NICKOLAS MARIO PERRONE

Radical Roots, Utopian Legacies

A usable past for today's communitarians

John Curl, *For All the People: Uncovering the Hidden History of Cooperation, Cooperative Movements, and Communalism in America* (Oakland: PM Press, 2009)

Iain Boal, Janferie Stone, Michael Watts, and Cal Winslow, eds., *West of Eden: Communes and Utopias in Northern California* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012)

In the fall and winter of 2011, Occupy Oakland quickly established itself as one of the most radical and resilient elements of a movement that was sweeping across the country. Today, after an election season and several rounds of suppression and eviction, carried out by police acting on the orders of public officials who saw the occupation of public spaces as threatening and unreasonable, the movement appears to have lost much of its momentum, at least as measured by the absence of tents and protesters in Oscar Grant Plaza.

But while the news cameras may have moved on to other stories, the organizational structure of Occupy Oakland has quietly endured, performing a variety of progressive functions throughout the Bay Area. Committees have mobilized against residential foreclosures, provided vocal opposition to the draconian police policy of "stop and frisk," and supplied solidarity with organized labor in the Bay Area. Occupy's cultural and political legacy is still a work in progress, but it is increasingly clear that it will eventually take its place within a deep tradition of radical cooperative and utopian movements in California that stretches from the nineteenth century to the 1960s and 1970s. That tradition is the subject of two recent works on the history of utopian communalism in the United States, with particular focus on California: John Curl's broad history, *For All the People: Uncovering the Hidden History of Cooperation, Cooperative Movements, and Communalism in America*, and an essay collection focused entirely on the Golden State, *West of Eden: Communes and Utopias in Northern California*.

The communes of the 1960s Bay Area—antiwar, environmental, radical feminist, ethnic nationalist, etc.—are the most well-known elements of communalism in America, but for all that was novel about that tumultuous era, the communal impulse

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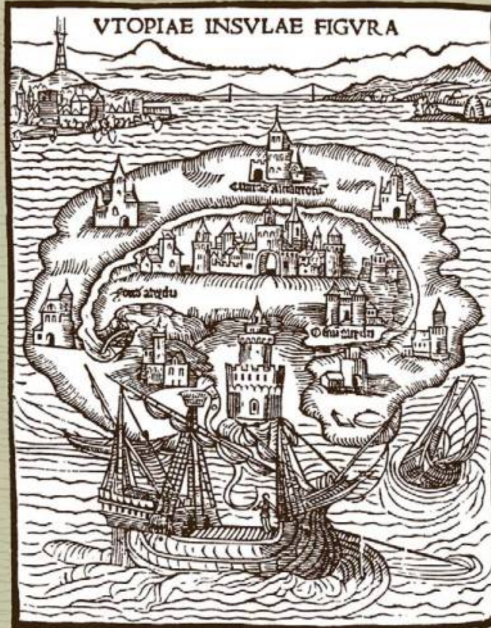

represented a surprising point of continuity with the past. By the time people decided to "drop out" in the 1960s, California had served as midwife to dozens of similar movements for nearly a century. In the 1880s, the Knights of Labor tried to organize workers at the ports of San Francisco and Oakland against the unfettered exploitation of sailors and dockworkers. They developed structures to provide food and housing for striking workers. Encountering the violence of union busting, a group of socialist union activists led by organizers from the Knights left the Bay Area to establish a utopian society in the southern Sierra Nevada. The Kaweah Colony, as this refuge came to be called, was populated by dockworkers, sailors, and middle-class reformers seeking refuge from an exploitative system that offered a bleak future. They set up a logging operation and experimented with dress reform, an eight-hour workday, and equal pay for women. Based on the principles of Lawrence Gronlund's "Co-operative Commonwealth," the colonists sought to demonstrate to the world that a socialist system was a superior alternative to the excesses and oppressions of the Gilded Age. They made plans to build a community among the world's largest trees, but faced a combination of internal division and external pressure (the colonists were eventually confronted by the US Army and driven from their land). These forces hastened the demise of Kaweah, but the colonists were not the first or last to try to live the changes they wanted for society.

John Curl's *For All the People* illustrates the long legacy of communal and utopian movements not just in California

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but across the country. Broad in its intent, the book seeks to uncover "the hidden history of cooperation, cooperative movements, and communalism in America," a challenge Curl attacks with vigor and enthusiasm as he describes various movements from European colonization through the twentieth century. The majority of the book is composed of brief descriptions—usually a page or two—of various movements, communities, or individuals. Curl draws connections between labor leaders, politicians, radicals, and reformers to demonstrate the resilient and sometimes naïve and self-destructive nature of cooperative movements, such as the tendency of offshoot movements to poach members from larger communities. Utopian communal movements often designed their structure and ideology from similar projects that preceded them. Hopeful utopian communalists looked to the leaders and detractors of previously failed communities for insight into what they should avoid and hints about the best ways to attain the elusive longevity of their communities. The book is most useful for reference purposes and is an excellent place to start for an understanding of the development and evolution of cooperative and communal movements.

While *For All the People* deals with a broad cross section of utopian communalism, the most familiar communes in California grew out of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. The Bay Area produced urban and rural communes that had similar goals but developed on separate trajectories. Both urban and rural communards sought to circumvent a system that they viewed as exploitative and corrosive to the physical and mental well-being of society.

Communards participated in change on a holistic level, isolating themselves in the rural hinterland or creating counter-institutions in urban ghettos. Urban communal counter-institutions mirrored the benefits one might receive from a more privileged position in society—such as access to healthcare, food, jobs, and education—but denied to poverty stricken communities, mainly composed of minorities. *West of Eden* fleshes out some of the motives, experiences, and legacies of the Northern California communes. The book focuses on communal ventures in and around San Francisco that began in the mid-to-late 1960s and extended into the 1970s. A collection of essays, with topics that range from the Native American occupation of Alcatraz to the influence that counterculture had on the development of

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cyberculture in the 1980s and 1990s, *West of Eden* demonstrates the resonance of ideas that developed around the communes of those two decades.

The rural communes of the sixties and seventies were generally composed of white, middle-class devotees of the counterculture. But if we were to include urban movements in our analysis of utopian communalism in the same period—as we should—then race, class, and gender play a more prominent role. Urban and rural communities had separate identities while being part of a larger utopian communal movement. The rural communards chose to escape to the countryside and live out their utopian dreams. In doing so they experienced poverty, sexual exploitation, and discrimination by locals; nevertheless, they were intentional communities. They weren't forced to develop counter-institutions in order to survive. They experimented with new forms of social order on their own terms, and with little interference from the outside world. The reason rural communes were largely white and middle class was that this was the demographic that could afford to experiment with utopian ideas in such a way. They had the means to buy land in rural areas, or had friends who could do so on their behalf. Many urban communities were not so fortunate.

Urban communal movements required a more confrontational structure in order to exist. The fact that they could not escape to rural landscapes required urban communards to develop counter-institutions to serve the needs of their communities where they existed. Relocation was not an option. The Panthers collectivized housing and childcare, provided free breakfast, free clinics, and an independent newspaper. Perhaps most famously, they created armed citizens' patrols to try to restrict police violence in their communities. Communitarian and utopian movements can provide hopeful resistance to systems or conditions that are violent, repressive, exploitative, racist, or all of these. Bobby Seale and Huey Newton organized The Black Panther Party in Oakland in 1966 to provide solutions-based resistance. The power, influence, and structure of the organization spread to African American communities across the country. By 1980 the Panthers succumbed to internal division and intense persecution from federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. Once they officially ceased to exist as an organization, their ideas of self-defense and community advocacy persisted in Oakland and elsewhere. The Panthers created a strong legacy of community activism, but perhaps more importantly, they created a legacy that future movements such as Occupy Oakland could draw upon.

For All the People and *West of Eden* both offer a nuanced analysis of movements that are often slighted by participants and detractors alike. These movements are usually cited not for their influence or resilience, but for their naïve idealism and fleeting existence. With very few exceptions, they remain but footnotes to larger social movements deemed more "successful." These two works only begin to fill a void of analysis and understanding that can inform the way we react to our current unsustainable economic, environmental, and political situation. They also demonstrate how utopian communalism can create long lasting impressions on communities seeking solutions to oppressive and exploitative conditions. While they certainly are not straightforward "recipes for the kitchens of the future," *For All the People* and *West of Eden* provide a useful lineage for the radicals and communitarians of today.

As we reel from economic and ecological calamity in our own time, many seek a new path forward, but in doing so they also look to the communards, utopians, and revolutionaries who preceded them. This extends into the bureaucracy. The National Park Service, for example, has recently restored graffiti from the Native American occupation of Alcatraz. What was once considered vandalism is now acknowledged as part of the official history, in which the Bay Area's tradition of occupations and utopian communalist movements reemerges. Acknowledging the protests and occupations of the past by writing them into the official accounts illuminates obscure parts of our history while paying respect to events hitherto seen as peripheral or even subversive. This history is not lost on the reformers and revolutionaries of our time. The Occupy movement caught fire for the same reasons that sailors and dockworkers headed for the hills in the 1880s in search of utopia. The Panthers developed urban counter-institutions to fend off the violence of capitalism—among other things—just as the

PHOTO BY MICHELLE VIGNES, SAN FRANCISCO.

Wobblies and Knights of Labor had done in the ports of Oakland and San Francisco in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Given California's history, it is not surprising that one of the most resilient and radical wings of the Occupy movement remains in Oakland.

While it is unclear what future communal movements can learn from the communes and utopias of the past, we can take comfort in the knowledge that California, perhaps unlike any other place, has consistently produced radical movements of resistance and reform. These movements might not always shift society in a revolutionary direction, but they can illuminate some of the most pressing issues of the present while providing tangible solutions for the future. Renaming public spaces and restoring graffiti may appear superficial, but these actions serve to memorialize the resistance, reform, and revolution of generations past. Just like the Occupiers of today, the resisters, reformers, and revolutionaries of the future will be able to draw upon this legacy for inspiration and validation.

The apparent retreat of Occupy Oakland as an influential factor in the social and political activities of the city and the region should not overshadow its capability for continuity, not only as an intact institution but also as the impetus for ancillary movements. The Occupy movement paved the way for Occupy Sandy, a relief effort for the victims of Hurricane Sandy that put FEMA and the Red Cross to shame in many ways, while providing mutual aid and long-term solutions to empower communities. Dozens of other offshoots, like Occupy Homes and Strike Debt, have garnered considerable support and attention since city officials ordered police to remove the tents and prevent general assemblies in Oscar Grant Plaza. Occupy Oakland and the other communitarian movements of our time will have some impact on the policies and debates of the future. While these movements, past and present, may not always cause the change they seek, they live that change before most of us, and for that we must give them a second look. There is a robust genealogy of reformers and revolutionaries in California. Their failures and successes can inspire and inform future generations to venture where the groundwork has been laid, and reassure them that they are not the first to hazard into the wilderness of nonconformity. **B**