

Is This Utopia? Hippie Communes and the Contradictions of Living Otherwise



Student Number : 2410292

Word Count : 9945

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I declare that this research was approved by the SPAIS Ethics Working Group

Abstract

Hippie communes of the 1960s and 1970s have often been interpreted as attempts to withdraw from capitalist modernity and reorganise social life on egalitarian terms. This dissertation examines how such ideals were enacted in practice, asking through what mechanisms founding ideals were negotiated or undermined within everyday communal life. Adopting a qualitative, historical-interpretive design, the study draws on documentary sources across four communes: Drop City, Libre, The Farm, and Montague Farm.

Thematic and comparative analysis is organised across three domains: the negotiation of capitalist dependence, the emergence of informal governance, and gendered labour. The findings indicate that communes fell short of achieving structural rupture but continuously renegotiated their relationships to dominant systems. Capitalist dependence was morally reframed as resistance; anti-hierarchical ideals displaced authority into informal and charismatic forms; and gender inequality was reproduced through the material organisation of subsistence labour. These contradictions were the processes through which communal life was made possible. The dissertation contributes to sociological debates on countercultural withdrawal and social organisation by conceptualising communes as processual formations, whereby dominant relations persisted beneath their explicit rejection. It argues that the significance of hippie communes lies in what their compromises reveal about the difficulty of organising social life otherwise.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my huge gratitude to Professor Thomas Osborne, whose guidance and genuine care shaped this dissertation in ways I did not anticipate. The depth and breadth of his knowledge guided me toward texts and literature that have expanded my perspective well beyond academia, leaving a mark on how I see and engage with this world. His passion for ideas was infectious, and it is no small part due to him that this process became one I enjoyed!

“Turn On, Tune In, and Drop Out”

—Timothy Leary, 1966, 36:10

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1. Introduction

From the mid-1960s into the 1970s, the United States underwent profound political and cultural transformation. Civil rights activism, student protest, and escalating opposition to the Vietnam War brought to the fore what Miller (1992, p.86) terms a “politics of moral passion,” fuelling a broader rejection of established institutions. This moment unfolded within conditions of post-war affluence and an expanding youth culture. A politically charged generation refused to inherit the values of consumer capitalism and social conformity that structured advanced industrial society (Duncan, 2013). The counterculture emerged as part of a wider discontent with a social order perceived as materially prosperous yet socially and spiritually impoverished.

Within this conjuncture, the idea of “dropping out” crystallised as both critique and practice. As Miller (1992) proposes, the hippie movement coalesced in the mid-1960s out of earlier practices of bohemianism and Beat generation dissent. Communal living represented a concrete extension of this dissent, rooted in a long American communitarian tradition that, despite never occupying a dominant paradigm, has persisted since the seventeenth century (Elder, 2012). Distinct to the 1960s communal revival was its scale and openness. Hippie communes were underpinned by a belief that, once removed from institutional structures of mainstream society, more harmonious and egalitarian forms of collective life could be realised. This optimism rested on the assumption that human beings, once liberated from the constraints of capitalist modernity, would orient towards cooperation and mutuality (Miller, 1992).

Despite popular images of the counterculture emphasising refusal and indolence, many participants actively pursued forms of organisation aimed at achieving a degree of autonomy from American capitalism. As Farber (2016) argues, this involved moving beyond rejection toward the construction of alternative economic systems and self-defined forms of work. While these efforts were neither uniform nor consistently successful, they reflected a shared attempt to reorganise material life in response to dissatisfaction with consumer acquisitiveness and corporate labour. Such discontent was enacted through lived practice, distinguishing it from more passive forms of opposition. However, as Moretta (2016) notes, the aspiration toward complete withdrawal was only partially realised.

This tension between ideological aspiration and material practice gives the communal movement its sociological significance. By the late 1960s, communes numbered in the tens of thousands, involving up to a million participants (Miller, 1999, intro). They offered bounded and empirically accessible settings in which sociological problems such as alienation and solidarity could be examined as lived processes. Existing scholarship has extensively documented the outcomes of these experiments, frequently identifying patterns of dependence, hierarchy and inequality. However, these outcomes are often treated as inevitable or self-explanatory, rather than as effects produced through specific social and material practices.

This dissertation addresses that gap by shifting the analytical focus from ideological intent to lived organisation. It asks: how did hippie communes of the 1960s and 1970s attempt to realise their founding ideals in practice, and through what mechanisms were these ideals sustained, negotiated, or undermined within everyday communal life? As opposed to evaluating communes against the standard of ideological coherence, the analysis examines how contradiction itself was produced through the practical organisation of collective life.

Adopting a qualitative, historical-interpretive approach, the study draws on documentary sources across four communes - Drop City, Libre, The Farm and Montague Farm - to examine how communal life was experienced. Through thematic and comparative analysis, it focuses on three central domains: the negotiation of capitalist dependence, the emergence of informal governance, and the division of labour along gendered lines. Across these domains, the analysis demonstrates that communes did not transcend the structures they sought to reject, but instead reconfigured their relationship to them. Capitalist dependence was discursively and materially reinterpreted, hierarchy re-emerged in informal and obscured ways, and gender inequality was reproduced through the organisation of everyday labour.

The empirical chapters examine how communal ideals were negotiated across the three thematic domains, tracing the processes through which contradiction was produced and sustained in practice. In doing so, the study suggests that the significance of communes lies in what their internal tensions reveal about the persistence of power and the difficulty of organising social life otherwise.

2. Literature Review

Hippie communes of the 1960s and 1970s have been interpreted both as symbolic critiques of capitalist modernity and as experimental attempts to reorganise everyday life along egalitarian terms. This literature review examines how “dropping out” has been theorised as a form of critique, and whether such withdrawal constituted meaningful political opposition or a retreat from structural engagement. Across three interconnected strands, communes are approached as sites of capitalist critique, expressions of utopian imagination, and social formations shaped by internal contradictions of hierarchy, power, and gender.

While existing scholarship establishes the ideological ambitions and structural constraints of communal life, it offers limited insight into how these tensions were negotiated in practice. The tendency to treat the counterculture as a broad cultural phenomenon risks obscuring communes as distinct social formations, with internal dynamics diverging from the predominantly urban countercultural milieu. This dissertation, therefore, adopts a processual approach, examining communes as sites in which critique was not only articulated but continuously enacted and destabilised through practice.

Withdrawal as Capitalist Critique

Amid a crisis of legitimacy in American liberal capitalism, the dropout ethos framed withdrawal from consumerism, wage labour and bureaucratic rationality as a form of social critique (Farber, 2016; Shipley, 2013; Duncan, 2013). This rejection was moral and economic, grounded in a denunciation of what the counterculture perceived as mainstream society’s acquisitive individualism (Miller, 1999). Shipley (2013) extends this interpretation, positioning dropping out as an explicitly anti-modern impulse rooted in experiences of collective unity that challenged the perceived moral and spiritual bankruptcy of capitalism. In this sense, withdrawal functioned as a response to alienation through which alternative social orders could be enacted, oriented toward egalitarian futures.

However, the depth of this withdrawal generated its own limitations. Wallmeier (2017) notes that communards insisted that their rebellion resisted articulation, leaving their critique less politically coherent. This ambiguity can be sharpened through Hirschman’s

(1970) distinction between “exit” and “voice.” While voice denotes attempts to change an objectionable system from within, exit entails withdrawal from it. Applied here, withdrawal risks appearing less as collective political critique than as a form of individual disengagement. Hirschman’s (1970) contention that the two are inversely related suggests that the availability of exit may displace rather than mobilise collective critique. His characterisation of exit as “flight rather than fight” (p.108) situates countercultural withdrawal within a broader American cultural disposition favouring avoidance over problem-solving, raising the possibility that such practices reproduced the structures they opposed. Yet, Wallmeier (2017) complicates this, challenging Hirschman’s assumption that critique must take the form of a collective, publicly articulated voice, positioning withdrawal itself as a legitimate form of critique.

The literature thus remains divided over whether exit constituted political resistance or its attenuation, a tension that sharpens when considering the conditions that enabled withdrawal. Literature identifies commune members as predominantly white, middle-class, and well-educated (Duncan, 2013; Moretta, 2016; Miller, 1999), though this profile may reflect research visibility rather than the full range of participation. Duncan (2013) attributes this to the emergence of the counterculture at the height of the “Age of Affluence”, where family wealth and social security bankrolled dropping out. This positioned withdrawal as a form of selective renunciation, available to those whose prior access to material abundance made rejection of the system a viable choice (Miller, 1999). Wallmeier (2017) adds another layer of complexity, noting that some communards were aware of this contradiction, reflecting on their communes as insular and exclusionary spaces of racial and class homogeneity. If egalitarianism was conditioned by privilege, then withdrawal appears less as a genuine political rupture than as a socially patterned retreat.

Economic dependence on capitalist structures further undermines claims to withdrawal. Wallmeier (2017) observes that most communes were not economically self-sufficient, relying on state support or donations. Miller (1999) demonstrates that attitudes towards this dependence varied across communes as governmental subsidies such as food stamps and welfare constituted the economic bedrock of some communities, while others shunned any entanglement with the state, striving for autonomy. This divergence reveals that economic dependence was not a uniform condition but a site of ideological contestation, where the boundary between principled withdrawal and material necessity

was negotiated. Elder (2012, p.14) captures this tension in describing Drop City Commune as “perched on the edge of parasitic dependence and self-sufficiency, relying on ...consumer society’s continued surplus”. She further contends that the countercultural ethos undermined money’s symbolic power, disregarding their dependency on capitalist structures. However, Farber (2016) challenges the expectation of total rupture, recalibrating the analysis by suggesting that many participants were primarily invested in reimagining their relationship to work and consumption through cooperative labour and self-sufficiency.

Taken together, this literature positions communal withdrawal as a powerful critique of capitalist alienation, yet one fundamentally constrained by the structural limits of exit and the persistence of economic entanglement. The literature frames withdrawal both as a politically transformative critique and as a partial, escapist retreat from structural engagement. What remains underdeveloped is how these tensions were materially and socially negotiated within communal life itself. This opens space to examine how resistance to capitalism was enacted and made meaningful in practice, and by what criteria its success or limitation can be understood within the lived realities of collective life. More broadly, this shifts the analytical focus from evaluating withdrawal as transformative to examining how critique is enacted within constraint, challenging dominant understandings of political opposition as necessarily coherent and instead foregrounding its lived, socially conditioned forms.

Utopian Visions & Rurality

Where withdrawal operates as critique, utopianism represents its positive articulation, translating refusal into a transformative social project, particularly evident within rural communes. This aligns with what Storey (2019, ch.1) terms ‘radical utopianism’, a mode of practice that disrupts the taken-for-granted nature of the present, revealing it as historically contingent and therefore open to transformation. Rural communes are often understood as sites of ideological experimentation. They constituted environments where social life was informed by altruistic values, such as resource pooling (Duncan, 2013), alongside a quasi-mystical worldview that sought to dissolve boundaries between human and nature, which modern society had eroded (Shipley, 2013). Moretta (2016) similarly identifies a pursuit of Arcadian existence at the core of the hippie countercultural imagination, with rural migration functioning as a rejection of industrial modernity.

However, this framing is not uncontested. Jennings (2012) traces a historical shift from collective utopian projects toward a more introspective search for a personal 'Eden,' reflecting the changing discontents of each era. This suggests that communes functioned less as revolutionary projects than experiments in personal fulfilment. While the back-to-the-land movement provided a spatial framework through which these aspirations could be enacted in constructing social organisation from scratch (Sadler, 2006), it also points to rurality as an idealised space that may have obscured the practical constraints of communal life. Utopianism, beyond mere romanticisation, was pursued through lived experimentation. As one contemporary journalist described, rural communes were understood as "testing grounds, self-experimental laboratories" for alternative forms of life, arguably more attuned to the human condition (Hedgepath, cited in Moretta, 2016, p.278).

Debates over prefiguration further complicate this. Bookchin (1977, p.16) argues that communal life can function as a prefigurative means toward revolutionary change, suggesting that "dropping out becomes a mode of dropping in" to experimental social relations, while cautioning that such practices remain politically limited if treated as ends in themselves. Empirical accounts reinforce this ambivalence. Vaisey (2007) suggests that alternative social relations required sustained cultivation rather than emerging organically, while Jennings (2012) emphasises their modest and experimental character, oriented toward constructing meaningful alternatives in everyday life. Utopianism thus appears as a provisional process, suspended between revolutionary aspiration and everyday experimentation.

Collectively, this literature positions rural communes as sites of both utopian experimentation and practical limitation, yet remains divided over whether they constituted meaningful alternatives to capitalist social relations. Less attention, however, has been paid to how utopian ideals were translated and negotiated within communal life itself, particularly when they required adaptation or abandonment. This leaves space for an analysis of a more unsettling question: whether capitalist social relations persist not despite but within radical attempts at their rejection, embedded in everyday practice and individual disposition alike.

Power & Inequality

When utopian ideals were enacted in practice, they generated internal contradictions through which hierarchy and power re-emerged. Existing scholarship is divided over whether this reflects the failure of communes to realise egalitarian ideals or the structural persistence of hierarchy within collective organisation. Jameson (2004) argues that even explicitly anti-hierarchical projects generate forms of governance and regulation, whether formal or informal. Miller (1999) substantiates this, demonstrating that communes required economic arrangements and systems of coordination to sustain collective living. Sternfeld (2010) similarly traces how the initial utopian vitality of communes such as Drop City gradually eroded under material pressures. This created precisely the conditions for informal authority to consolidate in the absence of accountable governance structures, suggesting a displacement of hierarchy rather than its erasure.

This persistence can also be understood as the reconstitution of underlying social conditions. Drawing on Paul de Man, Shipley (2013) argues that despite ambitions to dissolve ego-bound and hierarchical distinctions, attempts to rupture from the past were inherently incomplete, as existing power relations inevitably re-emerge. Reinforcing this, Scott (2017) observes that many of the relations communes sought to escape were reproduced within them, underscoring the limits of withdrawal as a strategy for structural transformation. Yet, the processes which enabled power to be produced and legitimised in practice, and ultimately how a generation committed to rejecting authority came to reproduce it, remain insufficiently developed.

At the level of practice, the necessity of organisation sat in tension with anti-hierarchical commitments. Moretta (2016) documents the emergence of charismatic authority within The Farm commune, where Stephen Gaskin's leadership produced structures of obedience that contradicted its anti-authoritarian ethos, illustrating how power was reconstituted through interpersonal relations. Wallmeier (2017) similarly argues that reliance on spontaneous organisation often masks a persisting hierarchy. The collapse of Drop City under conditions of minimal organisation, and the subsequent introduction of selective membership at Libre commune, further indicate that some degree of structure was required for communal durability (Elder, 2012; Jennings, 2012). These cases suggest that organisation was a practical condition of communal survival, with the literature

indicating towards an implicit assumption among communards that egalitarianism could be sustained in the absence of structure.

Gender provides a particularly acute lens through which these power dynamics are revealed. Miller (1999) takes a gradualist perspective, arguing that the predominance of male commune founders generated structural inertia that delayed gender equality, while acknowledging that women's proximity within communal settings enabled processes of consciousness-raising and incremental shifts toward greater equality. In contrast, Scott (2017) argues that gender hierarchies were embedded within the material and ideological organisation of communal life itself. He illustrates that divisions were naturalised through practice, as assumptions about women's physical incapacity for intensive labour confined them to domestic tasks without explicit enforcement. This aligns with Delphy's (1984) critique of naturalism, whereby women's supposed physical incapacity is treated as an ideological explanation to naturalise a socially organised division of labour.

Feminist critiques sharpen this further. Piercy (1969) highlights how women's labour within radical movements remains invisible, challenging the notion of communal labour as egalitarian sharing. Within communes, the fusion of domestic and productive spheres intensified this dynamic, concealing exploitation beneath the rhetoric of collective living. However, Lemke-Santangelo (2009) complicates this picture, arguing that the countercultural context reconfigured the value and significance of women's labour despite the persistence of essentialist structures. Building on this, Duncan (2013) highlights the emergence of cultural feminism as a site of agency within these constraints. Gender relations thus emerge as neither regressive nor emancipatory, but internally contradictory, simultaneously reproducing and reworking existing hierarchies.

This literature demonstrates that power within communes was not an aberration but a constitutive feature of their organisation, emerging through the very conditions that sought to negate it. Yet these dynamics are often catalogued as contradictions without interrogating how power was accepted, whether dissent was expressed, or what its persistence reveals about domination in social life more broadly. Gender, in particular, is frequently identified as an area of communal contradiction instead of being theorised as an active mechanism that directly produces and sustains power in everyday practice. What remains at stake is how this contradiction endured, and whether it adapted within attempts to construct alternative social orders.

Research Gap

Existing scholarship establishes communes as socially consequential phenomena, yet tends to treat them either as symbolic moments of cultural rupture or as structurally constrained failures, rather than as complex and internally differentiated social formations. Though the literature identifies key ideological ambitions and structural conditions, it remains limited in examining how these tensions were negotiated in practice. Scholarship often stabilises its analysis at the level of representation or outcome, leaving the mechanisms through which contradiction was managed or reproduced insufficiently explored.

Consequently, three interrelated gaps can be identified. First, while communal withdrawal is frequently framed as an ideological critique or a structural constraint, there is comparatively less engagement with the discursive processes that members adopted to reconcile contradictions between ideals and lived experience. Second, although hierarchy is frequently framed as either structurally inevitable or as evidence of organisational failure, the emergence of informal authority within interpersonal relations and routine practices remains insufficiently examined. Third, while gender inequality is acknowledged, the processes through which gendered divisions of labour were organised and made meaningful in practice remain under-theorised.

This dissertation, therefore, asks: how did hippie communes of the 1960s-70s attempt to realise their founding ideals in practice, and through what mechanisms were tensions between aspiration and lived experience produced and sustained? By conceptualising communes as processual social formations, it shifts analytical focus from what communes represented to how they functioned as lived organisational systems, and what this reveals about the persistence of power within attempts to construct alternative social orders.

Communes provide critical empirical sites through which to interrogate broader questions concerning the viability of alternative social arrangements and the limits of withdrawal as critique. By foregrounding the relationship between ideological intention and lived practice, this dissertation re-conceptualises contradiction as an ongoing social process, extending beyond the specific case of hippie communes to offer insight into the persistence of power within anti-hierarchical environments more broadly. Ultimately, what

appears contradictory within communes reveals a deeper sociological problem: that attempts to transcend dominant structures remain entangled in the very relations they seek to overcome.

3. Methodology

Research Design & Epistemological Framework

This study employed a qualitative, historical-interpretive design, blending thematic analysis with comparative case study logic. Following Yilmaz's (2013) account of qualitative inquiry, the study approached reality as socially constructed, where knowledge is context-dependent, and meaning is produced. The empirical material consisted of documentary sources, which were treated as situated artefacts shaped by specific assumptions and intentions of their production (Mogalakwe, 2006; Prior, 2003). These conditions were particularly salient given the retrospective and self-representational nature of the sources themselves. Accordingly, ideological and biographical inflections were approached as constitutive of the data.

Disjunctures between what communes claimed and what they practised were not treated as factual discrepancies or distortions of hindsight, as they constitute how meaning is made, managed and contested over time. Social constructionism, therefore, provides the epistemological basis for treating these tensions as substantive. Interpretation was guided by Scott's (1990) distinction between literal and interpretive reading, the former identifying stated practices and the latter situating them within broader social and ideological frameworks. The analysis examined how tensions were negotiated by members and how these interpretations shifted across contexts and perspectives. This enabled the study to assess how organisational and ideological mechanisms intended to produce egalitarian communal life generated, through their enactment, the conditions for hierarchy and uneven power relations to emerge.

Commune Selection

Four communes were purposively selected, primarily informed by maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002), enabling systematic comparison across structural dimensions. The sampling frame was bounded by documentary availability, as only communes with accessible first-hand sources were eligible. As Miller (1999, intro.) cautions, the diversity of hippie communal forms renders generalisation inherently precarious, necessitating a purposive sampling strategy over a representative one. The sample was therefore constructed to compare communes broadly associated with ideals such as anti-

capitalism and egalitarianism, across diverse structural conditions spanning scale, organisational form, geographic location and economic strategy. Variation functioned at the level of case selection, ensuring that similarities observed across different settings could be interpreted as analytically significant.

- **Drop City** (Colorado) was selected as a foundational experimental commune, emerging in 1965 (Curl, 2021), characterised by minimal formal organisation, welfare reliance, scavenging, and radical openness. It enabled examination of how anti-capitalist identity was constructed and sustained under conditions of material dependence.
- **Libre** (Colorado) emerged in 1968 (Price, 2004) following discontent among Drop City members, offering a smaller-scale follow-on case for within-context comparison. Libre's experimentation with evolving countercultural practices, particularly in response to the perceived failure of Drop City (Azzarito, 2012), made it valuable for examining whether Drop City's structural tensions were resolved through adaptation or reproduced in modified forms.
- **The Farm** (Tennessee) represents a large-scale institutionalised commune, emerging in 1971 with approximately 300 members and expanding to around 1500 members (Rudder, 2013). Its subsequent restructuring into a cooperative in 1983, following significant debt, illuminates tensions between communal aspiration and material sustainability. Under Stephen Gaskin's spiritually grounded leadership, it enabled examination of how ideologically legitimised authority became institutionalised within an ostensibly egalitarian setting (Moretta, 2016).
- **Montague Farm** (Massachusetts), established in 1968 (Diamond, 1971) by members of Liberation News Service, was selected for its explicitly ideological founding and informal small-scale structure. It enabled analysis of how radical intent translated into practice, while surfacing micro-dynamics of informal authority and labour that risk becoming obscured within larger, more institutionalised communes.

Margaret Grundstein's (2015) memoir constitutes a purposively selected supplementary source, incorporated for its psychological frankness and evidential depth. Recalling life at two minimally documented small-scale communes in Oregon, her account is arguably less shaped by a retrospective impulse to sustain a specific communal identity than

sources tied to more publicly prominent sites such as Drop City or The Farm. Where her evidence corroborated patterns identified across the core cases, it strengthened the credibility of findings as structurally produced rather than solely context-specific phenomena.

Data Collection & Sources

The research question requires access to three distinct registers: what communal ideals were articulated, whether practices diverged from those ideals, and how members evaluated that divergence. Data collection involved the systematic, purposive selection of documentary sources on the basis of relevance and capacity to generate meaningful insight (Bowen, 2009), spanning archival commune publications, documentary transcripts, contemporary and retrospective memoirs, and an online blog, as displayed in Figure 1. This diversified corpus reflects Lemke-Santangelo's (2009) and Miller's (1999) contention that no single source type can adequately capture the diversity of communal experience.

DROP CITY Colorado · 1965	
<i>Drop City Newsletter</i> (Drop City, 1967–1968)	Commune publication
<i>Drop City</i> (Grossman, 2012)	Documentary
<i>Memories of Drop City</i> (Curl, 2021)	Memoir
MONTAGUE FARM Massachusetts · 1968	
<i>What the Trees Said</i> (Diamond, 1971)	Memoir
<i>Far Out: Life on & After the Commune</i> (Light, 2024)	Documentary
Supplementary source: <i>Naked in the Woods</i> (Grundstein, 2015) — Retrospective	
LIBRE Colorado · 1968	
<i>Huerfano</i> (Price, 2004)	Memoir
THE FARM Tennessee · 1971	
<i>Hey Beatnik</i> (The Farm, 1974)	Commune publication
<i>40 Years on The Farm</i> (Rudder, 2012)	Documentary
<i>Voluntary Peasants (Volumes 1–5)</i> (Stiriss, 2018)	Memoir
<i>Growing up on a Hippie Commune</i> (Celeste, 2012–2016)	Blog
Key: Contemporary source Retrospective source	

Figure 1: Selected Commune Case Studies and Primary Source Corpus

Archival commune publications provide the most contemporaneous access to ideological articulation and organisational practice. The *Drop City Newsletter*, accessed via johncurl.net and comprising four issues published between 1966 and 1967, and The Farm's *Hey Beatnik!*, accessed via thefarmcommunity.com, and published in 1974, were produced by the communes themselves. Their rhetorical function renders them analytically valuable as evidence of how communes constructed and legitimised their identity, enabling a disjuncture between public articulation and lived practice to be examined.

Documentaries provided mediated oral testimony and were transcribed in full for analysis. *Drop City* (Grossman, 2012), *40 years on The Farm* (Rudder, 2013) and *Far Out: Life on & After the Commune* (Light, 2024) include retrospective accounts from multiple former residents, allowing distinctions to be explored between lived experience and public articulation. This also broadened the range of personal narratives and affective dimensions within the dataset.

The blog *Growing up on a Hippy Commune*, published by Celeste between 2012 and 2016, offers a distinct vantage point as a child who experienced The Farm's norms as ambient as opposed to ideologically chosen. Her account is potentially less shaped by ideological performance or retrospective reckoning than other sources.

Retrospective memoirs provided rich accounts of lived experience, enabling analysis of narrative reconstruction and the management of contradiction with hindsight. These included John Curl's *Memories of Drop City* (2021), Roberta Price's *Huerfano* (2004) on Libre, Melvyn Stiriss' five-part *Voluntary Peasants* (2018) on The Farm, and Margaret Grundstein's *Naked in the Woods* (2015). Stephen Diamond's 'What the Trees Said' (1971) is the sole contemporary memoir in the dataset, capturing experience at Montague Farm from within the period itself.

Direct contact was also attempted with several authors and commune-associated figures in pursuit of supplementary testimony. Timothy Miller, Roberta Price, Melvyn Stiriss and John Curl, to name a few, were contacted through email, website messaging portals and LinkedIn. None of these attempts yielded a response. Despite dead ends, these efforts constitute part of the evidentiary record of the research process. The study remained grounded in naturally occurring documents, which, as Payne and Payne (2004) highlight,

are not produced in response to research intervention and are therefore less susceptible to researcher-induced bias at the point of data generation.

Analysis Strategy

The six-step thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was utilised alongside comparative case study logic following Priya (2021). Thematic analysis was selected because its flexible yet systematic structure accommodated a heterogeneous documentary corpus within a single analytical procedure. Its sequential structure of immersion, coding, thematising, reviewing, defining and writing also provided discipline against the risk of interpretive drift across a vast body of biographical material. Its capacity to operate across manifest and latent meanings was essential, given the study's concern with reading beneath explicit discourse. The analysis was therefore inductively oriented but conceptually sensitised, as prior engagement with literature on the communal era oriented attention toward particular tensions without predetermining their significance. Yet the specific forms these tensions took, and the mechanisms through which they operated, were shaped through sustained engagement with the data.

Initial engagement was guided by broad questions concerning communal withdrawal, including what members believed they were constructing, how they framed opposition to mainstream society, and how this shaped communal organisation. The data subsequently directed the analysis toward how contradictions between egalitarian ideals and lived practice were justified within everyday life.

The analytical process required sustained engagement with predominantly descriptive sources. Memoirs, in particular, contained extensive detail on activities such as meals, landscape, weather, building progress and interpersonal interactions. Such material was treated as evidential only where routine description illuminated the structural tension under investigation. For example, where meal organisation exposed a gendered division of labour, or where the sourcing of building materials disclosed anti-capitalist discourse. This distinction informed the identification of analytically relevant passages.

This orientation shaped the first analytical phase, in which each source was examined thematically in isolation through iterative reading, with coding deliberately open to recurring contradictions, disputes, roles, perceptions and silences. Codes were

subsequently consolidated into three thematic areas with the greatest analytical density and sociological significance: the negotiation of capitalist dependence, the emergence of informal authority, and the reproduction of gendered labour. Other themes, including drug use and sexual relationships, emerged during open coding but were set aside where the evidence base was thinner and their relevance to the research question was weaker.

In the second phase, comparative case analysis was applied across the four communes. Following Yin (2014, as cited in Priya, 2021), cross-case comparison strengthened analytical robustness by enabling patterns identified in one case to be examined across others. Comparison was therefore used to assess the consistency of emerging interpretations, with similar tensions across structurally diverse communes interpreted as indicative of broader structural dynamics. For example, gender inequality initially observed in Price's (2004) account was interpreted as structurally significant only when comparable patterns appeared in Grundstein's (2015) account within a different communal context. Divergences were also treated as analytically generative, revealing how communes managed similar contradictions through different mechanisms such as discursive reframing or informal authority. Comparison, therefore, operated as a continuous analytical logic throughout the thematic analysis, with each case used to interrogate and refine interpretations developed in others.

Reflexivity & Ethics

Reflexivity was integral to the analytical process, requiring critical awareness of how self-representational sources, shaped by strong ideological investments, could influence interpretation. As Lemke-Santangelo (2009) notes, retrospective hippie commune accounts are vulnerable to selective recall, while contemporary sources may be glamorised by youthful idealism. Such partiality was treated as analytically significant, since members' efforts to reframe or justify contradictions of communal life were central to the study. This nonetheless required methodological caution, particularly during cross-case comparison, with interpretations revised where accounts appeared unusually idiosyncratic or unsupported by the wider literature. Care was also taken to avoid selective quotation and misconstruing intended meanings (Silverman, 2017).

Despite sources being publicly available, ethical care remained necessary as several contained ideologically charged or personally sensitive narratives. These were

represented with attention to context and complexity, avoiding reductive interpretation or distortion of members' meanings.

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. The sample and dataset were constrained by the availability and manageability of source material within the scope of the project. The focus on four communes, therefore, reflected both the need for comparative depth and the practical limits of locating and analysing sufficient material across a wider range of cases. This created a bias toward communes that left substantial documentary traces, whether through commune-produced publications or members' accounts, potentially privileging more visible and self-articulated forms of communal life. The evidential base was also uneven across cases. Libre, in particular, rests on a narrower foundation, though its inclusion was supported by references in the Drop City documentary (Grossman, 2012) and Curl's memoir (2021).

As a documentary study, the analysis was limited to narrated and recorded accounts. This suited the focus on interpretation by members, but left embodied and unarticulated dimensions of communal life only partially accessible. Finally, as Polat (2025) notes, themes are analytical constructs shaped through interpretive decisions, meaning alternative coding choices could have produced differently configured findings. While the analysis was systematic and comparative, interpretive plurality remains an inherent limitation of qualitative research.

4. Findings & Discussion

The following findings are organised across three thematic areas: the negotiation of capitalist dependence, the reproduction of hierarchy through informal governance, and the persistence of gendered inequality. Read alongside critical theory, the primary accounts suggest that communes were not spaces outside of capitalism, but sites where its pressures were renegotiated. Capitalist logics became reconfigured, hierarchy was obscured, and gender inequality was reproduced through the material conditions of communal life. Together, these findings show that the limits of egalitarianism were embedded in the conditions of withdrawal itself.

4.1 Negotiating Capitalism

The evidence suggests that communes' anti-capitalist ambitions were only partially realised. Whilst rejection of capitalism was foundational to hippie communalism, the communes analysed did not transcend these structures so much as to renegotiate their relationship to them. External support and informal exchange were often re-articulated as resistance, allowing members to claim autonomy from capitalist values despite material reliance.

Dependence as Resistance

At Drop City, discursive reframing of capitalist dependence is particularly evident. Residents recalled negotiating for discarded materials and scavenging as forms of ingenuity (Grossman, 2012), with contemporaneous accounts describing the pile of material collected from consumer society's waste as a beautiful and aesthetic site (Curl, 1967, p.3). Beyond Drop City, Grundstein (2015, p.167) evoked scavenging as "doing America a favor" by clearing capitalism's surplus. Welfare was similarly reinterpreted. Peter Rabbit's claim that government funds received by Drop City, diverted money from the Vietnam War (Grossman, 2012), reframed economic dependence as political resistance. Price (2004, ch.11) echoed this sentiment, describing the obtaining of food stamps as "not a bad way for our government to spend its money." Dependence was thus systematically inverted through moral reclassification, recasting reliance on external systems as ethical refusal.

Festinger's (1962) theory of cognitive dissonance offers an analytical lens here, positing that conflicting beliefs and behaviours generate a psychological discomfort, motivating individuals to restore consistency through reinterpretation. Such dissonance, however, is not always fully resolved and may persist even if it is managed. The aestheticisation of waste and moral reframing of welfare can therefore be read as strategies of dissonance reduction, reconciling material dependence with anti-capitalist identity without fully resolving the underlying contradiction.

This dynamic can also be situated within a longer American tradition of self-reliance. In *Walden*, Thoreau (2004) proposes that economic constraint is often self-imposed through the unexamined acceptance of socially constructed needs. Communal claims to autonomy similarly required redefining necessity. Yet Thoreau's framework also exposes the limits of communal withdrawal. While Thoreau presents simplicity as a means of escaping economic constraint, the evidence suggests that communes remained structurally entangled within the systems they critiqued. Dependence endured in reconfigured forms and required continual justification. As Elder (2012) contends, Drop City occupied a middle-ground position between self-reliance and free-rider dependence. The evidence suggests that this tension was acknowledged, intensifying the need to preserve ideological coherence through reframing.

Strain & Shame

Reframing dependence produced psychological strain alongside political justification. Grundstein's (2015) recollections introduce shame as a significant dimension of withdrawal. Despite justifying welfare by describing corporations and the government as "the thieves" (p.123), she also recalled hiding food stamps until checkout and trying to escape the discomfort quickly (p.83). Her admission that "below my bravado... sat shame" (p.83) complicates claims of liberation associated with such practices. Similarly, Price (2004, ch.11) recalled discomfort when applying for food stamps. These accounts suggest that anti-capitalist commitments coexisted with residual expectations of self-sufficiency.

Weber's (2001) notion of the capitalist "calling" clarifies this shame. Labour and self-sufficiency operate as economic practices in addition to moral obligations, so deviation

can produce material insecurity and a sense of personal failure. This tension deepens when read alongside Bellah et al.'s (1996) identification of a persistent tension in American culture between individual self-reliance and communal obligation. While mutual support remains a cultural ideal, the discourse of independence tends to carry greater weight in regard to how individuals understand themselves. Welfare dependence thus became difficult to reconcile with communards' sense of self, explaining the strain and shame evident across these accounts.

This finding also reveals the durability of classed dispositions. Shipley (2013) argues that withdrawal remained shaped by mainstream society's psychological and historical residues. The evidence shows how these residues operated subjectively. Grundstein (2015, p.83) notes that she identified more with the distributors of wealth than its receivers, suggesting that welfare dependence unsettled inherited middle-class attachments to stability and self-sufficiency. Given that many commune members derived from middle-class backgrounds (Duncan, 2013; Moretta, 2016; Wallmeier, 2017; Miller, 1999), voluntary poverty did not erase the dispositions attached to those origins. Withdrawal was often sustained by forms of security that remained unevenly available, including the possibility of return. Price's (2004) desire to return to her bourgeois parents' home when ill with the flu (ch.3, 27) illustrates how familial security could remain available as a fallback, even within the rejection of bourgeois life. Curl (2021, p.276) makes this structural limit explicit, arguing that the rural movement was largely inaccessible to working-class urban countercultural members. As a result, "communes would not be a giant step to social revolution...the back-to-the-land movement became a question of lifestyle" (p.276). Class, therefore, shaped withdrawal both internally, through dispositions carried into communal life, and externally, through unequal access to the material conditions that made withdrawal possible.

This reframing of welfare as moral redistribution functioned as both a political stance and a psychological strategy. Sykes and Matza's (1957) concept of neutralisation is useful here, as justifications can suspend internalised norms, enabling deviation while preserving a sense of moral legitimacy. Communes thus became sites of economic experimentation and ethical negotiation. Their limits were shaped by the social dispositions members carried with them, which proved more difficult to shed than the structures they sought to escape.

Self-Sufficiency & its Limits

Comparison with The Farm demonstrates the diverse constraints of economic independence from capitalism, even within a commune committed to self-sufficiency. Unlike Drop City, The Farm rejected state aid in favour of member donations, presenting this refusal as evidence of autonomy and moral purity (Stiriss, 2018, ch.50; The Farm, 1974, p.5,17). Its emphasis on collective labour and agrarian independence placed it further from capitalist structures than the other communes studied. Yet this relative independence generated new pressures. Members were unaware of rising debt caused by overpopulation, weak commodity income, high external spending by Stephen Gaskin and covert expenses, culminating in over \$300,000 of debt, and ultimately forcing the commune's restructuring into a cooperative in 1983 (Stiriss, 2018, ch.54). Ideological ambition therefore delayed a reckoning with financial instability, as claims to autonomy masked deeper structural fragility.

As Weber (2001) suggests, the pervasive nature of modern economic life, structured through processes of rationalisation, means that even those who attempt to step outside its framework remain constrained by its material demands. On The Farm, collective labour became an ethical duty, retaining aspects of the "spirit of capitalism" through discipline and obligation. This echoes Weber's (2001) account of Puritan asceticism, where work becomes morally virtuous beyond its economic function. Although rooted in Christianity, Weber contends, this ethic persists beyond its origins, shaping conduct even in settings that consciously reject the system from which it emerged. Farber's (2013) discussion of "right livelihood," a Buddhist principle linking ethical conduct to work, similarly shows how members reframed labour as meaningful communal practice rather than alienated employment. This moralisation of labour placed habits of productivity and duty within an alternative ideological framework.

The Farm's internal economic organisation shows how anti-capitalist ideals could obscure material tensions. The *Hey Beatnik* publication states that "if you live on The Farm you give The Farm everything" (The Farm, 1974, p.21), drawing on the biblical Book of Acts, to frame resource pooling as a spiritual covenant. Stephen Gaskin also spiritualised labour to motivate genuine collective effort (Rudder, 2013). When labour was framed as love, dissent could appear selfish and spiritually deficient.

As poverty became understood as part of dropping out (Rudder, 2013), members reoriented their views on scarcity. However, economic calculation prevailed. Reflecting on communal life more broadly, Grundstein (2015, p.101) recalls “endless calculations” were made concerning money and contribution, processes “so ever-present they were invisible”. Moreover, retrospective accounts of concealed valuable possessions such as jewellery (Celeste, 2013) and former members’ economic critiques of The Farm’s ideological overreach (Stiriss, 2018, Epilogue), suggest that private attachment and resentment persisted under communalism. Calculative habits survived even within an avowedly anti-capitalist framework.

Synthesis

Across the cases, withdrawal did not eliminate capitalist logics; they persisted in altered forms. Weber’s (2001) argument that modern economic life operates as an internalised mode of conduct is therefore central. Dependence was discursively reframed as resistance, sustaining anti-capitalist identity despite material reliance. This produced shame for some members, as internalised norms of self-sufficiency persisted. Even in attempts at autonomy, calculation remained present in everyday practice.

Gibson-Graham’s critique (2006) of capitalist inevitability provides a useful lens, while the evidence extends it. She contends that capitalism’s all-encompassing character makes it difficult to imagine a society entirely absent from it. Capitalism here persisted as an internalised habit. Members continued to reproduce practices of valuation and accumulation, unable to entirely let go of the lessons capitalism had ingrained within them. Communes disrupted capitalism more effectively at the level of culture than at the level of conduct. In this sense, as Farber (2016) argues, communes reimaged capitalism more than they dismantled it. As Duncan (2013) suggests, they nevertheless achieved a degree of cultural and social distance from mainstream norms. The key tension lay in the gap between what members believed they had escaped and what they continued to enact.

4.2 Governance & Authority

The counterculture’s rejection of hierarchy and bureaucratic governance is sufficiently documented; however, communes were never structureless. Freeman, in *The Tyranny of*

Structurelessness (2013, p.232) argues that “there is no such thing as a structureless group,” since all collectives generate arrangements that distribute power, often without accountability. The evidence supports this, but also portrays how power became socially and materially embedded. Where organisation remained informal, access to decision-making was uneven, privileging those already in positions of social recognition and influence. The limits of egalitarianism, therefore, lie in the difficulty of disputing power once it has become informal.

Structurelessness & Informal Authority

Montague Farm demonstrates how the rejection of formal organisation could produce informal authority. Initial attempts to avoid schedules and imposed structure led to “disorganisation and chaos,” leaving projects unfinished (Diamond, 1971, p.38). Leadership coalesced around Marshall through his self-identification as a commander, despite no democratic vote. His authority helped coordinate an environment where “lack of organisation... is usually death,” yet it also generated resentment (p.38). Leadership was both necessary and ideologically incompatible with egalitarian ideals. Here, the refusal to formalise structure clouded accountability, allowing power to operate without regulation.

Drop City reflects a similar pattern, as residents rejected the idea of a boss, while acknowledging ongoing power struggles (Grossman, 2012; Curl, 2021, p.193). Authority became diffuse, operating through informal channels. Grundstein’s account extends this. Her reflection that “living without a leader, too many egos for anyone to be a follower, meant inaction became our action” (2015, p.84) captures the limits of consensus-based governance. Without agreed roles, collective decision-making stalled, and egalitarianism slipped into individualism. However, power did not remain evenly distributed, as she notes “someone took initiative, usually one of the men” (p.169), revealing how informal organisation reproduced masculine authority under the appearance of spontaneity. This supports Freeman’s (2013) argument that structurelessness masks hierarchy by allowing informal criteria of belonging and influence to govern participation. In the absence of formal governance, power followed existing lines of social capital, favouring those already recognised in wider society as entitled to coordinate.

Material & Charismatic Power

Land ownership exposed another limit of communal egalitarianism. Where land was not collectively owned, members recognised it as a source of uneven influence. Grundstein (2015, p.15) described land ownership as the “ultimate nemesis,” suggesting that private property continued to shape communal life even where ideologically rejected. At Drop City, some residents dismissed legal title as irrelevant (Curl, 2021, p.108), while others recognised that it conferred power: “Legally you’ve got all the power. Do you want us to pretend that you don’t?” (Curl, 2021, p.107). Miller (1999, ch.7) similarly notes that communes rejected private property in principle, yet remained constrained by ownership frameworks rooted in capitalist law. Without formal structures, these tensions remained contingent on informal negotiation. Attempts at resolution emerged as Drop City sought to redraft the land as “forever free and open to all people” (Curl, 2021, p.284) while The Farm held the land in common (Rudder, 2013).

If land ownership exposed material power, The Farm shows how informal authority became ideologically obscured. Publicly, Stephen Gaskin rejected the label of leader, identifying as a teacher while framing governance as consensus-based (The Farm, 1974, p.104). Accounts suggest that he functioned as the ultimate decision-maker. In moments of conflict, Gaskin was the judge, and his authority was widely accepted (Celeste, 2012). Moretta (2016) substantiates this, noting that Gaskin consolidated an authority that invited little challenge. One former member described “the internal governance of these groups were as corrupt as the bigger government” (Rudder, 2013), indicating that anti-authoritarian rhetoric did not prevent hierarchy.

The Farm, therefore, shows how denying leadership can legitimise authority. By recasting rules as “agreements” (Stiriss, 2018, ch.14), Gaskin softened his authority through moral and spiritual framing. His self-appointed role as the commune’s “enlightened monarch” (Stiriss, 2018, ch.18) formalised what had been implicit. Gaskin mediated what outside information entered the commune, producing an intellectual dependency (Stiriss, 2018, ch.23), shifting power into knowledge itself. Miller (1999) frames leadership as a functional response to the inefficiencies of consensus governance, but The Farm portrays how such leadership could become ideologically justified. Weber’s (2019) concept of charismatic authority is therefore instructive here. Legitimacy rests on followers’ belief in a leader’s exceptional qualities, making obedience personal and grounded in recognition. Here,

Gaskin's authority was difficult to contest as it operated through belief as much as organisation.

Openness & Governance

The commitment to openness intensified these tensions. Miller (1992) notes that inclusivity was central to the hippie ethos and tied to the transformative promise of shared experience. In practice, open membership proved destabilising. At Drop City, it brought an influx of individuals with diverse motivations, ranging from collective living and political transformation to temporary escape (Curl, 2021, p.174). Attempts to impose a population limit were negated through loopholes such as intimate relationships. Resources became strained, and infrastructure deteriorated, utopian aims gradually dissolved, and many original members decided to leave (Grossman, 2012). As Elder (2012, p.15) argues, Drop City's open-door policy "bankrupted" its subsistence model, shifting attention from artistic production to survival. Openness produced resource scarcity and organisational strain, weakening the conditions necessary for equality.

Tönnies' (2001) conception of *Gemeinschaft* encapsulates this breakdown, suggesting that community requires more than co-presence. He describes a common spirit, rooted in mutual understanding and shared habit, that binds individuals into a coherent social whole. Vaisey (2007) makes a related point, arguing that structural mechanisms cannot generate a genuine "we-feeling" without an underlying shared moral order. Unrestricted entry invited transient participants with little commitment to the founding ethos, diluting shared norms and eroding the collective frame of reference on which solidarity depended. As Grundstein (2015, p.129) recalls, "all you had to do was show up," resulting in the arrival of people described as "lonely" or "mentally infirm." Openness aligned with the utopian desire for solidarity, yet undermined the conditions necessary for its maintenance.

Confronted with these pressures, communes gradually reintroduced regulation. At Montague Farm, openness gave way to exclusion, evidenced by Diamond (1971, p.62) stating that "the survival of the farm was dependent on the departure of the free-loaders." Libre went further, implementing selective membership and less formalised expectations of contribution (Price, 2004), producing noticeably greater stability. Price observed "for every visitor who contributes to our endeavour, there are fifty who suck us up dry" (ch. 14). The Farm also used informal meetings to pressure disruptive or non-contributing

members to conform or leave (Celeste, 2012). These practices were framed in moral terms, yet they functioned as informal governance mechanisms.

Ostrom's (1990) conception of collective systems is useful here. She identifies defined membership and the capacity to exclude non-contributors as central to limiting free-riding and resource depletion. Communes resisted such boundaries in principle, but arrived at them in practice. Although openness was ideologically central, it became destabilising without shared norms and conditions of participation. As Echols (2002) argues, dominant cultural values remained deeply entangled within the counterculture. The findings suggest that communal survival required the reintroduction of boundaries, often mirroring the organisational forms they sought to reject.

Synthesis

The synthesis these findings invite is that communes mistook anti-authoritarianism for an escape from institutional formation. Rejecting formal governance relocated power into interpersonal and material arrangements, where it became harder to identify and contest. Freeman's (2013) critique of structurelessness and Ostrom's (1990) account of durable commons converge here, showing that collective life depends on agreed boundaries and rules that can be revised by those they bind. Communes recovered the principles they had initially resisted in response to disorganisation. Openness produced the same contradiction, weakening collective identity once detached from shared norms. Echols' (2002) account of prefigurative politics sharpens the tension, as communes sought to enact an alternative society in the present, despite lacking the organisational forms required to sustain it. Their significance lies in exposing the institutional labour that anti-authoritarian groups must perform. Freedom had to be organised to remain collective.

4.3 Gendered Labour

The pursuit of egalitarianism was constrained by the persistence of gendered labour, as women's subordination in wider society carried into communes despite their commitment to social withdrawal. As Echols (2002, p.50) argues, the counterculture's eccentricity often obscured its attachment to dominant social norms, including gender. The evidence shows a consistent disjuncture between egalitarian rhetoric and gendered lived reality, aligning

with existing scholarship (Miller, 1999; Lemke-Santangelo, 2009; Duncan, 2013; Scott, 2017). This section extends the literature by demonstrating how gender inequality was reproduced through the interaction of material conditions and communal ideology, thereby naturalising women's subordination.

Across all communes examined, domestic labour remained primarily feminised. Women performed most of the cleaning, dish washing, cooking and childcare, while men undertook physically demanding work such as construction. These roles often operated through implicit expectation. At Drop City, one woman was told, "you'll be in the cooking rotation, of course. All the women share the cooking. And helping clean the kitchen" (Curl, 2021, p.106). This reflects Delphy's (1984) materialist analysis of domestic labour as work that becomes appropriated and naturalised through social organisation. Similarly, at Montague Farm, Diamond (1971, p.30-31) recalled: "None of the men ever washes dishes or hardly cooks," while at The Farm, "It was usually the ladies who made dinner" (Celeste, 2013). These accounts show that gendered labour divisions were embedded in everyday practice.

Dissatisfaction Without Transformation

Women's dissatisfaction with essentialist norms was evident across the communes. At Drop City, one woman retrospectively reflected that her cooking was "more important in the community," which she found deeply unfulfilling (Grossman, 2012). Diamond (1971, p.30) records a female resident's exhaustion at "having to look at and wash all the tons of dirty dishes," while Curl (2021, p.116) described women collectively recognising the disproportionate burden of cleaning left to them. At Libre, Price (2004, ch.4) stated: "If I have to stay in the kitchen anymore, I'll have a nervous breakdown." These accounts demonstrate that feminised domestic labour was recognised and contested at the level of individual experience.

What remains striking is the limited translation of dissatisfaction into structural change. Price's (2004) account of Libre is significant because gendered divisions continued despite the commune's development from Drop City's shortcomings. Even where there was an opportunity to adapt, change did not follow. The persistence of gender inequality therefore, cannot be explained by gradual emergence alone, as Miller (1999) suggests. It reflects a deeper inability to convert individual critique into collective reorganisation.

This limitation can be linked to the ideological orientation of communal life. While second-wave feminism was developing a vocabulary that understood women's oppression as structural and political (Echols, 2019), there is limited evidence that such frameworks were consistently mobilised within communes. The countercultural rejection of hierarchy and "bourgeois" politics may have made formal mechanisms of contestation, such as voting or policy-making, ideologically suspect. Curl (2021, p.159), for instance, records the claim that "voting is bourgeois." Withdrawal from mainstream society further limited access to external political frameworks, with accounts describing minimal interest in newspapers, radio or the outside world (Light, 2024; Diamond, 1971, p.26; Stiriss, 2018, ch. 15; Grundstein, 2015, p.113).

This disengagement offers one possible explanation for why broader feminist ideas appear unevenly translated into communal practice. Sarachild (1975) conceptualises consciousness-raising as a collective practice through which shared experience becomes political understanding. Such a process requires sustained and organised interaction. This complicates Miller's (1999) suggestion that the concentration of women within communes could facilitate consciousness-raising. Awareness of inequality was present, but shared experience alone did not turn dissatisfaction into collective action or structural change. Within informal and anti-structural communal conditions, dissatisfaction often remained personal, despite it being widely shared, because no stable mechanism existed to convert recognition into collective reorganisation.

Material Reproduction of Inequality

The persistence of inequality was also materially produced. Grundstein's (2015) account is especially revealing: "As we abandoned modern technology, daily becoming more dependent on the sheer physical strength and outdoor skills of the men for survival, our voices and choices diminished to pre-liberation levels" (p.170). The back-to-the-land ethos elevated male-coded physical skill into a condition of survival, allowing authority to emerge through perceived practical dependence. Grundstein's later recollection that women were "grateful" for men's heavy labour shows how unequal arrangements could be legitimised as necessary (p.136).

The same logic appears at the level of everyday task allocation. At Drop City, a woman's resistance against domesticity was met with: "Do you want to be swinging a hammer? It's hard work" (Curl, 2021, p.106). The response redirected her toward domestic labour through an implied logic of physical capacity. Price (2004, ch.10) depicts this through self-regulation, recalling that she tried to help build her home before returning to the kitchen because "she couldn't keep up" with the men. A male resident later reassured her that "your loaves of bread are building the house!" There was no overt coercion, as material conditions rendered patriarchal roles complementary. At Montague Farm, one woman recalled learning male-coded mechanised farm labour, including tractor operation, in the hope that "the men would filter in where I was filtering out" (Light, 2024). This shows that redistribution remained dependent on women's individual initiative.

Delphy's (1984) materialist analysis of domestic labour theoretically grounds this pattern. She proposes that domestic labour is productive work whose value is obscured by its location within domestic relations. Women's labour is therefore appropriated and naturalised as an extension of femininity, leaving its economic contribution unrecognised. Little (2002) extends this into agrarian contexts, showing that the spatial and organisational fusion of the home and workplace intensifies the undervaluation of women's labour. Within communes, this fusion became more pronounced, as subsistence support was essential to communal survival, but male-coded tasks were more readily recognised as skilled production. Within this arrangement, women's labour remained indispensable to everyday survival while being denied equivalent social value.

Constrained Agency

Female authority was not entirely precluded, but remained constrained in the forms it could assume. Within the evidence, The Farm showed the least gender inequality, with Ina May Gaskin emerging as the clearest example of female authority. Through midwifery, she exercised significant influence within and beyond the commune, establishing recognised expertise in natural childbirth (Rudder, 2013; The Farm, 1974, p.94-101). Farber (2013) notes that The Farm's midwives challenged male-dominated medical authority while operating within Stephen Gaskin's gendered division of labour, which located women's power primarily in childbirth and care. Midwifery, therefore, functioned as a site of resistance and containment.

Butler's (1990) account of gendered intelligibility clarifies this constrained agency. Ina May's authority became recognisable because it operated through care and maternity, domains already coded as feminine. Her influence was legible because it aligned with the gendered norms that governed how female authority could be understood. In this sense, her power was articulated through the existing gender order. The commune facilitated feminist expression only where it could be absorbed into communal values. Authority within a feminised domain, therefore, did not unsettle the broader organisation of power around Stephen Gaskin's charismatic authority.

Synthesis

Communes reproduced gender inequality through egalitarian practices themselves, relocating gendered power into subsistence labour and informal organisation. The deeper finding is that withdrawal cannot dismantle what it does not recognise as structural. Gender operated as an internalised framework shaping what appeared natural and necessary. This logic is captured in Delphy's (1984) materialist account and extended by Little's (2002) work on rural governance, where gendered power operates through everyday assumptions about whose labour and authority count as central. Across the cases, dissatisfaction was recognised, but feminised labour was absorbed into the fabric of communal life. This sustained the tension between aspiration and lived experience through the normalisation of gender itself. Inequality persisted without explicit enforcement, revealing that gender constructs are not so easily unlearned through the rejection of mainstream society's structures.

5. Conclusion

This dissertation examined how hippie communes of the 1960s and 1970s attempted to realise their founding ideals, and through what mechanisms those ideals were negotiated or undermined within communal life. Through an interpretive analysis of documentary sources, the study traced the movement from anti-capitalist and egalitarian aspiration into organised practice. Communes matter as they expose the contradictions that emerge in attempts to live beyond capitalist dependence and inherited authority.

The central finding is that contradiction was the condition that made communal life possible. Attempts to reject capitalist dependence required welfare, scavenging, informal exchange or disciplined collective labour. Anti-hierarchical rhetoric displaced authority into informal relations, where unequal power dynamics persisted. Gendered assumptions around capacity reproduced reproductive labour as women's work. Withdrawal generated structure at the very point where inherited structure was being refused, and efforts to resolve one tension often displaced it into another.

These findings contribute to a culturally rich and historically well-documented field in which sustained empirical analysis of specific communes remains comparatively uncommon. Existing scholarship identifies the three points of tension discussed: capitalist dependence, informal governance and gender inequality, while this dissertation locates them within the everyday organisation of communal life as managed experiences. By foregrounding negotiation, the dissertation makes visible the mechanisms through which ideals were lived. The comparative significance of the cases lies in showing that contradiction was structurally recurrent but practically mediated, translated through each commune's moral vocabulary and organisational culture. The contribution is therefore to reframe compromise in such settings as a mechanism through which communal ideals became liveable.

Weber's (2009, p.120) distinction between an ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility gives explanatory force to this finding. Communes were animated by principled commitments to equality and autonomy, yet sustaining collective life required decisions about resources and regulations. These decisions generated consequences that could never be morally purified. Weber clarifies why communal life involved governance even when governance was rejected as domination. The issue was that

power still had to be distributed and justified under conditions where compromise was unavoidable. Shotwell's (2016) account of constitutive impurity sharpens this. The communes' pursuit of autonomy remained mediated through the infrastructures they opposed. "Living purely is impossible" (p.4), and communal compromises can therefore be read as a condition of possibility for alternative life itself. Purity becomes a misleading standard as it obscures the entanglements through which alternative life becomes possible.

The limitations of this study are most consequential at the level of analytical orientation. By foregrounding contradiction as the primary lens, less attention is given to the positive meaning members attributed to communal life, and the value the experiment retained despite its strained ideals. Communes reproduced dominant structures, but this does not exhaust what they were. The argument here is not a verdict on dropping out, but should be read as an account of constrained transformation within the hippie communal era as a whole. This orientation is reinforced by the source base, where female voices only appeared in three accounts, narrowing the depth of gendered experience that could be examined. Moreover, emerging from the late 1960s American counterculture, these forms of withdrawal were likely implicated by the affluence and political upheaval of the era. The persistence of contradiction may be a general condition of collective life, but the forms it takes remain historically contingent.

Future research should compare historical movements of withdrawal as forms of ethical practice, examining how tensions between ideals and conditions are negotiated across different attempts to live otherwise. This would build on the recognition that collective life requires decisions which cannot fully correspond to founding principles. In the communes examined here, ethical life was shaped by the recognition that no collective decision could remain innocent, as the realisation of one freedom often limited another, producing uncertain outcomes. Ethical action within alternative communities, therefore, consisted of governing without innocence. As Midtgaard's (2007) account of utopian micro-societies suggests, moral theory can illuminate competing claims within such communities without producing a final verdict. Future work should also investigate domination within anti-hierarchical settings, where power may become most difficult to identify when it no longer appears as command but is dispersed through charisma and moral authority. Such research would substantiate how domination survives its explicit rejection within projects committed to egalitarian life.

Ultimately, the enduring contribution of hippie communes lies in making visible the difficulty of autonomy from capitalism and the dispositions it instils, while keeping alive the possibility that social life can be imagined and attempted otherwise. Contradiction should not halt pursuits of living otherwise; if anything, it makes the pursuit more necessary.

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