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Communing

Communalism: From Its Origins to the Twentieth Century by Kenneth Rexroth

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Communalism: from its Origins to the Twentieth Century/ The Irrelevant English Teacher/ The Clockwork Testament or Enderby's End/ Managing Today's University

Communing

Communalism: from its Origins to the Twentieth Century by Kenneth Rexroth. New York: Seabury Press, 316 pages, \$12.95.

Kenneth Rexroth, erstwhile poet of the Beat Generation, is both a shrewd scholar and a mild scold. As scholar he has given us this sharply etched chronology of communes, beginning with the neolithic village, through the early Christians, the Mennonites, the Diggers, and the Hutterites, and ending with "the thousands of groups that...have sprung up all over the world...since the Second World War." As scold he faults these latterday communards for lacking both substance and conviction; but that comes near the end, in his "Epilogue."

On page one Rexroth bravely plunges into the history of communism (i.e., communalism): "This much is self-evident. People who hunt and gather cannot be anything but communist." So much for the neoliths who attained paradise and then gave it up in exchange for agricultural progress. They beat their bliss into ploughshares and pruning hooks. From that point on, one surmises, the world strayed further and further from the communal ideal, toward such nonsharing contexts as feudalism and capitalism.

Still, in every century there were people ready and eager to organize communes as alternatives to whatever system was then reigning. Rexroth's book is a remarkable, scholarly *hegira* to dozens of these communal Meccas, from the monastic experiments of the Essenes (the folks who brought us the Dead Sea Scrolls) through the major American "utopias" of the nineteenth century: New Harmony, Oneida, and Brook Farm.

The strongest communes, concludes Rexroth, had strong leaders, strong religions (whether secular or theological), and strong limits. He cites the excesses of the Adamites and the Brethren of the Free Spirit, medieval communards who taught that "by mystical contemplation... man can become united with God... and therefore rise above all laws, churches and rites made by God for common man, and can do whatever he wishes.... United with God it is impossible for the mystic to sin, therefore he can do whatever he wants...."

Such ethically slothful notions do not die; they merely hibernate from time to time. Nowadays, notes Rexroth, they are again astir, so that "all over America misguided young people crowd the highways, hitchhiking to an Adamite promised land called Big Sur, which they discover consists of a range of mountain cliffs above the sea, thinly populated by hostile natives who seem to know only two words of English: 'Move on.'"

Thus does the ancient vision of communalism become blurred in the Carmel sun. Alas, as Rexroth observes, most alleged communes today are little more than "cooperative boarding houses in university towns of the sort which have always existed.... Just because their members smoke marijuana and sleep with each other indiscriminately does not make them fundamentally different from the Greek-letter fraternities."

Rexroth is no sweetheart of Sigma Chi, much less of the thousands of "crash pads" that pretend to be communes. In rhythms that are plainly unBeat he charges them with slovenliness and with playing "musical beds." His ironic tone *vis-à-vis* these false but feisty communes does

not mean he is against sin, only that he is for communes—*real* communes, communes that breathe ideology and ritual, and in which all members share both the work and the bounty.

—Richard J. Margolis

RICHARD J. MARGOLIS is *Change Magazine's* book reviews editor.

Reconsiderations

The Irrelevant English Teacher by J. Mitchell Morse. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 142 pages, \$8.50 (hardcover); \$2.95 (paperback).

I missed J. Mitchell Morse's *The Irrelevant English Teacher* the first time around. Happily, it has been reissued now in paper, and should be required reading for discouraged English teachers as well as for educationists and administrators who have forgotten—or never learned—the uses and pleasures of language. Covering a wide range of topics from Black English (the "shuffling speech of slavery") to *Finnegan's Wake* as an apt text for freshman English, the 11 essays in this collection are thematically and stylistically unified. And for the most part, they remain fresh.

The ironic title conveys Morse's central concern and suggests the bizarre cultural ambience of the late sixties and early seventies in which most of the pieces were conceived. Taken together, they form an eloquent restatement of Matthew Arnold's observation that culture is "the great help out of our present difficulties." There is nothing new in Morse's defense of literature and composition as a primary focus of