life of the phalanx, Ch. XXXVI, XXXVII, XXXVIII, pp. 449-511.

17. Letter from Charles Sears, 22 April 1853. National Archives, Paris. Herman Belz, in "The North American Phalanx: Experiment in Socialism", *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*, describes the sixty members who initially joined the Phalanx in 1843: "Out of twenty-eight cases where occupation could be ascertained, a middle-class background appeared in nine instances"; by 1854-55 applications for membership show a greater working-class presence, mostly from the urban areas of the Northeast. Quoted in Hayden, *op. cit.*, p. 183n

18. Fredrika Bremer, *Homes of the New World. Impressions of America*, translated by Mary Howitt, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1853, p. 77.

19. *Ibidem*, p. 80.

heavy burden of work he noted that "some of the best women, though filled with enthusiasm for the cause, broke down with hard work" and admitted that "the idea that woman in Association was to be relieved of many cares, was not realized". Still, in the same pages written in 1866, he noted that "to this day do members, and particularly women, look back to that period as the happiest in their life."²⁰ As George Ripley wrote in the *Harbinger*, members of the community, in their militant choice of joining the Phalanx, were conscious of enrolling "in the lot of pioneers in a great social reform", and were "content to endure sacrifices for the realization of the ideas that were more sacred than life itself". This consciousness of being part of a large, noble experiment certainly helped women to endure their specific sacrifices and left vivid, positive memories of a warm, cooperative atmosphere, an idealization relegating to the background the obvious conflicts and difficulties.

In fact, other reports from visitors confirm this atmosphere: in spite of the heavy strains and hard work, visitors had the striking feeling that associative life offered a superior and delightful existence to the members. At the North American Phalanx, women appeared to N. C. Neidhart as "a genial band, with happy, smiling countenances, full of health and spirit ... such deep and earnest eyes, it seemed to me, I had never seen before". The "strange effect" that A. J. Macdonald, a travelling journalist, had arriving for the first time at the North American Phalanx was that he "almost believed that this was a Community where people were really happy". Macdonald visited the Phalanx three times between 1851 and 1853. The "sombre pilgrim", as Noyes called him, among his notes reported a conversation, during his last visit in 1853, with a member of the Phalanx, Mr. French, who after a brief absence from the community, confessed he was "happy to return and he felt he could not live elsewhere."²¹

Fredrika Bremer, though she confessed that she "would rather live in a cottage on the bleakest granite mountain of Sweden" than in a phalanstery, recognized that "Association is evidently doing a justice to many individuals which would never be done to them in the great social system as it is usually constructed" and offered as an example the case of a man "of considerable knowledge and a cultivated mind", who in consequence of the weakness of his eyes was unable to maintain himself; he was poor and without near connections and risked a sombre destiny.

As a member of the Phalanstery, this man gave his bodily labor ten hours in the day, and on the other hand he was entitled to all the nobler enjoyments of cultivated life, intercourse with superior and educated people, good meals partaken in cheerful company, always a kind welcome, and every evening, when the work of the day was over, if he were so inclined, rest and refreshment in society, in a large, light room, with agreeable women, handsome children, music, books, opportunities for conversation on the highest interests of life in connection with the interests of the association.²²

Bremer was also touched by the story of a young woman "of weak health and small means", almost driven insane by her poor existence, who found at the Phalanx "love and freedom ... her being expanded and unfolded itself like a drooping flower

20. John H. Noyes, *op. cit.*, pp. 500-503.

21. *Ibidem*, p. 486.

22. Frederika Bremer, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-84.

... and she soon became one of the most active members of the little community, devoting herself to the cultivation of the garden, and to the care of its fruits and flowers."²³

Despite the great personal efforts of the members and its relatively long existence, the North American Phalanx did not succeed in becoming a large, stable community: in 1853 part of the members seceded from the Phalanx and formed the Raritan Bay Union, in 1854 a fire destroyed shops and mills and finally in 1855 members voted to dissolve. With Fourier's grand ideal plan in mind, Albert Brisbane observed disdainfully that "although the life of this little Association was far superior to that of the isolated household among industrial classes, it was still without ideality; its organization was extremely incomplete. It was associative life in its simple degrees, possessing few charms other than social intercourse; it was a life of calm well-being, not one of enthusiastic action."²⁴ A scornful epitaph that reveals once more the great expectations of the Fourierist leader.

Brook Farm, founded mainly as an "educational establishment" in 1841 in West Roxbury, eight miles from Boston, became a Fourierist Phalanx in early 1844. Only three miles away from the Dedham Branch Railroad, the new Association with its 208 acres of land combined "a convenient nearness to the city, with a degree of retirement and freedom". The place was described as "one of great beauty" surrounded by a "rich and various"²⁵ landscape. The small original group of the founders, comprising George and Sophia Ripley, Charles Dana, John S. Dwight, expanded and in its first Fourierist year the community accepted sixty-seven new members.²⁶ The community had already improved its organization with "a larger and more convenient dining room, a labor-saving cooking apparatus, a purer diet, a more orderly and quiet attendance of the refectons, superior arrangements for industry".²⁷ In 1844 a new workshop was erected and soon the community was engaged in building a large Phalanstery, one hundred and seventy-five feet by forty, prepared for the reception of a hundred and fifty new members. Unfortunately the building, still unfinished, was destined to be completely destroyed in 1846 by a disastrous fire, deeply affecting the energies and hopes of the phalansterians.

Less reticent than the members of the North American Phalanx, Brook Farmers left personal accounts of their experiences; most of these memoirs were written, in old age, by former young members of the community, especially women, and were published in the late nineteenth century. The letters that Marianne Dwight wrote from Brook Farm, mostly to her friend Anna Parsons in Boston, have a special flavour: they can be read as a journal of daily life at Brook Farm and more vividly and directly than the late recollections of other members offer an insight into the experience of a young woman in a Phalanx.²⁸

23. *Ibidem*, 619.

24. Redelia Brisbane, *Albert Brisbane: A Mental Biography*, Arena, Boston, 1893, p. 218.

25. From the preamble to the new constitution, quoted in Noyes, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

26. Michael Barkun, *Crucible of the Millenium, The Burned-Over District of New York in the 1840's*, Syracuse Univ. Press, Syracuse, 1986, p. 87. Barkun specifies that "of the sixty-seven individuals ... there were seven professionals, six business people, and forty-three workers. The latter included shoemakers, farmers, carpenters and printers". Interesting are the comments of the previous members about the newcomers, see for example, John Thomas Codman, *Brook Farm: Historic and Personal Memoirs*, Arena, Boston, 1894, p. 57: "came other men and women, new and untried, with not so much of Greek and Latin, not so much suavity of manners, not so much 'cultivation', but warm of heart and brave of purpose".

27. Charles Lane, "Brook Farm", *The Dial*, vol. II, n. 3 (January 1844), p. 354.

28. Among the autobiographical writings, see Georgianna Bruce Kirby, *Years of Experience, An*

Some of the young Brook Farmers were sent there to study and belonged chiefly to the first, pre-Fourierist phase, others went through the entire experiment, but all the recollections agree in stressing a point : Brook Farm offered them special years in a warm, friendly atmosphere "pervaded by intellectual grace" and that was why it left "so lasting and so happy an impression".²⁹ Georgianna Kirby, who left the community some time after it started its Fourierist years, recalled well how special, intense and involving was home life in the community :

Some, who like myself, were but novitiates, dwelt much of the time in a state of beatitude while scraping the dinner plate, scrubbing the stairs, or making check-shirts in the sewing room.³⁰

However idyllic the memories were, through these recollections the reader can catch a glimpse of real home life at Brook Farm. Countless anecdotes testified the climate of "arcadian simplicity, cordiality and studiousness", and stressed the pleasantness and the advantages that the community offered, especially to young people. A lady, knowing it by direct experience, recalled that "there was a great deal of fun at Brook Farm".³¹ In the evenings, Brook Farmers would meet "to hear or themselves take part in the pleasant and often brilliant conversation ... Little dances were common ... and music too lent its charms to these reunions."³² The list of amusements varied from summer picnics in the woods to winter coasting down the steep hills on moonlight evenings, and comprised also impromptu dialogues, games of euchre, fancy-dress balls and tableaux vivants; charades and proverbs were frequently acted and in the long winter evenings Shakespearian readings were added to the usual recreations.

Visitors, with their agreeable conversations, were a further element of diversion at Brook Farm. Horace Greeley, Stephen Pearl Andrews, Bronson Alcott and Albert Brisbane were welcome guests, but the English reformer Robert Owen also spent a few days there and gave lectures on socialism.³³ The record book of the reception room, lost after Brook Farm broke up, "would reveal a list of four thousand names" of visitors "registered in one year": it is not surprising then that "hunting places for stray visitors" was one of the main activities of the chief of the Dormitory Group, Lizzie Curson.³⁴

Brook Farm demanded serious efforts and long hours of work from its members. In "this busy little world", as Amelia Russell defined it, domestic chores "were not lightened by paid domestics".³⁵ Not in her "early youth" when she entered the

Autobiographical Narrative, Putnam's Sons, New York, 1887; Marianne Dwight, *Letters from Brook Farm, 1844-1847*, edited by Amy Reed, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, N.Y., 1928; John Thomas Codman, *Brook Farm: Historic and Personal Memoirs*, Arena, Boston, 1894; Lindsay Swift, *Brook Farm: Its Members, Scholars, and Visitors*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1908; Amelia Russell, "Home Life of the Brook Farm Association", *Atlantic Monthly*, (October 1878), pp. 458-466 and (November 1878), pp. 556-563; Ora Gannett Sedgwick, "A Girl of Sixteen at Brook Farm", *Atlantic Monthly*, 85 (March 1900) pp. 394-404; George Willis Cooke, editor, *Early Letters of George Wm. Curtis to John S. Dwight*, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1898.

29. Georgianna Bruce Kirby, *Years of Experience*, op. cit., p. 175.

30. *Ibidem*, p. 133.

31. John Thomas Codman, *Brook Farm*, op. cit., p. 172.

32. Amelia Russell, "Home Life at Brook Farm", op. cit., p. 462.

33. Marianne Dwight, *Letters from Brook Farm*, op. cit., p. 94.

34. John Thomas Codman, *Brook Farm*, op. cit., pp. 80 and 137.

35. Amelia Russell, "Home Life at Brook Farm", op. cit., p. 460.

association, Amelia gradually found her place : at first she simply “offered to make up the muslins of all on the place who wore them” and soon found out that “many considered such finery useless” and then she “belonged to the ironing-room” together with Sophia Ripley. They “were amongst its most indefatigable workers” working side by side “for ten hours or even longer at a time, only leaving long enough for dinner.”³⁶

Marianne Dwight, writing to her brother Frank, described her daily work schedule; a “long day”, lightened by “alternation of work and pleasant company and chats”: mostly domestic duties – waiting on the breakfast table, clearing it, sewing, setting the tea table, washing tea cups – and some hours devoted to teaching drawing. Although a few women also had some responsibility in the educational series, domestic chores were women’s predominant tasks, and Marianne noted that “there are so many [tasks] and so few women to do the work, that we have to be nearly all the time about it.” She stressed that what women needed at Brook Farm – or least would have liked – was “more leisure”.³⁷ In the laundry, at the sink, in the dormitory, women worked in groups and “volunteers and gallant aid to the household brigade were welcome” so that “the work went fast and gayly”;³⁸ still, in spite of the help from young male volunteers, the large share of domestic chores kept women very busy.

In fact, at Brook Farm the conventional antebellum conceptions of sexual division of labor were not questioned : domestic tasks were considered beyond men’s “experience and knowledge” and the young men who helped women did it because they liked to offer their gallant aid and often because they wanted “to free the young women for participation in some further scheme of entertainment”.³⁹ Miles Coverdale, Hawthorne’s *alter ego* in *Blithedale Romance*, considered with great skepticism the utopians’ projects of gradual liberation of women from domestic drudgery, and ironically observed:

What a pity that the kitchen, and the house-work generally, cannot be left out of our system altogether! It is odd enough that the kind of labor which falls to the lot of women is just that which chiefly distinguishes artificial life —the life of degenerated mortals — from the life of Paradise. Eve had no dinner-pot, and no clothes to mend, and no washing-day.⁴⁰

At Brook Farm the complex work organization suggested by Fourier was not easy to realize: lack of enough members impeded the formation of the necessary groups and series to carry out in practice the rotation from job to job that was necessary to make industry “attractive”. Codman wrote that “an attempt only could be made to alternate labor and to relieve mothers from the excess of burden that the care of young children often is. Some very sweet and choice ladies attended to this

36. *Ibidem*, p. 460.

37. Marianne Dwight, *Letters from Brook Farm*, *op. cit.*, p. 8

38. Lindsay Swift, *Brook Farm*, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

39. *Ibidem*, p. 51.

40. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*, Desmond Publishing Co., Boston, 1899, p. 15. Hawthorne defined his experiences at Brook Farm, where he lived in the early 1840’s, as “the most romantic episode of my life”. The novel, written in 1852 when the community had already dissolved, offers a rather bitter and skeptical picture of the reformers’ ardor and zeal.

employment, choosing it from their attraction toward it" and, in his memoirs written in 1894, he observed that thus Brook Farm inaugurated "the day nursery system, now coming into vogue in our large cities."⁴¹

Another modest attempt – but very important for the women involved – to overstep the female bonds of domestic chores was made in 1844. Marianne Dwight wrote in July how busy she was with a new task, "making fancy articles for sale in Boston" and again informed her brother about her grand projects and expectations:

I must interest you in our fancy group, for which and from which I hope great things, — nothing less than the elevation of woman to independence, and an acknowledged equality with man... Women must become producers of marketable articles; women must make money and earn their support independently of man. So we, with a little borrowed capital (say twenty-five or thirty dollars; by we, I mean a large part of the women here) have purchased materials, and made up in one week about forty-five dollars worth of elegant and tasteful caps, capes, collars, undersleeves, etc, etc.⁴²

Like the North American Phalanx, Brook Farm did not survive a disastrous fire, a hard blow to the members' hopes and enthusiasm. After the phalanstery burned in 1846, the end of the experiment soon approached. Marianne Dwight, in a letter dated March 1847, expressed vividly how sad it was "to see Brook Farm dwindling away" and what it meant personally to leave the community.

I love every tree and wood haunt — every nook and path, and hill and meadow. I fear the birds can never sing so sweetly to me elsewhere, — the flowers can never greet me so smilingly. I can hardly imagine that the same sky will look down upon me in any other spot, — and where, where in the wide world shall I ever find warm hearts all around me again? Oh! you must feel with me that none but a Brook Farmer can know how chilling is the cordiality of the world.⁴³

Despite its serious efforts to become a Phalanx true to Fourier's model, through the memories of its young members Brook Farm appears rather as a lively, entertaining college, offering an intense atmosphere and an interesting intellectual life. The years spent at Brook Farm not only left strong and lasting memories in its members, but they created a special tie among them: in her "Home Life at the Brook Farm Association", published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1878, more than thirty years after the end of the community, Amelia Russell mentioned a recent "social gathering of the remnant of Brook Farmers",⁴⁴ a meeting testifying the long-lived bonds of friendship. Then again Brook Farm for many young unmarried members was the place where they met their partner: John Codman listed "fourteen married couples whose mutual friendship was begun or continued through Brook Farm", among which Marianne Dwight and John Orvis.⁴⁵

The Unitary Household was the last of the antebellum experiments.⁴⁶ Created in

41. John Thomas Codman, *Brook Farm, op. cit.*, p. 134.

42. Marianne Dwight, *Letters from Brook Farm, op. cit.*, p. 3.

43. *Ibidem*, p. 177.

44. Amelia Russell, "Home Life at the Brook Farm Association", *op. cit.*, p. 559.

45. John T. Codman, *Brook Farm, op. cit.*, p. 136.

46. On the Unitary Household, Luisa Cetti, *Un falansterio a New York*. See also Carl Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative, op. cit.*, pp. 396-97 and Ch.14 on the new directions of Fourierism in the 1850's.

1858, when the wave of interest in Fourier's theories had already declined, it had a peculiar feature: it was established in a big city, New York, while the previous numerous Fourierist experiments were located in the countryside. At first, the Household occupied a four-story building in Stuyvesant Street, then, after the success of this first experiment involving twenty persons, it moved to four brownstones on East 14th Street, numbering three hundred residents in two years. In Edmund Clarence Stedman's memoirs the chapter devoted to the two years the poet spent at the Household is significantly entitled "A Brownstone Utopia".⁴⁷

Given its urban location and the prominence of some of the residents, the Household was more directly exposed to the curiosity of the press than Brook Farm and North American Phalanx, which could find some protection in their country isolation. As only Stedman, among the numerous residents, left records of his experiences at the Household, it is essentially thanks to the malevolent press if the historian can have information on the Household. When the *The New York Times* started its campaign against the Household, labelling it "the latest and most repulsive development of the Free-Love system", it was Edward Underhill, the house manager, who replied to the various charges of depravity and immorality, thus offering an insight into the life of the urban commune and the aspirations of the promoters.⁴⁸

The Household's urban location meant, as well, different aims and a totally new organization from the previous Fourierist experiments. Its sole purpose, declared the house manager, E. F. Underhill, was "to test the practicability of a cooperative household succeeding under individual leadership ... a long step forward in the effort to improve the social position of the masses of our population". A circular intended "to save the troubles of constantly repeated verbal explanations to applicants", explained that the Unitary Household was "organized to secure the economies of association and cooperation through an equitable division of its expenses".⁴⁹

Like Brook Farm and North American Phalanx, the Household had communal parlors and dining room for the residents, but the sharing of household chores was no longer part of the internal work organization, in fact all domestic tasks were carried on by paid servants. Even the participation in communal meals and social gatherings was not a settled point of the life of the commune, for, as Stedman recalled in his memoirs, "Individual Sovereignty was another maxim of the establishment: there could be no intrusion upon one's privacy, nor was there any obligation to frequent the common parlors, or to form entangling acquaintanceship with fellow tenants". He added that "at slight expense we had, when desired, the luxury of private meals and service." Thus, compared to Brook Farm or to the North America Phalanx, the Household had a totally different organization based on a new and strong element, "the vital principle of individuality".⁵⁰

While honoring the genius of Fourier "a great annunciator, but not always an

47. Laura Stedman and George M. Gould, *Life and Letters of Edmund Clarence Stedman*, Moffat, Yard and Co., New York, 1910, vol. I, Ch. VII, pp. 151-182.

48. See the articles of June 22 and 25, 1858 and September 21 and 26, 1860 in the *New York Times*.

49. Letter from E. F. Underhill to the *New York Times*, Sept. 26, 1860. Underhill, a *New York Tribune* journalist, in the same letter, briefly summarises his experiences: "successively a factory operative, an actor and a journalist — and certainly an enthusiast".

50. Laura Stedman and George Gould, *Life and Letters of E.C. Stedman*, op. cit., p. 159.

exact thinker" – wrote the Household manager Underhill, the promoters were inspired as well by the economic and social teachings of the early American anarchist, Josiah Warren, in particular by the principle of Individual Sovereignty as a new theoretical element in their organization.⁵¹ Josiah Warren's long and rich experience in communal experiments had convinced him that at the basis of an ideal community was individual freedom and no authoritarian rule, no rigid organization should imprison Individual Sovereignty: this was the necessary condition that the promoters of the Household thought would permit an easier realization of Fourier's grandest visions.

The idea of the unitary household, as opposed to the traditional isolated household, the nuclear family, was borrowed from Fourier, whose arguments against the *ménage isolé et incohérent* and the institution of marriage were a rich source of inspiration for American reformers. One of the main arguments against the isolated household was a sharp economic criticism of its monotonous work organization and waste of energies and means. Immense would be the savings in a phalanstery of 1800 persons: it would avoid the monstrous complication and waste of three hundred isolated families with their retail purchases, and their "three hundred separate houses, three hundred kitchens, three hundred kitchen fires, three hundred sets of cooking utensils, three hundred women to do the cooking". No more "toiling at the wash-tub" once a week for three hundred women: "association will avoid this useless and repulsive drudgery", with the help of "proper machinery ... which may be invented ... for performing kitchen and other household work upon a large and economical scale".⁵² The need to give a more scientific and rational structure to the defective work organization typical of "isolated households" was evident even to women far from utopian dreams: Catherine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe recognized, a few decades after the Fourierist experiments had ended, the advantages that associated life could offer.

If all the money that each separate family spends on the outfit and accommodations for washing and ironing, on fuel, soap, starch and other requirements, were united in a fund to create a laundry for every dozen family, one or two good women could do in first rate style.⁵³

In addition to their economic critique, Fourierists condemned the isolated household as the "tomb of Love", a place that "produces disagreements, engenders antipathies and deadens all enthusiasm"; thus the Unitary Household was conceived, as well, as an alternative answer to the long list of evils commonly produced by isolated family life: "quarrelsome ignorance, monotony, tyranny, drunkenness and petty domestic cares and anxieties". But while in the 1840's the early Fourierists like Albert Brisbane thundered against the isolated household, they were less explicit in condemning marriage; the free love advocates of the 1850's added open and harsh attacks not only against the isolated household, but against marriage as well, considered "the sole cause of woman's degradation and misery".⁵⁴

51. On Josiah Warren see Ronald Creagh, *Laboratoires de l'utopie: Les Communautés Libertaires aux Etats Unis*, Payot, Paris, 1983, pp. 63-93.

52. Albert Brisbane, *Concise Exposition of the Doctrine of Association*, J.S.Redfield, New York, 1844, p. 17.

53. Catherine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home: or Principles of Domestic Science*, J. B. Ford and Co., New York, 1872, p. 334.

54. Albert Brisbane, *Concise Exposition*, p. 13. For a detailed attack against the isolated household see

Soon labelled as the Free Love Headquarters, the Household attracted the curiosity of the press. However "quiet and unobtrusive" it might appear, it aimed, according to an alarmistic article of the *New York Times* to "unite different families under a single system of regulations, live cheaply, and what is more curious than all the rest, introduce in the heart of New York, without noise or bluster, a successful enterprise based on Practical Socialism". In fact, the Household proved to be a success: the *New York Times* itself had to admit that

a Unitary Household solves one of the problems of living. It unquestionably proves that aggregation insures economy, ... that a good living may be had for the inconsiderable sum of \$ 3.50 per week for each person,

which meant "two thirds less than the average expenses of separate establishments" and a letter to a newspaper of that period stressed that the modest cost of living at the Household comprised "full hotel accommodations, on the most expensive street crossing the town, in the most convenient quarter".⁵⁵

Thus the Unitary Household offered a comfortable style of life, quite different from the communal efforts in the farms, shops and kitchens of Brook Farm and the North American Phalanx. The communitarian impulse was sacrificed to the new principle of individual freedom, placed at the center of the aspirations and organization, and the utopian dream of a universal social reform, of a new society built through cooperation, gradually focused on more limited realistic goals, like building an alternative to isolated households or, more simply, offering a comfortable practical solution to the many difficulties that life in a big city imposed on those lacking important financial means.

For two years, till the eve of the Civil War, the Household was the meeting place and the residence of a variegated group of reformers, artists, journalists, feminists, spiritualists, who found there a very convenient and hospitable refuge; some of the residents were young and inexperienced, while others came from the most radical, communitarian experiments of the previous decades, almost two generations working together on a new project. The main promoter of the Household was Stephen Pearl Andrews⁵⁶ who lived there with his family; his presence and that of dr. Marx Edgeworth Lazarus, author of the first free-love bible *Love vs. Marriage* in 1852, contributed to create a sulphureous air of scandal around the Household.

The urban commune gave hospitality as well to the artists and journalists belonging to the circle of Bohemians, whose wit and brilliant sense of humour animated New York intellectual life.⁵⁷ Stedman, young poet in his first years in New

Julia Branch's speech at the Rutland Free Convention of 1858, *Proceedings*, J.B. Yerrington and Son, Boston, 1858, p. 55. On free love see also Taylor Stoehr, *Free Love in America*, AMS Press, New York, 1979; Hal D. Sears, *The Sex Radicals: Free Love in High Victorian America*, Regents Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 1977; John Spurlock, "The Free Love Network in America, 1850 to 1860", *Journal of Social History* (Summer 1988), pp. 765-79 and Luisa Cetti, "Feminism and Free Love in Mid-Nineteenth Century America", *Storia Nordamericana*, 5, 2 (1988), pp. 9-22, and "The Radicals and the Wrongs of Marriage: The Rutland Free Convention of 1858", in L. Valtz Mannucci ed., *Making, Unmaking and Renaking America: Popular Ideology before the Civil War*, Quaderno 1, Milan group, Istituto di Studi Storici, Milan, 1987, pp. 77-94.

55. *New York Times*, June 22 1858. The letter is quoted in Laura Stedman and George M. Gould, *Life and Letters of E. C. Stedman*, op. cit., p. 159.

56. On Stephen P. Andrews see Madaline B Stern, *The Pantarch. A Biography of Stephen Pearl Andrews*, University of Texas Press, Austin and London, 1968.

57. On the Bohemians and especially on their King, Henry Clapp, see Luisa Cetti, *Un falansterio*, op. cit., pp. 79-85.

York away from his native New England, "consorted with newspaper men and bookmen, and amateur poets, and doctors." At the Household resided Leonard A. Hendricks, reporter of the *Herald*, Alfred C. Hills, city editor of the *Evening Post*, Charles T. Congdon, of the *Tribune*, and other young "news gatherers".⁵⁸

Among the residents of the Household there were a few radical feminists, such as Julia Branch, a poet and a famous medium, described by the *New York Times* as "the leader of the New York free lovers", and Marie Stevens, whose interest in communitarian ventures was still lively in the 1880's when she contributed to the foundation of the Topolobampo community in Mexico.⁵⁹ Both in their twenties, at the Household they certainly found a favourable ground for developing freely their "passional attractions".

Freed of the burden of domestic chores and responsibilities, they had the possibility of choosing their work activities and following their intellectual interests. While she resided at the Household, Julia Branch published a few of her poems in the *New York Leader*, a popular Sunday paper; she gained the front page on the *New York Times* for her daring speech against marriage at a Reform Convention in Rutland, Vt., and was a well known medium, whose presence at Spiritualists' meetings was duly reported by the press during her brief season of fame as alleged leader of the New York free lovers. Marie Stevens in the early 1850s had moved to New York from her native Massachusetts, leaving her work in the Lowell textile mills; she became a teacher and in the radical circle of the Household met her second husband, Edward Howland, co-founder with Henry Clapp of the *New York Saturday Press*.⁶⁰

However profound were the differences in aims and organization separating the Household from the previous Fourierist experiments, the ties – "a current of affinity", as Stedman would put it – between the urbane commune and the North American Phalanx, or rather what survived of the Phalanx, whose land had been largely sold when the community was dissolved in 1856, were strong. The Phalanx, now named Strawberry Farms, offered a refuge from the city, a pleasant boarding house where the residents of the Household could migrate in the summer.

The home-lot of the general building and grounds, and the greater part of the best land adjoining, was secured and occupied by Phalansterians and their families— a charming, fair-minded, moral, and industrious neighborhood. The great main building remained, a portion of it divided into compartments for families, the rest for those who like us came to board. Our dining-room had been the great community hall of the Phalansterians, and smacked alluringly of the past; with its dais at one end, of which the *raredos* was a grand and unique painting, the imaginary representation of Fourier's ideal Phalanstery, the city of a 1000 souls.⁶¹

The reasons for the failure of utopian experiments like Brook Farm, the North American Phalanx or the Unitary Household were various and complex. The analysis

58. Stedman, *Life and Letters*, *op. cit.*, pp. 167-69

59. On Marie Howland see Robert S. Fogarty, *Dictionary of American Communal and Utopian History*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 1980, p. 55; Dolores Hayden, "Two Utopian Feminists and Their Campaign for Kitchenless Houses", *Signs*, vol. 4, 2 (Winter 1978), pp. 274-290.

60. See for example, "The Pic-Nic of the Spiritualists", *New York Tribune*, August 12, 1858.

61. Stedman, *Life and Letters*, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

here is circumscribed to the specific unsuccessful prophecy of woman's emancipation in communitarian life. Phalansterians aspired to create model communities capable of conquering a wider following, and in general they attempted generously and honestly to live up to their ideals, to make visible in the present glimpses of a freer and more satisfying future female condition. However unoffensive and prudent they tried to be in order to gain a wider following, denouncing woman's degraded condition they touched a delicate issue; moreover, their lifestyles differed from the contemporary models and thus they often became object of the heaviest charges of immorality and depravity. The Unitary Household, in particular, suffered fierce attacks from the press, including "accusations of adultery, fornication, lust, the debauching of children, universal license, incest, abortion and general depravity".⁶²

In their ideal plans, Fourierists aspired to experiment a well ordered, regimentarian organization offering more chances of female emancipation. Still, in spite of their efforts and bold statements, in their phalansteries equality remained a theoretic assumption more than an accomplished fact. Of the three cases above examined, Brook Farm and the North American Phalanx show that, although women's horizon in utopian communities was less limited than the customary destiny of marriage and childbearing, still they could not fully escape the stereotypes and models prescribed by the woman's sphere: the home, unitary instead of isolated, remained the centre of their activity.

The Unitary Household was a more limited, urban, project and stands apart because it adopted a simple organizational solution which offered women a chance of escaping household drudgery: domestic chores were assigned to paid servants, thus female residents were free to engage in other activities, following their "passional attractions" as regards work. This choice of no longer sharing household chores, as had been the case in previous Fourierist experiments, and of watering down the communal militant efforts, meant abandoning the well structured work organization in Groups and Series that in the 1840's Fourierists considered necessary to support individual "passional attractions" and to ensure collective well-being. The Household seemed to aim at individual comfort at a moderate price rather than at collective well-being built through cooperation and active participation. Relieved of household responsibilities, women could certainly have a more emancipated life, but if they gained new personal perspectives through the organization based on Individual Sovereignty, they lost the wider communitarian goals of early Fourierism.

Although Fourierists' assertions of woman's equal opportunities were very unorthodox compared to the opinions of most of their contemporaries and foreshadowed revolutionary changes, in fact Brook Farm and the North American Phalanx failed in creating real equal opportunities. Equality was denied in the sexual division of labor generally adopted in the phalansteries: domestic duties were women's predominant task, an absorbing role in these small-scale experiments, where the number of female members was very low compared to that of men. Moreover, though the right to vote and to participate in meetings and debates was guaranteed in the phalansteries, while it was denied in the society, yet women were often too busy with their domestic tasks and so forced to neglect their active participation to guarantee necessary services to the community.

62. Letter of E.F. Underhill to the *New York Times*, Sept. 26, 1860.

This evident gap between theory and practice is deeply rooted in mid-nineteenth century society and reveals the pervasiveness of the conventional notions about woman's true nature of that period. Phalansterians were certainly ahead of their times when they defended woman's rights, then so openly denied. But at the same time they fully belonged to their times since they shared with their contemporaries the same conventional views as regards woman. Certainly they were not conscious of fostering contradictory notions – equality and woman's "true nature" – indeed, they repeatedly denounced the obstacles opposed by the "civilized society" to real woman's emancipation. However, they undervalued the heavy burden of "civilized" conventional notions about woman which pervaded their communitarian life itself.

Charles Lane wrote in January 1844 in the *Dial*

all the writers of the 'Phalansterian' class ... are acute and eloquent in deploring Woman's oppressed and degraded position in past and present times, but are almost silent as to the future.

In fact, rather than silent they were vague. They always proclaimed that in a future Harmonic society woman would be free and independent, but they did not predict precisely how she could gain freedom and economic independence. Certainly, the new society would abolish woman's slavery in the "isolated household" and a future, rational work organization would lighten household drudgery. Still, the experiences of the phalansteries show that women were not particularly relieved from domestic chores and only in a few cases they could experiment work outside the conventional domestic roles.

Fourierists, well inspired by Fourier's fantastic visions, did not certainly fail in offering sketches of a happier future: in the efficient and well-organized unitary households the use of machinery would relieve women, at least in part, of the exclusive burden of housework, allowing them to freely choose more satisfying and remunerative activities. In fact, as Marx noted, utopian projects always contain an anticipation and the fantastic imagery of a new world and even some Fourierist fantasies about simplified and rationalized domestic tasks came true: the use of machinery to lighten the burden of housework turned out to be a poetic, confused forecast of solutions which were going to be introduced in a few decades, through the technological progress brought about by electricity.

On one important point however the poetic foresight was not exact: it was the isolated household, the nuclear family, which would benefit from technological progress, and not the unitary household.⁶³ Whereas even those daring Fourierist demands that openly offended current conventions and morality – more tolerant divorce laws, acknowledgement of illegitimate children – proved to be part of the future.

Considering the inadequate fulfilment of the promises of equality and freedom for women in phalansteries, the conclusion might appear simple and clear: phalansteries did not succeed in giving full realization to woman's emancipation

63. Fourierists could not foresee that technological innovation, instead of producing freedom from domestic slavery, would prove to be source of a more subtle female uneasiness affecting 20th-century housewives, as analysed by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1962).

because their participants, including the female members, did not clearly perceive how the conventional notions of woman's true nature limited the real chances open to women. Still, an historical interpretation of women's experiences in phalansteries cannot simply be confined to a careful valuation of the promises fulfilled or failed : it must take into account the personal meaning that those experiences had for the women involved. If we consider the personal impact on female members' lives of the actual arrangements as regards work, family, education and sex – in brief, the imperfect but generous attempt to respect everybody's "passional attractions" in every field – we discover that their experiences are often recalled as idyllic, if not explicitly as the happiest period of their life. Personal memoirs and reports show how long-lived and strong are the bonds of friendships born during "those years of thought and toil", to use Hawthorne's words. They clearly reveal as well what life in phalansteries meant for women: a quiet, laborous and lively life in an alternative, relatively comfortable shelter, secluded from the roar, the competitiveness, the disorder of antebellum America – a feeling they shared with their male condisciples, yet it was reinforced by their specific pride in their active participation – so new and exciting in a society that confined woman's sphere at home and excluded her from any active social role in the efforts to build a communal, cooperative life.