

# Imagining the Intentional Community Counterpublic

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## Preface

We had reached consensus; though it was only 11:30 AM, the sun was making itself known on my still-pale shoulders and it was time for lunch! My daily rhythm as a farm apprentice at D Acres of New Hampshire, Organic Farm and Educational Homestead, followed this basic pattern: wake early, do morning chores, breakfast whenever it felt right, group work in the gardens, and finally a well-deserved lunch break when everyone was ready. We went back into the homestead, took leftovers out of the industrial-size fridge, laid stacks of plates and silverware on the counter, and sat down to eat. Every person's plate featured different combinations of salad, stir-fry greens, scrambled eggs, potpie, and homemade relishes, krauts, and chutneys. There was, however, one reliable commonality. It was summer, in the midst of a bountiful growing season, and nearly everything on our plates was grown, harvested, stored, and prepared on the property.

Once the lunch dishes were washed, I sat down on one of the Homestead couches, waiting for my friends, co-workers, and teachers to be ready to go back to work. I picked up a heavy book from the coffee table, *The Communities Directory*, and I started to leaf through the pages. What I read there made quite an impression. When I decided to spend the summer after my sophomore year in college as an apprentice in sustainable agriculture, an unusual choice among the array of internships and jobs boasted by my peers, I enjoyed teasing my friends and family: "I'm going to an intentional community...you know, a *commune*!" It was genuine excitement, the mocking tone owing only to the skepticism I expected to receive for doing something so out of the

ordinary. I had come to D Acres to spend the summer outside and to learn how to grow food. I also wanted to experience a fully-integrated life: living, working, eating, thinking, and playing with the same group of people all within the space and time of a walkable property. I did not know, yet, that I had joined a movement.

The *Communities Directory* informed me that I was certainly participating in a growing movement. The *Directory* is published by the Fellowship for Intentional Community (FIC), a non-profit organization that promotes community living and cooperative lifestyles in North America. The 2007 edition includes listings and descriptions of 900 intentional communities in North America, an additional 325 listings of communities in other parts of the world, maps intended to help prospective-community members find communities to visit or join, and a selection of reference articles.<sup>1</sup> D Acres, my resting place for a summer, is only one of over 900 publicly listed communities in North America alone. It is evident that growing numbers of people in North America are taking a step back from other kinds of lifestyles to live in *community*, and *intentionally*. I came to wonder: what does this phenomenon mean? According to political theorist Lucy Sargisson (2000), joining or forming an intentional community “is an act of political significance.”<sup>2</sup> During the time I spent as an apprentice at D Acres, I could *feel* the truth of this statement. Living there *felt* like an act of political significance. But how, exactly?

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<sup>1</sup> The FIC suggests that this is only a fraction of the communities that actually exist (“What’s True About Intentional Communities: Dispelling the Myths”).

<sup>2</sup> Lucy Sargisson, 2000, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression* (London: Routledge): 63.

# Introduction

An ‘intentional community’ is a group of people who have chosen to live together with a common purpose, working cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared core values. The people may live together on a piece of rural land, in a suburban home, or in an urban neighborhood, and they may share a single residence or live in a cluster of dwellings.

This definition spans a wide variety of groups including (but not limited to) communes, student cooperatives, land co-ops, cohousing groups, monasteries and ashrams, and farming collectives. Although quite diverse in philosophy and lifestyle, each of these groups places a high priority on fostering a sense of community--a feeling of belonging and mutual support that is increasingly hard to find in mainstream Western society.<sup>1</sup>

Intentional community, at its essence, is based on the ideal of *community*. In the context of democratic politics and theory, community is a contested ideal. Many political theorists articulate concerns about community as an enclave of sameness exclusion. Thus, community comes into tension with the radical democratic ideals of equality, inclusion, and participation. Theorist Iris Marion Young (2004) provides a provocative set of questions to guide my exploration of intentional communities and their relationships to society-at-large; my exploration of intentional communities must confront her concerns.

Young is a vehement critic of community as a social or political ideal. Some radical democratic and social theorists appeal to community as an ideal alternative to “the oppression and exploitation they argue characterize capitalist patriarchal society.”<sup>2</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> Geoph Kozeny 1996, “Intentional Communities: Lifestyles Based on Ideals,” Community Catalyst Project, Fellowship for Intentional Community Online, <<http://www.ic.org/pnp/cdir/1995/01kozeny.php>>.

<sup>2</sup> Iris Marion Young, 2004, “The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference,” In *Contemporary Political Theory, A Reader*, edited by Colin Farrelly, (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd.): 195.

contradistinction, Young argues that face-to-face community is problematic when posited as the ideal organizing unit of society and politics:

The desire for community relies on the same desire for social wholeness and identification that underlies racism and ethnic chauvinism, on the one hand, and political sectarianism on the other... It denies difference in the sense of time and space distancing. It implies a model of the good society as consisting of decentralized small units which is both unrealistic and politically undesirable. And finally, it avoids the political question of the relation among the decentralized communities.<sup>3</sup>

Young condemns the desire for community as exclusionary and sectarian, as appealing to sameness as a political ideal, and as politically unrealistic and undesirable. It is, largely, boundaries that make communities threatening to democracy. Lacking the will to transgress boundaries and confront difference, communities are prone to becoming enclaves of sameness and exclusion. In describing communities as lacking the will to confront the question of the relationships among communities and between communities and the public-at-large, Young suggests that communities are incapable or unwilling to navigate their boundedness in inclusive and politically productive ways. In sum, Young suggests that small-scale, bounded, face-to-face collectives are undesirable and perhaps even harmful to the democratic project—a project that hinges, for Young, on inclusion and recognition of unassimilated difference.

As we will see in the following chapters, intentional communities possess a number of characteristics that make them subject to Young's critiques and questions. Intentional communities are bounded spaces that come together for the purpose of realizing everyday practices in accordance with shared values. Many intentional community members *do* desire social wholeness and identification between self and other in ways that may deny difference and may be perceived as sectarian. Young also argues

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<sup>3</sup> Young, 195-197.

that the ideal of community creates a problematic dichotomy between reality as alienation and community liberation:

The projection of the ideal of community as the radical other of existing society denies difference in the sense of the contradictions of ambiguities of social life...If institutional change is possible at all, it must begin from intervening in the contradictions and tensions of existing society...society understood as a moving and contradictory process implies that change for the better is always possible and always necessary.<sup>4</sup>

Young says that by creating a thoroughgoing dichotomy between inside and outside, the ideal of community unintentionally obscures the complicated processes by which institutional social and political change may occur. Intentional communities can be aptly interpreted as creating just such a critique-based dichotomy. In the definition of intentional community above, author and community member Geoph Kozeny suggests that the values embraced by intentional communities are ones that are “increasingly hard to find in mainstream Western society.”<sup>5</sup> Intentional communities are critique-based alternatives to mainstream western society. As critique, intentional communities are defined and delineated not only by what occurs within community borders, but also by distinction from common lifestyles and value systems. In the context of North America, intentional communities define themselves against the perceived inadequacies in the industrialized, privatized, capitalist mainstream: alienation, isolation, competition, excessive individualism, greed, over consumption, commodification and privatization. Intentional communities are community and cooperation-oriented lifestyle alternatives to a dominant culture that is notably less communitarian, less cooperative, less supportive, and less intentional. Implicit in the concept of the intentional community is that intentional community may provide a better, more fulfilling lifestyle for their members

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<sup>4</sup> Young, 198-199.

<sup>5</sup> Kozeny 1996.

than is available elsewhere. In order to live lives that are more fulfilling, intentional community members focus their energy inward on the space of the community, perhaps at the expense of working for emancipatory social and political change with wider ranging impact. In these ways, Young's assertion that small-scale face-to-face communities are unfit to achieve emancipatory social and political change may be aptly applied to intentional communities.

The ways in which Young's critiques resonate, here, become extremely provocative when we note that many intentional communities and community members aspire to be catalysts of social and political change. In 2001, at the Seventh International Communal Studies Conference, presenters Timothy Miller and Christopher Coates both discussed intentional communities as possessing transformative potential. Miller described the conference as "a limited but tantalizing look at a few of the thousands of intentional communities that represent a deep commitment to nothing less than saving the planet."<sup>6</sup> Echoing this sentiment, Coates describes the ensemble of today's intentional communities as "a landscape peppered with people's hopes and aspirations for a better world."<sup>7</sup> To understand intentional communities, we need to come to terms with the contradictions that they embody. Intentional communities are bounded spaces that seek group unity, and yet they do not intend to be isolated enclaves. Quite the opposite, the intentional communities I discuss in this paper believe they have something to offer that the world can benefit from.

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<sup>6</sup> Timothy Miller, 2001, "A word from the president," in *Communal Living on the Threshold of a New Millennium: Lessons and Perspectives*, International Communal Studies Association, <[http://www.ic.org/icsa/docs/ICSA\\_eBook.pdf](http://www.ic.org/icsa/docs/ICSA_eBook.pdf)>.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Coates, 2001, "Utopia Britannica," in *Communal Living on the Threshold of a New Millennium: Lessons and Perspectives*, International Communal Studies Association, <[http://www.ic.org/icsa/docs/ICSA\\_eBook.pdf](http://www.ic.org/icsa/docs/ICSA_eBook.pdf)>.



It is from this tension, that I draw the organizing questions for this project:

*Does the inward orientation of intentional communities constrain or complicate their ability to act agents of social and political change? How can intentional communities serve as a source of political imagination?*

I argue that a different concept of community can help us better understand the relationship of intentional communities to society-at-large. This is the concept of the counterpublic, as articulated by Nancy Fraser, Michael Warner, and Robert Asen. Warner (2002) defines a counterpublic as a social space in which discourse “is understood to contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large” and which “maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate state. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one.”<sup>8</sup> A counterpublic is a located group of people or a discursive social space whose definition depends on a tensional demarcation between the counterpublic entity and its dominant context. I take the counterpublic as a working conceptual model of community because it takes the existence of smaller social units within larger contexts as its starting point even as it recognizes the complicated and ambiguous terrain of social and political life. Understanding intentional communities as a counterpublic can do a lot to help us understand the tension between their inward orientation on community and outward oriented transformative aspirations.

The application of the counterpublic concept to the intentional community is a contestable endeavor. Many theorists of the public sphere theorize about counterpublics in the context of the democratic challenges that face communities of people subordinated on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, or sexuality, among other categories of difference. While intentional communities are perceived as marginal, it would not be fair to argue

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Warner, 2002, *Publics and Counterpublics*, (New York: Zone Books): 56, 119.

that they are similarly *marginalized*. Also, community and counterpublic are not conceptual equivalents. Young speaks of communities that are definitively smaller-scale, face-to-face, and more locatable than the definition of a counterpublic implies. Though the work of these theorists has been done in different contexts, I believe that they can shed light on the interaction of small communities and larger contexts, the inevitability and potentiality of the borders that exist between, and the political potential that lies therein.

Using the counterpublic model, I frame my project as an inversion of Young's approach to an emancipatory politics of difference. Young asserts that, "radical politics must begin from historical givens, and conceive radical change not as the negation of the given, but rather as making something good from many elements of the given. The city...is for us a historical given, and radical politics must begin from the existence of modern urban life."<sup>9</sup> With over 900 North American communities publicly listed in the *Communities Directory*, I take the intentional communities to be a contemporary historical given, albeit on a different scale than the city. I do not assume community to be a social or political ideal. Nor do I dismiss community as necessarily politically impotent or destructive. Rather, my project begins with the simple *existence* of intentional communities in the North American context, acknowledges their aspirations to be catalysts of change, and suggests the counterpublic concept as a generative lens for examining this tension.

In the interest of pursuing these questions, I begin in *Chapter 1* with a discussion of intentional community basics. I discuss a few definitions of 'intentional community,' give a short history of the intentional community phenomenon, and specify the

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<sup>9</sup> Young, 200.

parameters of my project. In *Chapter 2*, I discuss intentional communities as bounded spaces that adopt an inward focus in order to achieve lifestyles based on shared communal ideals. This chapter paints a picture of intentional communities as possessing many of the characteristics of community that Young dismisses as politically impotent and destructive. With the outward oriented transformative aspirations of intentional communities in mind, though, I do not dismiss them in this way. Rather, I ask the question: How do intentional communities negotiate the possible tension that is generated by a necessarily bounded community that aspires to external change and relevance?

In *Chapter 3*, I introduce and explore the counterpublic concept as a model that may help to address and resolve this question. In *Chapter 4*, I apply the counterpublic model: I imagine an intentional community counterpublic and I describe the ways that it fits with and diverges from the counterpublic concept described in *Chapter 3*. I argue that the counterpublic concept is most applicable and illuminating as it sheds light on the emancipatory potential that resides in the dialectic between inward and outward orientation. Finally, in *Chapter 5*, I ask: what is the exact nature of the political or transformative potential that has, up until this point, only been discussed in vague terms? I argue that intentional communities may be generative sources of political imagination in two main ways. Firstly, intentional communities exercise an essential political function by formulating critiques of currently existing society and demonstrating alternatives through their capacity for innovation. Secondly, by demonstrating social, political, environmental, and economic alternatives, intentional communities shift the nexus of transformation to everyday life challenging the ever-uncertain bounds of *the political*.

# Chapter 1

## *Literature Review*

In this chapter I provide a brief discussion of the terminology used to refer to intentional communities, a history of the movement, a more in-depth discussion of the definition of “intentional community,” and a clarification of the parameters of my argument and method

### **Terminology**

In order to talk about intentional communities it is essential to know exactly *which* communities we are talking about, and which terminology applies. In, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” (1994) Lyman T. Sargent, a theorist currently active in the field of Utopian Studies, identifies nineteen terms that scholars have used to describe communal living arrangements:

Intentional community, intentional society, communal society, cooperative community, practical utopia, commune, withdrawn community, enacted community, experimental community, communal experiment, alternative lifestyle, communitarian experiment, socialist colonies, collective settlement, mutualistic communities, communistic societies, utopian society, and utopian experiment.<sup>1</sup>

This list approximates reverse chronological order with ‘intentional community,’ the term used most frequently today, at the beginning.<sup>2</sup> Today, the array of terminology has been differentiated and reduced. Generally speaking, the term ‘utopian societies’ refers to nineteenth century communities such as those of Robert Owen, and ‘commune’ refers to the countercultural communities that existed during the period 1965-1975. ‘Intentional community’ is the term preferred by today’s community members and advocates.

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<sup>1</sup> Lyman T. Sargent, 1994, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” *Utopian Studies* 5: 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> Sargent 1994, 14.

According to Sargent (2006), the term ‘intentional community’ was first used in 1948 at the founding of the Fellowship of Intentional Community (here referred to as the FIC).<sup>3</sup> For the duration of this paper, I will use the term ‘intentional community’ because I believe it to be the most broadly encompassing of communities of past and present and of the diversity of community values and practices. As I use it, the term ‘intentional community’ includes communities that are elsewhere labeled ‘communes,’ ‘cooperatives,’ or ‘collectives.’

## History

Other attempts to understand intentional communities take a historical approach, which posits the contemporary intentional community movement in relation to intentional communities of the past. Benjamin Zablocki’s *Alienation and Charisma: A Study of Contemporary American Communes* (1980) is one such effort that continues to be cited by scholars today. According to Zablocki, the rise of intentional communities is a recurrent social phenomenon whose evolution in the United States can be understood as having occurred in five distinct phases.<sup>4</sup> These are:

1. The Colonial Period (1620-1776)
2. The Shaker Influx (1790-1805)
3. The Utopian Socialist Period (1824-1848)
4. The Turn of the Century (1890-1915)
5. Contemporary American Communitarianism (1965-1975)<sup>5</sup>

Based on his visits to 120 communities between 1965 and 1975, Zablocki concludes that, with the exception of some innovations, this period “is best seen not as a unique historical phenomenon but as part of the recurrent tradition of utopian communitarianism.”<sup>6</sup> He defines this recurrent communitarian phenomenon, of all periods, as a movement of

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<sup>3</sup> Lyman T. Sargent, 2006, “In Defense of Utopia,” *Diogenes* (53) 11: 16.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Zablocki, 1980, *Alienation and Charisma*, (New York: The Free Press): 20.

<sup>5</sup> Zablocki, 31-39.

<sup>6</sup> Zablocki, 180, 80.

people and groups in the quest of “the *discovery or creation* of shared values...to escape from alienation by achieving consensus within a circumscribed social microcosm.”<sup>7</sup> Given this ongoing commonality, Zablocki holds that the term ‘commune’ applies to all historical periods.

Do contemporary intentional communities have a place in Zablocki’s history? Utopian theorist Saskia Poldervaart asks, “Could we carefully conclude that a next utopian period is dawning?”<sup>8</sup> Kozeny provides more specific evidence in support of understanding contemporary communities as the dawning sixth wave:

The last wave came out of the counter-culture in the '60s, and now a new wave is beginning. This 1994 edition of the Communities Directory documents more than 50 new communities started during the past five years, and that's merely the tip of the iceberg. Also listed are more than 160 that have survived at least a decade, and 80 others that have been in existence for more than two decades.<sup>9</sup>

The contemporary intentional community movement has grown to such an extent that Kozeny claims that the intentional communities of the 90s and 2000s constitute another wave of the recurrent communitarian phenomenon. According to Timothy Miller, the sixth wave is best characterized by certain trends. These are the emergence of ecovillages and cohousing communities, the continued prominence of traditional religious orders, the kibbutzim in Israel, and the Federation of Egalitarian Communities in the United States.<sup>10</sup> The communities I discuss in this paper can be understood as fitting into the sixth wave of the recurrent communitarian phenomenon.

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<sup>7</sup> Zablocki, 24-25.

<sup>8</sup> Saskia Poldervaart, 2001, “Utopian aspects of social movements in postmodern times: some examples of DIY politics in the Netherlands,” *Utopian Studies* 12(2): 157.

<sup>9</sup> Kozeny 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Miller, 2001, “Out to Save the World: Why Communal Studies Matters for the Twenty First Century,” in *Communal living on the threshold of a new millennium: Lessons and perspectives*, International Communal Studies Association, <[http://www.ic.org/icsa/docs/ICSA\\_eBook.pdf](http://www.ic.org/icsa/docs/ICSA_eBook.pdf)>.

## Definitions

We now have adequate terminological and historical context to ask: What, exactly, is an intentional community? This concept is made up of two familiar words that suggest an intuitive meaning: a community made by intention. However, the compound, ‘intentional community,’ may be unfamiliar to many. In the introduction, I provided the definition of intentional community that I will use throughout this paper:

An ‘intentional community’ is a group of people who have chosen to live together with a common purpose, working cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared core values. The people may live together on a piece of rural land, in a suburban home, or in an urban neighborhood, and they may share a single residence or live in a cluster of dwellings.

This definition spans a wide variety of groups including (but not limited to) communes, student cooperatives, land co-ops, cohousing groups, monasteries and ashrams, and farming collectives. Although quite diverse in philosophy and lifestyle, each of these groups places a high priority on fostering a sense of community--a feeling of belonging and mutual support that is increasingly hard to find in mainstream Western society.<sup>11</sup>

This is a good working definition of intentional community because it calls attention both to the commonalities that unite intentional communities as a category and to the diversity of philosophies, practices, and structural forms taken by *particular* communities.

To deepen this conception, let us take a look at a few more definitions. In “Who Are We: An Exploration of what ‘Intentional Community’ Means,” (1996) Dan Questenberry reports on the responses he received when he asked twenty-six communitarians: “What is—how do we describe—an intentional community?”<sup>12</sup> Here are a few of the particularly interesting responses:

An “intentional community” is a group of people dedicated with intent, purpose, and commitment to a mutual concern. Generally the group shares land or housing,

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<sup>11</sup> Kozeny 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Dan, Questenberry, 1996, “Who We Are: An Exploration of What ‘Intentional Community’ Means,” Fellowship for Intentional Community Online, <<http://www.ic.org/pnp/cdir/1995/05quest.php>>.

or is otherwise close enough geographically to be in continuous active fellowship so that it can effectively carry out the purposes to which it is dedicated.

*(Harvey Baker, Dunmire Hollow, member since 1974)*

[...] A group of people who come together deliberately in a residential situation around a specific vision, agenda or shared values. Certainly there are communities that adhere to the latter criteria whose members do not live together; however, when we think of intentional communities, it seems to imply being residential.

*(Lisa Paulson, High Wind in Wisconsin, member for over 14 years)*

A group of people who share values, goals, commitments, and hopefully living space and food. A group of mutual respect and support.

*(Marein Whitman, ReJenneration in Jenner, California, May 1992)<sup>13</sup>*

These three definitions of “intentional community,” in combination with Kozeny’s definition above, seem to come to an agreement on certain issues. An intentional community is a group of people who have come together in a shared residential space and organize life around a set of shared values and visions of a different way of living. This different way of living can take many different forms and focuses—such as a feminist, spiritual, economic, or environmental focus.

## **Parameters**

When I say ‘intentional community’ in this paper, I employ both a generalized and a narrower use of the term. On the one hand, my definition of intentional community described above is meant to encompass any group of people who live together in community and enact value-based lifestyles that address sources of dissatisfaction with the mainstream. I believe that there is very compelling justification for using a generalized definition like this which describes intentional communities as a unifiable phenomenon. As explained above, Zablocki asserts that intentional communities of any given period are part of a recurrent communitarian phenomenon.<sup>14</sup> He says that all

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<sup>13</sup> Questenberry.

<sup>14</sup> Zablocki, 20-26.



intentional communities can be understood to follow the same general pattern of attempting to escape the alienation of western modernity through living according to shared values within the circumscribed space of a residential community.<sup>15</sup> Jon Wagner (1982) further elucidates a rationale for understanding intentional communities as a unifiable phenomenon:

While the charismatic vision is theoretically a comprehensive reform of society-as-it-is, no visionary program attempts to give equal attention to all realms of life. A certain configuration of values, institutions, and kinds of behavior are usually identified as the source of humankind's divergence from the true path of fulfillment, and specific measures are prescribed to set things right. Thus the changes advocated by a visionary will tend to focus on certain aspects of mainstream life and to leave other relatively unaffected.<sup>16</sup>

Charismatic vision refers to the vision that guides founders as they establish intentional communities as alternatives to perceived problems in mainstream society and politics. Because no community can "give equal attention to all realms of life," intentional communities tailor their holistic visions to focus on specific components of their comprehensive critiques. This accounts for the fact that specific communities take different forms (income-sharing communes, student cooperatives, land co-ops, cohousing groups, monasteries, and farming collectives) and focuses (environmental, economic, spiritual).

Taking my cue from Zablocki and Wagner, I hold that as long we acknowledge the diversity of values and practices contained therein, a *generalized* understanding of the intentional community phenomenon is generative for understanding the actions of communities and communitarians within larger social contexts. Thus, in this paper I will

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<sup>15</sup> Zablocki, 24.

<sup>16</sup> Jon Wagner, 1982, "Sex Roles in American Communal Utopias: *An Overview*," In his *Sex Roles in Contemporary American Communes*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press): 1-44.

often speak of intentional communities as a unified category even as draw from seemingly disparate sources: my own experiences as an apprentice at D Acres of New Hampshire, community mission statements, non-academic literature such as the *Communities Directory* and the film *Visions of Utopia*, and scholarly explorations. It is important to note that I make use of scholarly explorations of nineteenth century utopian societies and 60s era communes, including many written the 1970s and 1980s. Though they predate my primary period of interest, scholars continue to reference these sources and so they are relevant to my generalized understanding of the intentional community phenomenon.

On the other hand, the question I pursue in this paper—*Does the inward orientation of intentional communities constrain or complicate their ability to act as agents of social and political change?*—assumes a definition with narrower parameters. In this paper, I use the term ‘intentional community’ to refer to a narrower subset of outward oriented intentional communities—communities that aspire to be catalysts of social and political change with a wider scope than the bounded circumscribed space of the community. How, though, is it possible to limit the purview of my exploration to exclude communities that maintain an exclusively inward focus? I contend that understanding intentional communities as a *counterpublic* opens up something critical in our understanding of this distinction. Counterpublics are groups of people who formulate and circulate discourses that are in oppositional tension with dominant discourses. According to Nancy Fraser:

The concept of the counterpublic militates in the long run against separatism because it assumes an orientation that is *publicist*. Insofar as these arenas are *publics* they are by definition not enclaves—which is not to deny that they are often involuntarily enclaved. After all, to interact discursively as a member of a

public—subaltern or otherwise—is to disseminate one’s discourse into ever widening arenas.<sup>17</sup>

This is a rich passage that we will return to later. For now, I am interested in the idea that to participate in a counterpublic “is to disseminate one’s discourse into ever widening arenas.”

What happens if we imagine an intentional community counterpublic? Intentional communities may be considered part of this counterpublic if they participate in avenues of publicity that are intended to speak to wider circles than just their limited memberships. Intentional communities do this in a number of different ways: by being listed in the *Communities Directory*, participating in or holding conferences, through membership in networks such as the Fellowship for Intentional Community, being featured in the film *Visions of Utopia*, or making publicly accessible websites.

Conveniently, intentional communities that interact with the outside in the ways I’ve just listed are also the ones that I have access to information about. By focusing my paper on communities that take part in the intentional community counterpublic and counterdiscourse, I can be sure that I am talking about communities that “are by definition not enclaves,” and hold publicist orientations. In this paper, I grapple with the tension between the publicist orientation just described and the boundedness and inward orientation that is inherent in the desire for ‘community.’ In the next chapter, I will paint a picture of intentional communities that fits well with Young’s critiques of community as a social and political ideal: intentional communities are intensively bounded spaces that adopt an inward focus on ‘community’ in order to achieve communitarian values.

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<sup>17</sup> Nancy, Fraser, 1990, “Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy,” *Social Text* 25/26: 67-8.

## Chapter 2

### *Bounded Spaces and Inward Orientation*

In *Chapter 1*, I drew on theories of intentional community articulated by Benjamin Zablocki, Jon Wagner, and Geoph Kozeny to establish a generalized understanding of what exactly intentional communities are doing. I said that intentional communities are groups of people who formulate critiques of mainstream society and form residential communities that transform the patterns of everyday life according to particular sets of alternative shared values, purposes, and visions.

This chapter draws a picture of intentional communities as bounded and inward oriented. In the first half of this chapter, I discuss theories of community boundedness from the literature on nineteenth century, '60s, and contemporary intentional communities. The literature draws correlations between external boundaries, community stability, and group cohesion. I argue that contemporary intentional communities still construct and maintain boundaries between inside and outside.

In the second half of the chapter, I show that many communitarians espouse 'community' is an ideal in itself. I use D Acres and Twin Oaks as case studies to illustrate how individual communities enact particularized versions of 'community.' I argue that achieving 'community' necessitates that community members focus their time, energy, resources, and attention *inward* on the space, values, and practices of the community. This constitutes an inward orientation on the circumscribed bounded space of the community.

## Community Boundedness in the Literature

There is an ongoing thread in the intentional community literature that draws a correlation between the boundedness of a community and its structural success. The term ‘structural success’ refers to whether or not a given community is able to adequately provide for the material needs of its members and so continue its existence as a physical entity. Success, here, is measured in terms of longevity. This idea originated with Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s theory of community success and commitment mechanisms in nineteenth century utopian communities. Kanter characterizes nineteenth century communities as groups with a fundamental belief that humans tend naturally toward harmony, cooperation, and mutuality. Nineteenth century communitarians established centralized communities to criticize, challenge, and provide an alternative to societal norms that tended toward greed, competition, and atomism. However, as their response to perceived societal problems was one of inter-group unity and isolation from the outside, Kanter observes that they tended to “consider that their own internal affairs are more important, more valuable, than are the demands made on them by the larger society.”<sup>1</sup>

Kanter concludes that the success of communal groups “requires many fairly strict and demanding social practices,” by which communities set boundaries between inside and outside to maintain the internal unity of the collective.<sup>2</sup> Kanter calls these practices “commitment mechanisms,” and she identifies instrumental, affective, and moral commitment mechanisms that utopian communities use to ensure the loyalty and

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<sup>1</sup> Rosabeth Moss Kanter, 1972, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press): 53.

<sup>2</sup> Kanter, 126-127.

commitment of their members and the structural integrity of the collective.<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper the specifics of the commitment mechanisms are not important. What is significant, here, is the fact that Kanter found that groups that engaged higher levels of commitment from their members, which corresponds to greater geographic and social isolation, existed longer and were better able to provide members with basic necessities and a higher quality of life. This suggests that even despite differences of time-period and social and political context, any group pursuing group unity, coherence, and solidarity will have to negotiate boundaries between inside and outside to achieve adequate commitment and group coherence.

Scholars of 1960s era communes generally found that the communes of the '60s were relatively less bounded than nineteenth century communities and correspondingly less cohesive and structurally sound. Kanter concludes that "the contemporary commune movement is characterized by diminishing scope," focusing on family rather than societal alternatives, solidarity rather than shared ideology, a language of flux and impermanence, personal growth, and on nostalgia rather than forward-looking social innovation.<sup>4</sup> She concludes that as a result of this shift away from explicit shared ideology, the '60s-communes encountered greater difficulty with setting boundaries than their nineteenth century counterparts. Kanter characterizes the communes of the '60s and early '70s as suffering from the diffuse and transitory nature of the counterculture and as generally less successful than the nineteenth century communities. Zablocki corroborates this picture,

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<sup>3</sup> Kanter, 74.

<sup>4</sup> Kanter, 166.

suggesting that the greater ease of joining a 60s commune corresponded to a decline in stability.<sup>5</sup> Here, again, we see an association between stability and strong boundaries.

The literature on the communities of the 1980s and '90s tends to reinforce the correlation between boundaries and internal communal coherence. In contrast to the '60s communes which they characterize as being dominated by individual freedom, few rules, spontaneity, alternative lifestyles, retreat or withdrawal, transient membership, and an absence of formal ideology, community members Corinne McLaughlin and Gordon Davidson (1985) describe '80s communities as possessing an ethics of cooperation, well-defined rules and expectations, diverse lifestyles, service-to-others orientation, long-lasting membership, and well-developed belief systems.<sup>6</sup> The emphasis on cooperation, rules and expectations, and long-lasting membership bears resemblance to some of the features of nineteenth century communities that enabled them to achieve group unity through high degrees of commitment, separation and boundedness.

### **Contemporary Intentional Communities as Bounded Spaces**

As editor of *Communities Magazine*, Diana Leafe Christian observes “no matter how inspired and visionary the founders, only about one out of ten new communities actually get built.”<sup>7</sup> The other 90 percent fail after short periods of time or never get built at all. Based on interviews with community founders, Christian concludes that most communities fail as a result of “structural conflict.” She recommends six strategies that

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<sup>5</sup> Zablocki, 180.

<sup>6</sup> Corinne McLaughlin and Gordon Davidson, 1985, *Builders of the Dawn: Community Lifestyles in a Changing World*, (Summertown, Tennessee: Book Publishing Company): 100-101.

<sup>7</sup> Diana Leafe Christian, 2003, *Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow an Intentional Community*, (Gabriola Island, British Colombia: New Society Publishers): 5.

community founders may pursue to avoid common sources of conflict in the early stages of community founding.<sup>8</sup> These are:

1. Choosing a fair, participatory decision-making process that is appropriate for the group. And if it's consensus, getting trained in it.
2. Identifying their vision and creating a vision statement.
3. Learning what resources, information, skills and tasks they would need, and then either learning or hiring them
4. Drawing up clear agreements, in writing.
5. Learning good communication skills, and making clear communication a priority.
6. Selecting cofounders and new members for emotional well-being.<sup>9</sup>

Christian's recommendations serve to strengthen the internal cohesiveness and unity of an intentional community group. In effect, the strengthening of the inside is accompanied by boundaries that set the inside apart from the outside. I argue that Christian's recommendations are a contemporary, and admittedly more flexible, equivalent of Kanter's commitment mechanisms. Contemporary intentional communities continue to face the difficult task of negotiating the boundaries between inside and out.

To take just one example of a source of boundaries: the intentional community as a decision-making body. Just as a nation-state is a sovereign decision-making body with jurisdiction only over its own bounded space, the intentional community is a bounded space with internal decision-making powers. Only residents participate in most decisions made by communal decision making bodies and most communal decisions are meant to impact only those within the circumscribed space of the community. Rodolfo Rosase, member of Comunidad Arcoiris community in Mexico, gives a definition of 'intentional community' that hinges on this idea of community as a political unit with borders:

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<sup>8</sup> Christian 2003, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Diana Leafe Christian, 2000, "Six Ingredients for Forming Communities (That Help Reduce Conflict Down the Road)," *Communities Directory*, 2000 Edition Online, <<http://www.ic.org/pnp/cdir/2000/20diana.php>>.



Implicit in the term is an area or territory, a certain ideological, racial, economic, and/or political characteristic that separates it from other neighboring groups; and a higher degree of interpersonal contact and relationship between members. A community is a distinct social, economic, and political organism. (Rodolfo Rosase, Comunidad Arcoiris, Mexico, 7/16/92)<sup>10</sup>

As decision making bodies, intentional communities are “distinct political organisms” that are separated from the outside by the division between the space of internal jurisdiction—of both formal decision-making procedures and of overarching value systems—and the space outside the borders of the community where multiple value systems, decision-making bodies, and sources of authority prevail more prominently.

The intentional community as decision-making body is just one source of internal cohesion and external boundaries. We will now see that a general focus on ‘community’ and other day-to-day practices meant to enact communal values also tend to encourage communitarians to focus inward on community and reinforce external boundaries.

### **Focusing Inward on ‘Community’**

The voices of community members and of the Fellowship for Intentional Community itself express a commitment to ‘community’ as an ideal and an end in itself, and this tends to reinforce inward orientation and boundedness. Sargisson observes, “The need for ‘community’ is a key factor in intentional communities. People seek a community that offers an intimacy that they do not find in ‘mainstream’ society.”<sup>11</sup> In addition to providing intimacy and safety, ‘community’ provides a contained space, shared values, a set of rules, and resources that make it possible to live life in accordance with communal values that may be or hard to realize in other more mainstream spaces

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<sup>10</sup> Questenberry.

<sup>11</sup> Sargisson, 68.

and lifestyles. Other forms of community demonstrate what is truly unique about communitarianism:

Many folks get involved with various civic or social change groups; others get more deeply involved in the activities of their church; still others create friendships and support networks in their neighborhoods. Those with strong motivation to live their values 'full time' often seek to join or create intentional communities.<sup>12</sup>

Intentional community is not the only option for those who want to do something about personal dissatisfaction with mainstream western society. Some people immerse themselves in more traditional forms of community such as civic associations, organized religion, or friendship networks. Kozeny writes that what makes intentional community distinct is that it is a solution uniquely suited to "those with strong motivation to live their values 'full time'." The idea of living values "full time" implies that certain values are intensive and require significant amounts of energy, attention, and resources for their realization. Communitarian values such as collectivity, cooperation, and solidarity place a high value on interpersonal relationships and intimacy and in this way they *are* highly time-intensive values.

Communal values can be hard to enact in mainstream Western society, dominated as it is by values of individualism, competition, and an attitude that "time is money." I do not mean to suggest that intentional communities are the *only spaces* that enable the realization of time, resource, and people-intensive communitarian values. Other non-residential spaces and communities dedicated to these same values may exist. Intentional community is an ideal place for people who want to live according to values that can be can be most fully realized when surrounded, full time, by others who shared the same values. Nor do I mean to suggest that individualism, competition, and greed are universal

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<sup>12</sup> Kozeny 1996.

mainstream values. What is essential to take from this is that the distinction made between communal values and “mainstream” values is an essential aspect of the conceptual and physical construction of the communities. For example, observe the language that Shaun uses to express his desire to live in community:

I think the main reason I wanted to join is that I have seen communities and visited a few and always liked the idea of living with a lot of people who are willing to live, eat and talk together and mostly help each other. I have always liked the principles of Communism but think things will stop true communism expanding over the world, but if I can live my principles it makes me feel a fuller person. (Shaun, PIC, 17 November 1997)<sup>13</sup>

Shaun expresses doubt that other modes of political action, like political parties, legislation, or revolution, will be adequate to create large-scale transformation. Larger scale structures and modes of action are not compatible with his values. Living in community is a more manageable alternative that allows him to *live* his values coordinated with others endeavoring to do the same. Shaun expresses that *living his principles* makes him “feel a fuller person”—makes him feel more fulfilled. “Community” is the context that enables those who hold communitarian values to pursue lifestyles that often run contrary to those held by the mainstream and to get the additional support from others who share this commitment.

In addition to ‘community’ as a general value in itself, individual communities pursue more specific value-based practices that are equally time and resource intensive and that are more fully realizable in the context of intentional community. Let us recall that the particular form and focus of a community comes from the way each community differently prioritizes what they feel to be most in need of transformation. A group of people who prioritize a critique of human relationships to nature will be more likely to

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<sup>13</sup> Sargisson, 63.

form a community that intends to re-vision and transform this relationship. A group of people who focus more on critiquing what they perceive to be selfish, greedy, and uncaring human behavior in the mainstream West might decide to form a community that recasts human behavior according to a more cooperative vision. I will discuss the missions, values and practices of D Acres and Twin Oaks to illustrate what ‘community’ may look like in more particularized forms.

### **D Acres: Re-visioning Human Relationships to Nature**

D Acres Organic Farm and Educational Homestead is an ecovillage that was founded in 1997 in Dorchester, New Hampshire. An ecovillage is a type of intentional community that aims to enact alternative visions of the way humans interact with the natural world. The term ‘ecovillage’ was first coined by Corinne McLaughlin and Gordon Davidson in their book, *Builders of the Dawn: Community Lifestyles in a Changing World* (1985).<sup>14</sup> Since then, the ecovillage movement has grown substantially. Ecovillages are one of the growing trends in the contemporary intentional community movement, and Kozeny estimates that today “there are several thousand self-identified ecovillages worldwide, with many intentional communities redesigning themselves based on the ecovillage model.”<sup>15</sup>

The most frequently cited definition of ‘ecovillage’ is the one authored by Robert Gilman (1991) in his article “The Eco-village Challenge.” Gilman says that an ecovillage is a “human-scale, full-featured settlement in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world in a way that is supportive of healthy human

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<sup>14</sup> Alan R. Wight, 2008, “‘We are Nature’: Exploring Ecovillagers’ Perceptions of Nature and Uses of Technology,” (Masters Thesis, University of Cincinnati): 16.

<sup>15</sup> Geoph Kozeny, 2004, *Visions of Utopia Volume I: Experiments in Sustainable Culture* (Rutledge, MO: Community Catalyst Project, Fellowship for Intentional Community).

development, and which can be successfully continued into the indefinite future.”<sup>16</sup>

Gilman explains further:

Human-scale refers to a size in which people are able to know and be known by the others in the community, and where each member of the community feels he or she is able to influence the community's direction...A ‘full-featured settlement’ is one in which all the major functions of normal living - residence, food provision, manufacture, leisure, social life, and commerce - are plainly present and in balanced proportions.<sup>17</sup>

Ecovillagers aspire to live in ways that are harmlessly integrated in the natural environment and that are indefinitely sustainable. Ecovillages demonstrate one vision of what a conceptual shift in the human approach to nature might look like in practice. Gilman’s definition also emphasizes that ecovillages are small-scale integrated spaces. Sustainability is a value—like cooperation, community, and solidarity—whose full realization is time and resource intensive and so benefits from the closeness and intensity of life in an intentional community.

D Acres articulates a mission that is in line with the ecovillage challenge:

The mission of the organization is to function as an educational center that researches, applies and teaches skills of sustainable living and small-scale organic farming. Striving to improve the human relationship to the environment, the center functions as a demonstration farm to role model exemplars of healthy living. Sharing a communal living situation, individuals come to respect and share values of interdependence and love of nature. In addition, the organization supports educational activities directed toward improving the quality of life of residents and the larger community.<sup>18</sup>

The organization articulates a commitment to re-visioning everyday life in the community according to values of sustainability, education, communal living, love of nature, and an improved quality of life for its residents. D Acres is committed to creating

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Gilman, 1991, “The Eco-village Challenge,” *In Context*, (29) 10, <<http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC29/Gilman1.htm>>.

<sup>17</sup> Gilman.

<sup>18</sup> “About Us,” D Acres of New Hampshire Online, <<http://www.dacres.org/index.htm>>.

a lifestyle according to these values within its space and also to serving as a demonstration farm to role model to those outside.

Accompanying the D Acres Mission Statement is a list of “intentions,” which can be thought of as practical applications of the more conceptual value oriented mission. These are to:

1. Develop a farm system sustainable and suitable to this climate to act as a demonstration and experimental model;
2. Increase consciousness about people’s impact on the environment by limiting our consumption of fossil fuels and other resources; reducing, reusing, recycling; as well as emphasizing local and onsite production and consumption;
3. Develop skills as a group to problem solve, organize and pursue an agreed agenda;
4. Interact with and contribute to the community at large providing goods, services and educational opportunities while representing the vision of the organization;
5. Provide a training center for development of skills related to organic farming, forestry, landscaping, eco-friendly construction and cottage crafts;
6. And develop personal and group skills to improve economic viability through “cottage style” industry.<sup>19</sup>

To these ends, those living at D Acres engage in small-scale, diversified, organic vegetable gardening based on a permaculture model, sustainable forestry using oxen, cooking and hospitality using mostly what is grown on the property, cottage and value-added crafts like woodworking, blacksmithing, jewelry making, canning and preserving, workshops on all of these skills, and a whole host of organizational meetings.

To successfully implement practices based on the value of sustainability—to live sustainably “full time”—is extremely time and resource intensive. With a few exceptions, D Acres members both live and work within the community. Thus, D Acres residents orient much of their attention, imagination, physical energy, and skills to the mission of the community. This constitutes an *inward* orientation on ‘community,’ most generally,

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<sup>19</sup> “About Us,” D Acres of New Hampshire.

and on values of sustainability and love of nature more specifically. Next, we will look at Twin Oaks, a community that is dedicated to enacting practices based on egalitarian principles.

### **Twin Oaks: Re-visioning Human Relationships**

Twin Oaks, founded in 1967 in Louisa, Virginia, is one of the six intentional communities that make up The Federation of Egalitarian Communities (FEC). The FEC is a network of North American intentional communities that was established in 1976. The member communities are Acorn Community in rural Virginia (est. 1993), East Wind in rural Missouri (est. 1973), the Emma Goldman Finishing School in Seattle (est. 1996), Sandhill Farm in rural Missouri (est. 1974), Skyhouse in rural Missouri (est. 1997), and Twin Oaks in rural Virginia (est. 1967).<sup>20</sup> As benefits of membership in the FEC, each member community may participate in a catastrophic health insurance program, may receive support for recruitment and outreach programs, and individual FEC communarians may participate in a labor-exchange program at any of the member communities.<sup>21</sup>

The FEC communities differ based on size, form and emphasis, but the member communities share significant commonalities. A community may join the FEC only if it abides by a prescribed set of egalitarian principles:

1. Holds its land, labor, income and other resources in common.
2. Assumes responsibility for the needs of its members, receiving the products of their labor and distributing these and all other goods equally, or according to need.
3. Practices non-violence.
4. Uses a form of decision making in which members have an equal opportunity to participate, either through consensus, direct vote, or right of appeal or overrule.

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<sup>20</sup> "Our Communities," in *Communities*, Federation of Egalitarian Communities Online, <<http://thefec.org/taxonomy/term/4>>.

<sup>21</sup> "Becoming an FEC Community," in *About Us*, Federation of Egalitarian Communities Online, <<http://thefec.org/taxonomy/term/3>>.

5. Actively works to establish the equality of all people and does not permit discrimination on the basis of race, class, creed, ethnic origin, age, sex, sexual orientation, or gender identity.
6. Acts to conserve natural resources for present and future generations while striving to continually improve ecological awareness and practice.
7. Creates processes for group communication and participation and provides an environment which supports people's development.<sup>22</sup>

These are principles of income and resource sharing, mutual support for community members, non-violence, participatory decision-making, equality and egalitarianism, ecological sustainability, and communication and participation. The Egalitarian Communities are dedicated to working toward human relationships based on communal, cooperative, and egalitarian values.

In line with the overarching values of the FEC, Twin Oaks describes itself as follows:

Since the community's beginning in 1967, our way of life has reflected our values of cooperation, sharing, nonviolence, equality, and ecology...We do not have a group religion; our beliefs are diverse. We do not have a central leader; we govern ourselves by a form of democracy with responsibility shared among various managers, planners, and committees. We are self-supporting economically, and partly self-sufficient. We are income-sharing. Each member works 42 hours a week in the community's business and domestic areas. Each member receives housing, food, healthcare, and personal spending money from the community.<sup>23</sup>

This description places the vision of the community side-by-side with the practices that the community uses to enact this vision. Twin Oaks espouses values of cooperation, sharing, nonviolence, equality, and ecology, and each of these values is enacted through particular practices, though, of course, many of the practices overlap and relate to more than one value.

The community enacts cooperation and sharing through full resource and income

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<sup>22</sup> "Principles of the FEC" in *About Us*, Federation of Egalitarian Communities Online, <<http://thefec.org/taxonomy/term/3>>.

<sup>23</sup> "Twin Oaks Intentional Community," Twin Oaks Online, <<http://www.twinoaks.org/>>.



sharing, cooperative businesses, sharing domestic work, collective decision-making, carpooling using shared vehicles, sharing computer access, communal living in residences that each house 10-20 people, a communal childcare system modeled after the Israeli kibbutzim, and a close-knit community social scene. The community enacts the values of nonviolence, equality and community through practices such as egalitarian decision-making, working toward a non-gendered division of labor, equal opportunity and access to resources for all members, the use of the gender neutral pronoun 'co,' and a labor credit system in which each member works the same number of hours and all forms of labor are equally valued<sup>24</sup>

The totality of these practices is evidence of Twin Oaks' commitment to human relationships governed by norms of cooperation, sharing, non-violence, and egalitarianism. Just as we saw with the example of D Acres, the day-to-day realization of egalitarian principles and practices at Twin Oaks is extremely time and resource intensive and requires that Twin Oaks residents direct their energy and resources inward to the community itself. Most Twin Oaks residents work on site, 42 hours/week, spending all of their time, resources, and energy contributing to practices that realize the egalitarian value-based mission of the community.

## **Conclusion**

I have aimed, in this chapter, to communicate something very simple: intentional communities are bounded and inwardly focused spaces. The boundaries that separate intentional communities from the outside are both spatial and conceptual. Boundaries are necessary to maintain group unity and cohesion according to sets of shared values that is the goal of so many communitarians. Boundaries contain intentional communities as

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<sup>24</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions," Twin Oaks Online, < <http://www.twinoaks.org/FAQ.html> >.

self-governing decision-making spaces. Within these bounded spaces, community members pursue the ideal of ‘community.’ I have attempted to show that ‘community’ is an ideal context for those with “full time” communitarian values and that living values “full time” entails an inward focus on community.

My interest in the relationship between intentional communities and society-at-large and the possibility that intentional communities may serve as generative sources of political imagination necessitates an exploration of borders and boundedness. The extent to which intentional communities can interact and communicate with the outside may be hindered by boundedness and inward orientation. This is even more so because many outside the network of members and scholars perceive them as different, marginal, or even threatening. Lucy Sargisson does not mince words on this subject: “In terms of the broader society and culture in which they exist, intentional communities are strange, and different. They are the ‘hippies on the hill’, ‘those weirdos’. Some people who live in intentional communities look ‘different’, unconventional.”<sup>25</sup> Intentional communities are undeniably *different* from the mainstream. We’ve seen that most of them define themselves so, as an alternative or even escape from the perceived problems of mainstream societies. North American intentional communities exist in the context of a dominant culture that mistrusts difference, and intentional communities have been marginalized as a result. For example, due to relatively unnuanced similarities, intentional communities have gotten swept up in America’s obsession with cults.<sup>26</sup> A less extreme form of this distrust is the agonistic nature of relationships between newly

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<sup>25</sup> Sargisson, 59.

<sup>26</sup> Timothy Miller, 2005, “‘Cults’ and Intentional Communities: Working Through Some Complicated Issues,” in the *Communities Directory*, Forth Edition (Rutledge, Missouri: Fellowship for Intentional Community): 30.

forming intentional communities and their more “conventional” or “mainstream” neighbors.<sup>27</sup> In both cases, popular distrust or even fear of differences causes intentional communities to come to be seen as separate, marginalized, or even dangerous.

I mention the marginality of intentional communities to clarify the context and stakes of this discussion of community boundedness. These stakes are especially high because, coexistent with the boundedness and inward orientation of intentional communities, communities desire and aspire to transgress their boundaries in significant ways. We have already begun to see hints of this. The D Acres mission statement discussed earlier in this chapter contains aspects that gesture to outward looking transformative aspirations: D Acres strives “to improve the human relationship to the environment,” and so “functions as a demonstration farm.” Recall, also, statements by community advocates that claim that intentional communities aspire to “nothing less than saving the planet.”<sup>28</sup>

These statements are ambitious and visionary. They are also deceptively simplistic. Lots of people, groups, communities, and organizations claim to be catalysts of social change. Every contestant in a Miss America pageant claims that she’s working toward world peace, or something like it. The transformative aspirations that many of us hold may rest, implicitly or explicitly, on critiques of the current social order, as those of intentional communities and communitarians do. As I’ve shown, though, the North American intentional community phenomenon I discuss in this paper is a unique response to dissatisfaction with isolation, alienation, commodification, privatization, exploitation, and individualism. The communitarian response is distinct because those in intentional

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<sup>27</sup> Geoph Kozeny, 2007, “In Community, Intentionally,” in the *Communities Directory*, 2007 Edition (Rutledge, Missouri: Fellowship for Intentional Community): 12-13.

<sup>28</sup> Miller, 2001.

communities do not merely criticize the mainstream. Communitarians go a step further and enact residential lifestyle solutions based in communal cooperative values.

We cannot dismiss Miller's suggestion that thousands of intentional communities around the world "represent a deep commitment to nothing less than saving the planet," as either a straightforward statement of aspiration or a throwaway nicety. There is a tension between the boundedness and inward community orientation of intentional communities, on the one hand, and their outward looking transformative aspirations. It is my contention that the counterpublic model may be a useful lens through which to view this tension. In the next chapter, I will give a brief background on public sphere studies to contextualize the idea of a counterpublic and I will introduce the counterpublic concept as articulated by Nancy Fraser, Michael Warner, and Robert Asen.

## Chapter 3

### *The Counterpublic Concept*

The counterpublic concept is grounded in the discourse of the public sphere—a discourse that came to exist in the academic context of the United States when Jürgen Habermas’ work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was translated into English in 1989.<sup>1</sup> The concept of the counterpublic, the counterpublic sphere, or the subaltern counterpublic, as it has variously been named, emerged in the midst of an ongoing discourse that challenged many of Habermas’ assumptions about the public sphere. My interest lies not in the public sphere itself, but in using the counterpublic concept to illuminate the relationship between the tensional characteristics of intentional communities that I established in previous chapter. The discourse suggests that counterpublics often possess both inward and outward orientation—as I have suggested of intentional communities—and that this tension may generate emancipatory potential. In order to apply this concept and to imagine the intentional community counterpublic, I will first give a brief background on Habermas’ idea of the bourgeois public sphere and the subsequent challenges to this original conception. In this discussion, I will focus on conceptions of the counterpublic as articulated by Nancy Fraser (1990), Robert Asen (2000, 2001), and Michael Warner (2002).

#### **Public Sphere Discourse**

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas defines the public sphere as a political arena in which private individuals deliberate on issues of public concern. According to Nancy Fraser (1990):

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer, 2001, “Introduction: Reconfigurations of the Public Sphere,” in *Counterpublics and the State*, ed. Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press): 1-32.

It designates a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction. This arena is conceptually distinct from the state; it is a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state.<sup>2</sup>

According to this definition, the bourgeois public sphere has a few definitive characteristics: it is political, discursive, deliberative, public, and distinct from the state. The separation between the public sphere and the state enables it to serve as a space in which citizens can challenge and criticize the state. Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer give a similar account of Habermas' bourgeois public sphere, and conclude that "three qualities characterize this critical public sphere: access is guaranteed to all citizens; citizens debate openly; and citizens debate matters of general interest."<sup>3</sup> The public sphere is social concept that represents ideals of equality, rational discourse, and participation.

The idealization of the public sphere has always had its detractors, beginning with Habermas himself. Warner clarifies:

Habermas does not set out to invent or celebrate a putatively lost ideal of the public (though he has sometimes been read this way); he wishes to show that bourgeois society has always been structured by a set of ideals that were contradicted by its own organization and compromised by its own ideology...The important point for him is that the emancipatory potential of the public sphere was abandoned rather than radicalized and that changing conditions have not made its realization more difficult than ever.<sup>4</sup>

Habermas wrote, in 1962, not of the public sphere as a generalized concept but of the historical and political development of the *bourgeois* public sphere, which emerged in the late seventeenth century as the public domain of the monarch gave way to a critical

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<sup>2</sup> Fraser, 57.

<sup>3</sup> Asen and Brouwer, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Warner, 46, 49.

discursive public domain made of private individuals.<sup>5</sup> Habermas laments that the ideal of an accessible participatory public sphere has always been hampered by bourgeois social structure and ideology.

In the 1990s and early 2000s there emerged a burst of critical scholarship on the public sphere. Whereas Habermas had been critical of the ways in which the conditions of modernity constrain the emancipatory potential of the public sphere, other scholars began to critique Habermas' articulation of the bourgeois public sphere for being overly idealized and for ignoring exclusions. In "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," (1990) Fraser articulates one of the most frequently cited critiques of Habermas' public sphere:

If you will grant me that the general idea of the public sphere is indispensable to critical theory, then I shall go on to argue that the specific form in which Habermas has elaborated this idea is not wholly satisfactory. On the contrary, I contend that his analysis of the public sphere needs to undergo some critical interrogation and reconstruction if it is to yield a category capable of theorizing the limits of actually existing democracy.<sup>6</sup>

It seems that Fraser's peers did grant her the premise of the indispensability of the concept of the public sphere. A number of theorists have since articulated what we might call "post-bourgeois" conceptions of the public sphere. Asen and Brouwer nicely summarize these trends: in contemporary public sphere discourse public sphere theorists aim "to rethink the public sphere more inclusively without abandoning its promise of a critical publicity."<sup>7</sup> Scholars have done this through three primary conceptual avenues: 1) articulating the multiplicity of publics, 2) loosening the boundaries of what are considered appropriate topics for public deliberation, and 3) reconsidering the separation

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<sup>5</sup> Warner, 47.

<sup>6</sup> Fraser, 57.

<sup>7</sup> Asen and Brouwer, 6.

between the public sphere and the state.<sup>8</sup> I will focus my discussion of this discourse on Fraser's articulation of the *subaltern counterpublic*, Warner's discussion of *publics and counterpublics*, and Asen's conception of *emergent collectives*.

### **Fraser, The *Subaltern Counterpublic***

Fraser criticizes Habermas for having foreshadowed the dissolution of the bourgeois public sphere without tracing the evolution of a post-bourgeois model. Fraser argues against four foundational assumptions of the bourgeois public sphere and articulates four alternative foundations of a post-bourgeois public sphere that is more fitting as "a critical theory of actually existing democracy."<sup>9</sup> This post-bourgeois conception differs from Habermas' as it acknowledges inequality, embraces a *multiplicity* of publics, and recognizes interests and issues that are ordinarily excluded from public deliberation.

Fraser first critiques the *singularity* of Habermas' conception of the public sphere. According to Fraser, Habermas' account takes a normative stance on the actual state of affairs: "namely, that the institutional confinement of the public life to a single, overarching public sphere is a positive and desirable state of affairs, whereas the proliferation of a multiplicity of publics represents a departure from, rather than an advance toward, democracy."<sup>10</sup> Habermas idealized a *singular* public sphere as insuring equal access to all. In direct contrast, Fraser argues that in stratified societies the singular public sphere is controlled by dominant ideologies and modes of communication. Therefore, insisting on a *singular* public sphere excludes subordinated groups that are

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<sup>8</sup> Asen and Brouwer, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Fraser, 77.

<sup>10</sup> Fraser, 66.



disadvantaged by those modes of communication.<sup>11</sup> She concludes “in stratified societies, arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single comprehensive overarching public.”<sup>12</sup> Contestation between multiple publics holds more potential to enable the voices and needs of subordinated groups to be heard.

The argument that a multiplicity of publics better advances the ideal of participatory democracy leads Fraser directly to her concept of the *subaltern counterpublic*. Subaltern counterpublics are constituted by groups of people subordinated by dominant discourses:

The history records that members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. I propose to call these *subaltern counterpublics* in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.<sup>13</sup>

Subaltern counterpublics are beneficial for those who are disadvantaged by the exclusive norms of participation in the bourgeois public sphere because the counterpublic is a space where members can voice “counterdiscourses” that fall in opposition to dominant discourses. Fraser offers the late-twentieth century feminist movement in the United States as an example of subaltern counterpublic. This particular counterpublic aimed to bring formerly ignored issues such as sexism and sexual harassment into public view.<sup>14</sup>

Most significantly, Fraser concludes that subaltern counterpublics have emancipatory potential. As counterpublics bring public attention to previously

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<sup>11</sup> A stratified society is one in which the “basic institutional framework generates unequal social groups in structural relations of dominance and subordination” (Fraser, 66).

<sup>12</sup> Fraser, 66.

<sup>13</sup> Fraser, 67.

<sup>14</sup> Fraser, 67.

suppressed issues, contestation occurs between dominant and subordinated discourses.

Fraser explains that she emphasizes the contestatory nature of subaltern counterpublics to challenge the idea that counterpublics are necessarily isolated enclaves:

In my view, the concept of the counterpublic militates in the long run against separatism because it assumes an orientation that is *publicist*. Insofar as these arenas are *publics* they are by definition not enclaves—which is not to deny that they are often involuntarily enclaved. After all, to interact discursively as a member of a public—subaltern or otherwise—is to disseminate one’s discourse into ever widening arenas...its members understand themselves as part of a potentially wider public, that indeterminate, empirically counterfactual body we call ‘the public-at-large.’<sup>15</sup>

Thus, while a counterpublic could be understood as withdrawing from society-at-large, Fraser maintains that publics are, by definition, *public* in orientation. Subaltern counterpublics maintain a *publicist* orientation through the control of a discourse that not only circulates *between* members, but also among wider publics.

The simultaneity of internal and external focus is the crux of Fraser’s understanding of subaltern counterpublics and their relationships to wider social and political contexts. There is a potential tension between inward attention—sometimes seen as withdrawal and isolation—and outward orientation. Fraser holds, however, that in this tension lies potentiality:

The point is that, in stratified societies, subaltern counterpublics have a dual character. On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides.<sup>16</sup>

As *separate, counter, oppositional* spaces, subaltern counterpublics are able to function as spaces of “withdrawal and regroupment” for those subordinated by dominant publics and discourses. It is through this dialectic between inward and outward attention that

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<sup>15</sup> Fraser, 67-68.

<sup>16</sup> Fraser, 68.

subaltern counterpublics are able to work toward the emancipation of those who are *part* while also working for the transformation and emancipation of those *apart*, or outside the counterpublic. This idea of the dual function of counterpublics is reminiscent of what I have identified to be essential and potentially conflicting aspects of contemporary intentional communities—inward focus and boundedness in tension with outward orientation and transformative aspiration. I will return to this idea of dual function when I elaborate an understanding of an intentional community counterpublic in the next chapter.

### **Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics***

Michael Warner defines his conception of publics and counterpublics in partial distinction from Fraser's notion of subaltern counterpublics. In *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), Warner focuses on a notion of publics that come into existence through the reflexive circulation of texts and discourses.<sup>17</sup> Publics have a mutually constitutive relationship with discourse: a public is called into being by the discourse that addresses it and circulates this discourse among other publics in turn.<sup>18</sup> While Fraser's definition has a discursive element, Warner's notion of publics and counterpublics is entirely discursive and comparatively less located in time and space.

Like Fraser, Warner emphasizes the multiplicity of subpublics within the public sphere. In his conception "there are as many shades of difference among publics as there are in modes of address, style, and spaces of circulation."<sup>19</sup> However, not all subpublics are on equal footing. In some more mainstream subpublics, members may easily maintain membership in the general public or in other equally mainstream but specialized

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<sup>17</sup> Warner, 90.

<sup>18</sup> Warner, 72.

<sup>19</sup> Warner, 117.

subpublics. Others, though, define themselves in more oppositional terms. These Warner labels as not just *sub*, but *counterpublics*:

Some publics are defined by their tension with a larger public. Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general. Discussion within such a public is understood to contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large, being structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying. This kind of public is, in effect, a counterpublic: it maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status.<sup>20</sup>

Members of some subpublics easily float back and forth between their specialized identities and memberships in other publics and even the mainstream general publics. Participants in counterpublics, such as the queer communities Warner uses as an example, maintain subordinate status. Despite the commonalities, Warner questions Fraser's use of the term 'subaltern.' He writes, "It is not always clear that all counterpublics are composed of people *otherwise* dominated as subalterns. Some youth-culture publics or artists publics, for example, operate as counterpublics, even though many who participate in them are 'subalterns' in no other sense."<sup>21</sup> The people who participate in counterpublics may not be subordinate on the basis of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, or gender. But, the very fact of participation in an oppositional public engenders subordinate status. Participants in counterpublics separate themselves from mainstream publics through their participation in dispositions, behaviors, values, and practices that run *counter* to the norms that govern other publics. For Warner, counterpublics are defined by opposition to dominant norms, principles, and practices and participation is not exclusively associated with the same sense of minority identity as it is in Fraser's account.

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<sup>20</sup> Warner, 56.

<sup>21</sup> Warner, 57.

### **Asen, *Emergent Collectives***

Similarly, Asen (2000) questions the ways in which counterpublics are restrictively defined by the particular persons, places, and topics they are often said to contain. Instead of defining counterpublics by persons (20<sup>th</sup> century feminists), places (bookstores and conferences), or topics (gender, or gendered discrimination more specifically), Asen advocates understanding the definition of a counterpublic as contingent on participants' *recognition of exclusions*, rather than on whether or not external observers classify participants as *excluded*. Asen says that unlike the term 'subordinated groups,' "the concept of emergent collectives does not invoke essential identities or the physical bodies of participants in a counterpublic."<sup>22</sup> As emergent collectives, counterpublics are constituted "neither necessarily nor exclusively by actually or potentially excluded individuals, but formed by participants who recognize exclusions in wider public sphere and resolve to join together to overcome these exclusions."<sup>23</sup> The recognition of exclusions is not limited to those excluded on the basis of any sort of minority or subordinate standing. Concluding, Asen posits that scholars have continued to investigate and theorize about the public sphere because of a desire to "reveal potentially emancipatory practice."<sup>24</sup> Asen understands the emancipatory potential of emergent counterpublics to be the potential they hold to reconfigure power dynamics by bringing excluded people, practices, norms, places, and topics to public attention and legitimizing these through public deliberation.

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Asen, 2000, "Seeking the 'Counter' in Counterpublics," *Communication Theory* 10: 438.

<sup>23</sup> Asen, 444.

<sup>24</sup> Asen, 444.

## Emancipatory Potential

In this chapter, I have given a brief overview of contemporary public sphere discourse focused on Fraser, Warner, and Asen's respective notions of the *counterpublic*. These three theorists are united by their recognition of the emancipatory potential of counterpublics. This emancipatory and potential is met and matched by comparable challenges:

Counterpublics are encountering—without always recognizing—limitations in their public media, their relation to the state and to official publics, their embeddedness in larger publics and large processes of privatization... One doesn't 'go public' simply as an act of will... The context of publicness must be available, allowing these actions to count in a public way, to be transformative. How does this come about?<sup>25</sup>

Here, Warner confronts the fact that, in order to contribute to efforts for emancipatory social change, counterpublics must negotiate a difficult balance between inward withdrawal and publicist orientation. In the following chapter, I will elaborate an understanding of the intentional community counterpublic. I hope to understand if and how the actions of intentional communities may count in a public way and be realized as politically and socially transformative in relation to wider publics.

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<sup>25</sup> Warner, 63.

## Chapter 4

### *Imagining the Intentional Community Counterpublic*

In the previous chapter, I gave an overview of public sphere studies and the ways in which contemporary scholars have challenged Habermas' conception of the bourgeois public sphere and advocated, instead, a public sphere defined by multiplicity. I focused on Nancy Fraser, Michael Warner, and Robert Asen's respective elaborations of *counterpublics* as publics that define themselves in tension with dominant discourses and modes of being and thinking. In this chapter, I will sketch my conception of the intentional community counterpublic, clarify the ways in which my endeavor fits with and diverges from the counterpublic model, and discuss how the intentional community counterpublic *counts* as *counter* to dominant discourses and values. I argue that imagining the intentional community counterpublic enables us to identify a synergy and emancipatory potential between inward and outward orientation.

#### **The Intentional Community Counterpublic**

For the moment, the reader will have to take it on faith that intentional communities *count* as *counterpublics*—an assertion that I will interrogate in a latter part of this chapter. First, I would like to present my vision of the intentional community counterpublic. The intentional community counterpublic of my imagination exists at two levels: 1) alliances of communities and the literature produced by the network of intentional communities, 2) face-to-face interaction within individual intentional communities and alliances of communities. These are *unlocated* and *located* conceptions of the counterpublic, respectively, that I source from the contrast between Warner and Fraser's conceptions of what constitutes a counterpublic.

The first level of the intentional community counterpublic is based on Warner's conception of publics as social spaces that do not exist apart from the circulation of discourse.<sup>1</sup> His is an entirely unlocated conception of a public that "is not based on a precise demography but mediated by print, theater, diffuse networks of talk" and other discursive modes of publicity.<sup>2</sup> Following Warner's definition, a single intentional community could not count as a counterpublic because it is a definite and located group of people that maintains a physical existence apart from its discourse. Instead, we could conceive of the network of intentional communities and the literatures and discourses they circulate as a counterpublic. This level of the intentional community counterpublic can be understood as composed of the following:

1. Alliances

*Examples:* the Fellowship for Intentional Community (FIC); the Federation of Egalitarian Communities (FEC); the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN); the Ecovillage Network of the Americas (ENA); the Cohousing Association of the United States; federated communities such as the Emissaries of the Divine Light and the Hutterites; and alliances of specific kinds of communities such as the Catholic Worker Communities.<sup>3</sup>

2. The "literature" published by academic associations

*Examples:* journals published by the Communal Studies Association (CSA); the International Communal Studies Association (ICSA); and Community Services, Inc.

3. The "literature" published by alliances and communities

*Examples:* Directories such as the *Communities Directory*, *Diggers and Dreamers* and *Eurotopia*; *Communities Magazine*; the film *Visions of Utopia*; alliance websites such as those maintained by the Global Ecovillage Network and the Federation of Egalitarian communities; conference proceedings and papers; and books, websites, personal statements, interviews, and articles published by particular communities or included in analytical scholarship.

These are nodes of the intentional community counterpublic that do not depend on face-to-face interaction between members. Following Warner's conception, the intentional

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<sup>1</sup> Warner, 72.

<sup>2</sup> Warner, 56.

<sup>3</sup> Kozeny 1996.



community counterpublic comes into being through the reflexive circulation of discourse through the avenues of publicity listed above. It is this more diffuse level of the counterpublic that is publicly available to anyone who looks for it, and that I have made extensive use of in researching and writing this paper.

The second level of the intentional community counterpublic is a rather more located and local one that I draw from Fraser's conception of the counterpublic. In "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," Fraser highlights the late-twentieth century feminist movement in the United States as exemplary of her conception of the subaltern counterpublic. She writes that this counterpublic took place in "journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places."<sup>4</sup> This example shows that Fraser's definition is both discursive and located. Bookstores, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places certainly have discursive elements, but they also promote face-to-face interaction. The intentional community counterpublic, similarly, takes place through person-to-person interactions within the space of individual communities and at alliance and network gatherings: the annual CSA and ICSA conferences; biannual FIC organizational meetings that are open to the public; GEN conferences; and thousands of public workshops and events held every year at communities all over the world.

It is this last form of gathering and publicity—workshops and events held at individual communities—that resonates most with the experience of everyday life in an intentional community. For instance, in my short time at D Acres I attended and

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<sup>4</sup> Fraser, 67.

participated in a medicinal herb workshop, a blacksmithing workshop, two open mic nights, the monthly “Farm Feast” breakfast, two soup nights, one pizza and movie nights, a talk by soldier recently returned from Iraq, volunteer day, and a Full Moon Potluck. These events are open to residents, non-residential members, neighbors from the central New Hampshire region, and anyone else who decides to show up and participate; many of them are free and the others payable on a sliding scale. At events like these, D Acres residents and others realize themselves and each other as members of a community and participate together in the construction, teaching, and circulation of values, skills, and practices centering on values—sustainability, community, and self-provisioning—that are not supported in other spaces.

### **Does the Model Fit?**

I have just described the intentional community counterpublic of my imagination. I will present two arguments to suggest that the intentional community counterpublic fits within Fraser, Warner, and Asen’s respective counterpublic concepts. The first reason has to do with the subordinate status of intentional community values and practices. The second concerns the dialect between inward and outward orientation.

First, the extent to which intentional communities can be understood as a counterpublic depends on how we define “subordinate.” For Fraser, the public sphere is an arena of interest articulation, and counterpublics are special venues for subordinated groups to voice experiences, values, and needs that are ordinarily denied to public recognition deliberation. According to Asen, “Fraser advocates counterpublics so that members of subordinated groups may engage in communicative processes beyond the

supervision of dominant groups.”<sup>5</sup> Given the inequalities and exclusions that characterize “actually existing democracy,” the purpose of Fraser’s counterpublic is for people united by subordinated identities to regroup so as to work toward participation and inclusion within officially sanctioned public arenas. “Subordinated groups” refers to groups of people who are traditionally conceived of as subordinated and subaltern on the basis of sexuality, race, gender, ethnicity, or class. Intentional Communities based around sexuality, race, gender, or class identities were more common during the 1960s and are rare today. In fact, the average demographic makeup of the intentional communities listed in the *Communities Directory* defies the traditional concept of subordinate or subaltern. According to Laird Schaub, Executive Secretary of the FIC:

The Communities Movement is overwhelmingly white and middle class. It tends to be well educated, pro-environment and politically liberal. While most communities aspire to embrace diversity on some level, they tend to most readily attract new members like themselves. It’s difficult for people of privilege to walk away from the advantages of money and class and share power gracefully with others...it is also challenging for communities created in the image of white collar educated folks to do the work needed to make blue collar (working class) members feel that it can be their home also.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of race and class, intentional communities are more likely to resemble dominant publics than subordinate subaltern social groups. Thus, if we were to limit the definition of counterpublic to those constituted exclusively by subordinate groups typically defined, intentional communities might not qualify.

Despite the fact of their relatively homogeneous and privileged demographic makeup, many intentional communities *do* come together with the intention of re-visioning and enacting alternatives to traditional gender, class, race, and sexualities

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<sup>5</sup> Asen, 428.

<sup>6</sup> Laird Schaub, 2005, “State of the Communities Movement: Getting Marries,” in *The Communities Directory Fourth Edition*, (Rutledge Missouri: Fellowship for Intentional Community): 21.

distinctions. The egalitarian communities, for example, enact alternatives to traditionally gendered divisions of labor. As Kozeny notes, “today’s intentional communities are melting pots of ideals and issues that have been in the public spotlight over the decades,” such as equality, civil rights, women’s liberation, gay liberation, antiwar efforts, deep ecology, and environmental justice.<sup>7</sup> So, while intentional community membership may not be made up of subordinated peoples, they often aim to transform the same power relations that are the object of change for many of the subaltern counterpublics that fit within Fraser’s conception.

In addition, both Warner and Asen make room for divergent interpretations of what counts as a counterpublic. Warner says that those in counterpublics are not necessarily subordinated or subaltern previous to their participation in a counterpublic. Asen suggests that instead of looking to people, places, and topics as definitive of counterpublics, we might define emergent counterpublics as groups of people who identify exclusions and come together in response. Those who act in response to exclusions do not necessarily hold subordinated or marginalized identities. Nevertheless, Warner and Asen maintain that in order to count as *counter*, a public must espouse a discourse that holds subordinate status to dominant discourses. I contend that there is a way to understand intentional communities as constituted by differences that make them subordinate to dominant publics. These are differences that revolve around the social, decision-making, environmental, and economic values and value-based practices that organize life in the intentional community.

The language that the FIC uses to describe itself illustrates how the intentional community counterpublic is constituted by difference and subordinate status:

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<sup>7</sup> Kozeny 2007, 12.

For the last two decades the Fellowship for Intentional Community—publishers of this *Directory*—has been waving the flag of cooperative living in a world awash in competition and hierarchy...We're making available the on-the-ground learnings of intentional communities to people hungry for positive alternatives to a mainstream culture of isolation and alienation. Our work is based on four common values: cooperation, nonviolence, inclusivity, and unrestricted freedom to walk away from a group when it's no longer working out.<sup>8</sup>

The FIC suggests that the North American intentional community counterpublic defines itself against a dominant value system of competition, hierarchy, isolation, and alienation.

I would add based on what we've seen thus far that the counterpublic also defines itself against the perceived prominence of violence, exclusion, greed, waste, privatization, and the emphasis on individualism in mainstream western society. In opposition, intentional community discourse and practice is based on principles of cooperation, nonviolence, inclusivity, voluntary participation, community, solidarity, and sustainability.

This opposition is not only a source of *difference*, but also of *subordinate status*. The implication of the FIC's language—"waving the flag of cooperative living in a world awash in competition and hierarchy"—is that mainstream western values and lifestyles actively discourage cooperative, sustainable, and community-oriented lifestyles.<sup>9</sup> There is much evidence to support the idea that mainstream values subordinate cooperative, communal, sustainable lifestyles. Just look, for instance, at the many legal difficulties that intentional communities encounter when they try to convert land to communal ownership. There are also few established legal protocols for income-sharing communities. In North America, it is difficult for those who do not live in intentional community to enact communal land-ownership, income-sharing, or cooperative

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<sup>8</sup> Laird Schaub, 2007, "About the Fellowship For Intentional Community," in the *Communities Directory 2007 Edition* (Rutledge, Missouri: The Fellowship for Intentional Community): 31-33

<sup>9</sup> Schaub 2007, 31.

childcare, not least because there is little precedent to do so and many people are used to engaging in behaviors governed by norms of individualism and privatization. Intentional communities exist as spaces to enact lifestyles, values, and practices that are discouraged and inhibited elsewhere.

We can turn, again, to D Acres as a more specific example. D Acres criticizes mainstream behavior as wasteful, irresponsibly consumptive, and overly reliant on nonrenewable fossil fuels. The community addresses these perceived problems by modeling an alternative relationship to nature guided by the values of sharing, cooperation, coexistence, stewardship, and sustainability. These values are enacted through practices such as composting, the use of human composting toilets, sustainable forestry, use of oxen instead of tractors, using recycled vegetable oil to power farm vehicles, and eating a mostly local organic diet. The values and practices central to D Acres' vision difficult to realize in spaces governed by mainstream norms. For example, most cities and towns in North America lack institutionalized composting systems, and the recycling systems that do exist are often prone to difficulties due to popular misunderstanding of what is recyclable. It is *easier* to practice composting and recycling in communities where everyone is committed to these practices and where there is space and reason to *use* compost. It is also nearly impossible to eat a mostly local and organic diet if one does not produce one's own food. Even D Acres residents still face difficulties in carrying out environmentally sustainable practices due to the overarching unsustainable systems of the US context in which the community is embedded. To take one example: D Acres owns a truck that is converted to reuse filtered vegetable oil instead of gasoline. Legally, however, the truck may only be driven on the community's

property because it is illegal to drive on state roads with a vehicle that does not also pay gas taxes.

These are just a few illustrations of the ways in which communal values such as cooperation, sharing, and sustainability are difficult to realize within the context of mainstream value, lifestyle, and legal systems. Thus, the values that govern intentional community discourse and practice require integrated spaces for their comprehensive, or at least more effective, realization. I do not mean to suggest that these values and practices are fully and easily achievable for those who live in intentional community or that they are impossible outside of intentional community. Rather, I have aimed to show that these values and practices are difficult to enact in spaces governed by mainstream western institutions and value-systems and that they may be somewhat easier to realize in spaces where all those present are committed to their realization and where alternative institutions and systems support their realization.

I have argued that despite the fact that intentional community members themselves may not be subordinate, they organize their communities and their daily lives around values and practices that *are* subordinate and harder to realize outside of the space of community. In this way, the intentional community counterpublic of my imagination fits the counterpublic concept. I can now introduce my second argument for the applicability of the counterpublic model. Reading intentional communities as counterpublics provides a lens through which to understand the tension between the inward focus and boundedness of intentional communities, on the one hand, and their outward oriented transformative aspirations. Fraser writes of the “dual function” of counterpublics: “On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and

regroupment; on the other hand, they function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics.”<sup>10</sup> I contend that this “dual function” perfectly describes the interactions between intentional communities and society-at-large. As we saw in *Chapter 2*, communities are bounded spaces with an inward focus. This corresponds well to Fraser’s articulation of spaces of “regroupement.”

However, Fraser says, counterpublics are also “bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics.”<sup>11</sup> The use of the term “training grounds” suggests that mustering the energy and resources for outwardly oriented agitational, oppositional, or transformative activities is a dynamic ongoing process that depends on protected spaces of regroupment. Fraser concludes, “It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides.”<sup>12</sup> Fraser means that there is a synergy between the inward and the outward functions of counterpublics. Neither function would be as meaningful or generative if it did not coexist with the other. I argue that intentional communities fit this articulation: they have outwardly oriented transformative aspirations, but would lack the energy, imagination, and resources to enact these visions unless they also protected their internal space of *communitas* and of lifestyles based on ideals. As I described in *Chapter 2*, the protected internal space of regroupement is necessary because the needs, values, experiences, and practices held by intentional communities and community members are sometimes repressed, discouraged, or hard to realize in mainstream Western capitalist society. It is in the contention and co-existence of these two facets that the transformative potential of intentional communities can be found.

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<sup>10</sup> Fraser, 68.

<sup>11</sup> Fraser, 68.

<sup>12</sup> Fraser, 68.



In *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, Lucy Sargisson suggests that intentional communities possess transformative political potential because of the way that they create space to engage in imaginative thinking and exploratory practice. She writes:

Sustainable political change requires that we first enable ourselves to break free of mental constraints and think differently. Thinking differently is a process that cannot occur within existing constraints and so I suggest that we seek tools that enable a paradigm shift in consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

Sargisson believes that the creation of a more sustainable inclusive politics requires shifts in consciousness. We must transform the way we think in order to transform the way we act. There are, however, certain kinds of thinking—utopian, emancipatory, transgressive, counterdiscursive thinking—that cannot happen in instituted mainstream spaces. Thus, we also need to act, to remove ourselves temporarily from spaces of mainstream discourse, in order to think differently. This dual function of thinking (regroupment) and action (agitational activities) mirrors Fraser’s articulation of the dual function of inwardness and outwardness. Protected spaces of regroupement allow those within to articulate thoughts and beliefs that are ordinarily repressed with the end goal of working toward outwardly oriented sustainable political action. Sargisson’s experiences on environmental intentional communities in Great Britain illustrate this dialectic. Sargisson concludes that the Findhorn communities, in addition to being spaces that encourage utopian transgressive thinking, also “represent spaces from which individuals can go out and work and play in external political spaces.”<sup>14</sup> Sargisson observed that communities often serve as resting places for people in between political engagements; offer physical space for political gatherings, meetings, collaborations, and festivals; are home to alternative industries that serve larger communities such as CSAs or large-scale

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<sup>13</sup> Sargisson, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Sargisson, 72.

composting ventures; and may also engage in direct political organizing with other communities or with non communitarian local political groups.<sup>15</sup>

The synergy between an inward focus and outward orientation resonates, also, with my experiences at D Acres. At D Acres, the outward oriented educational goals of the community would not have been possible if it were not for the unity and coherence of the internal community. This is true both materially and emotionally. The boundedness and close proximity of the community allows members to learn practical skills from one another—intensive diversified organic gardening or sustainable forestry, or how to filter used cooking oil for a converted diesel car, for example—that are either hard to access or expensive and time-consuming to learn in the outside world. This internal community knowledge is the reservoir from which D Acres draws the resources to lead workshops and trainings for those outside the community. On the emotional level, I felt during my time at D Acres that I would not have been able to sustain the constant energy it requires to engage with visitors, hostel guests and workshop participants, if it were not for the weekly community meeting and daily meals with my co-residents which renewed my feelings of solidarity and community togetherness. Thus, the synergy between inwardness and outwardness enables intentional communities to realize their outward aspirations and transformative potential.

What is the exact nature of the so-called “transformative potential” of intentional communities? In the next chapter I will discuss the intentional community as a source of political imagination.

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<sup>15</sup> Sargisson, 71-73.

## Chapter 5

### *The Intentional Community Counterpublic: A Source of Political Imagination*

Despite Iris Marion Young's warnings that the ideal of small-scale face-to-face community is incompatible the radical democratic project, I believe that intentional communities have the potential to be generative sources of political imagination. In this chapter, I will argue that the political potential of intentional communities has two main dimensions: 1) as *critique*, intentional communities exercise an essential political function by demonstrating *alternatives*. Intentional communities demonstrate alternatives primarily through their capacity for *innovation*. And 2) by demonstrating social, political, environmental, and economic alternatives, intentional communities shift the nexus of transformation to everyday life and challenge the ever-uncertain bounds of *the political*.

#### **Critique and Alternative as a Political Function**

As we've shown, intentional communities operate on the general pattern of formulating critiques of perceived problems and enacting bounded residential lifestyle alternatives. In this way, intentional communities resemble utopia and the literature on intentional communities is pervaded by references to *utopia* and *utopianism*. Rosabeth Moss Kanter's seminal study *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (1972), *Living in Utopia: New Zealand's Intentional Communities* (2004) by Lucy Sargisson and Lyman T. Sargent, and Geoph Kozeny's two-volume documentary project *Visions of Utopia: Experiments in Sustainable Culture* (2002) are just a few examples that confirm this resonance between intentional communities and utopianism. Looking at the similarities between intentional

communities and theory about the political dimensions of literary and metaphorical utopia can help us better understand the political function of formulating critiques and enacting alternatives. According to Sargisson, literary utopias are transgressive spaces that allow transgressive thinking and acting to take place:

Utopia—good places that are no place—are good places from whence to attempt this kind of [transgressive] thinking. They are outside the real world, but engage critically with it. They arise from discontent and attempt creative imaginings of how things might be better...They give social and political movements a sense of direction or vision. Utopias are ideal places in which to engage in the kind of thinking that I suggest is appropriate to the contemporary political environment.<sup>1</sup>

Sargisson suggests that visions of utopia, even those that just exist on paper, are politically generative because they provide contemporary social and political movements with visions of how things could be other than how they are. While intentional communities are certainly not “outside the real world” to the same extent as literary utopia, they are separated from the societies in which they are embedded by many conceptual and physical boundaries. Intentional communities are situated with a unique purview of the difficulties and challenges that face the societies to which they are both *part* and *apart*. Thus, I would say that intentional communities, like utopia, arise from discontent, engage with society-at-large from a critical distance by attempting “creative imaginings of how things might be better,” and are situated to give social and political movements direction and vision.

How can utopian “creative imaginings of how things might be better” contribute to real, material, enacted social and political change? In *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2009) Erik Olin Wright writes about the concept of “Real Utopias” and provides clues about the connection between imagination and reality:

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<sup>1</sup> Sargisson, 3.

The idea of Real Utopias embraces this tension between dreams and practice. It is grounded in the belief that what is pragmatically possible is not fixed independently of our imaginations, but is itself shaped by our visions...Nurturing clear-sighted understandings of what it would take to create social institutions free of oppression is part of creating a political will for radical social changes to reduce oppression. A vital belief in a utopian ideal may be necessary to motivate people to leave on the journey from the status quo in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

Wright suggests that what is possible in reality may depend in significant ways on vision, imagination, and ideals. It may be that only once we allow ourselves to imagine other ways of life, other politics, other ways of relating to one another can take we the plunge to act on these visions. There are, however, many steps between imagination and reality. Without assessments of reality and instituted plans of action, utopian visions may actually be destructive:

Vague utopian fantasies may lead us astray, encouraging us to embark on trips that have no real destinations at all...What we need, then, is 'real utopias': utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of navigating a world of imperfect conditions for social change.<sup>3</sup>

Those who wish to envision and enact real utopias must perform three tasks: elaborating a systematic critique and diagnosis of the world as it exists, envisioning viable alternatives to that world, and understanding the obstacles and dilemmas that will confront attempts at transformation.<sup>4</sup>

Wright's real utopias provide a generative way of assessing the potential intentional communities possess to serve as catalysts of emancipatory social and political change through imagination. I do not mean to suggest that intentional communities are perfectly realized utopias that provide "clear-sighted understandings of what it would

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<sup>2</sup> Erik Olin Wright, 2009, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, Final Draft Manuscript Online, <[http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/ERU\\_files/ERU-full-manuscript.pdf](http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/ERU_files/ERU-full-manuscript.pdf)> 4.

<sup>3</sup> Wright, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, 8.

take to create social institutions free of oppression.”<sup>5</sup> To say so would be to represent intentional communities as a vague utopian fantasy. I’ve already established that intentional communities perform the utopian function of formulating critique of the existing values and practices and enacting alternatives. Further, I argue that intentional communities contribute to efforts for social and political change, which depends on “accessible waystations” and “utopian designs of institutions,” primarily through their capacity for innovation.<sup>6</sup> Intentional communities formulate critiques and enact *innovative* alternatives. Below, I will describe how intentional communities innovate in the technological/environmental, economic, and social/political realms, and provide examples of innovations.

### **Technological and Environmental Innovation**

Many intentional communities initiate technological innovation meant to improve human relationships to the natural environment. I will focus my discussion of this type of innovation on ecovillages. Jonathon Dawson (2006), President of the Global Ecovillage Network, describes what he believes to be the general principles of ecovillages:

- 1) Primacy of community
- 2) Ecovillages are citizens’ initiatives
- 3) Aim to regain control over own resources
- 4) Strong body of shared values
- 5) Ecovillages act as centers of research, demonstration, and training to develop new ideas, technologies, and modes that are then shared with the wider world. Ecovillages are always in the service of a wider goal.<sup>7</sup>

Most importantly, ecovillages are committed to acting as research, demonstration, and training centers for innovative ideas, technologies, and lifestyles. Examples of these practices are tool sharing, recycling, technology resource sharing, and locally based food

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<sup>5</sup> Wright, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Dawson, 2006, *Ecovillages: New Frontiers for Sustainability*, (Foxhole: Green Books Ltd.): 34-36.

production.<sup>8</sup> D Acres, for example, participates in ecological and technological innovation through engaging in permaculture inspired on-site agriculture, using composting toilets, and testing multiple solar water heating models.

Community Alternatives Society and Frasier Common Farm, both in the Vancouver area, innovate in a variety of other ways. Through their urban-rural partnership, the two communities have cooperated to institute car shares, install solar panels, initiate composting and recycling systems before the city of Vancouver offered such programs, establish the region's organic certification system, and to demonstrate the viability of working urban-rural partnerships.<sup>9</sup>

### **Economic Innovation**

Ecological innovations often go hand-in-hand with economic innovations. Many intentional communities practice less consumptive models of sustainable living, experiment with self-provisioning, and work to strengthen local and regional economies.

Each member community of the Federation of Intentional Communities operates a cooperative business. Twin Oaks, for example, operates a cooperative hammock making business. The Farm, established in Tennessee in 1971, runs multiple cooperatively owned businesses: construction, book publishing, electronics manufacturing, village media services, and farm excavation.<sup>10</sup> Cooperative businesses demonstrate that production can be in the service of people rather than capital, and that locally produced commodities can satisfy local community needs.

Other intentional communities, including Twin Oaks, the other Egalitarian communities, and the Ganas Community in Staten Island, NY operate on an income-

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<sup>8</sup> Dawson, 45-50.

<sup>9</sup> Geoph Kozeny, 2009, *Visions of Utopia Volume II: Experiments in Sustainable Culture* (Rutledge, MO: Community Catalyst Project, Fellowship for Intentional Community).

<sup>10</sup> Kozeny 2009.

sharing model. Income-sharing models challenge traditional conceptions of private and public, especially in regards to private property. These communities show that it is possible to establish high collective and individual quality of life without the constant drive toward private accumulation.<sup>11</sup>

### **Social and Political Innovation**

Many communities take most pride in their roles as *social innovators*. The centrality of *sharing* to intentional communities is at the center of their capacity to re-imagine human relationships between self and other and between individuals and collectives. Intentional communities encourage sharing of resources that are normally reserved for our most intimate friends and family such as intimate space, childcare and other responsibilities, tools and technologies, income and other resources, and emotions. Thus, intentional communities demonstrate the potential for greater openness and connectedness between people.

In Catholic Worker Houses all over North America, low-income people in transition live side-by-side with long-term residents and short-term volunteers. These communities model a new conception of human relationships in which people are not kept separate by socio-economic distinctions.<sup>12</sup>

Other communities, such as the Ganas Community, employ daily “feedback learning” techniques to implement greater levels of communication and cooperation and to reestablish primary ties that ordinarily exist only between family members.<sup>13</sup>

Consensus-decision making also provides an example of other ways of negotiating the difficulties of living with others. The consensus model is based on the

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<sup>11</sup> Kozeny 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Other communities, such as Hearthaven established in Kansas City in 1988, also serve as community and residential spaces for people in transition (Kozeny 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Kozeny 2009.



idea that all people who will be impacted by a decision have the right to be a direct participant in the decision-making process. 68% of the 900 communities featured in the 2007 *Communities Directory* practice consensus decision-making.<sup>14</sup>

As pioneers of a multiplicity of technological, environmental, economic, social, and political innovations, intentional communities and their members help bridge the gap between formulating critique, creative imaginings, and enacting alternatives. As located centers of innovative alternatives, intentional communities may be considered real utopias—imperfect but real—that can help social and political movements navigate toward a more ideal world based on communal values of cooperation, nonviolence, solidarity, and sustainability.

### **Shifting the Bounds of *The Political***

Through their capacity for innovation, intentional communities shift the locus of transformation away from the government—the officially sanctioned political realm—toward daily practices, places, and activities that are traditionally considered unfit for deliberation, publicization, and politicization. For example, in Fraser’s conception, counterpublics are politically generative as spaces that enable groups of subordinated people to work toward participation in sanctioned political venues, the intentional community counterpublic see *community* itself—face-to-face, day-to-day, resident-governed, located spaces—as the nexus for social and political change. In a sense, this makes an intentional community counterpublic even more radical than other counterpublic conceptions. The value-oriented activities of Twin Oaks, D Acres, and every other intentional community, are *political* precisely because they challenge the bounds of what is political.

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<sup>14</sup> Schaub, “State of the Communities Movement—2007,” 18.

While many think that *the political* is anything that happens among politicians or in the voting booth—far from everyday life in an intentional community—the boundaries of the political realm are not so easily defined. In *Politics and Vision* (1960), political theorist Sheldon Wolin writes of the shifting boundaries of the political:

The boundaries of what is political have been shifting ones...The designation of certain activities and arrangements as political, the characteristic way that we think about them, and the concepts we employ to communicate our observations and reactions—none of these are written into the nature of things.<sup>15</sup>

The bounds of what is political and what is not have always been subject of debate, and it is the task of political theorists to observe the dynamic nature of those boundaries and identify enduring commonalities. Contemporary social movements, too, have taken it as their task to challenge the boundaries of the political. Warner writes that “the women’s and gay movements represented groups who were by definition linked to a conventional understanding of private life – gender roles, sexuality, the home and family,” and yet, “they were public movements contesting the most private and intimate matters. Their very entry into public politics seemed scandalous or inappropriate.”<sup>16</sup> Movements centering on gender and sexuality showed that to contest the distinction between what is private and what is public, what is of common concern and of particular concern, is itself a political act.

Wolin, himself, took on the task of defining the bounds of the political in his essay “Fugitive Democracy” (1994). In this essay, Wolin makes important distinctions between politics, the political, and democracy:

I shall take *the political* to be an expression of the idea that a free society composed of diversities can nonetheless enjoy moments of commonality when, through public deliberations, collective power is used to promote or protect the

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<sup>15</sup> Sheldon Wolin, 1960, *Politics and Vision*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company): 4-5.

<sup>16</sup> Warner, 31-32.

wellbeing of the collectivity...In my understanding, democracy is a project concerned with the political potentialities of ordinary citizens, that is with their possibilities for becoming political beings through the self-discovery of common concerns and of modes of action for realizing them.<sup>17</sup>

It is my understanding that in Wolin's articulation, *the political* refers to acts of commonality and collectivity, and to decisions made about common interests. Politics refers to the institutionalized form of public deliberation over the access and distribution of resources to various members and groups within the collectivity. Lastly, democracy is concerned with the politicization—the becoming—of political beings, which occurs as individuals come to act together around areas of common concern. Institutional politics is only one particular iteration of *the political*, and Wolin argues that identifying state politics as the site of politics and democracy misunderstands the true nature of what is *political*: “Democracy needs to be reconceived as something other than a form of government: as a mode of being which is conditioned by bitter experience, doomed to succeed only temporarily, but is a recurrent possibility as long as the memory of the political survives.”<sup>18</sup> Wolin is suggesting that rather than focus on the practice of politics in official governmental arenas we look for moments of fugitive democracy and of *the political* in unconventional places. We can identify *the political* in moments when groups of private individuals achieve moments of commonality by recognizing common interests and working toward the wellbeing of the collectivity.

The coming together of intentional communities and the operation of daily life according to shared values constitute acts of *the political* as Wolin defines it here. It may be hard to identify life in intentional communities as political because much of what happens in the intentional communities seems to be so definitively private and particular.

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<sup>17</sup> Sheldon Wolin, 1994, “Fugitive Democracy,” *Constellations*, (1)1: 12.

<sup>18</sup> Wolin 1994, 23.

Cooking, eating, waste management, natural resource management, friendship, recreation are all typically conceived of private activities. Sargisson captures the conceptual difficulty exactly when she writes:

Intentional communities are places in which private things are politicised. Examples are decisions regarding lifestyle: where to live, what to eat, how to dispose of your shit. Further, they are 'private' homes of politicised individuals.<sup>19</sup>

Intentional communities politicize seemingly private decisions about lifestyle, food, and waste because communities and community members treat them as subjects that are common and worth deliberating over. There are many circumstances in which small groups of people—families for example—deliberate over issue of common concern without it constituting a true act of the common good or shifting the bounds of the political. The notion of the intentional community counterpublic suggests, though, that participating intentional communities do not wish to contain the implications of their values and practices within the bounded space of the communities. The intentional community discourse is a *publicist* discourse that aspires to make subordinate values of community and cooperation heard in wider publics and to demonstrate that other ways of living are pragmatically possible. When intentional communities publicize and politicize previously private activities, the terrain of the political shifts accordingly. In doing so, intentional communities and their members participate in what Wolin describes as the foundational act of the field of politics—the ongoing dynamic process of defining what is political.

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<sup>19</sup> Sargisson, 4-5.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have engaged in a critical exploration of intentional communities as a source of political imagination. Starting from Iris Marion Young's criticisms of the ideal of community as deleterious to projects of radical democracy, I explored the ways in which Young's critiques might resonate with intentional communities: intentional communities are bounded spaces that adopt an inward focus on 'community' itself. I identified a potential tension between this inward orientation and the outward looking transformative aspirations held by many communitarians and I imagined an intentional community counterpublic to see what the counterpublic concept could open up in our understanding of this tension. I argued that imagining the intentional community counterpublic enables us to see the transformative potential that resides in the dialectic between inwardness and outwardness. Finally, I argued that the particular transformative potential of the intentional community counterpublic resides in its capacity to imagine critique-based alternatives, to model innovative technological, economic, social, and political practices, and to challenge the bounds of what is *political*.

My project contributes, in small ways, to both the field of community studies and to democratic theory. In terms of community studies, the 1960s-era communes are widely written about in the social sciences, but contemporary intentional communities deserve more analytical attention. More specifically, my project contributes to an analysis of the political dimensions of contemporary intentional communal living, which has been largely under-theorized.

My project of *imagining an intentional community counterpublic* also contributes to the field of democratic theory. In *Beyond Gated Politics* (2005), Romand Coles challenges his reader, other democratic theorists, and political activists to turn their attention to the generative and tension-filled margins between theory and practice. This is exemplary of trends in contemporary democratic theory that increasingly attempt greater communication between theory and practice. In particularly inspired prose, Coles calls for us to “let ourselves get swept up in the messy world of democratic practices and see how theory might look from there.”<sup>1</sup> For Coles, the goal of this kind of project is not to use practice as a confirmation of pre-existing tenets of democratic theory. Rather, the aim is to challenge, question, re-invent and re-imagine those theoretical foundations from a point of view that is situated in the limitations, nuances and successes of contextualized democratic practices.

This paper has been an exercise in getting “swept up in the messy world” of intentional communities and using their value-based practices as a source of political imagination. The counterpublic literature that I have drawn from also treats counterpublics as a source of political imagination. Warner writes, “Counterpublics of sex and gender are teaching us to recognize in newer and deeper ways how privacy is publicly constructed. They are testing our understanding of how private life can be made publicly relevant. And they are elaborating...new privacies, new individuals, new bodies, new intimacies, and new citizenships.”<sup>2</sup> I would like to mirror Warner’s articulation for the intentional community counterpublic. The intentional community

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<sup>1</sup> Romand Coles, 2005, *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press): 215.

<sup>2</sup> Warner, 62.

counterpublic is a *counterpublic of everyday life* that demonstrates new strategies for negotiating the difficulty of borders between inside and outside, that uses critique to model innovative ways of thinking, being and acting, and that pushes the bounds of *the political*. The intentional community counterpublic's contribution to society, politics, and theory thus surpasses the questions of the size, popularity, or duration of intentional communities themselves. The intentional community counterpublic shows, above all, that cooperative, integrated, nonviolent and community-oriented ways of life are in fact possible.





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