

**SQUIRRELS BURROWING TOGETHER AND APART:
Dis/Continuities in a small housing cooperative**

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*Shortly after I left Squirrel Burrow, one of the members,
"Bianca," passed away suddenly in a tragic accident.
This work is dedicated to her memory.*

*The worm drives helically through the wood
And does not know the dust left in the bore
Once made the table integral and good;
And suddenly the crystal hits the floor.*
— John M. Ford

Introduction

I intend here to establish a framework for talking about ways in which organizations and communities can successfully persist over time, or fail. This framework encompasses three types of continuity: continuity of ideology, or how well an organization passes on shared beliefs and values and pursues its stated goals; continuity of institutions, or how well an organization maintains its rules, traditions, and any commonly-held property; and continuity of fellowship, or the maintenance of goodwill and friendly cooperation among members of an organization. I will primarily illustrate and support each type of continuity with ethnographic data acquired through fieldwork conducted at Squirrel Burrow Cooperative,¹ a housing cooperative which is currently having difficulties with each type of continuity, and looks as though it might fail to persist if the community does not take action. Outside the realm of theory, I am indebted to David Graeber's *Direct Action: An Ethnography* as a model for doing an ethnography of a social movement from within that social movement. Within the realm of theory, I will draw on concepts from Durkheim, Graeber, Douglas, and others, and I will explain how my framework fits into previous work done on community endurance. In the conclusion, I will discuss the utility of the framework, within the context of Squirrel Burrow and in the larger world.

The framework I put forward in this paper is intended to help describe processes that take place within communities and organizations generally. I want to place it within the larger context of writing and theorizing about intentional communities.

First, what is an intentional community? Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in her book *Communes: Creating and Managing the Collective Life*, defines communes, which includes what I think of as intentional communities, as follows:

They are voluntary; they separate from the larger conventional society and conduct relations with it as a unit; they place values, moral concerns, group solidarity, and relationships above instrumental or economic purposes; they are identifiable as entities, with boundaries, a territory, and consciously limited membership; they share resources; and they constitute a primary group, in which people interact with each other on a generalized basis, as

¹ All names of places and people have been changed.

“wholes”, rather than in terms of specific roles.²

The Fellowship for Intentional Community defines “intentional communities,” much more simply, as “projects where people live together on the basis of explicit common values.”³ Squirrel Burrow is definitely a commune, by Kanter’s definition. Whether or not it falls into the FIC’s definition, I will leave as a judgment call for the reader once they have read the paper.

Kanter has “analyze[d] the overall organization problem of communes as one of building commitment.”⁴ Communities that build strong commitment among their members tend to endure; those that do not tend to fall apart. The framework I will use for analyzing community endurance is not directly related to commitment; I hope to provide additional ways of looking at the topic, on the principle that the more ways one has of looking at a topic, the better a picture one can get.⁵

Overview of Research Site

Squirrel Burrow is a housing cooperative founded in 2004 and incorporated in 2006 in a mid-sized Northeastern city. At the time of writing, it occupies two rented houses, with nine bedrooms and nine residents, as well as one general member who does not live in the cooperative (or, indeed, in the neighborhood) and several former members throughout the city. It is situated in an inexpensive neighborhood in the southwest quadrant of the city. The neighborhood is described on the city website as having a mixture of long-time residents, university students, and well-intentioned gentrifiers,⁶ and the first image on the webpage is Squirrel Burrow’s porch sign. In a sense, the cooperative is serving as the poster child for the neighborhood. Squirrel Burrow’s houses are owned by a landlord who also rents a large number of other houses in the neighborhood. The cooperative is connected through former members and general community ties to two other cooperatives in the city: Tea Tree, another housing cooperative, north of downtown; and Wheatgrass Bakery, a work cooperative that combines a bakery and a “fermentery” to provide good food using ingredients from local organic farms. Tea Tree has several members who are former Squirrels, and Wheatgrass Bakery was started in the “brick house” a couple doors down from the main Squirrel Burrow house by one of the earliest Squirrel Burrow members.

² Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Communes: Creating and Managing the Collective Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), xiii.

³ “Welcome to FIC.” *The Fellowship for Intentional Community Website*, accessed May 5, 2014, www.ic.org.

⁴ Kanter, *Communes*, 99.

⁵ To quote F. Nietzsche, “the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our ‘concept’ of this thing, our ‘objectivity,’ be.” (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, essay 3 section 12.)

⁶ Paraphrased both for anonymity’s sake and for my own amusement.

During the research period, January through April 2014, there were about twelve significant people involved with the cooperative. First was my friend Antigone,⁷ through whom I found out about Squirrel Burrow; she had moved in by September 2012 and moved out at the end of December 2013. There were nine or ten residential members: Sue, a retired woman who had been a member since 2009; Stephan, a man in his mid-twenties who had been a member since 2012; a cohort who moved in during August or September 2013: Artemis and Roger, new graduates of the same university; Adrian, the youngest house member (just turned 21); myself, in my fifth year of college; Xavier, a graduate student in education; Heather and Victor, new graduates of the same university as Artemis and Roger, who moved in during September and October 2013 respectively, who were dating at the beginning of research and broke up partway through; and Bianca, a student in her mid-twenties, who moved in during March 2014.⁸ There was also one general member, Anderson, who served as president of the Board of Directors, and had been involved since incorporation or earlier.⁹

Residential members are expected to do chores regularly, which are divided up by who's willing to do what. Days to cook dinner are claimed at house meetings on Sunday evenings. Most members hold manager positions, which are a way of making sure every household task or need is monitored by a specific person. For example, there is a garden manager, a food manager, and a treasurer, who do what one would expect. There is one person who manages internal affairs, one person who manages general external affairs, and a few other positions. Manager positions are elected every four months or so. Most members pay into the food share, and the cooperative buys a common stock of food, all the necessities people want, often in bulk to get better prices. Ideally, then, the house is cooperatively run by all the people in it.

Continuities in Organizations

An existing organization is one that has not yet failed. The reasons that organizations and communities fail have been examined at length,¹⁰ but I am interested here in analyzing why and how they might succeed, that is, continue existing and operating. I posit that the continuity of a community may be analyzed along three separate axes: ideological continuity, institutional continuity, and continuity of fellowship.

Optimal continuation and maintenance of a given organization or community relies

⁷ Pseudonyms were assigned with input from the individuals concerned.

⁸ She is sorely missed.

⁹ The documentation is unclear.

¹⁰ Notably in Kanter, and in works cited in Kanter.

on a healthy, productive amount of each type of continuity, although many communities can operate for quite a long time under suboptimal conditions. Ideological continuity is necessary in order to give an organization something to collectively act for, to keep it from turning into a loose association of acquaintances or dissolving from apathy. This can be as simple as a group of people meeting once a month for dinner or as complex as a permanent community formed around a shared religion. Institutional continuity is necessary, at minimum, to prevent each new generation of members from reinventing the procedural wheel. At their best, well-maintained institutions provide a sense of deep connection to a shared past and a framework for incredibly meaningful shared experiences, as well as, in some cases, the actual daily sustenance of community members. Continuity of fellowship is needed because some amount of mutual respect and tolerance allows people to work together productively.

The absence of any given continuity will be harmful. For example, loss of ideology may lead to loss of purpose or direction; loss of institutions can lead to an inability to carry out infrequent but necessary tasks; loss of fellowship is often accompanied by a breakdown of working relations within a group.

I also observe that continuities may be realized in what I call “toxic modes.” To give an example, when a community does not allow some level of disagreement, debate, and dissent regarding its goals and values, that is a toxic ideological continuity, and can lead to vicious sectarianism, schisms, or purges. When an organization is so bound with formal rules and procedures that more time is spent enforcing process than doing anything productive, that is a toxic institutional continuity. When members of a group form into tight cliques that alienate potential new members, thus putting the group in danger of death by attrition, that is a toxic continuity of fellowship.¹¹

This framework of continuities provides structure for my collected observations at Squirrel Burrow. As I have developed it, I have found it to cast light on dynamics in and out of Squirrel Burrow, enhancing my ability to perceive and describe dysfunctions in the situation.

Continuity of Ideology

This is the maintenance of interest in and work towards the community’s main goal(s) based on its shared beliefs and values. It requires the sustained interest of members in the purpose of the group, and also of new recruits who are interested in the group. A possible toxic mode of ideology involves focusing on a rigid version of

¹¹ Interestingly, many more toxic modes of fellowship present themselves than for the other two continuities: there are a lot of ways that being friends with people can go wrong.

the community's goals or beliefs—for example, when informal communities that form around various types of identity politics shut out members who aren't as well-versed in theory and jargon as other members.

If Squirrel Burrow has an explicit ideology or common goals, I was never informed of them as a new member. Testimony from members who had lived there in the past, such as my friend Antigone, suggest that there was quite a lot of informally communicated and shared ideology, passed on through older members instructing newer members; the disconnect in my cohort probably arose from the very low member overlap, and the relative disengagement of the overlapping members; Antigone spent much of the fall semester in her room or out of the house; Stephan is too socially passive to be very good at transmitting cultural information; and Sue spent all of her time in the annex, interacting with the rest of the members very little. It was largely left to the six (later seven, then eight) others to construct their own meaning for the house and cooperative.

The Squirrel Burrow wiki has a couple of pages that are relevant here: the inspiration, and the dream.

The elements of inspiration are largely co-ops and other pieces of communal living. There is a quote from Buckminster Fuller: "Making the world's available resources serve one hundred percent of an exploding population can only be accomplished by a boldly accelerated design revolution." They also list the makers of the Inflatocookbook, which is a book on how to make your own inflatable things. Finally, they've included a Mountain Goats song, *Color in your Cheeks*, with lyrics:

he drove from in from mexicali, no worse for wear.
money to burn, time to kill.
but five minutes looking in his eyes and we all knew he
was broken pretty bad, so we gave him what we had.
we cleared a space for him to sleep in,
and we let the silence that's our trademark
make its presence felt.
come on in, we haven't slept for weeks.
drink some of this. it'll put color in your cheeks.

they came in by the dozens, walking or crawling.
some were bright-eyed.
some were dead on their feet.
and they came from zimbabwe,
or from soviet, georgia.
east saint louis, or from paris, or they lived across the street.
but they came, and when they'd finally made it here,
it was the least that we could do to make our welcome clear.
come on in, we haven't slept for weeks.
drink some of this. it'll put color in your cheeks.

The wiki also offers an explicitly stated goal:

Communities and neighborhoods across the USA have atrophied in the last century, as people have become more mobile, and technology like TV, automobiles, and the phone system have shifted how people live, work, and play in relation to each other. While this has left many people more affluent, it has left just as many people feeling isolated from the city or community they live in.

The Goal of the Squirrel Burrow Cooperative is to create a cooperative housing system in [City] that will foster community, while giving students a good standard of living, at a low cost. In order to create the best community it can, Squirrel Burrow specifically seeks to create a broad cross section of members, with many different skills, interests, and abilities.

The page points at the Rochdale Cooperative Principles,¹² and includes a number of other elements, such as “learning from each other,” “promoting owner-occupied housing,” “being a positive effect in the world,” “a hot tub,” and “dinner every night.”

Next to none of this has been explicitly passed on to new members. Anderson, the sole general member, continually encourages the residential members to read the wiki, but it is unclear how many ever do.

Nevertheless, let us look at what exactly we have here. The Mountain Goats song evokes an image of a full, busy community ready to take care of anyone who passes through. Squirrel Burrow’s explicitly stated goal is to house students and foster a sense of community. The members who wrote these pages may not have had an explicit plan for how to accomplish what they wanted, but they seem to have known what they wanted.

Arguably it hasn’t been accomplished. Additionally, Squirrel Burrow used to be a NASCO member cooperative, but someone somewhere stopped collecting and paying the membership fees from new members, even though the wiki still claims new members need to pay them. Sue estimated that, as a result, Squirrel Burrow would owe hundreds of dollars in back fees if they were to reassert membership. However, some members of Boomtown, a cooperative about an hour away, while visiting for dinner, said that NASCO would certainly be willing to work with Squirrel Burrow to set up a fee situation they can afford and help them return to being more “Rochdale-affiliated.” Stephan seemed enthusiastic about the idea, although nothing further had happened by the end of the research period. This is most likely because Stephan has a habit of biting off more than he can chew volunteer-wise and then forgetting what he has promised to do.

¹² A set of principles first developed in Rochdale in 1844, and updated over the years to reflect changing needs and realities.

NASCO membership could offer a way for Squirrel Burrow to reformulate and confirm its ideology and goals, with the help of an outsider who cares about cooperatives in general and has worked with many.

Finally, one of the elements of the “dream” is being part of a culture of owner-occupied housing. The buildings Squirrel Burrow exists in are rented. Aside from the fact that, as a result, that element of the dream is unrealized, this creates somewhat uncomfortable power dynamics and reduces residents’ feelings of ownership over the space.

During much of the research period, the landlord was almost continually improving things around the house in order to meet requirements for a Certificate of Occupancy. The contractors who performed the work frequently made the residents uncomfortable with what felt like casual violations of personal space and also overheard verbal abuse of residents, presumably when the contractors thought nobody could hear them. When Adrian wrote a frustrated email to the landlord airing her grievances, they responded with a long list of concerns they had about the house with regard to health and safety. This made some members feel vastly disrespected, and caused Xavier to worry that the landlord was doing so much work on the house because they wanted to kick Squirrel Burrow out.

Some years ago, Squirrel Burrow had begun negotiations with the landlord for purchase of the main building. Unfortunately, the capital that had been saved for that purpose was wiped out when two members failed to pay rent for several months and the cooperative had no choice but to cover them. Those members put their personal financial priorities above the needs of the cooperative, and ended up severely curtailing the cooperative’s ability to pursue an important goal within its ideology.

To summarize, Squirrel Burrow has a set of goals clearly laid out and an accompanying ideology available on the wiki, but none of that information was passed on to new members in a reliable way. Potential external aid such as NASCO guidance was allowed to slip, and capital reserved for working towards a cornerstone goal was wiped out by uncooperative behavior by just two members. I’ll talk about some negative results of this lack of ideological continuity in the section on continuity of fellowship.

Continuity of Institutions

This is the passing-along of the rules, history, traditions, and other institutions of a community. It can happen organically or formally. High turnover, such as that found in a primarily-student-occupied cooperative, endangers this continuity. A possible toxic mode is the possibility of rules/traditions/bylaws actually stifling community development/growth.

Squirrel Burrow has a great setup for failing at continuity of institutions; there's a pretty high turnover; typical periods of residence range from four months to a year or two. Also, the institutions, such as they are, are poorly defined and rarely come up, or else have no built-in enforcement mode. One example is the process for voting on things: this exists, and Sue has mentioned it a few times, but in the time I was at Squirrel Burrow the only formal voting that came up was connected to member admission. The rest of the decisions were usually made with a highly informal, somewhat unconscious consensus process: simply put, we would discuss a thing until everyone either agreed with the current proposal or didn't care enough to bring up an objection. The barrier to the passing-on of these institutions is the combination of a lack of institutional memory with rarely-used procedures.

Squirrel Burrow has a potentially excellent resource for formal institutional memory in the wiki. Unfortunately it hasn't been consistently maintained pretty much ever (Anderson attributes this to a lack of ongoing interest in wiki technology; I think this is either simplistic or optimistic on his part). It seems likely that part of our detachment from it is the wiki's absence from our daily, weekly, monthly practice, and part is the lack of human continuity (though its lack of updating goes back to 2011, and so cannot be attributed to the current set of members, or even the set before).

Aside from the problems with a lack of institutional memory, the houses themselves are a physical institution. David Graeber says "we are all, and have always been, projects of mutual creation;"¹³ the most important work is that of creating and sustaining human relationships, and it is through those relationships that we create and sustain each other. The continuity of physical institutions permits this mutual creation to have effects forward in time, on people one may never meet. The art on the walls of the house tells the inhabitants something about those who have come before; the dried herbs on the wall of the kitchen literally and symbolically add spice to the lives of their inheritors.¹⁴ Physical institutions, objects and buildings, are a powerful force for the project of communal mutual creation.

Unfortunately, such institutions do not always have a positive influence. During most of the research period, the main Squirrel house was massively cluttered. Many objects had been left behind by former members and become communal property by default, like a suitcase I used on a few trips during my residence. Many of these objects were also junk, or things nobody knew how to use. Several members added to the clutter in some way or another; the front foyer was crowded with some of

¹³ David Graeber, *The Democracy Project* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2013), 288.

¹⁴ One of my own most profound moments of communal feeling was when I picked a small mountain of herbs I had not planted and dried them: for myself, yes, but also for the sake of people I might never meet.

Roger's stuff for several months. The attic and basement eventually became completely unusable. This was a significant source of psychological stress, largely handled by collectively ignoring it, and periodic but abortive attempts at organizing work parties. What tipped the scales turned out to be loyalty not to the cooperative but to an entirely different organization.

Victor, Heather, and Artemis belong to a fraternal organization while in college, which I will call Psi Nu (pseudo-nym), and as alumni they agreed to host a party. Victor organized a series of work parties in which the attic was partly cleared out and made totally usable for party purposes. Once the attic was usable, a sense of accomplishment was palpable in the house; those who had done the work were proud of having gotten it done, and in my opinion they had every right to be. It was fantastically freeing, for everyone, to have the attic be a useful space again. The small octagonal tower room, previously carpeted with dead electronics, was cleared enough for several people to sit in it and share a hookah;¹⁵ Antigone could not remember a time in the previous few years when that had been possible.

The other problematic space in the main house was the basement. It used to be a bicycle workshop, but the bicycle-oriented members left. Once it was no longer used, everything got dustier and more unpleasant to try to use. The working-on-bicycles ideology fell by the wayside and left a toxic institution in its wake. The basement had not been cleaned by the end of the research period.

The most problematic space was actually the annex. Sue owned something like four to six cats, and they had created what might be termed an odor problem in that house. For example, the piece of plywood stabilizing the washing machine almost smelled like a horse barn, minus the hay, the ammonia was so strong. Cat odor permeated the house. The situation created some tension within the house, as nobody was willing to ask Sue to leave; she was the member of longest standing, and also retired. Her cats seemed to be the main thing that she valued in her life. The situation also created some tension with the landlord. Because nobody was willing to ask her or the cats to leave, the annex became a very smelly and possibly genuinely hazardous toxic institution; although this was being addressed, it was not yet resolved by the end of the research period.

The toxicity of Squirrel Burrow's institutions became most sharply apparent when Xavier and Heather had a discussion in which they floated the idea of dissolving Squirrel Burrow. A conversation then occurred between Xavier, Heather, Victor, Roger, and me. The following is a very fragmentary reconstruction of the order of discussion. Everything not in quotes is a paraphrase.

¹⁵ Technically smoking in the attic is a violation of the lease, but everyone assumes the landlord will never find out, and since it doesn't stink up anyone's space, nobody seems to mind.

Xavier: Trying and failing to follow precedent is getting in the way of making a nice place to live

Heather: “need to like be in it for the people, for the love of keeping your home going, not for like an organization’s sake”

Xavier: The question to ask is, “What would be different?”

We don’t even know what our legal relationship with the landlord is (this point was returned to repeatedly)

The co-op is this non-existent middleman

What does the Board even do?

Esty: “Mysterious financial things.”

What are these contracts, how do they work? Are we really okay with the collective responsibility, of everyone being responsible for everyone else? (The most pungent point in connection with this, of course, is the cat odor in the annex; the landlord said Squirrel Burrow would be collectively financially responsible for the cleanup)

We’d get a fresh landlord start, be able to escape the Squirrel Burrow stigma (Victor said this; he may also have been the one who said we could still call ourselves Squirrel Burrow. Personally I think this fresh start is a bit optimistic)

Looking at other co-ops (Soup & Lilies, Tea Tree) raises the question, why have scheduled meetings? Especially because we get together just about every night for dinner. We could just have meetings when issues arise

Victor: But what happens when *we* move out, if the structure is gone?

Xavier: “Is any one of us thinking of living here long-term?”

I point out that according to our website, this isn’t meant to be a long-term-residence community; it’s meant for students.

If we dissolve the structure, how do we get new people?

Xavier: Why be a cooperative if we don’t own the house?

Heather wants us to have direct, individual relationships with the landlord (Reformation anyone?:P). We still can, e.g., pool our money for food and rent (although Heather is legit concerned about that latter).

Xavier continues to be concerned by the idea of signing contracts when we don’t know what they signify. Could we be taken to court? Is the landlord the sort of landlord who would take us to court?

There is a joke referenced about maybe the landlord being an alcoholic and therefore not caring. Heather seems to regret having made it (and not having

made it clear enough that it **was** a joke).

Xavier suggests essentially going behind the backs of the older members, Sue and Anderson. This idea is nixed; they have to be involved in the discussion.

Esty: They'll go ballistic. They won't just get defensive; they'll go ballistic. (I do not say that this is based on Antigone's reaction when I off-handedly mentioned that Xavier had mentioned it to me yesterday.)

Roger points out, very sensibly, that the effect would be very wide-reaching; it wouldn't only touch us who live here, but also Tea Tree, the people who go to our potlucks, the founders, the rest of the community.

Heather: Coming in, it felt overwhelming and unnecessary [the whole co-op thing].

Someone at some point (Xavier?) half-jokes that if we removed this structure from looming over us, maybe we'd actually do our chores.

Heather: Does the co-op status let us have this many people in the house relative to one kitchen?

After all, there are probably laws to prevent boarding houses.

Victor suggests a research work party.

Sounds to the rest of them like the landlord wants to dissolve us,¹⁶ and *all* of the problems pre-date us.¹⁷

Victor: "We're two work parties away from *our* house. We're two work parties away from a clean slate."

Heather: (referring to dissolution) "It's just a thought. We all should think about it."

This discussion was full of contradictions. Xavier, the person who brought it up in the first place on the grounds that it would make no practical difference, was the one to voice that it might look kind of bad to have come in, taken over, and dissolved a community institution of long standing. There was also a constant tension between the idea that the co-op structure does nothing, and holds us back or drags us down. Victor thought we could escape the Squirrel Burrow stigma by starting over, but pointed out that we can still call the house Squirrel Burrow. The members in this discussion seem very ambivalent about the idea - understandably so.

There was a general sense that something is wrong; this is beautifully summed up by Victor's closing comment: "We're two work parties away from a clean slate." Before

¹⁶ Antigone, Xavier, and I later found out that this was not the case.

¹⁷ Antigone disagrees, and says that all the spaces except the attic and basement were very clutter-free in the previous summer.

Squirrel Burrow's membership could feel as though they really owned the cooperative, they would need to wipe away some of the past. The possibility of dissolving the whole thing was the most drastic possible iteration of that.

This discussion illustrates really remarkably how toxic and badly-conveyed institutions can both affect people negatively, without them being necessarily able to pinpoint exactly what's wrong. An outside observer suggested that the discussion indicated an awareness of something being wrong and an inability to articulate it; when I brought this up with Xavier, he immediately agreed, and said he was disappointed nobody had worked around to that in the discussion.

Once the conversation had happened, it was never revisited during the research period, at least not in public or in private conversations of which I was aware.

The positive and functional institutions of the cooperative, such as procedural rules and social traditions, failed to be passed on in the same way that the ideology failed to be passed on. The negative and toxic institutions, on the other hand, proved very difficult to get rid of and placed sufficient stress on the inhabitants that some of them semi-seriously discussed disbanding the cooperative. The gap in knowledge where the positive and functional institutions should have been also functioned as a kind of toxic institutional continuity: everyone knew they were supposed to know something that they didn't, which was stressful.

Continuity of Fellowship

This is, generally, the maintenance of goodwill and friendliness between a group's members. What it requires depends upon how it is built. This continuity can be built organically, through openness of members to friendly connections with each other and with new members, or it can be created and maintained somewhat artificially, when members recruit their friends. Toxic modes can arise from either situation. I will restrict myself to only a few examples of fellowship harming organizations.

When members are close, they are likely to cut each other slack that they really shouldn't. The primary response to undone chores at Squirrel Burrow was being too chill to hold each other accountable; as a result, the house was constantly dirty.

When members of long standing are close and/or cliquey, they can forget that traditions need to be passed on to newer members. Then when they leave, institutional memory has failed.

When members recruit their friends to a community, they will sometimes accept someone who isn't entirely suited for the community in terms of goals or ideology. If this happens too much, enthusiasm for the community gets watered down by enthusiasm for each other, or worse, torn apart by in-fighting and friend-group

drama.

Squirrel Burrow seemed to have a large problem with enthusiasm for the community getting watered down by enthusiasm for each other. There was a change in the ways people created and reinforced social bonds. When Antigone first lived there, and for the first couple of months after I had moved in, the primary bonding rite was shared meals at dinner time. Later, that changed to the sharing of intoxicants and visual media: drinking while watching movies and television or playing video games.

Dinner at Squirrel Burrow is meant to be a communal affair. Every Sunday, house meeting is preceded by the largest shared meal of the week; four to five days during the rest of the week, members volunteer to cook and those who are around eat together.

When my friend Antigone originally lived at Squirrel Burrow, the primary bonding ritual was the sharing of food (and the labor that went into making it); one of her frustrations with the group I studied was the way that Stephan seems to have forgotten the hours and hours she spent trying to teach him how to cook. When asked¹⁸ whether he would describe food as the primary bonding rite, Antigone's ex-boyfriend Joseph said, "no matter what else anybody was doing with anyone else—dinner is the way you provide for others in the house and others provide for you // even if you're not there for it (via late plates¹⁹ etc)."

This is consonant with multiple theoretical interpretations of the social purposes of food. Mary Douglas, describing the way different kinds of shared consumption are reserved for different categories of people, says that "meals are for family, close friends, honored guests."²⁰ Durkheim points out that "meals eaten in common are thought in many societies to create a bond of artificial kinship among the participants,"²¹ Antigone, illustrating the emotional impact of shared meals in her time at Squirrel Burrow, objects to his use of "artificial".

Before and at the start of my research, dinner was a thing that members cared a lot about. By cooking for each other, Squirrels could have better, more complex, healthier meals more often for much less effort. However, the amount of effort that each member put into cooking varied widely, and few members tried to expand their skills and repertoire while I was there. In particular, Victor made taco salad most weeks, and Roger and Stephan regularly made mac n cheese and roasted vegetables,

¹⁸ Via instant messaging

¹⁹ "Late plates" are plates of food made up for members who aren't going to be home during dinner, labeled and stuck in the fridge for when they do get home. They became less common during the research period despite the presence of multiple members who frequently worked at night.

²⁰ Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," in *Implicit Meanings* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 256.

²¹ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford University Press, 2001), 249.

or later, ordered pizza for Sunday dinner.²² The grocery shoppers also started buying more processed food, including such symbolically and nutritionally empty items as a thirty-ounce container of Goldfish crackers.

Residents became inconsistent about putting away leftovers and doing dishes at the end of a meal. The common purposes of feeding each other delicious healthy cheap food and taking a share in keeping the house clean had fallen by the wayside; dinner began to feel more like a stop on the way to the main entertainment of a given evening: watching visual media on the house projector and, frequently, drinking.

Squirrel Burrow, as mentioned, owns a projector; the living room has a wall specially painted white across from a projector platform built by some prior resident. Members gathering to watch movies or television together has been a fairly consistent feature of the house. However, in the second half of my time at Squirrel Burrow, there was hardly a night when a subset of inhabitants were not sitting on the couch watching something, usually drinking alcohol at the same time.

I observe that while sharing food is a great way to create bonds, sharing visual media was primarily a way to reinforce existing bonds. The core of residents around whom this pattern turned were Roger, Victor, Heather, and to some extent Adrian and Stephan; the first three had all known each other at college, and the latter both fit easily into that particular social pattern. On the other hand, as a resident I felt somewhat alienated by a combination of homework obligations which kept me from participating, a dislike of the visual media chosen, and a desire not to drink four or five nights out of seven.²³

A deeper exploration of the manifestations and side effects of bonding through visual media and intoxicant use would be fascinating, but is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.²⁴ I will be satisfied with another thought from Douglas: “So long as it [food] remained unstructured it could not carry meanings.”²⁵ Food at Squirrel Burrow was previously symbolically structured in the sense that it was deliberately created and deliberately shared, on a set schedule with accompanying chores (pre-

²² This was particularly frustrating to Antigone, because of the aforementioned apparently wasted hours teaching Stephan to cook, and because Sunday dinner should be the best and most interesting meal.

²³ During the research period, I was almost the only person in the house still attending college; Adrian had finished her Associate’s degree in December and Antigone had moved out. Bianca was working on a degree in social work, but as she lived in the annex, she had the option of only emerging when she was free to fully participate. Also, as the most recent to move in, she took the least part in creating the behavior pattern.

²⁴ Also beyond the scope of this paper is a tangent in which I explore the inability of visual media to accurately show the importance of food, and the social implications for people whose primary modes of entertainment and interaction revolve around such media.

²⁵ Mary Douglas, ed., introduction to *Food in the Social Order* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984), 15.

clean and after-dinner dishes). Meals lost that structure gradually as people came to care less and less, and at the same time lost their ability to carry social meaning, to create and reinforce bonds.²⁶

The shift in primary bonding rite, from food to video, was accompanied by an intensification of the bonds of friendship and affection among a subset of the members, who seemed to “regard sexuality as a polymorphic instrument of immediate *communitas* rather than as the basis for an enduring structured social tie,”²⁷ to quote Victor Turner’s strikingly appropriate description of hippies. That is, some of the members in question used sexuality as a source of social closeness and means of expressing affection, in concert with regular gatherings of the same small group in the living room to watch visual media and consume alcohol late into the night. These things put together led to social alienation of members who did not fall into that clique, including Sue, the member of longest standing, and Xavier, the member who seemed most devoted in principle to the cooperative ideal. If these members had been integrated into the cooperative to a greater level, they could have more effectively pushed for Squirrel Burrow to realize its ideology, by words and by example.

In other words, I believe that the shift in fellowship from deliberate co-creation of bonds to passive re-creation of bonds and the lackluster maintenance of shared values and goals existed in a causal loop with each other, each enabling the other. An excess of fellowship among a part of the house interacted destructively with what ideological continuity remained, leading to the situation that predominated during the research period: apathy towards the cooperative as an entity in practice if not in theory, and sometimes-excessive enthusiasm towards members as individuals.

Conclusion

As one would expect from Kanter, many of Squirrel Burrow’s problems derive from insufficient commitment on the part of the members. What my framework offers is a way of analyzing the causes and aggravating factors of that lack of commitment. A lack of adequate positive institutional continuity and the presence of toxic physical institutions made simply existing in the community stressful for members, which reduced individual willingness to increase commitment. Furthermore, a change in the way fellowship was developed combined with low explicit ideological continuity to shift emotional commitment from the community to a subset of its members.

²⁶ Also beyond the scope of this paper is a discussion of the intentional-communities-potluck-attending-community in the area; suffice it to say that Squirrel Burrow’s participation dropped precipitously over the course of the research period.

²⁷ Victor Turner, “Liminality and *Communitas*,” in *The Ritual Process* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 112-13.

The framework of continuities I have set up has proven useful for analyzing problems within Squirrel Burrow, in a way that supplements Kanter's analysis of commitment as vital to community success. The next step I see is to offer this framework as one way communities can organize internal problems for analysis, and through use refine it as a useful tool.

The Ethnographer's Advice to the Community

Step zero

Each of you, ask yourselves what you want out of living in a cooperative that you would not get out of living in a house with friends. Try looking at the 'Dream' and 'Inspiration' pages on the wiki. If you're feeling motivated enough, go learn about other housing cooperatives. Read the Rochdale Principles (they're posted in the bathroom). Why do you want to live here? Why do you care?

You might come up with the answer "maybe I don't really want to live in a cooperative; maybe I just want to live in a house with some friends." That's fine. But for your sake and the community's sake, really think about that, and whether you should actually stay if that's the case.

Step one

Come together as a community and talk about what you've learned and decided for yourselves. Figure out what values you all have in common. Decide on a set of shared values for the cooperative that all of you can agree on. I recommend looking at the appendix on consensus process for some possible guidance in this conversation; I think the principles Graeber sets forth are harmonious with the general idea of the cooperative, and the part about principles of unity is entirely supportive of the thesis I've set forth above; without a clear ideology, it becomes harder for organizations to thrive.

Step two

Once you've decided on a set of shared values for the cooperative, talk about how to make sure those values are realized, day by day, month by month, year by year.

How can you, as a community, make sure that your values and traditions are passed on? How can you make sure that the house is well-maintained and a pleasant place to live? How can you create and strengthen ties with the community (if that is a value you share)?

Decide, as a group, on one thing you will do to create and reinforce the bonds of community, and decide how you will involve everyone. This could mean everyone cooking dinner once a week, using love and ingenuity and trying all the time to do it as well as or better than you did before. This could mean a weekly movie night, with everyone invited, at a set time, perhaps having everyone take turns picking the movie. This could mean something else entirely. (No matter what, I suggest including cleanup in the definition of the event, maybe on a rotating basis so nobody feels put-upon and overworked.) Keep in mind that it should be something everyone can feel good about and wants to do.

Step three

Keep in mind that it is very possible for a couple of individuals to become the *de facto* leaders of the cooperative, and that communities which rely on charismatic leadership are often quick to fail if or when that leader leaves. Also, if most things that happen are driven by the efforts and encouragements of two or three people, which was the situation while I was conducting research, that creates a recipe for burnout (of the leaders) and apathy (from everyone else).

Decide what you will do as individuals and as a community if you notice someone taking on more (or less!) authority and/or responsibility than they really should.

Step four

Finally, decide how you're going to pass on these values and traditions and decisions to future members. Try to create something that can grow and change with the cooperative. The responsibility of continuity might be a good thing to pass on to the Board; the responsibility of adapting perhaps can or should stay with the members proper.

Appendix: Consensus Process

(The following is an excerpt from David Graeber's The Democracy Project, chapter 4, pp 211-217)

The essence of consensus process is just that everyone should be able to weigh in equally on a decision, and no one should be bound by a decision they detest. In practice, this might be said to boil down to four principles:

- Everyone who feels they have something relevant to say about a proposal ought to have their perspectives carefully considered.

- Everyone who has strong concerns or objections should have those concerns or objections taken into account and, if possible, addressed in the final form of the proposal.
- Anyone who feels a proposal violates a fundamental principle shared by the group should have the opportunity to veto (“block”) that proposal.
- No one should be forced to go along with a decision to which they did not assent.

Over the years, different groups or individuals have developed systems of formal consensus process to ensure these ends. These can take a number of different forms. But one doesn't necessarily need a formal process. Sometimes it's helpful. Sometimes it's not. Smaller groups can often operate without any formal procedures at all. In fact, there is an endless variety of ways one might go about making decisions in the spirit of those four principles. Even the often debated question of whether or not the process of considering a proposal ends in a vote through some sort of formal show of hands, or other affirmation of consensus, is secondary: what's crucial is the process that leads to decision. Ending with a vote tends to be problematic not because there is anything intrinsically wrong with showing hands, but because it makes it less likely that all perspectives will be fully taken into account. But if a process is created that ends in a vote yet also allows all perspectives to be satisfactorily addressed, there's really nothing wrong with it.

[. . .]

There are a few areas of consensus process that often cause problems or confusion that I will try to clarify here.

One is that one cannot very well base a block on a group's principles of unity unless that group actually has principles of unity. Thus it's always a good idea to come to some sort of agreement about why the group exists and what it is trying to accomplish as quickly as possible. It is best to keep these principles simple. It is also crucial, in framing them, to remember that any activist group exists to *do* something, to change the world in some way. So the principles should reflect both what the group is trying to accomplish and the manner in which it goes about trying to accomplish it—and the two (the ends and means) should be in as much harmony with each other as they can possible be. But the smartest thing to do when it comes to defining the group is to keep it simple. ...

One good thing about having principles of unity is ... that it makes it possible for well-meaning participants to periodically remind everyone why they're all there.

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