

# Reclaiming the American Commons

A quiet upsurge of cooperative activity has been taking place throughout the US, where people are turning to mutual aid, collectivity and the commons.

*By John Curl*

A quiet, sweeping upsurge of cooperative activity has been taking place throughout the United States in recent decades. All over the American map, millions of people now realize that the existing economic system has failed in the core purpose of any economic system: to offer a decent life and future to all.

Since everybody needs to survive, people everywhere are turning to mutual aid, collectivity, cooperatives, communalist ventures and commons of every sort. The story is not in the statistics. The vast majority of this activity is under the radar, in the informal, underground economy, in unincorporated associations. That is both a weakness and a strength. Think Occupy.

## **Historic Collectivity in America**

America has historically always been a center of collective activity. That observation may seem to fly in the face of the stereotype of Americans being all about individualism and competition, but the truth is that from its earliest days the North American continent has been fertile soil to cooperative and communalist movements, based on people working together to provide for their mutual needs. Native American culture was built on those principles, and cooperative communities were integral to the entire project of working people immigrating here to escape poverty and oppression. Every wave of immigrants spontaneously created cooperative economic and social structures.

When settlers expanded westward in search of a better life, they often did so through cooperative means and formed cooperative settlements. The internal dynamics of American settler culture were intrinsically communalist in nature. But the entire colonial project also had a dark underside that can never be fully expunged: native people were already occupying the land, and the settlers were not only refugees, but also invaders – the vanguard of a tragic clash of civilizations.

The industrialization of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century brought a new form of oppression to America, and working people responded with the first modern social movements. Communalism was one of the earliest of these movements. It began in America in 1825, with the group of intentional communities inspired by New Harmony, and then renewed again in the 1840s. Like the movement of a century later, they too aimed at constructing a new society through communities based on collectivity and cooperation, but they eventually hit the limits of access to land and resources.

In the same era, worker cooperatives became an integral part of the early union movement. America was becoming increasingly dominated by capital, while working people were increasingly disenfranchised. The wage system, tied to the industrial revolution, was on the rise, and workers fought and resisted being made permanent wage slaves. They saw the wage system, in which people rent themselves to other people, as a form of bondage, and they formed worker-owned cooperatives to prevent themselves from being dragged down into it.

The early union and co-op movements culminated in the precipitous rise of the Knights of Labor

and their counter-institutional challenge to capitalism through erecting an alternative economic system of cooperatives. They planned to replace capitalism with what they called the Cooperative Commonwealth. Their defeat in 1886 and the destruction of their worker co-ops by the forces of capital was a historic turning point in American social history. A few years later, their rural allies in the Farmers' Alliance suffered a parallel defeat with the destruction of their agricultural co-ops. These defeats resulted in the triumph of the “gilded age” reign of the robber barons.

In the early 1900s and during the Great Depression of the 1930s, radical collectivist, syndicalist and cooperative movements surged again. But very little of them remained after World War II, leaving the US deeply regimented and militarized. Progressive ideas were expunged from schools and politics, and to express even mildly left opinions in the McCarthy era, you risked being branded a traitor. Parents feared losing their jobs and told their kids to keep their mouths shut in school.

### **Living the Revolution**

As the generation that grew up in this airless atmosphere came of age, we were suddenly told that we were being shipped off to Asia to defend “freedom” from Communism. Tens of thousands of young people were being ripped out of their lives and tossed as cannon fodder into a war they opposed. Their overwhelming response was to resist and to turn to each other to invent a new set of liberating social relations, to reject what the country had become and create an oppositional collective, communal and cooperative “counterculture”.

We created communal living spaces in both rural and urban settings. Many never even had a name. Just to know about them, you +needed to have connections through friends or friends of friends. They had no long-term sustainability, but formed and reformed. Since the world was so unstable and torn by social upheaval, the focus was on liberation, not sustainability. By today’s standards, most were not stable intentional communities. Shared living spaces are of course still ubiquitous among young people today, and the main difference was the prevailing atmosphere in society.

The idea at the time was to *live* the revolution. Unlike many radical organizations of previous generations, our internal organizations needed to reflect our goals. The purpose was liberation, and we could only accomplish that directly, by liberating ourselves. What was holding us all back from living in liberated ways? In some ways the structure of society was doing just that, while in other ways we were oppressing ourselves and each other. We need liberated spaces to experiment in, where each could help liberate the others.

Collectivity led to many cultural victories in that era. But these turned into political defeats as a frightened country retreated to law and order under Reaganism.

### **Collectivity in Today's America**

The current Communities Directory lists 2,364 intentional communities in America, including income-sharing communes, eco-villages, co-housing, residential land trusts, student co-ops and spiritual communities. These are all projects where people choose to live together sustainably, on the basis of common values, with goals of personal, cultural and social transformation. Intentional communities are just one aspect of collectivity, of the commons.

Much of the communalist and cooperative movement in the US is still underground, in the informal economy. But the above-ground movement is expanding rapidly today, in response to the economic

crises of this century, which globalized capitalism is not geared to handle or solve. Do an internet search for worker co-ops, collectives, farmer co-ops, housing co-ops, food co-ops, intentional communities, land trusts, any kind of co-op you can imagine, and you will discover vast numbers. You will also find an extensive network of organizations around the country doing cooperative education, innovation, funding and developing.

Large numbers of non-profits and social justice organizations have expanded their horizons to include co-ops, particularly worker co-ops and related social enterprises, community enterprises and solidarity enterprises. Go to the websites of the US Federation of Worker Cooperatives, the Network of Bay Area Worker Cooperatives and other regional networks. Cities are supporting worker co-ops as an economic development strategy. The New York City recently granted \$1.2 million to fund worker co-operative development.

### **An Underground Railroad of Communes**

For me, participation in the communalist and cooperative movement started back in the mid-1960s, when I lived at Drop City, the fabled commune in southern Colorado. At the height of the movement of that era, we were part of a loose network of intentional communities, and we entertained the notion that American society was collapsing and we were constructing the basis of a new social order.

No directory of communes existed, but if you knew where to go, you could cross the country and never have to stay at a motel. The Vietnam War was raging, and the draft was the spark that ignited the movement. Communal spaces formed a kind of underground railroad, where resisters could travel commune to commune until they reached refuge in Canada.

Each of the 1960s communes was organized around a space that belonged to no one person. Since the planet, the original commons, was almost entirely privatized, with everyone dispossessed except the elite, groups of dispossessed decided to start creating small commons of their own. That was at the core of the movement. But we soon hit a wall: only those with significant financial resources could have access to land, and you cannot conjure up alternative real estate. It was that contradiction that stopped the movement in its tracks. With the end of the Vietnam war in 1975, many communes disbanded and few new ones formed.

Eventually intentional communities began to proliferate again, as experiments in new ways of living, and continued to draw many people, as they still do today. To some extent, the drive of this new communalism remains the same: to restore a sense of community in an economic system where families, neighborhoods and entire populations are at the mercy of developers and planners, where people are moved around like cattle, with profit maximization being the primary consideration.

### **The West Berkeley Plan**

But people need not necessarily form communes to restore a sense of community. Many movements today aim to defend communities by protecting the commons. In this sense, it is worth pointing out that historical experiences like the Paris Commune were by their very nature centered around reclaiming the commons and defending isocial property in the fight against privatization.

An inspiring example of a contemporary movement aiming to protect the commons from economic attacks and displacement can be found in West Berkeley, California. Outsiders who visit this area

often wonder why in 2016 it has not been totally swept up in the relentless gentrification that has decimated and transformed so many other Bay Area neighborhoods. Why it is still full of funky little homes, local businesses, artists, artisans and industries? The secret answer is the West Berkeley Plan, through which a long-established, mixed-use urban neighborhood successfully created, recognized and defended a threatened commons.

The West Berkeley Plan was a radical transformative structure right in the heart of mainstream society, which all the developers strenuously opposed, since it limited their capacity to exploit and extract profit. Yet the movement eventually rose above the opposition and implemented the Plan by a unanimous vote of the city council. We had allies in city hall. That turned out to be key.

It began in the 1980s, when, during an era of expansive Reaganism, I brought several council members down to West Berkeley and showed them around the thriving and economically-diverse community that at was at risk of displacement. Meanwhile a community group formed called West Berkeley MAARS, which stood for Merchants, Artists, Artisans, and Residents. The city council passed an “urgency ordinance” to stop wild gentrification and stabilize the situation, because there was no area plan in place to govern development in the neighborhood.

The first thing we tried was a commercial rent stabilization ordinance for industrial spaces. Berkeley already had commercial rent regulations protecting small merchants in two gentrifying commercial districts across town, as well as residential rent control. These ordinances treated affordable rental space as a commons. The community needed to protect that commons to remain a diverse community. But within weeks after the city council passed the West Berkeley ordinance, the state legislature intervened with a law outlawing all commercial rent control in California. It was then that the city council initiated the West Berkeley Plan process.

The Plan was based on the radical concept of a neighborhood planning and administering itself by consensus. All the stakeholders attended big public meetings, refereed by the city. Over a period of several years large numbers of people participated, argued, fought and ultimately came to acceptable compromises in which every sector had enough of their needs met. All the groups in West Berkeley could stay. No one would be pushed out by unchecked gentrification. This was true community-based planning in the best sense of the term.

We managed to stabilize the situation through zoning. We created a series of industrial zones, in which industrial and arts-and-crafts spaces were protected. Industrial and art space was recognized as a commons. Once landlords realized they could only rent out an industrial space to an industry or artisan, and not convert it to a higher-paying use, they had to accept the situation and rents no longer escalated. Since an industrial or arts-and-crafts space use can only generate a modest income level, and since a landlord can only replace an industrial tenant with another industrial tenant, landlords had to accept community stability.

Although developers continued to attack the West Berkeley Plan before the ink was even dry, over the decades the plan has held. This continued success has been largely due to the ongoing efforts of another community organization called West Berkeley Artisans and Industrial Companies (WEBAIC), which took over the struggle from MAARS.

The West Berkeley Plan showed a way forward. The Plan struck a great blow to gentrification, achieved a triumph for diversity and community, and successfully created and protected a

commons. It is a living demonstration of how, when grassroots activist community groups and progressive elements in municipal government work together, the impossible can become possible.

### **Collectivity: A Way Forward**

Today's cooperative, communalist and collectivist movements emerged in the early years of the 21st century. While many intentional communities continue to thrive, living communally is not an option for the vast majority of the US population, who are struggling just to stay where they are and working to transform their existing communities. Nevertheless, people everywhere are turning to mutual aid, collectivity, cooperatives, communalist ventures and the commons for an alternative.

Today the US is no longer a powerhouse of heavy industry (apart from munitions), and the civil economy is largely based on services and small production. Our movement is not capable of challenging the commanding heights of the economy, like the Knights of Labor once tried to do, but it *is* taking over the margins. The objective now is to multiply and thrive, horizontally not hierarchically, in the age-old task of trying, under adversity, to create a sustainable humane society to live in, in balance with the natural world – a great commons.

Collectivity can involve many kinds of sharing, and they all enrich life. When we create collectivity among ourselves, we are creating commons. Collectivity and commons are of enormous value: by creating commons, by taking back and defending them, by filling our lives as much as we can with collectivity, with community, we bring about progressive and sustainable social change. In a real sense, then, the widespread collectivity and cooperation in our lives is already changing the world.

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