

Early American Utopias: Equality and the Individual Self

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Abstract

*After discussing the most important seventeenth and eighteenth-century religious utopian communities, the article focuses on the secularization of Foucauldian “pastoral power” and its impact on one of the first U.S. secular utopias, Charles Brockden Brown’s *Alcuin* (1798). Whereas the conclusion of *Alcuin* expresses the opinion that secularized “pastoral power” can transform traditional marriage and thus contribute to the democratization of sexual politics, some Brown’s novels, namely *Wieland* (1798) and the unfinished *Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist* (1804), explore the abuse of “pastoral power” and the effects of its use on the manipulation of individuals, their spirituality and moral principles. In this way, “pastoral power” is linked with the degradation of the original spiritual form of American utopianism.*

Keywords: American utopias, pastoral power, sexual politics, manipulation

Introduction

American utopia is a much broader concept than the familiar notions of America as the New Jerusalem or later, secular versions of the American Dream. It includes the teachings and practices of numerous religious sects and utopian societies and also experimentation with the role of women in the community, typical of the American version of utopias. As Lawrence Foster points out, one of the most important incentives of the later, nineteenth-century utopian communities was growing dissatisfaction with the “marriage and sex role-patterns” (4). Another often neglected aspect is that of class difference and social equality. As early as 1875, Charles Nordhoff distinguished between the European way of organizing working-class movements, mainly by means of trade unions, and the American approach:

Aside from systematized emigration to unsettled or thinly peopled regions, which the Trades-Unions of Europe ought to organize on a great scale, but which they have entirely neglected, the other outlets for the mass of dissatisfied hand-laborers lie through co-operative or communistic efforts. (Nordhoff 17)

While the co-operative movement was flourishing in some European countries, Nordhoff saw the U.S. as a country with “a number of successful Communistic Societies, pursuing agriculture and different branches of manufacturing” (17). Most of these societies (the Amana Society in Iowa, the Harmony Society in Western Pennsylvania, the Separatists at Zoar in eastern Ohio, the Shakers who established a number of communities, the Oneida “perfectionist” community in the upper New York State or the Icaria in Iowa) were based on religious principles but their nature was also economic consisting in a different organization of labor, distribution of wealth and property.

Although the gender and economic roots of American utopias are important, most of the early utopian communities were religious or esoteric projects. For instance, the Harmony Society in a village called Economy in Western Pennsylvania was based on the idea of common ownership of all property. This idea was supported by the belief in “Divine Economy,” the persuasion that the original Adam combined in himself both the male and the female sex and that “in the renewed world, man will be restored to the ideal godlike condition” (Nordhoff 86). The overcoming of gender and sexual differences justified the economic idea of communism. Similarly, the Oneida religious community, founded by the Yale theology student John Humphrey Noyes in 1848, was based on “common marriage” (i.e. frequent exchange of sexual partners). The major purpose was the integration of sexual, economic and government activities of individuals and the exclusion of the erotic “special love” as “the antisocial behavior threatening communal order” (Foster 9). Similar patterns, intertwining communal government, sexuality and economy, were to be found in the Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints, or the Mormon Church. In contrast to the previous communities, the Mormons were a church with its own Scripture, “the Book of Mormon” (1830) and its polygamy was based on the tradition of the Old Testament, the lives of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Foster 11).

Discussing early American utopias, I will first outline the most important religious utopian projects in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, then analyze the power relations typical of these communities, especially the links between power and sexuality, and finally focus on the theme of the abuse of power in the dystopian novels of Charles Brockden Brown (1771–1810).

Religious Utopias in the 17th and 18th Centuries

The first attempt to establish a religiously tolerant and, in some respects, even “democratic” community dates back to the 1630s, when Roger Williams had to leave the Massachusetts Bay colony because of his criticism of its oligarchy and Puritan theocracy. He founded the Rhode Island colony in 1636, which became a refuge for Jews and Quakers, as well as Catholics.

Another approach shaping early American utopias was Christian communism, preached at that time by a Huguenot reformer, a converted Jesuit, Jean de Labadie (1610–74).

Labadie's activities led to the foundation of a community called the Labadists and headed by Anna van Schurman (1607–78) after their founder's death. The Labadists claimed that the true church consisted only of the spiritually reborn or "elect" people. The church was "of the other world" and its members, especially women, wore special clothes that resembled monastic garb. All members of the church were priests. There was a general belief in predestination. And the main emphasis was put on the practice of self-denial, especially fasting. Marriage, called "the Lord's work," was allowed only among converts.

After years of persecution in the Netherlands, which forced them to seek the protection of Elizabeth, the wife of Frederick of Palatine and the former "Winter Queen" of Bohemia, the Labadists were offered the use of the Castle of Thetinga in West Friesland, where they stayed until 1733. From there they organized the first unsuccessful mission to Surinam, the Dutch colony in the Caribbean. Their next destination was New Amsterdam, where they converted some people, including Ephraim George Herrman (1652–1689). His father, Augustin Heřman or Herrman(n) (?1605–86), was allegedly the son of a Prague alderman, who emigrated, entered the service of the West Indian Company, went to America as early as 1629, and settled in New Amsterdam in 1643. He planted indigo in Surinam and became one of the founders of the Virginian tobacco trade. He led an embassy to the Rhode Island colony and it is not unlikely that he was influenced by Roger Williams' principles of religious tolerance. At the end of the 1640s he led the colonists' resistance against the governor, Peter Stuyvesant, and in 1662 he received a charter for a territory in Maryland at the northern end of Chesapeake Bay, which he called Bohemia Manor or "Little Bohemia." The property had manorial privileges and Herrman received the title of Lord. He became known as "the Lord of the Bohemia Manor." Before his death, in 1684, he was convinced by his son Ephraim to give part of his land (3,750 acres) to the Labadists, who established their utopian community on it. Later Herrman came to think this step imprudent and attempted to withdraw his permission, but the leaders of the colonists deftly secured their ownership by legal means. Moreover, the sect drove his son Ephraim to madness and premature death by insisting that he should leave his wife and join the religious community.

The sect was controlled by a cunning person, Peter Sluyter, who imposed severe discipline including the rationing of bread, eating distasteful food, forfeiture of all personal property and strenuous work duties. The reward was absolute equality between men and women in all activities, but it was evident that some members of the colony, that is, Sluyter and his family, were more equal than others. In 1698 Sluyter persuaded the Labadists to partition the land into private lots and he himself became one of the cruelest slave-owners. This was the end of one of the first American religious utopias.

However, utopian efforts were not paralyzed by individual cunning and avarice. In 1671 Labadie met the founder of Pennsylvania, William Penn, who was so deeply affected by his opinions that he invited the Labadists to join the Quakers. William Penn's plan was to make Pennsylvania a larger replica of Rhode Island and to bring in representatives of different sects. Apart from the Quakers, there were also the Mennonites, a pacifist, Anabaptist church which separated from the Swiss reformed church of Ulrich Zwingli and were known for rejecting infant baptism as well as the link between the Church and the State. Another important sect was the Pietists, founded by Johann Jacob Zimmerman (1644–93) a follower of the German (Lusatian) mystic Jakob Böhme. For his unorthodox approach to Copernican theory Zimmermann was forced to leave the Lutheran church. He

also developed a numerological interpretation of the Apocalypse and designed a utopian community – “a society of the Woman in the Wilderness,” the apocalyptic symbol of the true church (a woman who was carried by an eagle to the wilderness to bring about the spiritual rebirth of humanity). Zimmerman himself did not reach Pennsylvania, but the group of Pietists arrived there in June 1694 led by his disciple Johannes Kelpius (1673–1708). Later, some members of the group, including Kelpius, established a sanctuary on the ridge above the Wissahickon Creek. The group lived mostly like hermits, devoting a good deal of time to contemplating the stars for signs of the arrival of the Millennium. Their emotional prayers accompanied with bonfires (the largest were made on Saint John’s Eve) often led to collective hallucinations: once they saw an angel in the sky and hoped he would announce the Day of Judgment.

The Pietists “believed in physical Resurrection for everyone who led a virtuous life and adhered to the principles of Theosophy” (Holloway 41). They also used many features of medieval magic and medicine, practiced music (which provoked the ire of the Puritans) and were on friendly terms with the Indians (compiling a vocabulary of their words). One of their principal beliefs was in individual immortality. Most of their days were filled with drudgery in the forest or on small fields, while evenings were dedicated to esoteric studies. This sect, which survived Kelpius and dissolved only in 1748 after the death of his successor Conrad Matthei, no doubt became the model for Charles Brockden Brown’s account of the life of old Wieland in the eponymous novel.

Another German religious community was the Baptist Brotherhood, founded in Germantown, Pennsylvania, in 1719. They were also known as Dunkers or Dunkards (from German *dunken* – to dip). In 1735 they founded a settlement called Ephrata, a celibate colony which also included women. Their teaching followed mainly the Old Testament. The community had a monastic organization and its members lived in cells in two separate houses, one for men and another for women (both sexes were called “orders”). Their mystical belief was influenced by numerological principles, elaborating the Biblical description of Solomon’s Temple (1 Kings 6.7). The numerological predictions were focused on the arrival of the Millennium. The life of the community members was extremely austere: they wore “coarse woolen habits” (Holloway 46), slept on beds with no pillows or mattresses, and had to get up at midnight for their devotions, and again at five in the morning for another divine service. Their severity was not only physical but also moral. The community became unsettled by the attempt of the brothers Eckerling to bring about its economic transformation, which also included the introduction of private enterprise and marriage.

A more interesting feature is their publication activities, which were encouraged by the leading men of the time, including Benjamin Franklin. Apart from treatises on theology, collections of hymns and the first German edition of the Bible published in America, the community, especially one of its later leaders, Conrad Beissel (1691–1768), produced beautiful esoteric books, such as *Ninety-Nine Mystical Sentences*. The colony became also known for its music (their compositions anticipated the so-called serial music of the twentieth century) and also for their educational activities. One of its late leaders, Peter Müller, translated the Declaration of Independence into seven languages (Holloway 49).

Although the community seemed to live in harmony, the dictatorial tendencies of its leaders and their religious self-delusions (Conrad Beissel believed himself to be the

second Christ) complicated individual relationships. However, the communistic principles of Ephrata persisted until 1783 when the society partially dissolved; but some of the devotees left for Snow Hill where they established a new religious centre. As late as 1920, there were still about 200 members of the sect in the U.S. (Holloway 52).

Pastoral and Utopia

The first utopian societies in America had distinctly pastoral features, which, according to Suvin, included the “rejection of money economy, cleavage between town and country, and state apparatus” (58). Most American pastorals, however, do not have sensual features (such as the tales of the Land of Cockayne, where food and drinks were available without labor), nor are they modeled on the classical tradition of the honest life of shepherds, their simple nature-based economy, expressed by the Latin phrase “*dapes inemptae*” (goods not acquired by purchase), and finally their erotic affairs and philosophical reflections. It can be argued that successful utopian communities enact on a small scale that which according to Foucault simultaneously occurred in the development of modern states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the transformation of power from its predominantly totalizing character, typical of the earlier stages of history, into its modern forms characterized by a “combination ... of individualization techniques and of totalization procedures.” According to Foucault, the “modern Western state has integrated into a new political shape an old power technique that originated in Christian institutions.” This technique is called “pastoral power” (Foucault 1994a, 332). Pastoral power is different from royal, sovereign power, since it consists not only in “command” but in “sacrifice for the life and salvation” of the community. It also does not look only after the community but after “each individual in particular”, and it cannot become efficient “without knowing the inside of the people’s minds ... exploring their souls, without making them to reveal their innermost secrets.” It is the power over people’s “conscience,” which – and this is most important – “is linked with the production of truth – the truth of the individual itself” (Foucault, “Subject” 333).

While some American utopias tend to establish themselves as ecclesiastical institutions (this is the case of the church of Mormons), most of them anticipate the formation of the individuating power in the modern state and concentrate not on “leading people to their salvation in the next world but, rather, ensuring it in this world” (Foucault, “Subject” 334). The “secularization” of American utopias may be interpreted as an expression of the turn towards these “worldly aims” (334). However, instead of modern state institutions (police, health care, social security, educational system), it is “private ventures, welfare societies, benefactors ... and philanthropists” that take the initiative (334). As a result, Foucault claims “that power of pastoral type, which over centuries had been linked to a defined religious institution, suddenly spreads out into the whole social body” (335). The first social utopias and the dystopian reactions to them represented in Charles Brockden Brown’s writings can be read in this interpretive framework.

***Alcuin* and the Management of Sexuality**

The title of Brockden Brown’s first published work, a dialogue about the political, social and legal status of women in the Early American Republic, refers to the eighth-century

ecclesiastical writer Alcuin or Ealhwine of York (?735–804), who became a teacher and counselor at the court of Charlemagne. Apart from its ironic use – Brown’s interlocutor is a typical subaltern² subject in the new democracy, a petty teacher overwhelmed by his daily toil and vexed by his mischievous pupils – the name may also refer to the historical Alcuin’s pastoral and utopian activities: to educate Charlemagne Alcuin read to him the first Christian utopia, Saint Augustine’s *City of God*, which made the ruler rethink the idea of sovereignty and become crowned as the first ruler of the Holy Roman Empire, thus combining both the spiritual and temporal aspects of power (qtd. in Burgett 137).

In his revealing analysis of Brown’s text in the context of Thomas Malthus’ *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), Bruce Burgett sees the common purport in both works: “socialization of reproductive activity” based on Foucauldian notions of “heteronormativity” and “biopolitics” (128). However, while Malthus pursues the way of regulation by means of state institutions, an approach that clearly distinguishes between “agents” and “victims” of power, Brown – with his background in the Quaker culture – emphasizes the “pastoral” features of his project. As Burgett points out, for Brown’s utopian project the central prerequisite is *consent* among the sexes (it can be added that this consent is intended as a substitute for imperfect social contract which cannot prevent the marginalization of women, other races, aliens or minors), but in *Alcuin*, there is no “simple opposition between coercion and consent” (Burgett 140). As a consequence, utopian marriage, based on love and equal rights of partners, operates in *Alcuin* as a technique of “pastoral power.” As becomes clear from the conclusion of the dialogue, this power ensures the stability of the society, which is not a matter of marriage as a legal institution but, to use Foucault’s term, marriage as a “political technology of individuals” (Foucault, “Political”).

Having transformed the traditional purpose of secular society, the *honestum* (human dignity based on practical morality), into “liberty” and “spontaneous” union of the sexes (Brown, *Alcuin* 104–105), Brown anticipates a change in this technology, which, as Foucault points out, consists in the emphasis on “the reason of state”: the state (or marriage) becomes important in itself and for itself, “as a set of forces and strengths that could be reinforced or weakened according to the politics followed by the governments” (Foucault, “Political” 408). As a consequence, individuals lose their importance as targets of pastoral power, and secular, dissolvable marriage becomes a major instrument for regulating sexuality as Foucauldian “bio-power” – whose locus is no longer in the other world but in the bodies of the citizens of the new republic.

In the conclusion of *Alcuin* it becomes evident that the “pastoral power” of marriage, which has been employed against the rationalist utopia of the “Paradise of Women” using the authority of “nature” to criticize marriage as an institution based on “custom” and “habit,” may become an end in itself: the “spontaneous” nature of the union guarantees that it is “just” (Brown, *Alcuin* 105). However, the problem is that this spontaneity is no longer a category representing the power of nature. It is based on “personal fidelity,” which can be interpreted as a specific secularized form of Saint Augustine’s *honestum*. According to Burgett, this secularization leads to the “denaturalization” of marriage, whose purpose is no longer seen in the divinely instituted regulation of “natural” sexual drives, but in the “democratization” of sexual politics (Burgett 140).

The Abuse of “Pastoral Power”: Brown’s Dystopias

In his revealing study of Brockden Brown’s Quaker past (Kafer), Petr Kafer has shown how powerful was the influence of pastoral power vested in the nonconformist churches and religious societies on Brown’s novels. He has also pointed out the importance of the conflict between early revolutionary state power and the Society of Friends, which led even to the deportation of Brown’s father together with other leading Philadelphia Quakers as potential “spies” and enemies of the new regime in 1777. This conflict influenced the plots of most of Brown’s Gothic novels, but the most important instances of its impact are two novels written in 1798, one finished and the other abandoned: *Wieland, or the Transformation*, subtitled *An American Tale*, and *The Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*. An important element linking both novels is not just the “subaltern” character of Carwin (qtd. in White 50) who mastered ventriloquism, but also the setting – the margins of the civilized world represented by the Pennsylvania backwoods.

In *Wieland* this is a privileged space of religious utopia which, as I have already shown, shares some features with the early mystical religious communities, such as the Woman in the Wilderness colony founded on the ridge above the Wissahickon Creek. Significantly, old Wieland, who mysteriously dies in his woodland temple, is no longer connected with any community: he is the utopian individual influenced by a radical prophetic teaching of the Camissards – Protestant artisans, peasants and small landholders who fought the Catholic authorities in the south of France (Bas-Languedoc) at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Their teaching had powerful millennial features (White 46), and they also pleaded for a retreat to the “Desert,” expecting that they would meet divine judgment there, as did many utopian societies.

In *Carwin*, we also encounter a utopia, but as a perverted scheme of a secret European society, represented by an Irishman called Ludloe. Although the character of Ludloe can be traced back to another manipulator, Falkland in William Godwin’s novel *Caleb Williams* (1794), he is probably a descendant of Edmund Ludlow (?1617–92), a historian and an infamous general in the army of Oliver Cromwell (Leask 104), responsible for much bloodshed in Ireland and partially also for the execution of Charles I. In *Carwin*, Ludloe’s secret society uses technologies of pastoral power to manipulate the people. The protagonist has to live in Spain and become a monk. The practices of Ludloe’s society may also be said to resemble the Bavarian Illuminati, whose alleged conspiracy was considered a great danger for the Early Republic.

However, it is not Ludloe but Carwin who revolutionizes pastoral power by severing it from its supernatural source. In learning ventriloquism, Carwin uses empirical facts: he plays with the echoes of his shouts, multiplying and modifying them. The young hero is a cowherd and the setting reminds us of the pastoral *locus amoenus* transferred to the New World: a rugged, rocky landscape in the Pennsylvania backwoods. Another important feature is that Carwin imitates, or ‘echoes,’ the cry of Native Americans, “the shrill tones of the Mohawk savage,” using the sign of the cultural (no longer religious or ethical) other as the device of his technology of power. Carwin’s new subjectivity is no longer essential: according to White, he is “less a subject, than a nexus of a geography, voice and project” (50). This new, radical form of pastoral technology is a source of great expectations for Ludloe, who wishes to use Carwin, representing quintessential American freedom born in

the frontier backwoods, as a device of utopian political power deployed in secret on some remote Pacific islands, whose relative sizes resemble those of Britain and Ireland.

As White points out, Carwin's ventriloquism gives unlimited power, indeed divine sovereignty, to a subaltern voice expressing the dynamic of the "serial" society of the American backwoods (not based on the *polis* or community, but on isolated farms and enclaves). *Pace* Thomas Jefferson, Brown refuses to see these backwoods as a utopia of freedom. In this respect the dystopia of Carwin is less fictitious than it may appear, since it is nourished by the anxieties of recent colonial history, especially the Paxton Riots in Pennsylvania in 1763–64 which were one of the outcomes of the movement called The Great Awakening, and also fear resulting from contemporary events, such as the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794 (White 41, 44).

It can be argued that Brown's dystopian novels point out the traps of both European and American utopias, showing the abuses of pastoral power as well as the rationalist utopian projects as the "political technologies of individuals." What appears in *Alcuin* as a new political technology of individuals becomes a nightmare in *Carwin* and *Wieland* precisely because of the problematic nexus between the notions referred to in the title of this lecture: "equality" and "individual self." In Brown's writings, marriage based on equality becomes an advanced technology of what used to be pastoral power, and the individual self is dissolved into an assemblage of devices integrated only by the obscure authority of a displaced ventriloquist voice. The sequel to Carwin is not a monster out of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (Shelley was an avid reader of Brown) but rather a human being dissolved into a set of bodily fragments and held together by prosthetic technology and commanding voice, as in Poe's short story "The Man Who Was Used Up." Thus, the utopian quality of Brown's writing not only consists in a radical reformulation of the religious as well as secular issues of early American utopias, but also in the anticipation of some features of modern existence, such as the manipulation of individuals by anonymous forces or the fragmentation of the self.

Notes

¹ There is some confusion concerning his date and place of birth; according to the Czech sources Heřman was born in 1621 either in the small town of Mšeno or in a neighboring village, Mělnické Vtelno. However, this date is improbable, since Heřman came to the New World in 1633 as an employee of the West Indian Company (<http://www.loc.gov/tr/european/imcz/ndl.html#bibl>, visited 23 February 2009). U.S. sources favor an earlier birthdate (see *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, eds. James Grant Wilson, John Fiske, and Stanley L. Klos. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1887–1889, 1999; and <http://famousamericans.net/augustineherrman/>, visited 23 February 2009).

² Coined by Antonio Gramsci, the term expresses the inferior position of a marginalized individual vis-à-vis a hegemonic power. Subaltern citizens are deprived of agency due to their social, ethnic, etc. status.

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