This article outlines the rationale and format of a sociology course on utopian societies. It asserts that the lessons of utopian societies are particularly timely given the monolithic appearance of contemporary social life. If taught with an experiential component, the study of utopian societies can be an effective vehicle for promoting the sociological imagination. With this in mind, the article reviews the experiential methods of the course (as well as the academic case study component) such as participant observations of dorm life, light and lively exercises, leadership simulations, utopian community designs, a weekend retreat, and a final group celebration.

Teaching About Utopian Societies

An Experiential Approach to Sociological Learning

EDWARD W. GONDOLF
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

The study of utopian societies can offer some vital lessons to today's students. Many undergraduates claim that they feel overwhelmed by the extent of social disorganization expressed in pervasive problems like political and family violence. They consequently retreat into their own personal orbits and operate with a survival-of-the-fittest notion much in the vein that C. W. Mills (1959) notes in his famous essay, "The Promise of Sociology."

As educators, we are charged with creatively developing an antidote to the dimmed hopes. We must find ways to promote "the sociological imagination"—that is, an awareness of the relationship of an individual's experience to society's trends. With this facility, students are more likely to discern the influence that the individual can have on society, and vice versa. One neglected vehicle for such social learning is the study of utopian societies.

This article reviews one effort to use utopian studies as a means to broaden the "sociological imagination." It discusses a course on utopian societies that included both academic, experimental, and experiential components in the comparative analysis of case studies. The objective of the course was not only to illustrate fundamental sociological principles through the consideration of

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definitive case material, but also to promote the practical application of those principles through social inventions of one's own. The course, in the spirit of Mills' (1959) attention to the relationship of the individual and collective, attempted to demonstrate that individual development is achieved through social commitment, rather than personal indulgence.

The "utopian society", for the purposes of this course, is identified in sociological terms. It is a social invention established intentionally with explicit design, in contrast to the organic emergence of a neighborhood based on propinquity. The utopian society is any historical or contemporary community established with a definitive physical boundary and explicit set of ideological principles and common practices, including a self-reliant economy and shared living arrangements. Its organizational structure, however variable in form, requires subjugation of individual wants and desires to the well-being of the group and its professed purpose. In turn, this process is intended to further personal growth. In other words, the utopian society is dedicated to furthering individual potential through group cooperation and regulation.

Most utopian societies, in fact, have been boldly devoted to creating a "new man" and ultimately a new society. Their lofty idealism, nevertheless, is most often translated into attainable practices. The utopias, in sum, demonstrate that good intentions and high ideals do not automatically turn into good deeds and accomplishments. The successful utopian societies had social mechanisms, that is a set of deliberate social conventions, which were designed to help the group attain its common goals. The utopian society, in this vein, is considered to be a veritable social experiment with implications for society at large, rather than a mere side show for the American mainstream. (See Bouvard, 1975; Erasmus, 1977; Gardner, 1978; Hostetler, 1974; Kanter, 1972; Kephart, 1982; Rexroth, 1974; Zablocki, 1980.)

THE CONTRIBUTION OF UTOPIAN SOCIETIES

We live in a time when sociological vision has been supplanted by a pragmatic groping for human survival. With 1984 upon us, it

hardly seems appropriate to talk of "utopian" possibilities. The ominous "Big Brother" of anti-utopian proportions is becoming too much a present possibility amidst the rise of totalitarianism, electronic surveillance systems, and manufactured wars. The mass suicide ending the Jonestown paradise haunts even the most idealistic hopes. It is in fact an age frequently characterized as narcissistic, cynical, and pessimistic. Surely flimsy idealism is no match for the runaway inflation or Third World famine.

In the obsession to "make things work," there has been a reversion to "technique" that often fails to consider the wider implications of our endeavors. Consequently, crucial questions about human destiny are avoided or ignored. How do we assure humanity's progress, develop its potential, or simply manage its survival?

Utopian societies represent, to my way of thinking, an effort to respond to these broader issues. Individual actions are weighed in the balance of some larger scale. They are evaluated, not on the basis of some immediate or personal gain that they might accomplish, but on the basis of their contribution to overall personal growth, the collective well-being, or some divine plan.

Moreover, sociologists tell us that with the development of mass society has come a "loss of community." Increased mobility, the mass media, national political movements, and a corporate economy have, to varying degrees, subsumed much of our local self-determination, group interaction, and sense of identity. Consequently, much of the population has been set adrift, fending for themselves in what Philip Slater (1976) termed famously "the pursuit of loneliness."

This Durkheimian analysis sees individuals becoming increasingly distrustful, alienated, and isolated. In a desperate effort to attain some sense of satisfaction, some people revert to drinking, drugs, or casual sex. Some have even opted for "instant" communities provided by some cult groups.

Ironically, there is inordinate attention to self-help programs, popularized through do-it-yourself books, like *Winning Through Intimidation* (1979), that show how individuals can maintain themselves amidst severe competition. There is little attention given, however, to how to develop cooperation and further the group's well-being.

Utopian societies indicate to us, however, that a sense of community can be constructed through practical means, and that the quality of life can be improved through cooperative living. Furthermore, they show that there can be a conscious coordination of work, relationships, recreation, and spiritual life, instead of a compartmentalization of these different aspects of our lives.

Granted, it is highly unlikely that many students will ever live in a utopian society of the proportions of the Hutterite or Twin Oaks communities. Nevertheless, they will be a part of a variety of community settings such as their dorm, summer camp, church, and place of employment. An understanding of the utopian kind can, therefore, help them function better in these settings and also act to change these settings to be more responsive and humane.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE

While teaching at a small liberal arts college in the midwest, I developed an upper division course with these social issues and utopian contributions in mind. The course was designed with these specific objectives:

(1) to present a scholarly appreciation of the extent and nature of the utopian societies throughout history
(2) to develop a realization of the relationship of personal development to social structure and
(3) to offer an opportunity to experiment with the sociological principles demonstrated in utopian settings.

To accomplish these objectives, the course employed a comparative analysis of case studies through three integrated components of academic study of utopian societies through the instructor's lectures, textbooks readings, and student reports on a particular community. Two, students analyzed their immediate living situation and designed a hypothetical community using the principles developed from the case study analysis. Three, the students were required to plan and implement weekly "community building" exercises, a weekend retreat, and a class celebration at the end of the term.

The course was taught once a year over a four year period as an elective in the sociology department of Principia College. At the small liberal arts college, the course enrollment for upper division seminars was 12 to 20, an appropriate size for the experiential aspects of the course. It is conceivable, however, that the course as discussed here could easily be adapted to groups of thirty, the customary size of upper division courses at larger universities.

The students who participated in the course represented a broad range of interests. About half of them were sociology majors concerned with community issues. The remaining students were from a variety of other disciplines searching for an appealing elective, simply curious about "weird people" and their lifestyles, or seeking a deeper understanding of their own collective living situation.

As mentioned, one aspect of the course was largely a conventional academic consideration of the utopian societies. A series of introductory lectures traced the cycles of utopian movements throughout history and highlighted those societies present in the United States since its founding (Erasmus, 1977; Rexroth, 1974; Bouvard, 1975). It attempted to illustrate the prevailing sociological explanation that interprets utopian societies to be a response to social disorganization. (See also Zablocki, 1980, for a more social psychological analysis.)

During the first few weeks, the students reviewed the case studies presented in William Kephart's *Extraordinary Groups* (1982). (See also Hostetler, 1974, for a similar, shorter text.) In these case studies of Amish, Hutterite, Shaker, and Oneida communities, the author analyzes the organizational structure of each society and its impact on individual development. Also discussed was Rosabeth Kanter's *Commitment and Community* (1972), which identifies six social mechanisms prevalent in "successful" historical utopian communities. (Gardner, 1978, applies Kanter's analysis to contemporary communes.)

Conversely, the class considered the elements of "unsuccessful" utopian communities through reading and discussing accounts of Jonestown and its grisly ending (see Restin, 1981; Kilduff and Javers, 1978). (The NPR broadcast, "Father Cares," available in tape cassettes, presents vivid recordings of Rev. Jim Jones and his followers.) A brief consideration of other cult groups alerted

students further to the dynamics of "group think" (Appel, 1983). B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* (1948) invariably provoked discussion over the merits of scientific as opposed to religious utopias. (See also Kinkade, 1973.)

Students were then assigned to research a utopian community of their choice, to analyze it in terms of the theoretical framework developed in the course, and present a report on their findings to the class. The range of research projects included a diverse array of utopian experiments: the kibbutz, the Farm, Finnhorn, the hospice movement, Trappist monasteries, space colonies, science fiction utopias, spiritual communes, and the New Alchemy Institute (see *Communities*). During the course, the class also went on a field trip either to Nauvoo, the early Mormon settlement, or East Wind, a Walden Two type of commune, both of which happened to be within three hours driving distance from our campus.

It was useful as well to discuss specifically the role of collective living groups in social change movements. A consideration of "living lightly" co-ops, affinity groups of the anti-nuke movement, and social action collectives, like the Movement for a New Society, served to expose some contemporary "utopian" ventures and challenge the criticisms that utopian communities are somehow inherently insular (Case and Taylor, 1979; Longacre, 1980). Shared houses serve as another contemporary example of communal living arrangements. They can help counter the economic impingements of inflation and consumerism and present a social alternative to the absence of the extended family (Raimy, 1979).

EXPERIENTAL LEARNING PROJECTS

The second and third objectives of the course were met through seven experiential learning projects that investigated the lessons being gleaned from the academic study of utopian societies. Social scientists as diverse as Dewey (1916), Kohlberg (1981), and Perry (1970) document the role of experiential learning in developing social skills, understanding and commitment. In

essence, they suggest that an individual begins to move beyond a "me" orientation to the world toward an "us" orientation through the cooperative interaction demanded by basic survival tasks or moral dilemmas; they imply that social consciousness can be advanced through the management of social environment. The proponents of experiential learning, therefore, hold assumptions very similar to the utopian leaders. The participation in experiential learning projects, in this light, can serve to simulate the utopian societies' attempts at social development. (See Roemer, 1981.)

(1) Participant Observation of Group Living Situations: Students studied their dorm, fraternity, shared household, sports team, or campus-at-large for its similarities and dissimilarities to utopian societies. They attempted to identify the mechanisms of commitment in operation and their contribution to individual development. For instance, the initiations and common living space in a fraternity served to separate members from "outsiders" and maximize their association with the "insiders." In the process, a collective sense began to emerge, along with a sense of exclusiveness.

(2) *Light and Lively Exercises:* Students organized some group activity to serve as a short intermission during the two hour periods. They introduced group games, stunts, art work, or readings. The noncompetitive Knots game and Ungame were two of the perpetual favorites (see Flugelman, 1980). Besides offering a welcomed break in the class discussion, the "light and livelies" helped the students to relate to one another in new ways. In the process, emotions were shared, bonds of trust were built, and deeper exchanges of thought developed. To a certain extent, these exercises simulated the utopian society's efforts to develop the whole person through managed group experiences.

(3) *Leadership Simulations:* Towards the middle of the term, the class experimented with different formats designed to simulate the range of leadership structures appearing in utopian societies. During one class, the instructor acted as an authori-

tative charismatic leader; in a second class, a more democratic and participatory format was employed; and in other sessions, a consensus style of decision-making was used. There was also an attempt to approximate a mystical aura of guidance. In a room lit by candlelight, students waited silently until they felt "moved" to make a comment, much like at a Quaker service.

(4) Utopian Community Design: Each student designed a utopian community of their own creation. Their paper discussing this hypothetical community was to include a description of its size, setting, and facilities; the guidelines for male and female relations; the provisions for membership; designation of work responsibilities; and the means of governance. Each student was required to obtain a written critique of his or her paper from at least one other student in the class before submitting it to the instructor. Also, each student devised a two page brochure advertising his or her hypothetical community to interested persons. The brochures were compiled and printed in a booklet for students in the course and other sociology courses to discuss "Which community would I join and why?"

(5) Weekend Retreat: The students planned and implemented a weekend retreat at an off-campus, college lodge. During a couple of class periods, students discussed the objectives of the weekend, sleeping arrangements, meal provisions, recreational activities, and decision-making processes. Numerous questions surfaced that helped to test their sense of utopian community life: "What if I want to go on a date with someone on campus that weekend?" "Can I bring friends to dinner?" "How do we make sure everyone pitches in?" "What if I don't want to come, because I don't like certain people in the class?"

After the weekend, each student wrote a short reflective paper analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the retreat and some of his or her reactions to the experience. Many noted that they felt "confined" by the demands of the weekend or resentful toward those that "skipped out." Prior to the weekend, some students always insisted that the group could "work things out as they went." Their idealism, however, was deflated after the retreat because "things didn't get done on their own."

(6) In place of a final exam, students planned a "class celebration." Most of the successful utopian societies convened some sort of gathering that reaffirmed the community's ideals, developed a sense of transcendence, and practiced group cooperation and belonging. The class occasion, therefore, was to be a purposeful experiment in community building and affirmation, rather than a frivolous release. The celebrations included activities like painting a class mural, noncompetitive group games, meditation time, a group evaluation of the course, and some special refreshments.

PERSONAL ISSUES

There were of course some challenges in teaching the course. The most difficult aspect was having to tend to the personal issues raised by the intensity of the course. Consequently, I had to stay particularly alert to the students' emotional states. Objection to some aspects of the communal living on the basis of political, religious, or personal convictions might be reflected in a talkative student becoming unusually quiet. Inviting him or her for a conversation in my office or encouraging students to identify their feelings in class was often sufficient to defuse tension and resistance.

The most disagreement arose over group meetings or collaborative projects done outside of class. Someone would not show for the group meeting, not do the work expected by the group, or stubbornly not cooperate. Consequently grudges or factions emerged. These required some negotiating on my part, even if it was to give the frustrated members some thoughts on how to approach their "deviant."

Personal agendas, too, often superseded the objective of social analysis. There was often a concern about not having to confront others or do an exercise that might make one look stupid. There was a concern over "how do I tailor social structure to assure me little interference, minimum responsibility and a good time." In this regard, utopian communities often did reinforce personal indulgence, that is, allow for those seeking personal gain or an escape from social responsibility.

Furthermore, there was inevitable questioning from fellow faculty who regarded the highly visible course as unconventional and unacademic. "What about grading and evaluation?" and "What right do you have to invade the personal domain of students?" were some of the criticisms. Mention of the substantial reading and writing components of the course seemed, however, to allay many of the objections.

STUDENT EVALUATIONS

There were successes that offset the challenges to the course. For instance, 90% of the students gave the course their highest ratings predominantly because they "felt involved" in the course and "had fun" in it, and therefore found it "interesting." Another important consideration for most of the students was that the participatory exercises and case studies seemed to make the class time (2-hour periods) pass quickly.

In the written evaluations submitted anonymously at the end of each term, the students noted particularly the contribution that the course made to their sociological sensibilities. They mentioned gaining a practical knowledge of group living, an increased appreciation of alternative lifestyles, a better understanding of social change, and a keener sense of how to maintain one's individuality amidst the pressures of community life. The following quotations are representative of the students' comments about the course:

> I worked and lived in Colorado last summer. The shared household we had didn't really work. It was always filthy and people seemed a bit distant. I now see what was going wrong among us and how we could have had a more livable home. Also, the course has helped me see what is really important to me and how I might achieve those aims. As a result, I am totally changing my major.
>
> I realize that I am too urbane to ever join a commune. I have a lot of dependencies on things that I would have to give up to make it in

> communal life. However, I do see now the benefits of a cooperative spirit and a sharing lifestyle.
>
> The course has helped me just to see the variety of lifestyles we have available to us and in general to understand better how and why people live in such different ways. Sometimes what looks abnormal from the outside can actually make good sense to those on the inside and even be very practical.
>
> The course made me aware of the importance of individuality in community life. You need to really be alert to manipulative forces that pervade cults and eccentrics like Jim Jones.
>
> I took social welfare and criminology early this year and the world, in many ways, seemed to be falling apart. Even my environmental studies course churned me up inside. This couse has helped me see the alternatives we have, and how we can effect some change and pull things together around us.
>
> The course has given me more hope for the future of "man." I see, especially in the "new age" communities, possibilities for redressing the destructiveness of modern society and personally offering some alternatives to the direction we seem to be headed.

The course for many of the sociology majors, moreover, helped to integrate the array of sociological topics encountered in other courses: sociology and the individual, group dynamics, social welfare, social change, and so on.

The course appeared to have an impact that went beyond its limited enrollment and topic. One, the course participants through the experiential dimensions of the course were confronted personally as well as intellectually. In many cases, this experience helped them to reassess and redirect their own values and lifestyles. A few changed majors as a result of the course, several volunteered in social work projects, and some changed their housing arrangements. Two, the students who were enrolled in the course engaged their roommates, dorm companions, and friends in the issues of the course by asking critical questions. Three, they raised consciousness by experimenting with organizational changes in student or house government. The students, through articles in the campus newspapers and reports to the college administration, offered critical evaluations of student life

to the campus-at-large. This course activity also provided reinforcement for simple-living collectives that emerged as campus projects (see Gondolf, 1980, 1984).

CONCLUSION

My experience in teaching this utopian studies course suggests that utopian societies, rather than appear as some idealistic social form, actually demonstrate some essential needs for community life. As the student comments suggest, a course on utopian societies can significantly heighten the students' sociological imagination and reveal the relation of individual growth to social commitment. Specifically, the course appears to have exposed students to the practical means for interpreting and responding to their own community experience.

Utopian studies thus can supply direction for one's desire to better community life and society-at-large at a time when social forms appear monolithic and unresponsive. Utopian studies, therefore, should be a course of study that is more seriously considered as an integral part of sociology programs, rather than as a bizarre topic relegated to some remote corner of the curriculum.

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Edward Gondolf is currently Assistant Professor of sociology at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He teaches courses in clinical sociology, community development, and domestic violence. As a consultant and researcher, he has conducted community studies in Boston, Illinois, Guatemala, and Alaska.