

NINETEENTH CENTURY UTOPIAN COMMUNITIES IN MEMORY AND HISTORY

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At the famous climax to Edward Bellamy's novel *Looking Backward* (1888), the protagonist Julian West, having visited the better future society of the year 2000, finds himself back again in the "Golgotha" of late 19th century Boston. Horrified by its poverty, inequalities and competitiveness, and still more by a realization of his own former indifference to them, West seeks to persuade his old friends, his fiancée and her family of the social evils surrounding them and the possibility of a better future:

With fervency I spoke of that new world, blessed with plenty, purified by justice and sweetened by brotherly kindness, the world of which I had indeed but dreamed, but which might so easily be made real.

Far from engaging his listeners' sympathies, however, West's description of an ideal future gets him thrown out of the house: "I had expected ... the faces around me to light up with emotions akin to mine," but instead

they grew ... more dark, angry and scornful. Instead of enthusiasm, the ladies showed only aversion and dread, while the men interrupted me with shouts of reprobation and contempt. "Madman!" "Pestilent fellow!" "Fanatic!" "Enemy of society!" were some of their cries It seemed to me that my heart would burst with the anguish of finding that what was to me so plain and so all-important was to them meaningless, and that I was powerless to make it other.

As he is being expelled onto the street West awakes to find that, after all, he has been having a nightmare about the awful past, and that he will get to live in the ideal future world. But he goes there alone. His arguments fail to carry his 19th century contemporaries with him.¹

Bellamy was commenting on the Utopian's predicament in late 19th century American capitalism: it had become difficult to imagine a better future without being ridiculed. West experienced all the facets of a Utopian's dilemma: on one hand, a vision of a better life, confidence that it could be obtained by rational means, and a clear view of contemporary social injustices; on the other, the insistence of most people that these injustices were inevitable, and that advocating radical improvement was impractical, "visionary" and dangerous.² But this had not always been the case. In 1825, when Robert Owen announced his plans for an ideal

1. Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1888) ed. Cecelia Tichi, New York, 1982, p. 229.

2. A different interpretation of West's return is given by Jean Pfaelzer, "Nineteenth Century American Utopianism: Texts and Contexts – Introduction", *ATQ: American Transcendental Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (1989): 5.

community at New Harmony and his vision of a wider social revolution, he was given a hearing by thousands, from the President downwards – something that would have been inconceivable sixty years later. Though Owen's optimism led him to mistake his listeners' politeness for enthusiasm, at least his speech to members of the House of Representatives did not get him violently evicted from the building.³ So in the period between Owen's visit and Bellamy's novel there was a marked reduction in Americans' general tolerance for visions of the future. How did this come about?

The search for an answer to this question presents us with a paradox. Visions of a better future proliferated in 19th century America and grew in number over time. Lyman Tower Sargent has counted 115 utopian novels and stories published between 1800 and 1887; the appearance of Bellamy's *Looking Backward* inspired at least as many new utopian works between then and the end of the century.⁴ Otohiko Okugawa found 119 communal societies established between 1800 and 1859, and Robert S. Fogarty lists 141 more that were set up from 1860 to 1914, over half of them after the publication of Bellamy's novel.⁵ However, the growth of utopian activity also provoked increasing skepticism and opposition. Julian West's denouncers merely used language that had become commonplace in attacks on utopian visions in general. Whether they portrayed them as socially subversive or "fanatical," as perverted or "eccentric," as impractical and doomed to failure, Utopia's opponents succeeded in marginalizing and belittling efforts to realize a better future. Their success was part of the wider emergence of capitalist ideological hegemony in the 19th century, and it established a discourse that has shaped the discussion of utopianism ever since.

The roots of this hostile discourse and ideology can be traced in part by examining the memory and history of communal societies established in America between Owen's visit and the Civil War. From 1825 to 1860 over 100 groups, among them Owenites, Fourierists and religious sects of various kinds, founded new communities; in the 1840s alone there were at least 59 established. Most were short-lived. A few survived no longer than a few weeks, and their average longevity was just under two years, though some – like the North American Phalanx and the Oneida Community – lasted considerably longer. Their frequent "failure" itself explains much of the contempt in which such communities were held by contemporaries and, subsequently, by historians. However, recent scholars have started to look at them, not just as institutions in themselves, but for their links with wider efforts for social change: with radical abolitionism, religious liberalism, medical reforms, and campaigns against class, race and gender inequalities.⁶ It is in this wider context

3. J.F.C. Harrison, *Quest for the New Moral World: Robert Owen and the Owenites in England and America*, New York, 1969; Anne Taylor, *Visions of Harmony: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Millenarianism*, Oxford, 1987.

4. Lyman Tower Sargent, *British and American Utopian Literature, 1516-1985: An Annotated Chronological Bibliography*, New York, 1988.

5. The 1800-1859 figure is based on Otohiko Okugawa, "Annotated List of Communal and Utopian Societies, 1787-1919", in *Dictionary of American Communal and Utopian History*, ed. Robert S. Fogarty, Westport, Ct., 1980, pp. 173-233; that for 1860-1914 on Robert S. Fogarty, *All Things New: American Communes and Utopian Movements, 1860-1914*, Chicago, 1990, pp. 227-233. These do not count communities for which only plans or prospectuses exist. Neither figure is definitive; scholars continue to find evidence of previously unknown communities and the Okugawa list, in particular, is now out of date.

that members and critics of utopian communities formed their memories and historical accounts of these movements.

As they did so, they helped shape the climate in which utopian visions would become marginalized and Julian West get kicked onto the street; indeed some scholars have suggested that Bellamy's decision to write *Looking Backward* was prompted in part by his perception that communal societies had failed to achieve their aim of changing society.⁷ To explain the emergence of this climate I shall first discuss the visions of the future that these ante-bellum communities espoused, then explore the terms in which former members looked back at their experiences of community life and, finally, examine the ideological context in which these memories emerged and which they helped to reinforce. Because this contextualization relies on local, often obscure sources, I shall draw particularly on evidence relating to communities founded in New England during the early 1840s: Brook Farm (1841-47), the Hopedale Community (1842-56), the Northampton Association of Education and Industry (1842-46) and Fruitlands (1843).

I

The 1830s and 1840s produced a number of literary visions of the future, stories such as Mary Griffith's "Three Hundred Years Hence," (1836), Edward Kent's "The Vision of Bangor in the Twentieth Century," and Jane Sophia Appleton's feminist "Sequel" to it, both published in 1848. The historical romance *Margaret*, published in 1845 by the Unitarian minister Sylvester Judd, whose heroine reforms a New England village of the Revolutionary period into a model of a perfect society that would "unite nature and religion, harmonize man and God," was also connected with this tradition; Judd had once written an essay entitled "A Peep into the Twentieth Century." But these purely literary visions remained obscure compared with the much more prominent programmes for ideal communities that were being published by Fourierists and others, and with the actual communities that were set up with the aim of achieving a better future society. As a Fourierist reviewer put it, Judd's novel vision was certainly an expression of hope, but it was possible in 1845 for the radical reformer to do more than just stand by and imagine the perfect world: "we are permitted to be actors in the drama."⁸ Communal societies were the distinctive vehicles for social visions in this period.

Though they often differed sharply over the means to achieve them, the founders of most ante-bellum utopian communities had certain aims broadly in common. For most communitarians an ideal future society would be harmonious and non-competitive. It would promote human brotherhood and recognition of equal

6. Outstanding among this new literature is Carl J. Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative. Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1991.

7. Howard P. Segal, "Rethinking American Utopianism", *Reviews in American History* 20, no. 2, June 1992: 201.

8. Griffith's and Appleton's stories are reprinted in Carol Farley Kessler, ed., *Daring to Dream: Utopian Stories by United States Women, 1836-1919*, Boston, 1984; see also Arthur O. Lewis, *American Utopias: Selected Short Fiction*, New York, 1971. The description of Sylvester Judd, *Margaret: A Tale of the Real and the Unreal, Blight and Bloom* (1845) is in Sylvester Judd Jr. to Frederick Henry Hedge, Augusta, Me., Sep 25, 1845, Sylvester Judd Papers, *55M-1, Box 1, Houghton Library, Harvard University, and the review in *Harbinger* 1, no. 13 (Sep 6, 1845); Sylvester Judd Jr., "A Peep into the Twentieth Century" (1832) is in Judd Papers, Box 2.

human rights -- though the extent to which this applied in practice to women or to black people varied significantly. It would secure fairer and more equal rewards for labor. Both home-grown groups like the Oneidans and those, such as the Fourierists, who drew on European social theory, sought American recruits by portraying their communities as model societies that would enable Republican ideals of freedom and equality to be achieved. The theorist Clinton Roosevelt urged the founding of communities to

harmonize the interests of man, by an organization of men and things, by which it will be to the immediate self-interest of every one to act consistently with the greatest good of all.⁹

Religious groups, including Oneida and the Hopedale community, also equated these ideals with the concept of a return to primitive Christianity; as one of its circulars proclaimed, Hopedale was "a Socialistic Community, successfully actualizing, as well as promulgating Practical Christian Socialism," whose members professed faith "in the religion of Jesus Christ, as he taught and exemplified it, according to the Scriptures of the New Testament".¹⁰ Many Owenites, Fourierists and members of independent groups of the 1840s also saw their communities as leading the way towards the millennium.

Parts of these visions were related to improved material lives and day-to-day circumstances for community members. The founders of Brook Farm argued that co-operation could reduce labor without reducing its "desirable fruits ...; that there was no need of any drudge in society, provided there was no drone;" that "a reasonable and righteous sacrifice ... of mere bodily luxuries" could secure health and sufficiency for all.¹¹ Relief from poverty, assured employment, shorter working hours, the opportunity to work at varied or congenial tasks, and the benefits of co-operative labour and mutual support were offered by most community programmes and were among the advantages sought by men and women who applied to join communities. This was a particularly strong allure during the depression of the early 1840s. But along with these material advantages many communities also put themselves forward as places where members could advance their moral or spiritual development, or obtain superior education for their children. While some Owenites and Fourierists stressed the material benefits of co-operation or "association," others in these groups and elsewhere perceived "community" as an intrinsically superior arena for spiritual purposes. For Bronson Alcott, setting up the Fruitlands community in 1843, material circumstances contributed to higher ends:

Labor will be attractive; life will not be worn in anxious and indurating toils; it will be a scene of mixed leisure, recreation, labor, culture... Spirit being in all.¹²
All these facets of community life, material and spiritual were usually presented,

9. Clinton Roosevelt, *The Science of Government, Founded on Natural Law*, New York, 1841, p. 32.

10. *The Hopedale Community* (Milford, Mass., [c1851]), quotations from p. 5 and p. 2 (italics in original).

11. The Community at West Roxbury, Mass." *Monthly Miscellany of Religion and Letters* 5 (Aug 1841): 113-118.

12. Quoted in Clara Endicott Sears, comp., *Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands*, Boston, 1915, pp. 72, 74.

implicitly or explicitly, as opportunities to avoid the competitiveness, dishonesty, intolerance and other evils of existing society. Communities were therefore both harbingers of a better future and microcosms of that future established in the present.

Though, again, emphases differed, communities stood as a collective critique of existing social and economic arrangements in an emerging capitalist society. Whether they were based on a system of common property, like the Shaker communities, some Owenite settlements, the Skaneateles community and Oneida, or on versions of the joint-stock principle, there was a widespread scepticism about the wage system and efforts, as in Fourierism, to redistribute the unequal rewards to labour under capitalism. Though there was a division between groups such as the Shakers (celibacy) and Oneida perfectionists ("complex marriage") that abandoned conventional marriage and sexual norms, and those - including Hopedale, the Northampton Association, and the Fourierists - who were careful to maintain their adherence to "the marriage relation," all saw themselves as pursuing broadly similar social ends, and their differences were, as we have said, largely over the means to achieve these.

Above all, as recent scholarship has emphasized, most antebellum communitarian groups were closely identified with wider movements for social change and reform. By the early 1840s abolitionism was a common theme with greater or lesser influence on a whole variety of communities, particularly in the Northeast. The link was particularly strong at Northampton and Skaneateles, but it was also important at Hopedale, among Fourierists and to some degree at Brook Farm in its early, pre-Fourierist period.¹³ At its most powerful this engagement with abolitionism involved communities in a re-visioning of the racial and, to some extent, gender inequalities in American society. In ways that were distinct from earlier ventures, such as Frances Wright's Nashoba community in Tennessee in the 1820s, or from free black communities, abolitionism caused communitarians of the 1840s to imagine a future American society without slavery, in which free black people would live harmoniously and equally with whites. Given that they were also critical of the wage system, these abolitionist communitarians provided a focus for those in the antislavery movement who resisted its predominant endorsement of bourgeois ideology. Altogether, despite the relatively small size and fragmented character of the community movement in the 1840s, it served as a strong stimulus for radical visions of a peaceable, equal, harmonious American future.

II

However, the fragmentation and then collapse of most parts of the communitarian movement during the later 1840s and 1850s prevented these visions from becoming firmly established in wider discourses about American society. This was so not just because communities' outside critics could point to their failure as proof of their impracticality. The process was assisted by the responses and memories of former

13. On Northampton, Skaneateles and Hopedale, see John L. Thomas, "Antislavery and Utopia" in *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists*, ed. Martin Duberman, Princeton, 1965, pp. 240-265; on Hopedale, see also Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1973, and Edward K. Spann, *Hopedale: From Commune to Company Town, 1840-1920*, Columbus, Oh., 1992; on Fourierism and abolitionism, see Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative*, ch. 9.

community members themselves. Only Brook Farm, because of its close connections with the Boston area's social and literary elite, became the subject of systematic memorialization in print and in public consciousness.¹⁴ Evidence of the evolving memories of participants in other New England communities of the 1840s illustrates how most American utopian communities drifted into disrepute and then obscurity.

Memoirs of community life could be positive. The Hopedale community inspired fond recollections from some of its members for decades after it was bought out in 1856 and turned into a manufacturing enterprise. Frederick Douglass recalled the members of Northampton community, whom he had visited in the mid-1840s, as "the most democratic I had ever met". Frances Judd, a member of the Northampton Association for its four-and-a-half year existence, and who continued to live on its site for nearly fifty years after it ended, wrote two sets of reminiscences, one in the 1850s, one in the early 1890s, that were equally firm in their praise for its achievements and contributions: as a result, she wrote, Florence, Massachusetts, the factory village that grew out of the community, was "the home of free thought, and of great tolerance". The abolitionist, spiritualist and theist Giles B. Stebbins, who had been a pupil there, also praised the "richer and more vitalizing air" of Florence as one of the Association's chief legacies.¹⁵ The manufacturer Samuel L. Hill, one of the Northampton community's leaders, recalled it in the 1860s as "decidedly pleasant and profitable to its members, except pecuniarily," and congratulated members who "have with remarkable resolution and persistency acted the part of the pioneer in the wilderness of political and social reforms".¹⁶

But positive memories of community experience were often outweighed by the criticisms of those who had broken with their groups or endured hardship, disagreement and recriminations. George W. Stacy, who left the Hopedale Community in 1845, subsequently published reflections in the abolitionist press on the difficulties that had led him to resign. Community, he decided, was "a forced position." To some "leading minds," there might be "contentment and satisfaction, but to the majority," he concluded, "this *life is death* to true and lasting happiness." Community life was less alluring in practice than in prospect: "all those who are expecting 'the kingdom of heaven on earth' ... may be admonished not to promise themselves too much bliss without alloy".¹⁷ Maria Mack's memory of her three years at the Northampton Association, as recounted by her daughter, was entirely of a burden of domestic work so heavy that she had to withdraw to a water-cure establishment to recuperate.¹⁸ After a short spell at the Fruitlands community, Henry G. Wright noted that Alcott and Charles Lane, its founders, were being criticized as "unpractical dreamer[s]," and he admitted that "Sometimes I almost suspect that of

14. Late 19th century publications about Brook Farm included Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *George Ripley*, Boston, 1882, John T. Codman, *Brook Farm: Historic and Personal Memoirs*, Boston, 1894, and Lindsay Swift, *Brook Farm: Its Members, Scholars and Visitors*, New York, 1900.

15. Frederick Douglass, "What I Found at the Northampton Association," in Charles A. Sheffield, ed., *The History of Florence, Massachusetts, Including a Complete Account of the Northampton Association of Education and Industry*, Florence, Mass., 1895, p. 130; Frances Judd, *ibid.*, p. 118; Giles B. Stebbins, *ibid.*, pp. 126-129.

16. *Hampshire Gazette* (Northampton, Mass.), April 2, 1867.

17. Stacy's remarks appeared in *Liberator* (Boston, Mass.), Oct 9, Nov 27, 1846 (italics in original).

18. Isabella Mack Hinckley, *In Memoriam D.M. July 24, 1878. L.M.K.M. December 14, 1882*, Cambridge, Mass., 1883, and *idem.*, "Recollections of Some Interesting People I have Known and Met," (undated typescript), both in Mack Family file, Belmont Historical Society Collections, Belmont Memorial Library, Belmont, Mass.

myself." Frances Judd and others implied that community life most satisfied those who tempered their most optimistic expectations and were prepared to make sacrifices for it, but on longer reflection leaders such as Samuel L. Hill came to the conclusion that the whole venture had been misguided. In a late memoir, only published long after his death in 1883, Hill recalled that the founders of the Northampton Association had "expected to work out an improved state of society, and make ourselves and friends happier":

We had, too, an idea that the Associative movement would generally obtain and would ultimately revolutionize the old system, but we were shortsighted. It takes much longer to bring about such results than we anticipated. The millennium we thought so near seems a good way off now.

Hill's remarks did not much differ from the conclusions Henry G. Wright drew from the collapse of Fruitlands:

The world has decided pretty truly. I begin to respect its decision and to suspect my own.... I have dreamed only of great deeds. Let me never attempt again what is beyond my being's power.¹⁹

Even if they became sceptical of the worth of communities, former members such as Hill, Wright, Stacy and others did at least reflect, sometimes long afterwards, on their experience and the lessons they had learned from it. But my research on the Northampton Association and its members leads me to conclude that a considerable number of those connected with communities may later have preferred to play down, or even suppress entirely, memories of their involvement. Several late 19th century genealogies and memoirs of former Northampton community members gloss over or ignore entirely the fact that they had belonged. For many the community seems to have become subject to a kind of collective amnesia.

There were three sets of reasons for this. First, individuals who shifted their political or ideological allegiances put older ones behind them. William Bassett of Lynn, Mass., was a committed Garrisonian abolitionist and non-resistant when he enthusiastically joined the like-minded Northampton community in 1844, but his stay there was brief. After returning to Lynn he rejected Garrison and became a leading local figure in the Free Soil movement. Public acknowledgement of his former allegiances was inexpedient; the only later mention of his Northampton period that I have located are oblique references in a private family memoir and in a biographical sketch published two decades after his death.²⁰ Second, by the time many abolitionists and other reformers were compiling their memoirs in the post-Civil War period, the community experiments of the 1840s had paled into insignificance by comparison with the great upheavals of war and Reconstruction. To men and women looking

19. Hill's late memoir was published in William A. Hinds, *American Communities and Cooperative Colonies*, 3rd edition (1908; reprint edn. Philadelphia, 1975), pp. 279-280; Henry G. Wright to William Oldham, n.d., in Sears, *Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands*, pp. 134-135.

20. *Papers Read at a Gathering of the Families and Descendants of Isaac Bassett and Solomon Boyce, at Lynn, on Christmas Evening, 1855*, Lynn, 1856, p. 13; James R. Newhall, *History of Lynn, Essex County, Massachusetts: Vol. II 1864-1893*, Lynn, 1897, pp. 111-112.

back over long years of commitment to antislavery and other causes, the few months or years they belonged to the Northampton Association seemed only a small part of the story. Finally, the very decline of communitarianism and the scepticism with which it came to be viewed after mid-century itself led former enthusiasts to play down their involvement. So, for instance, even though two of them had been to school at the Northampton community, William Lloyd Garrison's sons sought after his death to distance themselves and their father's memory from association with it. In their biography of Garrison, they went out of their way to criticize community schemes drawn up by "the insane, the unbalanced, the blindly enthusiastic".²¹

If written memoirs could deny participation in communities, changes to the physical landscape at former community sites also helped to ensure that public recollection weakened over time. The Brook Farm property, for instance, was sold in 1849; part of it became a military camp during the Civil War and some former community buildings came to be used as a children's home. The Northampton Association site became a factory village; though later buildings and gravemarkers associated with former members remained to be found by those who knew what they were looking for, no explicit memorial to the community was ever created. At Hopedale, after the community had been taken over and wound up by members of the Draper family of manufacturers, its transformation into a company town entailed erasing or relegating emblems of its former community life. The community meetinghouse and other buildings were replaced, and the house of the founder Adin Ballou, eventually moved from its central location to make way for a statue of him.²² Even in the cemetery, the Draper family's large mausoleum overshadows (and turns its back to) the comparatively modest adjacent obelisk that marks Adin Ballou's grave.

III

But former members' forgetfulness, their reassessments or repudiations of community experience did not take place in a vacuum. They were only part of a wider process of ideological response to communities that was started as soon as the movement itself got going. These responses, and their eventual hegemony, shaped both contemporary attitudes to alternative visions of the future and later historical interpretations of these visions.

As men and women observed and responded to the creation of new communities in the 1840s and the involvement of relatives, friends or adversaries in the movement, they employed a set of distinctive discursive categories. They assessed communities and their expectations of them in terms of "success" or "failure," and of "practicality" or "impracticality". They regarded communities as the creations of particular individual leaders, to whom they ascribed authority and responsibility that frequently distorted reality; and they judged community experience ... in terms that the movement's own aims and rhetoric encouraged – on the extent to which it promoted harmony or disharmony among members. We can examine the development and extension of these categories in three successive settings: the forging of contemporary

21. W.P. Garrison and F.J. Garrison, comp., *William Lloyd Garrison*, 3 vols., New York, 1885: II.

22. Spann, *Hopedale*, p. 174.

scepticism about ideal communities; the unfolding of the hegemonic ideology that marginalized them; and their influence on the historical treatment of utopian movements.

Contemporaries were only too ready to receive and give credit to reports that newly established communities had failed. "The community scheme ... at Northampton, owing to disorder in the camp & want of finances, is likely to fall through," wrote the Boston schoolmaster Epes Sargent Dixwell in October 1842 after news had arrived concerning his friend, William Adam, who had been one of the Northampton Association's founders. Four years later, he would have been correct; in fact it was only eighteen months before he again reported prematurely "that the community had failed!"²³ In 1845 more rumours of Northampton's collapse circulated freely. Indeed, by the mid-1840s the actual failures of Fruitlands, Skaneateles and several Owenite and Fourierist groups reinforced this existing predisposition to expect the worst. Similar rumours circulated about the Hopedale community after a reorganization in the late 1840s.²⁴

The expectation of failure was rooted in a propensity to believe that communal societies were impractical. By mid-1843, Sargent wrote, William Adam at Northampton was "evidently cooling off with regard to the whole plan. Others of his associates are convinced of the impracticality of the 'community system'". But from other letters of his, it is evident that Sargent's interpretation was coloured by his own reservations about radical reform.²⁵ Arthur Clarke, writing from the South, was both stern and smug when he heard that his relative Mary Sawyer had left the Brook Farm Phalanx in 1845. "Perhaps after all", he wrote her,

you will finally come to your senses and be able to see that a perfect elysium is not for this earth; that the best we can do is make gradual improvements rather than radical changes in our moral social and physical condition. Whenever more is attempted the project fails. It ever has been so, and ever will be so. As for this making society all over again, founding it on new principles and making an improvement upon the present and to last for ever, it is about as reasonable as the plan of some demagogues to divide property with the expectation that it will remain equally divided.²⁶

Presenting her decision to leave Brook Farm as proof of the futility of the whole community movement, his circular logic left little space for argument.

Underpinning the discourse of failure and impracticality was a tendency to conceive utopian communities as expressions of the wills of individual leaders and of their singleminded panaceas for society's ills. This view achieved perhaps its clearest literary form in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel about "Blithedale" and its "self-concentrated Philanthropist," derived from his experience of Brook Farm and

23. Epes Sargent Dixwell to George Dixwell, Cambridge, Mass., Oct 30, 1842, Wigglesworth Family Papers, Box 3; same to same, Apr 14, 1844, Wigglesworth Family Papers, Box 4, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

24. Adin Ballou, *History of Hopedale*, Lowell, Mass., 1897, p. 169.

25. Epes Sargent Dixwell to George Dixwell, Cambridge, Mass., June 11, 1843, Wigglesworth Family Papers, Box 3.

26. N. Arthur Clarke to Mary C. Sawyer, Silver Bluff, S.C., Feb 18, 1845, John Sawyer Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

its leader George Ripley. Ironically, while he was actually at Brook Farm in 1841, Hawthorne had taken pains to dispel rumours that Ripley was an authoritarian figure: "We have never looked upon him as a master, or an employer, but as a fellow laborer on the same terms as ourselves".²⁷ The rumours were founded, not in reality, but in expectations. Different visitors to the Northampton Association in 1842 and 1843 came away with differing views as to who was in charge and of "whose" community it was, because of the predisposition to want to find that there was a single leader.

Such authority was both widely presumed to be necessary in a community and at the same time – in a republican society – suspect. As a consequence, fatal damage to communities was also presumed to result from disagreements between members or struggles over authority. Both were symptoms of disharmony. Evidence that communities could survive internal contention, perhaps even thrive on it, went largely unlooked for and unnoticed. Instead, communities' "failure" and "impracticality" were commonly seen to be rooted in such strife. The four elements of anti-utopian discourse were therefore bound together in an argument whose logic was impermeable.

Emphasis on the communitarian movement's failures was not just a product, therefore, of the fact that most community institutions did sooner or later collapse. The evolving discourse of scepticism helped sort actual experience into expected categories as events unfolded. As letters such as those of Arthur Clarke and Epes Sargent Dixwell demonstrated, the discourse was forged by ideological objections to all efforts to secure radical social change, or to reform the existing boundaries of hierarchy, race or gender. Added to the discourse were two further elements: orthodox and evangelical fears of religious tolerance of the kind espoused by Brook Farm, Northampton and many Fourierists; and the spectre of sexual immorality, raised in the 1820s by Frances Wright and Owenism, and fuelled by early revelations about John Humphrey Noyes's Perfectionists. Critics of communities were quick to find evidence of their religious "infidelity" and moral dissolution and – though most communities of the 1840s took pains to assert their attachment to conventional marriage and the family – to suspect them of sexual irregularities as well.

Over time, this discourse also formed part of an emerging bourgeois defence of capitalism and private property, a defence that rejected memories of the economy's most critical moments in the depression of 1837 to the mid-1840s, and that belittled the communitarian visions that the crisis had helped generate. The attachment of terms like "failure" and "impractical" to communities was ideological, because it was also highly selective. In fact, as a reading of the contemporary commercial press would reveal, these terms were no less applicable to business itself. Not only during the depression, but in the recovery that followed, journals continued to report estimates that as many as 97 out every 100 men who entered trade could expect to fail or be heavily overindebted during their careers. Credit reporting companies, led by Lewis Tappan's Mercantile Agency, founded in the depths of the depression, both sought to hold back the danger of impending collapse and, in their rapidly

27. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance and Fanshawe*, vol 3. of *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. William Charvat, Roy Harvey Pearce and Claude M. Simpson, Columbus, Oh., 1964; Hawthorne to David Mack, West Roxbury, July 18, 1841, Boston Public Library Am 1067(4).

accumulating records of individual fortunes and misfortunes, charted the uncertain waters of mid-19th century business.²⁸

Post-Civil War treatments of the community movement helped reshape interpretations of it to suit the assumptions of capitalism. Even those sustaining the view that communities offered visions of a better future could not avoid employing the common discourse of scepticism. John Humphrey Noyes's *History of American Socialisms*, published in 1870, presented the movement as an evolving sequence of trials and errors that formed a path to the superior achievements of his own Oneida Community; inherently, his interpretation stressed the failures and shortcomings of other community efforts. William A. Hinds, also a member of the Oneida Community, retained "an abiding faith in Communism as the ultimate basis of human society," but successive editions of his *American Communities*, first published in 1878, increasingly emphasised the long social evolution that would be needed to bring this about.²⁹ Most discussion of communities was openly dismissive or contemptuous. As the historian Edward K. Spann has recently shown, even the comparatively successful Hopedale Community received harsh criticism from late 19th century speakers and writers keen to celebrate the superiority of capitalism over this "futile communistic experiment." They denounced the community's "dry, barren, prosaic and somewhat repellent character" and Adin Ballou's failure to understand "scientific sociology," that had led him to conduct "a fatuous experiment ... in pursuit of a chimera." Above all, as a politician explained in 1887, business methods had rescued Hopedale by bringing the community to an end:

Enlightened and liberal selfishness became, as it usually does, a beneficence to which a weak communism was as the dull and cheerless gleam of a decaying punk to the inspiring blaze of the morning sun.³⁰

Community "failure" and "weakness," already part of the hostile discourse of the 1840s, became incorporated into a Social Darwinist language that legitimised individualism and bolstered capitalist hegemony. It "proved" that visions of the future based on collectivism of any kind were absurd and irrelevant.

But bourgeois ideology did not uniformly dismiss communal societies in such terms. Social Darwinists might accept competition and strife as the necessary driving forces of social evolution, but some commentators were alarmed that the inequalities and labour struggles of the 1870s and 1880s might, unchecked, disrupt capitalism and even overthrow it. In this view, communal societies' emphasis on harmony and avoiding competitive strife came to seem attractive and potentially useful. Charles Nordhoff's study *Communistic Societies of the United States*, first published in 1875,

28. On credit and uncertainty see Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1990, ch. 6; the 97 percent claim was made in *Massachusetts State Record and Year Book of General Information, 1848*, Boston, 1848, p. 217. Comparable estimates continued to be made for decades: see Samuel H. Terly, *The Retailer's Manual, Embodying the Conclusions of Thirty Years' Experience in Merchandizing*, 1869; reprint edition New York, 1978, p. 17.

29. John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms*, 1870; reprint edition, New York, 1966; Hinds, *American Communities and Cooperative Colonies*: the quotation is from the preface to the 2nd edition, of 1902; see also the conclusion to the 3rd edition, pp. 598-599

30. The foregoing is based on Spann, *Hopedale*, pp. 174-175, from which contemporary quotations are taken.

was among the first to interpret them, not as radical visions of the future, but as helpful aids to stability in a divided capitalist society. Nordhoff saw communities as numerically marginal to an economy in which, for the foreseeable future, most people would continue to be employed as wage workers. However, he advocated them to capitalists as a means of providing security and hope to the "great mass of our poorer people" who would, without them, "gradually sink into stupidity, and a blind discontent which education would only increase, until they became a danger to the state." Above all he advocated communities to workers as alternatives to trade unions, which he saw only as "lowering ... the standard of intelligence and independence among the laborers," and sowing an unreasoning and unreasonable discontent, "which . . . despises right, and seeks only changes degrading to its own class". Communities would, in short, help avert the "extreme... folly" of asserting "necessary and eternal enmity between labor and capital".³¹ In this view, communal societies were no longer threats to society, or harbingers of radical change, but were tamed to become models for resolving the conflicts of contemporary capitalism.

Memories and histories of the Northampton Association in the 1890s can, again, serve to illustrate this. A local history, including memoirs by former members of the community, and published by one of its leaders' sons-in-law, claimed a legacy for the Association in achieving social harmony among the manufacturers and workers of the factory village that succeeded it. A historical account of the Northampton community published in 1895 also stressed the relevance of its example for those concerned to solve the antagonism between capitalism and labour.³² In private memoirs and public statements over the next two decades, Arthur G. Hill, son of the Association's last leader, continued to promote its legacy as a model of harmony, but a succession of strikes, including some against the silk company that was the community's main institutional successor, revealed that this image was in many respects a myth.³³ The example of a community that had been formed in the 1840s to inspire a radical challenge to social evils was, by the 1890s, being used to head off comparable threats to social stability.

The 1840s had been a crucial turning point in American capitalism. Communal societies had created visions of a better future during a severe economic crisis. Subsequent bourgeois ideology used the language of controversy that these visions had evoked to shape the memory and history of these efforts, either to ridicule them or to harness them to a new, conservative, vision of social harmony. Bellamy's *Looking Backward* exemplified the ironies that resulted. On one hand, the rejection of Julian West expressed the frustration that awaited efforts to turn bourgeois thought towards radical social visions. On the other, Bellamy's fictional future society expressed his conviction that change would only come from harmonious progress. The optimism

31. Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States, from Personal Visit and Observation*, 1875; reprint edition, New York, 1965, pp. 11, 13-14.

32. Sheffield, *History of Florence*; Olive Rumsey, "The Northampton Association of Education and Industry", *New England Magazine* 12 (Mar 1895): 22-32.

33. Arthur G. Hill, "Anti-Slavery Days in Florence," undated typescript, Florence Civic and Business Association, Florence, Mass.; see also letters by Hill in *Daily Hampshire Gazette* (Northampton, Mass.), Aug 22, Aug 25, 1914, criticizing violence against scabs during a trolley strike. On strikes in local factories, see Agnes Hannay, "A Chronicle of Industry on the Mill River," *Smith College Studies in History* 21, nos. 1-4 (Oct 1935-July 1936): 99-100; they included a silk winders' strike in 1894, on the eve of the publication of Sheffield's and Rumsey's works.

that had motivated earlier communarians to seek radical change had been expunged. Bellamy's novel, though it marked a new turn in American utopianism, also signalled that communal efforts would, henceforth, be seen as marginal and ineffectual.

IV

Until recently, the accumulated 19th century discourses on utopian communities have continued to dominate the writing of their histories. In 20th century American analyses they were also joined by the influence of Marx and Engels' powerful critiques of utopian socialism as a visionary diversion from the necessity of class struggle.³⁴ Discourses created a terrain in which communities were easy to deride and hard to take seriously, and in which their members were treated – depending on the author's viewpoint – as curiosities, cranks, irrelevancies or perverters of social order. Sometimes the demands of different discourses imposed ludicrous burdens on writers. Local historians, in particular, usually feel obliged to stress the affinity between past and present people in their locality. A woman assigned the task of writing about the Northampton community in the early 1950s was torn between this expectation and the fear of appearing to endorse communism. She adopted the unconvincing strategy of portraying the community's members both as “discontented souls,” “dreamers” and “drones,” and – simultaneously – as “the same intelligent, normal citizens who today make a good living from the industrial community”.³⁵

Older discourses and their contradictions continue to influence the growing field of utopian studies. Historians have to respond to the assumption that they are studying “impractical” social experiments. It remains obligatory to explain why communities failed or – if they lasted more than a short time – what kept them from failing earlier than they did. Sources of “harmony” and “disharmony” figure prominently in such analyses. And, though emphases in recent studies have differed according to circumstances, historians still frequently assume a strong association between communities and their individual leaders.³⁶

As I have suggested in this paper, the discourses of impracticality, failure, harmony and leadership were rooted in contemporary responses to early 19th century utopian communities. They then played a part in the late 19th century reinterpretation of the community movement to serve the purposes of a dominant capitalist ideology. In consequence, they have also shaped our subsequent understanding of the role of visions of the future in American history. Recognizing this discourse and charting its influence is essential if we are to re-evaluate these visions once again, and to understand them better.

Studies of utopian communities are now beginning to step outside the trammels of these discourses. Scholars are moving beyond an institutional approach to

34. Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, transl. Edward Aveling, 1892; reprint edition, New York, 1975.

35. Hope Hale Davis, “The Northampton Association of Education and Industry,” *The Northampton Book: Chapters from 300 Years in the Life of a New England Town, 1654-1954*, Northampton, Mass., 1954, pp. 110, 112.

36. A recent example is Spann, *Hopedale*, which tells the community's story largely through the biography of Adin Ballou.

communities, reconstructing their links to wider social and political movements and contexts. They are starting to listen, not just to the voices of leaders, with their clearly-articulated visions of a future society, but to the wider variety of expectations and aspirations that their members held and expressed. These developments will take us in two directions. On one hand it will lead to a proper social history of utopias – “utopian history from the bottom up,” so to speak. On the other, it will link utopian visions more clearly to wider issues in the history of the economy, gender, race, religion, education, and of other fields in which communitarians sought radical change. Utopias, in other words, will not just belong to “utopian studies” but to history in general.