

unscheduled disruptions here were a carefully calibrated part of the program. This included the commercial breaks, which provided a slickly produced array of advertisements for love, understanding, and tolerance, with the production's main sponsor Cadillac as-

suming the unexpected role of a font of humanitarian values. *The New York Times* ran an advertisement—the most effective of the spots—for truth itself. Whatever uneasiness lay outside the hall, a surface of buoyant solidarity was generally maintained.

The last-reel confusion provided as perfect a chance-generated resolution as possible. The long-shot *Moonlight*, a favorite for many, was the beneficiary of a rare miraculous reversal—mirroring, but this time with a happy ending, the sort of last-

ditch overturning so recently disappointed in the political sphere—while *La La Land*'s split-second moment of illusory triumph rhymed nicely with those bubbly evanescent ecstasies toward which musicals have always aspired. □

# Building the American Dream

Christopher Benfey

**Man's Better Angels:  
Romantic Reformers and  
the Coming of the Civil War**

by Philip F. Gura.  
Belknap Press/  
Harvard University Press,  
315 pp., \$29.95

**Paradise Now:  
The Story of  
American Utopianism**

by Chris Jennings.  
Random House, 488 pp., \$28.00

**Utopia Drive:  
A Road Trip Through  
America's Most Radical Idea**

by Erik Reece.  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,  
346 pp., \$28.00

**Oneida:  
From Free Love Utopia  
to the Well-Set Table**

by Ellen Wayland-Smith.  
Picador, 310 pp., \$27.00

**We Are as Gods:  
Back to the Land in the 1970s  
on the Quest for a New America**

by Kate Daloz.  
PublicAffairs, 355 pp., \$26.99

1.

On a sunny August afternoon in 1851, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, after a picnic in the Berkshires and a leisurely smoke under the trees, decided, seemingly on impulse, to visit the Hancock Shaker Village, on the outskirts of Pittsfield, Massachusetts. For Melville, who lived nearby, it was a chance to share the company of the older American writer he most admired, and to whom he would dedicate *Moby-Dick*, published later that fall.

For Hawthorne, however, it was something of a research trip. Model, or “utopian,” communities like those established by the Shakers were to be the subject of his next novel, *The Blithedale Romance*. During the summer, as preparation, he had immersed himself in the “horribly tedious volumes” of the French visionary Charles Fourier, whose odd fusion of pragmatic and surreal ideas for harnessing human desires to create social harmony had had a surprising vogue in the United States. The day before the picnic, Hawthorne had written in his notebook, “Fourier states that, in the progress of the world, the ocean is to lose its saltiness, and acquire the taste of a peculiarly flavored lemonade.”

During the 1830s, Hawthorne had published two stories inspired by the

Shakers; in a letter to his sister in 1831, he had even broached (perhaps in jest) the possibility of joining the sect. His description of the community at Hancock begins on a positive note, as he admires the central brick dwelling house, with its “floors and walls of polished wood, and plaster as smooth as marble, and everything so neat that it was a pain and constraint to look at it.” But as their guide, an old man wearing a gray, broad-brimmed hat who was one of the elders of the village, leads them to the bedrooms, segregated by sex, Hawthorne's mood abruptly darkens, as he notes the lack of privacy in the two-to-a-bed alcoves and the rudimentary sanitary arrangements. “The fact shows,” he notes disdainfully, “that all their miserable pretense of cleanliness and neatness is the thinnest superficiality; and that the Shakers are and must needs be a filthy set.”

Hawthorne's intemperate outburst suggests how unfit for such a rigidly designed community he himself would be. And yet, in 1841, fastidious Hawthorne made the unlikely decision to join the utopian community at Brook Farm, outside of Boston, loosely modeled by its founder, a former minister named George Ripley, on precisely those Fourierist ideas that he had lambasted in his journals. Ripley's cousin Ralph Waldo Emerson had politely demurred to join what he referred to, in private, as “a perpetual picnic, a French Revolution in small, an Age of Reason in a pattypan.” Henry David Thoreau wrote with kindred scorn, “I

think I had rather keep bachelor's hall in hell than go to board in heaven,” and established his own utopian community of one, on July 4, 1845, on a patch of Emerson's land on Walden Pond.

What might have inspired a man of Hawthorne's temperament—antisocial, politically reactionary, and suspicious of reform of any kind—to join a community dedicated, in Ripley's words, to “a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor” and the substitution of “a system of brotherly cooperation for one of selfish competition”? Several new books (all written before the election of Donald Trump) examine aspects of the many utopian communities founded in the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century, as well as the larger question of their extraordinary appeal to earlier Americans and their possible relevance today.

2.

“Utopian”: the word has a strange sound at the troubled start of 2017. During the disheartening primary campaign of 2016, “utopian” came to mean hopelessly unrealistic, even delusional. “Let me tell you something,” Bernie Sanders tweeted in April, as his prospects were dimming, “there is nothing we've said in this campaign that is pie-in-the-sky or utopian. Nothing.” As for his primary opponent, “the good news is that she is not a utopian,” the conservative columnist Ross Douthat



An engraving of New Harmony, Indiana, the utopian community founded by Robert Owen in 1825 and dissolved in 1827

wrote in *The New York Times*, as Clinton's presumed victory in the election approached; “she is—or has become, across a long and grinding career—temperamentally pragmatic, self-consciously hardheaded.”

Meanwhile, commentators increasingly reached for utopia's dark twin, “dystopia,” to describe Donald Trump's dire view of America. According to James Poniewozik, writing in *The New York Times*, Trump, in his July acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, characterized the United States “as a dystopian hellscape and himself as the only leader capable of saving it from murder, terrorism, financial ruin and an uncontrolled wave of immigrants.” Trump's speech reportedly caused the number of inquiries about the words “dystopia” and “dystopian” to increase by 2,000 percent online, momentarily crashing the Merriam-Webster website; meanwhile, dystopian novels like *1984* and *It Can't Happen Here* have returned, ominously, to the best-seller lists.

And yet the word “utopia” has always been double-edged. Coined by Thomas More, five hundred years ago, to mean “nowhere” (hence its nineteenth-century literary spinoffs *Erewhon* and *News from Nowhere*), utopia has an ambiguous “u” (or “ou,” meaning “not”) that can also be read as the Greek “eu,” meaning good—hence a good place. Moreover, alternative visions of a better society, including More's, have historically included—as a key part of their justification—a grim assessment of the dark present. “If in the background of every utopia there is an anti-utopia,” Frank and Fritzie Manuel wrote in their influential 1979 book, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, “one might say conversely that in the background of many a dystopia there is a secret utopia.”

The subject of American planned communities sprawls in all directions, and a major challenge for the books under review is to narrow the scope, in space and time, of an otherwise unmanageable topic. For Philip Gura, a professor of American literature at the University of North Carolina, such model communities are best seen as part of a larger, specifically American movement of reform from roughly 1837 to the Civil War. What precipitated such experiments in what the reformer Thomas Wentworth Higginson called

“practical radicalism”—vegetarianism and temperance, prison reform and free love, abolition and women’s rights—was, in Gura’s view, the devastating financial panic of 1837, which followed a bad harvest the previous year and increasing foreign debt.

Banking crises would recur with disheartening regularity, in 1857, 1873, and 1893; what distinguished the collapse of 1837 was that it was totally unforeseen. “Until the spring of 1837,” Gura writes, “most Americans uncritically believed that limitless economic expansion was assured—indeed, was the nation’s divine destiny.” The ensuing wreckage was all the more shocking:

Many manufacturers closed their factories and peremptorily dismissed their mill hands. Those who still could find work saw wages plummet, sometimes in half. Prices of staple goods and housing increased, often to prohibitive levels, creating a population of literally hundreds of thousands of homeless in the nation’s cities. Disease and abject poverty abounded. Trade was stagnant. Bankruptcies were everywhere, with property sacrificed at auction at a fraction of its cost.

“The land stinks with suicide,” Emerson wrote in the aftermath. “Young men have no hope.” He concluded that “society has played out its last stake; it is checkmated.”

It is amid these grim historical circumstances that Gura invites us to see an experiment in community like Brook Farm, founded by a minister, George Ripley, appalled by the poverty and desperation of disenfranchised workers in his Boston parish. For a man like Hawthorne, engaged to be married and facing an uncertain future as a professional writer, buying shares in Brook Farm, with its plans to open an extensive dairy establishment and a day school, seemed a reasonable investment. When Brook Farm proved to be no more resilient than other businesses and could not compete with the more settled farms in its neighborhood, Hawthorne demanded the return of his investment.

Gura is perhaps too hard on Hawthorne in emphasizing his pragmatic interest in Brook Farm. Miles Coverdale, Hawthorne’s surrogate in *The Blithedale Romance*, refers to his months at Blithedale as “the most romantic episode” of his life, observing ruefully, “I rejoice that I could once think better of the world’s improbability than it deserved.” It was the marked individuality of so many of the Brook Farmers, faced with the rigid social and work arrangements of Ripley’s community, that, in Hawthorne’s view, spelled the experiment’s doom. Isaiah Berlin, in discussing the decline of utopian ideas, was fond of quoting Kant’s dictum: “Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.” Hawthorne adopted a strikingly similar wording in his assessment of Blithedale: “Persons of marked individuality—crooked sticks, as some of us might be called—are not exactly the easiest to bind up into a faggot”—or neat bundle.

### 3.

Brook Farm was not an isolated case. “We are all a little wild with number-

less projects of social reform,” Emerson reported to Thomas Carlyle in 1840. “Not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket.” At least a hundred such planned communities were founded in the United States during the nineteenth century, according to Chris Jennings in *Paradise Now*. Unlike Gura’s primarily economic explanation, Jennings attributes the rise of utopian communities to the “confluence” of two streams of thought in the “wide-open wilderness” of the New World. One of these was the Judeo-Christian belief that after a thousand years a New Jerusalem would reign on earth. The other was the secular Enlightenment faith, inherited from eighteenth-century thinkers like Voltaire and Locke, that every social problem had a solution discoverable by science.

Efforts “to construct the perfect society in miniature and then lead by example” differed in superficial ways, depending on the background and religious leanings of their founders, and the challenges of location or climate. But they had a surprising degree of overlap in their basic premises: that society should be based on cooperation rather than competition; that the nuclear family should be subsumed into the larger community; that property should be held in common; that women should not be subordinate to men; that work of even the most menial kind must be accorded a certain dignity. They also shared a dominant mood, a sense of disappointment, even anger, with the world as they found it. “Utopianism may be a species of optimism,” Jennings notes, “but it is always born of discontent.”

Jennings selects “five communalist movements that flourished during the busy golden age of American utopianism”: the Shakers; the Welshman Robert Owens’s short-lived New Harmony in southern Indiana; the Fourierist “phalanxes,” including Brook Farm; the doomed Icarians and their “techno-communist paradise” based on a six-hundred-page novel by their French founder; and the surprisingly long-lived Oneida community. In stressing the migration of radical social ideas from Europe to the United States, Jennings is indebted to a towering precursor, Edmund Wilson’s *To the Finland Station*.

Wilson was struck by how much of the freshest thinking about new models for society came from British Manchester, at the rise of the Industrial Revolution, with its cotton mills and hideously inadequate living and working conditions for its downtrodden laborers. It was here that the illiterate Ann Lee—abused by her husband, suffering terribly in childbirth, and finding refuge among a loosely knit group of renegade Quakers—began to develop her concept of a celibate, spotlessly clean society devoted to the Second Coming, in which she herself would function as a sort of female counterpart of Christ.

Lee’s mania for cleanness pervaded the Shaker communities established after her flight to New York in 1774. With their now-familiar “ladderbacks,” Shaker chairs were designed so that they could be hung on the walls while the floors were swept; ornament of any kind provided nooks and crannies where dirt and contagion might thrive, hence the spare construction that has become so admired in our own,

post-Bauhaus society. “Shaker crafts reflect a platonic impulse to unite the messy, imperfect material world with a numinous sphere of eternal forms,” Jennings writes. Charles Dickens, touring a Shaker village in 1842, was less impressed: “We walked into a grim room where several grim hats were hanging on grim pegs, and the time was told grimly by a grim clock.”

It was also in industrial Manchester that Robert Owen worked out his own progressive views for more humane ways to run a factory, including the eight-hour day and child care, ideas that he first put into practice, with great success, in Manchester before deciding to try something on a larger scale in the United States. It was also in Manchester that Friedrich Engels, an admirer of Owen, developed his ideas of a socialist revolution, part of the larger narrative for Wilson’s study, which culminates in the planned society of Leninist Russia.

The utopian leaders monitored one another’s progress and shortcomings. John Humphrey Noyes, founder of the Oneida community in upstate New York—“the most remarkable utopian experiment in American history,” in Jennings’s view—conceived of his own experiment as rising, phoenix-like, from the ashes of Brook Farm’s demise. “Look at the Dates,” he wrote. “Brook Farm deceased in October 1847. The Oneida Community commenced in November 1847.” Even before he became a student at Yale, Noyes had caught the millennial fever, and determined, from his own reading of the Bible, that human perfection was

available here and now. The mistake of the Brook Farmers, in his view, was that they “left God out of their tale and they came to nothing.”

The Shakers, too, had made a mistake, in Noyes’s opinion. They were right to break up the nuclear family, along with what he dismissively called the “special love” of marriage, but naive to think that abstinence was the means to accomplish it. Noyes proposed, instead, that all adults in his community embrace what he called “complex marriage”—i.e., multiple sexual partners—along with a “surprisingly effective” method of birth control based on males stopping short of ejaculation. Noyes himself “occupied the top of this pyramid,” as Jennings puts it. “For years, he considered it his duty to sexually initiate many of the young women in the community.”

Most of the utopian communities of the nineteenth century, including Oneida and Brook Farm, were agricultural. The Garden of Eden seemed to represent an unfallen world before the ravages of industrialization. When Oneida’s fruit trees couldn’t support the community, however, Noyes decided to mass-produce the innovative animal traps that one of his young members had been selling to local Iroquois trappers. Ellen Wayland-Smith, in her well-researched account of Oneida, gives a detailed account of the process by which, as Jennings wryly puts it, “the mostly vegetarian Perfectionists made their living from mammalian carnage.” Later, when much of the Northeast had been purged of beavers and bears, partly because of the ingenious Newhouse trap, Oneida turned

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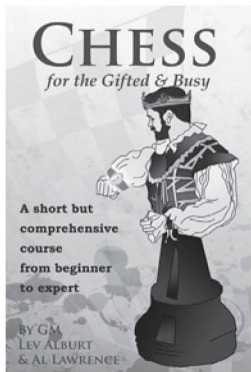


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Oneida was the rare utopian community to survive the Civil War, and even it renounced its experiment in free love in 1879, resolved its complex marriages into conventional pairings, and turned its communitarian flatware production into a capitalist joint-stock company. Jennings ventures the upbeat conclusion that such communities were partly the victim of their own successes in consciousness-raising: “The decline of American communal utopianism was less about the defeat of one idea than it was about the triumph of another,” the embrace of such civic schemes as free public libraries, universal education, and care for the poor. For Gura, the Civil War, in addressing the calamitous institution of slavery at the heart of American capitalism, taught Americans “that their social problems were of such a scale that they could not be addressed by the example of a few divinely inspired reformers,” and required pragmatism and compromise instead.

## 4.

And yet, the utopian impulse to create a more perfect society apart from its corrupt surroundings did not vanish with the Civil War, as Erik Reece makes clear in *Utopia Drive*, his engaging “road trip through America’s most radical idea.” Oneida and Owen’s New Harmony are on Reece’s itinerary; so is Walden Pond, and the Shaker community at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, near Reece’s home. “I’m not a social scientist,” Reece confesses disarmingly; “I’m a guy with a truck, a gas card, and a few boxes of old books shifting around in the cab.” But Reece also explores more recent attempts to live in an alternative, utopian way.

It was only in the back-to-the-land movement of the late 1960s and the early 1970s that one encounters anything like a mushrooming of utopian communities to match the 1840s. According to Kate Daloz, who grew up on a commune in northern Vermont and has written a history of the phenomenon, “the 1970s remain the only moment in the nation’s history when more people moved to rural areas than into the cities, briefly reversing two hundred years of steady urbanization.” The reasons are well known:

In the shadow of the Vietnam War and amidst widespread social upheaval, this ever-present American urge to reinvent ourselves in the wilderness spiked into its largest, most influential and most radical manifestation ever. That decade, as many as a million young Americans uprooted themselves, almost en masse, abandoning their urban and suburban backgrounds in favor of a life in the countryside.

Jennings is dismissive of this second wave of utopian ferment, arguing that “the aspirations of the hippie commu-

nards were categorically different from those of their utopian forebears,” and that while

the communalists of the sixties and seventies tried (and often succeeded) to build strongholds of cooperation, pleasure, and consciousness amid the mercantile bustle of American life, they seldom described their communities as levers of millenarian transformation.

This seems both overstated and mean-spirited. Surely the dwellers on communes around 1970 were hoping to be levers of social (if not “millenarian”) transformation.



An 1879 caricature of the critics of Oneida, the utopian community in central New York founded by John Humphrey Noyes in 1848 and dissolved in 1881

One of Reece’s best chapters is set at Twin Oaks, in Louisa, Virginia, a back-to-the-land experiment founded in 1967, which he calls one of the “country’s most stable sustainable communities.” The residents of Twin Oaks “hold land, labor, and income in common, advocate nonviolence and ecological sustainability,” and make decisions in a direct, consensual manner. They live lightly on the land, sharing the work—a required forty-two hours a week—of farming and maintaining buildings and property. As at Oneida, subsistence agriculture—supplemented by “dumpster beef” from the wasteful “mainstream” society they proudly shun—is insufficient to support the community, and Twin Oaks has developed a flourishing trade in hammocks and tofu.

At Twin Oaks, interestingly, Reece finds evidence of some of the same conflicts—marriage versus looser affiliations, for example—that bedeviled utopian communities of the past. Echoing Hawthorne’s Coverdale, he identifies “the nub of the whole utopia problem: What do you do when someone else’s idea of paradise conflicts

with your own?” One young woman tells Reece that when she first came to Twin Oaks, she was “ecstatic to be living around such cool people and in such a cool place,” but she soon came to realize “that a lot of my friends here are just as depressed as my friends back in graduate school.”

Across the long history of American utopian yearnings, experiments in communal living like Twin Oaks seem to have had their primary appeal for young people—not the very young, but those who have had their first bruising encounter with things as they are. Such “dreamers” have, in Hawthorne’s words, “gone through such an experience as to disgust them with ordinary

pursuits, but . . . were not yet so old, nor had suffered so deeply, as to lose their faith in the better time to come.”

Today, as is becoming increasingly clear, we have another generation appalled by what it sees, in the failure of its leaders to address the threat of climate change or the grotesque income disparity of our wildcat economy. Interest in the utopian communities of the past, from young writers like Jennings and Reece, may be a signal of social experiments yet to come in Trump’s America and after. “To say that these communities no longer exist,” Reece writes of the communes of the 1840s, “is not the same thing as saying that they failed. The angel of history may yet salvage their blueprints from the detritus of the past. Because, after all, we still need these ideas so badly.” In his assessment of the contemporary relevance of utopian visionaries, Jennings is more elliptical but no less insistent: “Their disregard for the world as it is guaranteed that they didn’t survive long. Our disregard for the world as it might be could prove just as grave.” □

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