

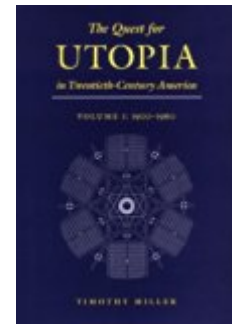
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Timothy Miller. *The Quest for Utopia in Twentieth-Century America*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998. xxvi + 254 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-2775-3.

Timothy Miller. *The 60s Communes: Hippies and Beyond*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999. xxviii + 329 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-2811-8.

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Published on H-Communal-Societies (September, 2001)



“To Be of Use”: Resources for a Social History of Twentieth-Century Intentional Communities

Until quite recently, sociologists, anthropologists, journalists, and communards have dominated the study of communes in the twentieth-century United States. Historians are only now beginning to grapple with this topic. Temporal distance affords historical perspective, and the prodigious expansion of intentional community in the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s has only recently receded to the point at which historians feel the urgency to move the phenomenon, in David Farber’s words, “from memory to history.”[1] Second, chroniclers of “the sixties,” many of them participants in the New Left, at first slighted the counterculture and its communal dimension, judging it to have lacked *gravitas* relative to the contemporary leftist and cultural-nationalist movements seeking social change via mass organization.[2]

Now that historians are beginning to assess the counterculture as a significant phenomenon in its own right, they find themselves in need of scholarly tools that will assist them in placing their particular research subjects in broad contemporary perspective. Timothy Miller’s *The 60s Communes* proves invaluable as just such a tool. They also feel the need for help in placing their subjects in longer historical perspective, and Miller’s *Search for Utopia* offers an important corrective to the popular belief that hippie communes appeared *sui generis* on the American landscape.[3]

Miller emphasizes in *Quest for Utopia* that it is his primary purpose to create tools that will facilitate the research of others, writing that his goal is “to provide hith-

erto elusive basic data to those who will interpret and place within the larger culture that special type of applied idealism that is communal living” (p. xiii). Such a goal might seem to call for the organization of that data in encyclopedia form. Yet he also wants to show “that, contrary to some assertions, intentional community is not so much an episodic series of isolated occurrences as it is a continuous, if small, ongoing theme in American life” (p. xiii). Therefore, he has sacrificed the convenience of alphabetical entries in favor of a narrative format that emphasizes continuity.

Some readers may not find that choice satisfactory, since they will have to rely heavily on the indices to both works. Other readers, in search of a more interpretive approach, may confound Miller’s narrative with a monographic approach to his subject, and then find inadequate his modest yet insightful interpretive commentary—as has one reviewer.[4] Having utilized these works in my own research, I know that those who come after will owe Miller much appreciation for the enormous amount of spadework that his labors have saved us.

Quest for Utopia is organized in an unswervingly chronological fashion: Miller marches the reader from the turn of the twentieth century forward, decade by decade. In *The 60s Communes*, he adopts a more complex organizational scheme, facilitated by the extensive oral-history interviews that he and his associates conducted for the Sixties Communes Project. He first treats the pattern of chronological development, and then turns to broad topical themes. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss, respectively, communes organized for spiritual and secular

purposes. Chapter 7 highlights questions of communal organization, governance, and economics. Recruitment is the focus of chapter 8, while the following chapter reunites these distinct themes in a survey of the wide variations of everyday life in different sorts of communes. The final chapter explores individual motivations for moving on to post-countercultural life when individuals and groups came to realize that the much-anticipated apocalyptic collapse of “straight” society was not immediately in the offing. This final chapter, incidentally, makes for an interesting comparison with the findings of sociologists Jack Whalen and Richard Flacks in their study of New Left political activism in Santa Barbara: as with those radicals, Miller’s communards often did not forsake their idealism, but rather adapted it to changed circumstances, including their own advance through the life cycle.[5]

By bringing the reader close to the far-flung sources on twentieth-century intentional community, Miller affords them in *Quest for Utopia* a somewhat more experiential sense of the diversity and marginality of communes in the earlier decades of the century. In *The 60s Communes*, Miller’s bilateral organization of the manuscript affords the reader a constant engagement with the contradictions inherent in a counterculture organized around principles of autonomy on the one hand, and community on the other; individual authenticity on the one hand, and the longing for *communitas* on the other; free form, suspicion of hierarchical authority, and an ethic of generosity on one hand, and the rigor-

ous demands for efficiency and productivity imposed by marginal living on the other. The counterculture generated a broad continuum of efforts to balance these countervailing principles and claims, making it an extremely complex historical phenomenon. These books, the fruit of more than a decade of scholarship, will assist immeasurably as historians turn to the challenge of making a usable past from that vast complexity.

NOTES

[1]. David Farber, ed. *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

[2]. For an incisive historiographical analysis of this literature, see David McBride, “On the Fault Line of Mass Culture and Counterculture: A Social History of the Hippie Counterculture in 1960s Los Angeles” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of California, Los Angeles, 1998), pp. 21-24, 32-36, 44-71.

[3]. Miller’s article, “The Roots of the 1960s Communal Revival,” *American Studies* 33, no. 2 (1992): 73-93, deserves mention as the first flowering of his project to create these scholarly tools.

[4]. Dominick Cavallo, review of Miller, *60s Communes*, *Journal of American History* 87, no. 4 (March 2001): 1580-81.

[5]. Jack Whalen and Richard Flacks, *Beyond the Baracades: The Sixties Generation Grows Up* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1989).

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Citation: Timothy Hodgdon. Review of Miller, Timothy, *The Quest for Utopia in Twentieth-Century America* and Miller, Timothy, *The 60s Communes: Hippies and Beyond*. H-Communal-Societies, H-Net Reviews. September, 2001.

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