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Utopian Landscapes: The Legacy of Alternative Communities
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In addition there were study excursions to the Norfolk coast, the Norfolk Broads, the Fenland, the Peak District, the Corby area, and lower Thames-side. These and the paper sessions provided opportunities for most constructive discussions between the geographers from the two countries. The Bulgarian delegation was particularly grateful to Prof. Clayton and his British colleagues for the cordial hospitality and the excellent organization of the Seminar. It is proposed to hold the Second Seminar in Bulgaria in September 1980 when the theme will be ' Geographical contributions to regional development '.

Keith Clayton and Kiril Mishev

Utopian landscapes: the legacy of alternative communities

Dennis Hardy, Middlesex Polytechnic

Summary. *Alongside the main thrust of nineteenth-century urbanization were a number of experimental communities, committed to a range of ' alternative ' life-styles. Four types of community have been distinguished, each of which has left its own mark on the English landscape.*

Against a background of more conventional patterns of nineteenth-century urbanization, a small number of people—in England, probably no more than a few hundred—settled in what may be termed ' alternative ' communities.[1] They were ' alternatives ' in the sense of being attempts to create new forms of society, radically different from that of mainstream industrial capitalism. In advance of more widespread change they amounted to what one of their number described as a ' society within a society '.

Inspiration for the new communities came from a variety of political and religious doctrines. These can themselves be located within a longer history of utopian thought, which has repeatedly looked to small communities as the proper basis for social regeneration. The Garden of Eden, remote islands, monasteries and lost villages have all featured in earlier utopian fantasies. On a more practical level, at the height of the English Revolution, Gerrard Winstanley urged others to follow the example of his Diggers (the ' True Levellers ') when they took possession of common land on St George's Hill in Surrey, to form a community of ' pure communism '.

Typology

In nineteenth-century England 28 alternative communities have been identified (Figure 1). Although there is some clustering in terms of their timing (the 1840s and 1890s being periods of especially intense activity) and in terms of place (with Essex and the West Riding attracting a disproportionate number of communities), given the small numbers involved, generalizations are better based upon qualitative considerations. In particular, it is instructive to see which of them share a common ideological basis. Using this criterion, four types of community can be discerned.

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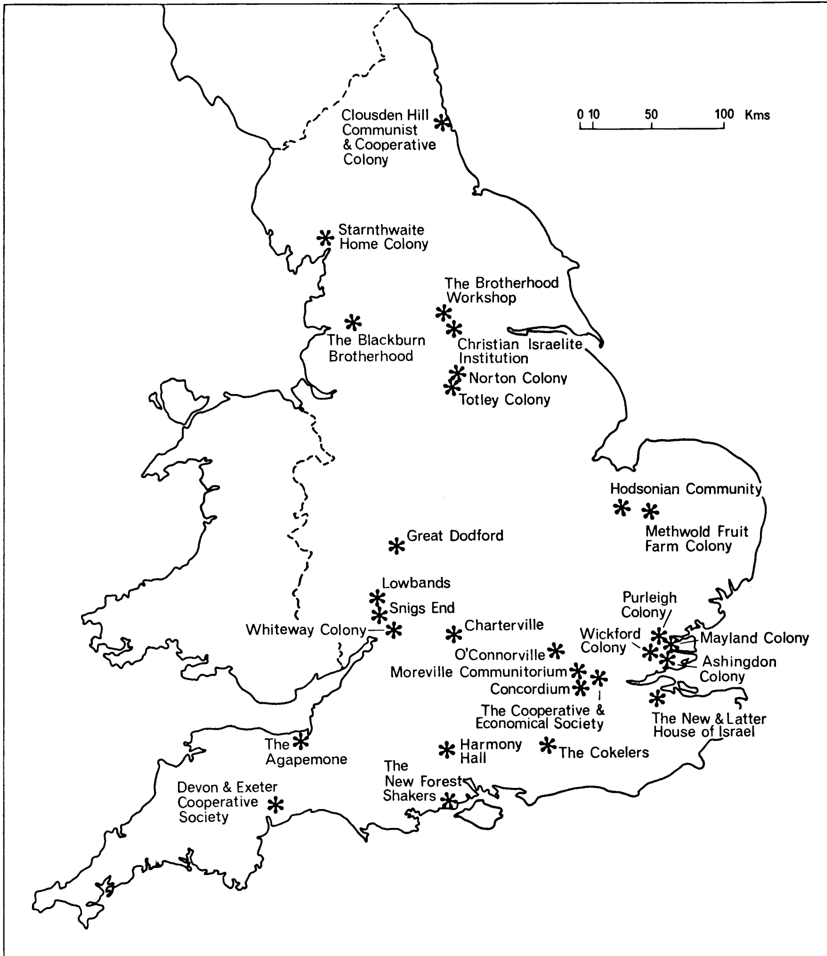

Figure 1. Alternative communities in nineteenth-century England.

First, there were six 'utopian socialist' communities, advocated in the early years of working-class agitation as both a means and an end for achieving social change. They were closely associated with Robert Owen's ideas, and include the only instance of Owen's direct involvement in community formation in this country, Harmony Hall in Hampshire. All had their origins within the period 1821 to 1843, paralleling comparable experiments in France and the United States.

Secondly, there were nine 'agrarian socialist' communities, which reflected a belief in getting back to the land as the source of both moral regeneration and a more egalitarian society. This type includes the Chartist communities that were to a large extent a result of the efforts of Feargus O'Connor and his National Land Company. Their story alone is a monument to working-class initiative—five villages built and settled within little more than 3 years, from the time of the first at O'Connorville to the last at Great Dodford.

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Thirdly, there were five sectarian communities—religious groups that withdrew from society in order to prepare for the Kingdom of God on earth, or to ensure their own privileged salvation after death. Each of these, unmistakeable in their commitment to extreme religious doctrines, produced forms of architecture that were no less distinctive—from the ' Abode of Love ' (built to house the Agapemonites in Somerset) to ' Jezreel's Tower ' (the sanctuary of the New and Latter House of Israel in Kent).

Finally, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, there were eight communities that were attempts to put anarchist philosophy into practice. They were alike in their rejection of the State and other forms of centralized control, and in their belief that communes represented the basic unit for a new co-operative society. For their inspiration they looked to the famous Russian anarchists, Peter Kropotkin and Leo Tolstoy, the latter having a direct influence on community formation in this country. Like other types of community, most of the anarchist experiments were located in the countryside, though there were also two interesting exceptions—the Brotherhood Workshop in Leeds (which gained a reputation for its bicycles and light engineering) and the Blackburn Brotherhood (which undertook electrical work for no money, and sold Tolstoy publications alongside electrical apparatus in their shop window).

Physical evidence

Few though they were, the nineteenth-century communities have left a rich legacy of physical evidence—sufficient to tell us not only about the communities themselves, but also something of the mainstream society against which they were reacting. At O'Connorville, for instance, the road names (Bradford Road, Halifax Road, Stockport Road and Nottingham Road) mark the origins of the first settlers—working-class families from industrial towns, who had won their chance of a new life through a Chartist lottery.

Examples of further evidence of the communities include their distinctive domestic architecture (from the sturdy brick-built cottages of the agrarian experiments to the wooden structures of the anarchists), and the various school buildings (introduced years in advance of State education, so that the communitarians could prepare for the new society). There are also more idiosyncratic reminders of communitarianism like the concrete tower in the New Forest and the stone mansion on the outskirts of Wakefield (both constructed in response to Divine ordinance), the little extension built in the Essex community to house a printing press for Tolstoy's English translations, and the foundations of Robert Owen's extravagant Harmony Hall.

Yet for all these reminders in the landscape, the true significance of the communities was not that of their physical impact, interesting and helpful though this is as a source of information. Instead, it is as social experiments that they can best be assessed, challenging established society on a wide variety of fronts. Within their boundaries they experimented, to differing degrees, with alternative methods of education, family and sex roles, relationships between town and country, farming techniques, diet and dress. For the communitarians at the time it was by no means inevitable that England had to follow the path of capitalist industrialization in the way that it has subsequently done.

Note

1. This article is based on material from Hardy, D. (1979) *Alternative communities in nineteenth-century England* (London)

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