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Utopian and Communal Societies: The Importance of Institutionalized Awe Through Ideology

Matthew H. Brittingham

Abstract: America's utopian and communal societies have a long history of using transcendence as a commitment mechanism for followers and converts. The most prevalent commitment mechanism is institutionalized awe through ideology. This principle is extremely important to utopian communities and societies in terms of longevity. Sometimes the ideologies need to be changed in order to help a community sustain awe, and, through the awe, membership. Some of the most successful utopian communities in American history utilized the flexibility of their ideologies to maintain awe and sustain the needs of their members, especially in tragic and difficult circumstances. The American communal societies that were failures in terms of longevity did not use the flexibility of ideological awe to sustain their societies. Part of this could result from the differences between economic and religious ideologies that inspire awe. This paper will explore awe inspiring ideologies in some successful and unsuccessful utopian communities to show how communal groups and their leadership adapted or changed the awe to bring failure or success. When one has a firm grasp of institutionalized awe through ideology it can be seen that ideological awe is extremely important and pervasive in religious traditions and satisfies different human desires.

The United States has always been a haven for utopian and communal societies due to the government's policies supporting freedom of religion and religious practice. However, even though the United States tends to be open to utopian societies and communal groups, the utopia sees tension with the outside society that does not believe or, as in many cases, understand their beliefs, practices, or lifestyles. Consequently, in the struggle and battle for the hearts and minds of its followers, converts, and those generally attracted to the community, utopian communities need to have some form of transcendence as a commitment mechanism in order to be successful and to acquire converts and potential followers from the outside world.
Transcendence, the ability for an individual to attach himself/herself to a higher power, is an extremely important commitment mechanism. It usually appears in the form of an ideology or meaning that involves the community as a whole and differentiates the community from the rest of larger society (Kanter 1972). This form of transcendence is known to some scholars as a phenomenon called “Institutionalized Awe through Ideology” (Kanter 1972:114). Awe inspiring ideologies in utopian communities are typically successful for initial recruitment by creating wonderment that has the ability to draw inspired and intrigued individuals from the outside world. Most importantly, I will argue that institutionalized awe through ideology is crucial to all utopian communities and their sustainability as a cohesive group. In most cases the ideology of communities must have either the capacity to resolve issues the group faces through change, or have the capacity to keep a sense of awe and wonderment through revitalization. One must understand the terms used, the problems these communities face, and how this awe manifests itself in specific cases, to fully understand the weight of what institutionalized awe through ideology means.

“Institutionalized” essentially means the ideology of a group becomes engrained in the community as normal and accepted. The word “awe” in this definition implies a certain power that exists behind the ideology causing reverence and inspiration (Kanter 1972). Some examples of the kinds of ideologies that are typical in utopian communities can be economic ideology, religious ideology, and ideology of leadership, or combinations of a few or all three. Actually, leadership plays a very vital role in the ideology of a community. Those in power or those with influence have the ability to persuade others to adopt a certain ideology, decide/create the ideology, build a community of followers, or simply sustain a community (Kanter 1972). Many times those in leadership who control the ideology have institutionalized awe in the way people perceive them, their decision making, or doctrines. However, institutionalized awe is not intrinsically a fool-proof mechanism, because awe is in the perception of one having the experience. This means that over time the awe can be lost, even though it was once a normalcy and a continuous point of identity or follower’s interest. Historically speaking, most utopian communities that utilized institutionalized awe through ideology could not overcome the typical problems facing these groups, primarily because they could not adapt or revitalize the awe in the ideology anymore (Kanter 1972).

Firstly, to have flexible ideology and the ability to adapt, a utopian community must understand the obstacles it faces. America’s utopian communities face many problems and these problems threaten the awe of the ideology and its institutionalization. Some of these problems are outside forces, such as the “desires of the world” and
other awe inspiring leaders. Such an example would be Count de Leon and Dr. William Keil, who both stole some members from George Rapp’s Harmonists (Pitzer 1997). Other problems that need adequate responses to retain membership are inconsistencies in the leadership, failed expectations set by leaders, problems with second generation converts, internal disunity, and leaders who put too much pressure on the other members of the community (Kanter 1972, Pitzer 1997). However, despite all of the difficulties, many utopian communities and their leaders endured the problems and adapted to fit the needs or desires of the community, at least for a time.

This paper will discuss some of the most important and influential utopian communities in United States history. Most of the groups discussed will span: different ideologies used to produce institutionalized awe, different purposes, organizational structures, and causes for their dissolving. However, some of these groups will have strikingly similar periods of existence, charismatic leaders, ideological positions, and even some similar causes for their dissolving. This paper will also show the groups that used awe well, in terms of sustained longevity, and those that did not use it well. The definition of longevity used will be that of Rosabeth Moss Kanter, one of the foremost writers and analyzers of utopian communities. Kanter’s definition of longevity is “lasting 33 years or more” (Kanter 1972:64). For the purposes of showing institutionalized awe through ideology, specific practices will be examined as examples, which by no means desire to detract from the overall complexity of beliefs and practices of utopian communities.

Early Religious Utopian Communities

There are many examples of awe inspiring ideologies that have adapted to fit current situations and helped sustain the community. Some specific examples can be seen in some of the early American utopian communities and nineteenth century utopian communities. One of the earliest utopian communities started in the colonial period and was called the Ephrata Cloister (1732-1814) (Pitzer 1997). The eccentric and passionate Conrad Beissel started this community, after splitting from the Schwarzenau Brethren to start his own religious group (Gordon 1996). Essentially, Beissel believed that he was above the scriptures and his revelations were from God, which inspired many people to follow. This shows the power of ideology and the awe it inspires, tugging those from the outside world into the utopian settlement. The reason that the Ephrata Cloister survived for so long in colonial America was Beissel’s ability to maintain awe in the eyes of the members, and through this he could make demands and order a semi-monastic life style for those in the society. However, he eventually failed to keep the ideological awe in his leadership because
the community realized they suffered from his demands and whims. He could not adapt the ideology or relax it. This would have helped the community instead of pushing followers back to the mainstream society. The Ephrata Cloister legally dissolved in 1814 after most of Beissel’s followers left to form daughter colonies or relocated to various towns in Pennsylvania (Pitzer 1997).

A great example of this concept of the flexibility of ideology and its ability to inspire awe and sustain a community can be seen in George Rapp and the Harmonists (1804-1905). Rapp was the leader of the Harmonists, who started in Pennsylvania and branched off to Indiana (Pitzer 1997). Rapp held millenarian beliefs, meaning that he believed the millennial reign of the messiah on earth was coming soon. The community relocated to Indiana because it was expecting the second coming of Christ at that location. However, George Rapp decided to move the community he established in Indiana, which existed there for a decade, to counteract the restlessness that Rapp saw in the society’s anticipation of the messiah. He used the millenarian ideology to counteract this problem by creating a new town called the Economy, which is a reference to the “Divine Economy (perfect world order)” (Pitzer 1997:83). Rapp used the institutionalized ideology of the expectation of Christ to move back to Pennsylvania when he saw restlessness amongst the society, which demonstrates the flexibility of the ideology. He did the same thing years before when he abolished the institution of celibacy that he once established. Seemingly, the reason Rapp abolished celibacy came in response to the problems that he faced in the community, that less people were committed to living the “perfect Christian life” (Kring 1973, Pitzer 1997:69). Another reason Rapp abolished celibacy was due to his very interesting relationship with Hildegard Mutschler. The actual details of the relationship are shrouded in mystery but it was definitely seen by many in the group to be Rapp contradicting his ideology (Kring 1973). Consequently, in order to save power and save his community George Rapp seems to have re-instated marriage, destroying a previously held ideology, to sustaining the community as a whole. This is also an example of revitalization within the community. In these situations, Rapp seems to recognize the problems he faces, but many years later the awe of his ideology would fall short in comparison to other outside leaders, such as Count de Leon and Dr. William Keil, both of whom stole some of Rapp’s congregation.

George Rapp’s charismatic leadership also commanded the attention of the community. He was given the name “Father” Rapp by all in the community showing his leadership ideology, which had a powerful awe and sustained the group in periods when Rapp falsely predicted the coming of Christ to earth, more than once. One letter
from a couple that left the community and desired a return shows the awe Father Rapp had in the eyes of his followers:

“Father I have sinned before heaven and you for I must turn to you for the waves are over my head, and in my sorrow I can go to no one for I have no rest day and night since I left the community and God. I beg you father, and all the society that you would be so good as to forgive me and my grave error.” [Kring 1973:72].

Rapp died in 1847, and without the charisma and little leadership with the same awe, the group dwindled quite steadily until very few members remained (Pitzer 1997).

As already shown through Rapp, if the ideology within itself does not allow for change and adaptation then there must be some ability of the leaders of the community to influence the ideology from outside, such as reinterpretation or even adopting or rejecting a new or pre-existing belief. More evidence of this being true comes from the Oneida Community (ca.1844-1881), where John Humphrey Noyes controlled the ideology much like Rapp did (Schaefer 2007). Noyes was a person of great awe inspiring leadership to those in the community. However, his ideology of “complex marriage”, where every male was spiritually married to every female, brought him much negative attention from the outside world (Foster 1981). This practice held an ideological awe that one could not have outside of the community. Through a practice called “male continence”, there were an extremely low number of births even though sex with different partners, while strictly regulated, was a widespread practice (Foster 1981). This community stopped having children for 20 years (from 1849-1869) and then started having children again to retain communal order through raising the children and sustaining their existence as a community. Noyes saw what would happen if his ideology remained stagnant; the community would have died out from lack of propagation.

Another famous example of the awe that was able to sustain the members of the group from Oneida was the practice of “mutual criticism”, which helped the members of the group move closer to perfection here on earth, as their ideology stated (Foster 1981). The Oneidans actually felt refreshed each time they appeared at mutual criticism sessions and let their elders quite harshly expose their flaws. These were all very successful methods used to establish group unity, identity, and awe, and were able to sustain its members until John Humphrey Noyes’ abilities declined. The loyalty to his leadership and ideology receded as he faded from the lime-light of the group. His son Theodore did not have the same charisma of his father, and when he took control the structure declined and the community dissolved into a
silverware company (Pitzer 1997). The Rapp and Noyes examples show the role of leadership and its influence on ideology.

In the religious communities described above, awe inspiring ideology is on some level desirable in what it offers. Many utopian communities have ideologies that offer closeness to god, perfectibility of man, brotherhood, and seek to satisfy many other human desires. These utopian communities even allow for members to tap into the spiritual realm. Other religious communities had inspiring ideologies as well. In the Shaker communities, members could speak in tongues and receive revelations (Kanter 1972). These members could not get the same spiritual connection outside of the community that they received inside of the community. This proclamation of a spiritual connection attracts converts among those who are seeking. It will also help sustain the community population, at least for a time. The Shaker ideology has inspired a sense of awe among its followers and offers closeness to god through revelation and is part of the reason that the Shakers have continued to exist for so long. The Shakers and their ideology show the importance of awe and how it becomes normative (institutionalized) in a community and how it distinguishes itself from the outside world, achieving an identity.

The Amana colony, which started a mass migration to Iowa in 1854, can be seen as another religious group that had awe inspiring leaders and ideology that brought man closer to the perceived ultimate deity. These were seen through the Werkzeuge, divinely inspired instruments of God (Barthel 1984). The Amana colony started to decline when its inspirational leaders started to leave the community. Those remaining had to neglect the ideology and hire outsiders to work in the community. This destroyed its firm ideological boundaries that gave the group a religious awe through separation from the world (Barthel 1984).

Socialist Utopias

In contrast to the early religious utopias, the socialist utopias starting around the same time provide an interesting case of ideology and awe. These utopian communities were created in response to the perceived problems of capitalism (Manuel 1966). These cases show a type of economic ideological awe, to differentiate it from ideological religious awe as mentioned earlier, however, some communities have both of these forms of awe while some only have one. In the capitalist United States the socialist communities and their form of rebellion and revolution created an awe that worked for initial recruitment. Essentially, like the religious utopian communities before them, the socialist communities were looking for a better place on earth, but based on the principles of economic fairness, brotherhood, and
happiness that are supposed to come from a community with such a state (Seligman 1989, Francis 1997). The ideas of fairness and brotherhood came from the leadership who started these utopian communities and the ideologies that came in response to the problems of the industrial revolution and the social ills stemming from it (Goodwin 1978). The religious communities mentioned before did see the social ills of the society outside of the community, but dealt with them using religious beliefs instead of economy. However, the Fourierist communities, Brook Farm especially, and the Owenites of New Harmony both had institutionalized awe through ideology; but fell short of being successful communities in terms of longevity. Both of these communities failed due to some of the same problems as other utopian groups, such as internal disunities and the draw of the outside world. However, Brook Farm and New Harmony did not have the institutionalized awe in their ideology that was flexible enough to save the community when problems arose. Also, leadership could not change the ideology without the utopia being destroyed.

One of these socialist communities, Brook Farm, was started from the ideology of Charles Fourier, who was born in France in 1772. Charles Fourier thought it was his mission to “bring order and justice to humanity” (Pitzer 1997: 159) Fourier worked as a salesman and quickly became disillusioned with the problems of commerce. After the French Revolution took almost all that he had, Fourier came up with an idea for utopian communities, called phalanxes (Pitzer 1997, Goodwin 1978). Fourier’s ideas boomed in America when a student, Albert Brisbane, joined the revolution and wrote the Social Destiny of Man explaining “Fourierism” and its socialist utopian outlook. Over time the Fourierists would have 22 mini-phalanxes created between 1843-1858, and the most important phalanx created would be Brook Farm (Pitzer 1997). Brook Farm became a phalanx in 1844, based on personal freedom, progression of society, and fairness, but would fail only two years later after a fire destroyed their main building. Brook Farm had nonselective membership that aided in its downfall (Myerson 1987). The Associationists, as they were also called, did not have enough start up capital to support themselves as well. The Fourierist communities of Sodus Bay and the Frontier Phalanx died out due to some of the same problems: relaxed membership criteria and lack of strong leadership (Preucel 2006). Brook Farm had awe in its beliefs but lacked a figure that could unify the people of the phalanxes or shape the doctrines to keep the community sustained. Due to this fact, the ideology of Fourier did not seem to affect the community much at all, and the needed ideological awe through a unified ideology, with which the members could identify themselves, was not present (Francis 1997). Brook Farm and the other Fourierist communities also had no ideology that addressed anything about the outside the world, except
economics. This is shown by the lack of screening of those who applied to the community. The religious communities that came before the Associationists had ideologies about the outside world that separated them in a way that would not allow a potential downfall from the parasites in the system and who knew nothing about labor. The awe was economic for the reason of social progress and curtaining competition, but this was not enough awe to sustain a community when times took a turn for the worst. Those in the community can always just leave and return to the outside world. It is easy to imagine that individuals would just leave a socialist utopia for the outside capitalist mainstream society when the community failed and they were in turn disillusioned with socialism. Many of the utopian communities that institutionalized their awe through religious doctrine and practice lasted longer and were sustain through harder times.

The community of New Harmony died out for some of the same reasons as Brook Farm. Robert Owen, when in America, created a community where education would reign supreme, which would lead to human bliss through rationalism. Robert Owen's ideas spread and soon there were many Owenite communities in the United States (Goodwin 1978). Times were not always joyful and New Harmony died out after only two years in existence. Without a selective membership process, many parasite individuals came into the community and then refused to work. There were also attempts to oust Owen from leadership (Kanter 1972). Owen had a form of institutionalized awe through ideology in his attempts at the betterment of society and people. However, this awe was not able to sustain the New Harmony group; it eventually split into 10 different sub-communities (Pitzer 1997). Some of the religious or spiritual communities that came before New Harmony had strict ideologies toward the outside world and stricter membership processes, showing the ideological awe of the world when it is based on religious principles. The successful groups had longer life spans due to more ideological unity that stemmed from awe inspiring worldviews and not just awe inspiring economic views.

Comparative Discussion of Utopias

Fourierism was a largely held ideology for many socialists' phalanxes and Robert Owen's beliefs were also very influential. Almost all of the religious utopian groups had communal wealth and sharing of goods as well. Why did the utopian socialist communities fail in terms of longevity? The answer seems to be one that is quite simple but often overlooked. While the religious communities suffered from some of the same difficult moments in their existence, they also had a different basis for the institutionalized awe through ideology. In
the expressly socialist communities leaning on economic awe through ideology, members can always leave for the outside world when there is an economic downturn. However, this option is not always available to the utopian religious communities. The religious groups were motivated by religious institutionalized awe, which means that if they left the "believers" or were ostracized by the community they were outside of God’s favor, or at least in rebellion to His will. This religious awe through ideology seems to be much stronger than the economic awe through ideology, especially when the socialist community has to do battle with the outside capitalist world, as is the case for American socialist communities.

Conversely, some interesting communal groups in the contemporary world are much different than the socialist utopias in institutionalized awe through ideology. They also lack the charismatic leadership structure of the early religious groups. Two groups specifically, the Old Order Amish and the Hutterites are the two most successful utopian groups in history. Both of these groups have awe in their very strict seclusion from society and their practices to keep the community awe sustained. Based on their models, leadership barely has to change the awe or make it flexible to help keep the group sustained.

The Hutterites have over 400 years of history and over 400 existing communities today, in such places as the United States, Canada, and Japan (Pitzer 1997). They started out of the Anabaptist movement from Jakob Hutter, which holds five tenants of the faith, adult baptism only, no state church, community of goods, refusal of oaths, and the separation of believers and unbelievers (Bennett 1967). This group keeps their institutionalized awe through their five articles of the faith and their remembrance of the past persecution they suffered in such places and Moravia and the Ukraine as well as the United States (Peter 1987, Pitzer 1997). They have actually recorded their history and recall it often for the purpose of keep the awe of the revolution that stemmed from persecution (Deets 1939). This historical text is called the Geschicht-Buch, or Great Chronicle (Deets 1939). This look backward toward their history helps establish religious awe through ideology that is institutionalized by the use of the Great Chronicle in religious observances. It helps by giving a common historical identity to the group even though they are not perceived as the same radicals they were when they started. Also, some scholars see this focus on history and tradition as a “transcendence-facilitating mechanism” (Peter 1987). While they many not have the radical awe of some of the past utopian groups, they also keep the awe in the community through a revitalization technique of splitting when one of the communities get too large, which satisfies what seems to be a desire for some newness in a group that focuses primarily on the past. Besides persecution, the
Hutterites have not been immune to economic problems in a communal structure that desires the sharing of goods. However, the Hutterites were willing to give up one of their main awe inspiring practices, the communal sharing of goods, more than once to satisfy and sustain the community when dealing with economic hardship (Pitzer 1997).

The Old Order Amish are another communal group based on religious ideologies stemming from Anabaptist beliefs. The way that the Old Order Amish keep awe in the community is through distancing itself from the beliefs and ideas of the outside world. A few interesting practices illustrate this point quite easily. The Old Order Amish reject the things of the world they deem to be Hochmut. Hochmut is a term that means pride and haughtiness, the idea of being better than others. Something that accompanies the idea of that which is Hochmut is the rejection of things which are Verboten, or forbidden, such as jewelry, mustaches, portraits and many other items. If one can give up these things then they have submission to God and his will, also known as Demut (Schaefer 2007). If not, then one who is in the community gets the greatest of all social controls in the Old Order Amish, Meidung (Nagata 1989). Meidung is a term used for shunning and avoiding contact with excommunicated members. In many cases, those from the community do not even acknowledge a former member if seen in public. Their institutionalized awe through ideology does not need revitalization techniques used by some other communities, such as George Rapp’s community of the Harmonists based on millenarian beliefs (Pitzer 1997). Both the Hutterites and the Old Order Amish have seemingly found an ideology that inspires awe that is sustainable and requires little leadership control. The institutionalization of these ideologies is one of the main reasons that both of these groups have survived for such an astounding period of time and continue to flourish.

Conclusion

In conclusion, much of what attracts future converts to utopian communities seems to be that initial awe and wonderment stemming from ideology and what the ideology can bring, whether it brings man closer to God or man closer to fellow man. However, with all of the external and internal pressures that push on utopian communities, institutionalized awe through ideology cannot be maintained unless it has the ability to adapt to new issues that arise, in some way undergoes revitalization, or creates an ideology that needs minimal leadership control and change. Even though times have changed since the early American communities with charismatic leaders, one aspect that remains the same for successful utopian communities is institutionalized awe. In America, societies that have economic awe institutionalized from socialist leanings have a harder time keeping the
community alive when times are hard. Part of this could stem from the fact that of those communities that have strictly economic awe promise a better place economically than that of the outside world. The Icarians and Theosophists fell into this trap as well, and in both cases their followers became disillusioned quite rapidly (Pitzer 1997). Many of the contemporary religious communities are different from the early American religious groups because they are not as radical in ideology, such as the Hutterites and the Old Order Amish, but the use of awe still remains in their practices and strict boundaries with the world. Utopian communities need a unifying idea or power that gives the community its identity and distinguishes it from the outside world. If the community loses this power or force and cannot re-create it, the community dies or deviates from its original intent.

One might ask why this awe is important at all. Institutionalized awe through ideology can be seen in other religious traditions as well. One place it can potentially be seen is in the Pentecostal Churches through the tradition of healings and speaking in tongues. The Catholic tradition has an ideology regarding the Eucharist, which says that communion is literally the body and blood of Christ. The Christian Holy Bible can be said to have the same kind of awe due to the fact that it speaks of many miracles and is believed to be the inspired word of God. There are many other forms of ideological awe that could be pointed to in almost every religion and movement. However, some individuals do not feel the same awe from these groups as others feel, which in many cases leaves them to desire separatist communities where they can attach themselves to a group and have a religious or humanistic experience that imparts awe. This seems to be the reason that such movements appeal to those who are marginalized by society. One specific example is the “Burned-Over District” in Western New York, which was an area that had been full of different mainstream social and religious movements. It seems quite reasonable that the Shakers, the Mormons, and John Humphrey Noyes gained many followers from that area (Holloway 1966, Pitzer 1997). Some of the population in the “Burned-Over District” wanted a different non-sectarianism experience. Sometimes it takes a separatist movement to give those lost by society something in which to participate that is perceived as awe inspiring, gives an identity, and allows an attachment that is in many ways desirable.

The study of these specific utopian communities is extremely important for American history regardless of the fact that most of them dissolved as utopian communities. Some of those who lived at Brook Farm went on to become famous outside the community, for example Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne (Lawson 1962, and Francis 1997). Robert Owen of New Harmony conceived an ingenious idea for a daycare system that allowed for children’s education and
freed up the mothers to work in the factories (Pitzer 1997). The Harmonists helped in the formation of the state of Indiana, and Conrad Beissel of the Ephrata Cloister wrote very influential treatises on music (Pitzer 1997, Kring 1973). Amana and Oneida became large companies producing great products in refrigeration and silverware, respectively (Pitzer 1997). Not only are these specific groups important, but so, too, are the Puritans who settled in the United States from England considered by some to be early separatist groups that functioned much in the style of utopian ideals by resting in the awe of separation for the purpose of practicing religion (Pitzer 1997).

Institutionalized awe through ideology is pervasive in utopian communities, especially successful ones. Much work and examination is still needed to get a more complete picture of institutionalized awe through ideology and how it is incorporated into socialist communities and the contemporary communities. However, this principle is crucially important to communal societies and their existence. Those who study communal and utopian communities need to realize the different forms of awe that are present in different communities.

Institutionalized economic awe looks different from those who have institutionalized religious awe that stems from separation from society. Leadership plays a large role in this subject as well since it controls the ideology and its flexibility to sustain the utopia. If a full picture of this can be seen it could open the door to a whole new study of utopian and communal societies.

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