Communes: In Search of Utopia

In his 1933 Utopian novel *Lost Horizon*, author James Hilton created a mystical, harmonious community, Shangri-La, in which all citizens were vital contributors to the welfare of each other. The highest common good for all prevailed, everyone's talents were maximized, and everyone benefited from the community. The novel, set in a fictional, isolated and sheltered valley among the high Himalayas, was reportedly inspired by the travels of Russian artist Nicholas Roerich, who was one of the first westerners to explore Central Asia. And it's said that Roerich, who traveled through India, Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, and surrounding countries, was in search of Utopia.

From the beginning of recorded time, Utopia has been an idea promoted through storytelling and philosophy:

- *Genesis*—the first book of the *Bible* (5th/6th Century BC)
- Plato's *Republic* (380 BC)
- Thomas Moore's *Utopia* (16th Century AD)
- Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (19th Century AD)
- G. Wells' *A Modern Utopia* (1905)
- Eric Frank Russell's *The Great Explosion* (1963)

Ever since humans were metaphorically tossed from the Garden of Eden, we've longed to create paradise on earth. And while paradisiacal ideals differ from person to person and culture to culture, the one thing theme that remains constant is this: All members of the community are equally afforded the opportunity to thrive mentally, physically, intellectually, and economically.

Caroline Myss, in her book *The Sacred Contract of America: Fulfilling the Vision of Our Mystic Founders*, offers the theory that the U.S. was founded specifically with the intention of becoming a Utopian community. If that's true, obviously the experiment is failing.

However, smaller scale Utopian societies—communes—have been successful in other parts of the world. This article takes a quick look at the history of communes with the view of taking what has worked and moving it forward to create successful self-sustaining economic communities (SSECs) today.

Communes

- **The Massachusetts Bay Colony**—Established by the Puritans in the 17th century, this might have been the first attempt to establish Utopia in the Americas.
- **Kibbutz**—Perhaps the best-known communes are the kibbutzim of Israel. Kibbutz is Hebrew for "communal settlement." The prevailing philosophy of the kibbutz is "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." The first kibbutz was formed in 1908, 40 years before the establishment of the State of Israel. Today, 270 kibbutzim, with memberships ranging from 40 to more than 1,000, are scattered across Israel.
- **Mondragon Corporation**—A federation of worker cooperatives (meaning, worker owned companies) based in the Basque region of Span, Mondragon was founded in 1956. It is the 10th largest company in Spain. For more information: http://www.mondragon-corporation.com/eng/.
- **Eleanor Roosevelt's commune initiative**—The former First Lady attempted to create a government-supported, back-to-the-earth commune in West Virginia. While unsuccessful in creating the commune, Eleanor Roosevelt's socialist initiatives sought to create economic equality for racial minorities and women.

Despite the failure of the commune system of the 1960s and 70s in the U.S., versions of communes not only still exist, but actually thrive today. One of the most successful communes, San Francisco's Rainbow Grocery, a worker-owned co-op that has grown steadily over the past 40 years despite Whole Foods opening a store in every neighborhood, proves that we as a society can come together for the common good. For more information: http://www.sfchronicle.com/food/article/S-F-s-Rainbow-Grocery-a-counterculture-6433041.php.

In future articles, we'll look at a key missing component in previous commune systems—profit—and how profitizing communes can help create the economic equality needed to bring true harmony and happiness to all.