

Socialism and Rationalism in America

Jim Pederson *Dyed-in-the-Wool History* January 20, 2025

In America, communist thought and Christian teaching started to blend together in varying degrees which can most directly be seen in Collectivist Utopian movements that sprang up around the Union but were most concentrated in the Yankee areas of New England and the upper Midwest. America in general acted as an incubator for various types of “free thinkers”. According to Morris Hillquit in the *History of Socialism*, there were 78 “*communistic and semi-communistic*” colonies founded in America in the 1800’s representing six sects. Those being Shakers, the Harmony Society, the Community of Zoar, the American Community, the Amana Community, Bethel and Arora, and the Oneida Society (1 p. 31)(2 p. 97). The two most notable were the Shakers and the Oneida Society.

The Shakers were founded by “*Mother*” Ann Lee who immigrated to America with a number of her followers in 1774 from Wales. This number grew to 5000 in the early to mid 1800’s and then declined to 2500 by 1874(1 pp. 32-33). The most notable aspects of this group were near complete abstinence from sex and the theological division of history into dispensations. The idea of dispensations would appear again with John Nelson Darby and modern Dispensationalism. Shakers were active in abolitionism and other 19th century social movements.

The Oneida Community was founded by John H. Noyes who was born in 1811 in Vermont, studied law at Dartmouth and then theology at Andover and Yale. While at Yale, Noyes developed the doctrine of perfectionism teaching that man could become perfect and live a life above sin. At first this may sound similar to teachings on Christian perfectionism associated with the Methodists and John and Charles Wesley but the Wesleyan position was that perfection was a gift bestowed by God and not by man’s own ability. Still the distinction could become easily blurred. Although his movement started off to be entirely religious, by 1848, after reading *The Harbinger* and other socialist writings, the society took a socialistic turn(1 pp. 34-35). Most notably, their communal practices included marriage resulting in what was referred to as a “complex marriage” (1 pp. 35-36)that made younger girls available to older men. Oneida also introduced the concept of “mutual criticism” which was a process used to silence dissenters and enforce conformance to the group(1 p. p. 37). This became a hallmark of Marxists and Statist regimes and is recognizable today in the form of modern “cancel culture”. Noyes’ followers were predominantly educated people from New England (the iconic Yankee stereotype).

These sects highlight a divergence in Christian thought that is traceable to the beginnings of the faith but really defined the American church in the 19th and early 20th century. The church, in all its forms, had primarily followed the teaching of St Augustine, bishop of Hippo, established in the 4th century that man is sinful and, apart for God’s grace, unable to work out his own salvation. The alternative view, presented during the time of Augustine by a monk named Pelagius, held that man retained enough divine goodness to work out his own salvation. While Pelagius’ position came to be seen as heresy, this sort of thinking remained the core of humanistic thought as well as Christian collectivism that seeks to bring forth heaven on earth.(1 p. p. 28)

Along with the groups that originated from American Christianity, there were others that generally originated in or had ties to European socialism seeing capitalism as the root of human suffering. Owenite Communities were founded by Robert Owen from Wales, who came from humble beginnings and amassed significant wealth as a stock broker. He saw man as being a product of his environment and circumstances(1 p. 40). In this view common to Marxist and collectivist thought, the individual man (person) is not able to lift themselves above their environment but collective man led by enlightened leaders somehow can. The individual is not morally accountable for their decisions but are a product of the environment which the collective can control and fix. Owens started out as a liberal philanthropist but became a believer in total equality and communal property. Owens was an influence on US politician and future President of the Confederate States of America, Jefferson Davis, who also was of a Welch background. After Owens's death in 1858, his son Robert became a mouthpiece for his father's views publishing the Free Thinker magazine and twice being elected to congress as a leader of progressive social causes (1 pp. 41-43).

Fourierist communes, named after Charles Fourier of France, became a national movement. Fourier was the son of a prominent merchant family but was attracted to utopian ideologies and wrote *"The Continental Triumvirate and Perpetual Peace within Thirty Years"* where big government was portrayed as the agent of perpetual peace. (He apparently didn't foresee the 20th century.) Albert Brisbane of Batavia, New York brought Fourierism to America with his own modified and adapted version defined in his book *The Social Destiny of Man*, which was published in 1840 and sold well especially to the academic and media elite. One of his influential converts was abolitionist and publisher of the New York Tribune, Horace Greeley who greatly spread Brisbane's message and gave an American platform to the likes of Charles Dana and Karl Marx(1 p. 42). Brisbane described Greeley's conversion as follows:

"I engaged Park Benjamin to look over the proof-sheets of "Social Destiny of Man", he being a practical journalist of wide experience. Talking over the subject together one day, and of probable effect of the book on the public, he suddenly exclaimed: "There is a Horace Greeley, just damn fool enough to believe such nonsense"

The best known communistic society in the modern memory was Brook Farm due to its association with prominent New England writers and activists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne (Hawthorne later parted ways with this group and became a Yankee critic), Charles Dana, Theodore Parker (secret six), and Elizabeth Peabody. The Brooks Farm founders were utopian reformers who were very influential amongst other utopian reformers as well as Congregationalist and Unitarian churches. Brook Farm was purchased by the Transcendentalist Club, founded by Emerson and other Unitarians including many ministers, in 1841. Transcendentalism was the final step in the full secularization of the Congregationalist church. Unitarianism was the initial split that denied most basic principles of Christianity and the transcendental movement went several steps further adopting German rationalism, reflected in the teachings of philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Fredrick Hegel, and incorporated eastern religious elements.

Although difficult to fully define, Transcendentalism forsook the Deist view of God where He was little more than the author of nature and nature's laws. It also rejected not only Reformed theology but was

hostile to Christian orthodoxy at virtually every point as well as to the church as an institution. It went so far as to fundamentally change concepts of God and Man and the role of reason which was shocking even to many Unitarians. Emerson held that there was a universal "*Mind of God*" and that each individual person was the incarnation of that mind which was reflected in his essay, the Over-Soul. Emerson wrote, "*Within man is the soul of the whole: the wise silence, the universal beauty to which every part and particle is equally related; the Eternal One. All men are different. Each in his own peculiar way expresses the Over-Soul within him*" (3 p. 58). While escaping the constraints of natural law imposed by deism, they denied all objective forms of truth. Quoting from historian C Gregg Singer in his book *A Theological Interpretation of American history*, "*the Transcendentalists declared their independence from all objective norms of truth and made the individual the ultimate authority and judge of what was true or false in religion.* (4 p. 59)"

While Transcendentalism may at first appear to have an inward focus, it was closely aligned with activism and was aggressively outward in its teachings. By invalidating reason and giving each individual the authority to define their own reality, it was remarkably similar to the late 20th and 21st century teachings of Frankfurt school postmodernism. Transcendentalist, and member of the secret six that financed John Brown's raid, Theodore Parker, described Transcendentalist objectives by saying:

The Problem with Transcendental philosophy is no less than this, to revise the experience of mankind and its teachings by the nature of mankind; to test ethics by conscience, science by reason; to try the creeds of the churches; the constitution of the states by the constitution of the universe; to revise what is wrong, supply what is wanting, and command the just."(4 p. 58)

Transcendentalism was a belief system where man effectively created God in his own image. While not formally organized, it was to impact Christian churches and denominations to varying degrees and acted as a bridge between progressive Christianity and neo-Marxism.(4 p. 76)

While these groups were relatively small their significance and influence was far greater than their numbers. This is especially true in the case of Transcendentalism to which a reasonable case can be made that it had a greater influence on American political thought from this point forward leading to the War of Southern Independence than orthodox forms of Christianity. The distinctions between Christian and secular forms of Marxism blurred with time and still remains a smoldering issue today yet the logical contradictions posed by this are remarkably obvious and were not lost on the founders of communism or Christian thinkers of their day. When Marx studied at the University of Berlin he associated himself with the school of Hegelians, who were followers of German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Hegel. The entire energy of this group was focused on the elimination of Christianity. Marx and Bruno Bauer, who had written a book in 1840 claiming the Gospels were forgeries and Jesus never existed, attempted to publish a journal of Atheism but it failed financially (5 p. 53). True Marxists have consistently recognized Christian communists and progressives as "useful idiots." Christian (Baptist) evangelist Charles Spurgeon was acutely aware of the deception of Communist and Socialist thought in the church stating in a notable sermon, "*I would not have you exchange the gold of individual Christianity for the base metal of Christian Socialism.*(6 p. 309)" Spurgeon consistently remained grounded and saw popular movements

for what they were. Spurgeon recognized German rationalism as the same common element driving both Christian and secular communism stating:

“German rationalism which has ripened into socialism may yet pollute the mass of mankind and lead them to overturn the foundations of society. Then “advanced principals” will hold carnival, and free thought will riot with the vice and blood which were years ago the insignia of” the age of reason.” I say not that it will be so, but I should not wonder if it came to pass, for deadly principles are abroad and certain ministers are spreading them.” C. H. Spurgeon(7)

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