

Communal living

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Is it possible or desirable to build large-scale anarchist organizations? Maybe the question is premature. Rebuilding a human order is not a matter of a group of theoreticians or activists imposing its program on intractable people. Reclaiming a human existence depends, first of all, on people fashioning cooperative forms of life.

Imposed collectivization does not work—the term deserves its repugnant Stalinist ring. Individualism cannot be abolished by any authorities. If Camatte/Collu are correct, and capital has assumed autonomous value, embracing all forms of life, then it cannot be fought only at the economic level. Deeply embedded by now in our attitudes and behavior, capital will reassert itself in a “worker’s state” unless a total alternative has been formulated, articulated, and most importantly, lived by people.

Revolution, therefore, must begin at home. Communal living helps prepare for a communal future. In contrast, the past returns to haunt “revolutions” which fail to take into account the reactionary impact of traditional living arrangements. Old habits and values, rooted in repressive patterns of sexual interaction, eventually emaciate political change. Any revolution will be a mere change of faces at the top unless people have long before begun to learn what it means to live and work collectively.

Communal living, so popular five to ten years ago, is now in disfavor. Many politically-minded people regard communal living as a hopeless lark, an impractical impediment to revolutionary change, or a matter of indifference. Others oppose it for more personal reasons: they consider communal living incompatible with careers, schoolwork, and/or monogamous coupling. In short, virtually nowhere is a collective living situation a priority these days. I think this disregard for communalism is evidence of political nearsightedness.

Space and the Scarcity of Affection

Advanced capitalism has even conquered time and space. Time has been quantified so much so that we speak of “spending” it like money. In a similar way, space is a commodity. Our mobility gives us the illusion that we have conquered space when in fact space has conquered us.

As Ivan Illich points out in *Tools for Conviviality*, the proliferation of highways has made it impossible for people to walk. The growth of transportation has rendered us helpless to move freely. More effort, time and money is spent in getting from here to there today than was spent one hundred years ago before the invention of the automobile, a machine which gives us the illusion of freedom while it is strangling human communities.

The effect of a modern transportation system is to so fragment space that our lives become victims of that fragmentation. Human community is essential to life, and without community as a base no social or political effort can topple the autonomy of capital. Community cannot exist unless and until people begin to reclaim space as their own—not as “property” to be owned but simply as a place to move about in freely.

One effect of the fragmentation and ownership of space is that human interaction becomes scarce. Affection, support, love and sexual exchange are artificially scarce in a society where one has to drive five miles to find a friend.



Human interaction is dependent on getting from one's home to where one's friends are: thus, cars (or public transit) mediate friendships. Support from other people is not always immediately available, as it might be (and once was) in a neighborhood where friendships are abundant, and households are large and open.

Knowing that affection is a scarce commodity, people huddle together in couples and are frightened of larger groups. Couples are more likely than larger groups to build their lives' almost completely around Mass institutions—the workplace, the supermarket, television, the school—and thus be at the mercy of capital.

People who live alone are also vulnerable to mass manipulation but they may at least avoid the mutual torture usually engaged in by monogamous couples. In both instances there is a paradoxical situation: an illusion of great freedom and a reality of great dependence upon capitalist institutions.

To topple capitalism, it is necessary to free oneself of its invading values. In an absolute sense this is impossible as long as capital remains dominant and pervasive, but this is no reason not to strive for greater control over one's life.

In many ways, communal living makes it possible to challenge the dominance of capital in daily life, to begin to root out from our psyches the values induced by an economic system that long ago transcended the workplace and invaded our most intimate selves. At its best, communal living can alleviate sexual/emotional scarcity by providing a nexus of conviviality, combining the reliability of family with the compatibility of friends.

Communal living can combat sex-role stereotyping both in this generation and the next. Finally, successful communal living makes it possible for individual atoms to unite into powerful forces for revolutionary change without sacrificing human autonomy to the program of some party or political leader.

Advantages of Communal Living

Tension between the sexes stems largely from their compartmentalization into separate cultures labeled masculine and feminine. The result is women who can't fix their cars and men who can't fix their meals. It is obviously profitable to capitalism to have both sexes so helpless—because each can be sold commodities and an entire lifestyle based on their deficiencies and insecurities.

A communal household provides a place where skills can be continually shared, where people may look and act themselves instead of displaying sex-role masks for the consumption of others, and where both sexes are empowered by becoming able to survive without an opposite-sex mate to take care of them.

To become capable of replacing capitalism, people must first become capable of living outside of its institutions. This means mastering survival skills. In a communal house, jobs are shared equally. No one person becomes identified with a certain task and no tasks are scorned. Housework, food preparation and health care are rightly seen as important survival skills that everyone needs to know how to perform, rather than shitwork fit only for unpaid servants (e.g. housewives).

The economic basis for sex roles—the division of labor between producers and consumers—is absent if wage-earning and domestic tasks are shared by all household members. The lonely act of consuming—essentially a relationship between an atomized individual and an impersonal commodity produced at a distance for profit—tenth to be replaced by the alternative of sharing—wherein commodities return to their old pre-capitalist status as media of interpersonal gift-exchange.

The structure of the collective helps make such sharing feasible. The mere presence of several people willing to share tools and goods makes it possible to avoid needless consumption and energy waste. The cost of living can be drastically reduced, and with it dependency on job or career, supermarket and department store, and the money system itself.

People living alone or in nuclear families have neither the time nor energy to escape from consumer addiction. Convenience defines what is valued, and consumption locks at least one family member into a treadmill of lifelong wage-earning to pay for all those household goods.

It is also necessary for households to band together in mutual aid. Suspicion and isolation characterize neighborhoods of nuclear families whose identities derive from competitive consumption (i.e., "keeping up with the Joneses.") But the self-esteem of communal households is not tied up in trying to outdo neighbors.

A communal organization of households promotes cooperative behavior at the most basic locus of daily face-to-face interaction: the home. Equally important, it provides the means to free time from the grasp of wage-earning for use in the development of community. By coalescing individuals into groups, communal living also serves to create the power and the freedom needed for revolutionary change.

Problems of Communal Living

The objection will be made that I am speaking of an ideal situation which no actual communal household even approaches. It is true that communal living is beset with practical problems, and that describing its possibilities is far different from coping with its realities. Disillusionment with communal living seems to be rampant these days, and much of the disillusionment is justifiable. However, none of the practical problems are unsolvable. Solutions depend on willingness to confront lifelong socialization which has caused us all to distrust collectives.

One of the greatest fears most people have about living with a group is that the sacrifice of freedom and time would be too great. Those who have made commitments to full-time jobs, full-time schooling, or exclusive dyadic relationships find their time precious.

In such situations leisure time tends to become defined as a commodity. Such people come to value their "freedom" to choose which unsatisfying form their leisure-time passivity will take.

However, real freedom means having control over one's life, and such control is paradoxically increased when time is invested in a group which works to empower its members. The freedom to order responses to the demands of job, social life and leisure should not be confused with real power.

Recognizing that freedom is predicated on interdependence is the only way to destroy the myth that individualism equals control. Learning to gain and hold real control over one's life may mean unlearning many of the responses inculcated into us by our socialization into a life of powerless subservience to mass institutions.

Many people, not completely unjustifiably, equate communal living with a loss of privacy, a lack of autonomy, a great amount of transiency, a haphazard approach to child care, and a painful wilderness of sexual experimentation. These problems and others must be recognized as potential sources of trouble for any group embarking on communal life.

Most successful communal groups place a high value on privacy. To have energy to work at living with a group of people, it is essential that each member of the household have her or his own room whose sanctity is inviolable. The right of the individual to be alone is a way to insure personal autonomy. In addition, the group must operate without coercion. Decision-making should be based on consensus, for often the individual is right and majority opinion is wrong. Conformity for its own sake is destructive.

Another problem is balancing the individual's freedom to leave the group with the group's need for stability. Transiency has been the downfall of too many communes, and perhaps it reflects the lack of commitment fostered by our fascination with mobility.

One way to combat transiency is to require a commitment of a certain length of time from household members, perhaps even a renewable "contract." Ultimately, however, it is likely that the long-term, stability of a group will be correlated with its internal coherence—its unification around common projects, ideals, and human needs.

Stability is most essential if children are involved in the group. In a communal situation children should benefit from the availability of several people besides their biological parents, but the benefits will be doubtful if the others lack a shared commitment to caring for the children.

The Problem of Sexuality in the Commune

Perhaps the most difficult practical problems faced by communal groups are those connected to sexuality, for it is in this area that socialization is probably strongest and feeling most volatile. Therefore, along with a pledge to work out difficulties through open discussion, there must be group recognition of the strength of the feelings accompanying sexuality, no matter what their source.

It is easy to say that jealousy is a bourgeois emotion that must be rooted out from our psyches if we are to become true revolutionaries, but much harder to cope with the swirling emotions that result from wounded affection. It is more reasonable to admit that there can be no one “correct” solution to the problems of love and jealousy. Feelings cannot be legislated away, no matter how democratic is the group that lays down the law.

Each household must find its own solution among the options of prohibiting sexual relations among group members, group marriage, couples within the commune, or variations of these arrangements. Leaving sexuality to chance is a dangerous approach. Almost inevitably, households that begin with no sexual attachments and everything “up for grabs” end up with plenty of hurt feelings as people begin to pair off (or fail to).

Many people have been permanently discouraged from communal living due to jealousy, resentment and hurt arising from a sexual relationship within the household. These difficulties may be due in part to our repressive and sexist socialization contrasted with the chic sexual oversaturation of a world of manufactured sexual scarcity. But for anyone who has concluded that marriage is a totally bankrupt institution rife with hypocrisy, rape, guilt and manipulation, more human approaches to sexual relationships are obviously essential and the communal alternative perhaps attractive, despite its difficulties.

Communal Scarcity

Obviously communal living is no longer fashionable.

Neither is Detroit a hotbed of communal living. In this city we find the opportunity for genuine community severely hampered by the fragmentation of neighborhoods, the difficulty of economic survival, and the harshness and decay of “modern” urban life. Yet these very obstacles make communal living and the formation of genuine human community all the more appealing and all the more imperative.

The present apathy about once-grand dreams for urban community and the abandonment of this city by many who once held those dreams can both be equated with the alienation that is at the core of this factory/freeway town. Those of us who are left, with dreams intact, repressed or abandoned, feel pride in our ability to survive. The community within this city still exists. It is incredibly resilient, interconnected and enduring. But the bonds remain largely unspoken ones, and the community unfocused and often intangible.

Joining together with like-minded people may indeed be our most fundamental avenue for pursuing change, as Camatte/Collu imply, but that coalescing is a weak one if it is only for the purpose of theoretical discussion. Affinity groups are at the foundation of the revolutionary process—as they were in the Spanish Revolution, for example. My feeling is that such affinity groups should establish their own living structures or risk being blown apart by the centrifugal forces at work in this city and this society.

I have not written this article (much of which is condensed from a longer manuscript) out of a need for theoretical posturing, but only because communal living on the model I have sketched out here has again, unfortunately, become more of a dream than a reality for me.

My personal experience bears witness to both the possibilities and the problems inherent in communal living, but I nevertheless remain a staunch advocate of its necessity. My aim in writing is to elicit responses from like-minded individuals—if they exist—as well as questions and challenges from critics.

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