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Review of *Community on the American Frontier* By Robert V. Hine

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BOOK REVIEWS

Community on the American Frontier. By Robert V. Hine. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980. Illustrations, bibliography, index. xii + 292 pp. \$12.50

This appears to be a very "personal" book. Robert V. Hine's motive in writing it evidently stemmed not from any historiographical issue—a gap in the literature, for example—but simply out of a fascination with the commune movement of the 1960s and 1970s. What was there of the true communal impulse, he asked himself, in the westward movement? His answer: not much. This apparently will surprise today's "commune people," who look to the American pioneer experience for community models. One suspects that it will surprise few historians.

But I could be wrong, and for those who find the question of interest, Hine provides a lengthy elaboration. He begins by juxtaposing the views of Frederick J. Turner, Josiah Royce, and Daniel Boorstin, who agreed that precious little sense of community was to be found on the frontier and who disagreed only in evaluating this fact. Hine then calls on sociology for some definitions of community. Finally, he escorts the reader through time in a survey of frontier groups that—under the relentless onslaught of individualism, materialism, geographic mobility, and other disintegrative aspects of frontier life—failed to muster or maintain true community. Chapters 3 through 9 are each devoted to one such group: New England Puritans, cattle drovers and wagon train members, miners, farmers, townspeople, ranchers and their employees, immigrants and blacks, members of cooperative colonies. All groups, sooner or later, succumbed to the dominant spirit of the frontier.

There is nothing here seemingly provocative of useful scholarly debate, but I would nevertheless raise two substantive questions. First, the author's failure to offer some sensible

working definition of frontier is more than of trivial import, since his argument asserts that the frontier was *distinctively* subversive of community values. But this cannot logically be proven, disproven, or even (in my opinion) very intelligently discussed so long as the author refuses to disentangle the frontier from the rest of America. How is the conscientious reader to separate (1) social destruction wrought by the frontier from (2) the destructive spirit of American culture at large? Such a separation is clearly essential if the author wishes to be taken seriously.

Hine variously collapses or expands the frontier as it suits his purpose, but it is a little difficult to see whether his begging the question of definition is conscious or naive. A case in point: on pages 97 and 134 he cites high population turnover among Midwestern farmers and townspeople as another important datum proving the lethal nature of the frontier spirit on true community. Only in a footnote does he briefly acknowledge that historians have found the same high turnover rates in virtually *every* American population unit yet studied—eastern as well as western, urban as well as frontier, countryside and town, the 1850s as well as the 1890s. Yet Hine's exceptionally subtle disclaimer—that the frontier was the same as every place else when it came to geographic mobility—is blithely ignored for the next 160 pages as he continues to lament the *special* impact of frontier mobility on community.

My second substantive point is to wonder why Hine's search for community overlooked the American Indian. One need not be a romantic to acknowledge that here is precisely the frontier (i.e., western or wilderness or low-population-density area) group that offers the best evidence for what the author would require of true community. Although tribal variations existed of course, Indian culture

normally possessed a strong commitment to geographical place; it fostered a healthy accommodation of individualism to group norms that offered a maximum of personal freedom within carefully structured communal constraints; the wealth-sharing component of its economy was usually so embracing as to require some source other than material success for the individual achievement of high status; and its sense of community often successfully resisted well-planned and -funded campaigns of cultural genocide administered by Caucasian churches and governments. Despite Hine's argument, it is clear that a great many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Euro-Americans *did* find a satisfying sense of community in the West, and memoirs of their lives among the Crow and Blackfeet and other Indian peoples often mention this fact.

Hine's footnotes testify to an admirable breadth of scholarship, and his photographs of everyday life in the nineteenth-century West and Midwest are some of the best that I have seen.

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