Striving for Eden: Working Towards Equality in Two Virginia Communes

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In the summer of 2016 I spent five weeks living and researching in Twin Oaks and Acorn, two all-income sharing communes in rural Virginia. Twin Oaks was founded in 1967, and Acorn was founded in 1993. Both communities are a part of the Federation of Egalitarian Communities, or the FEC, which is a small network of communities that have come together based on their commitment to “the common struggle of creating a lifestyle based on Equality” (thefec.org). Not all intentional communities share one central goal, but, as two constituents of the FEC, Twin Oaks and Acorn both prioritize egalitarianism as their foremost goal and value.

I visited Acorn first for two weeks, completing twelve interviews, and then went straight to Twin Oaks for the next three weeks, where I gathered another twelve interviews. I participated in each community’s visitors’ program and spent my days working alongside community members, sharing meals and space with them, conducting interviews and doing archival research.\(^1\) I briefed each community on my project months ahead of time, so they knew I would be researching during my visit. They had both given me permission to do so and agreed to help facilitate my data collection.

Introduction

Our passion was equality, and everything we did was a working out of that central idea.

--Kat Kinkade

During my visit to the communes, I was surprised at the exceptionally wide range of personalities I found living together in community. Because every intentional community boasts a very specific alternative lifestyle, I had expected the people who chose to live there to have a lot in common. And they do have a lot of things in common, in broad, ideological, value-based terms: everyone believes strongly in communal living, in egalitarianism, and in sharing resources. They all work forty-two hours a week, eat

\(^1\) This paper is drawn from my senior thesis in Anthropology at Grinnell College, advised by Jon Andelson, completed in the fall of 2016.
lunch and dinner from the same table, and get the same dollar amount of allowance each month.

However, despite all these similarities, what I found during my visits to these “egalitarian” communes was less egalitarianism than I had expected. There were older, longer-term members with more responsibility, more knowledge, and therefore more power than younger, newer members who might be more transient. Some people had many more leadership positions than others—always by their own choice, but this still created a power dynamic, at least interpersonally, in terms of whose individual voice was heard loudest and most often.

Twin Oaks and Acorn each had community-specific inequalities as well. During my visit to Twin Oaks the community was experiencing low membership and a correlating labor shortage that amounted to 420 hours of labor deficit per week. The remaining community members had to pick up this slack in the busy summer months on the farm and were feeling the physical and emotional strain of being spread thin in their work lives. Additionally, the tofu industry perpetuates a constant source of inequity at Twin Oaks because the business requires many hours of labor in a hot, physically demanding environment. Only young, able bodies can work in the tofu hut, and this often means that those individuals work in tofu too much and get burned out. Many young tofu workers have ended up leaving the community because they could not handle the demand of the work they felt they needed to be doing for the community.

At Acorn, inequalities flare up more in the interpersonal sphere of community life. During its history, Acorn has weathered three near-dissolutions because of domineering personalities. Only one current Acorn member has been there since the beginning. During a period which is now referred to as the “family domination age,” Acorn was somewhat railroaded by one family—the Weavers—who came in with a very fixed vision of what kind of members they wanted Acorn to accept: they wanted a community made up entirely of families. “They treated people badly,” one member remembered. “They got really involved in process, policy-making and the business . . . they blocked new interns . . . they held all the
power” (Interview 1). After the Weavers left, Acorn suffered from a severe gender imbalance among its membership, which at one point consisted of eleven men and one woman. Finally, Acorn occasionally deals with inequalities in terms of its interns and visitors. The community’s policy on visitors is fairly lenient, but this has led them into trouble in the past, particularly when one visitor committed arson in the community’s main residential building. These jarring events have challenged the community to regain its balance and remember its egalitarian ethic, even in the face of fear, distrust, and betrayal.

The longer I spent at Twin Oaks and Acorn, the more apparent it became to me that there is a strong dissonance between each community’s egalitarian ideal and the inequalities that arise every day in community life. Members of Twin Oaks and Acorn are also aware of this dissonance. They constantly struggle with the paradox of knowing that, though they seek it, they will never be able to achieve absolute, ideal egalitarianism (which hereafter I will refer to as Equality) among all members of their community; and yet every day they strive for that ideal in the midst of real-life obstacles and difficulties.

The differences I saw between the members of Twin Oaks and Acorn derive from the ways in which the two communities manifest their egalitarian ideal. Twin Oaks emphasizes accountability: they have an extensive set of systems—an assigned labor system, a manager/planner system, and an internal government—put in place to ensure that everyone is contributing equally to the community. Twin Oaks revolves around policy and process, and its policies exist to protect members and clarify conflicts, ensuring that things are done as fairly, efficiently, and transparently as possible. These systems serve Twin Oakers well, many community members told me in interviews, and have for almost fifty years now. However, I was also told by members, and witnessed myself, how easily these policies could blot out individual voices in favor of what is best for the group. Another aspect of an impersonal, bureaucratic community structure is that it generally considers the needs of the group before the needs of an individual. Twin Oakers defended their community’s structures to me; they believe that having clear structures is the

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2 Most of my interviews were formal, with corresponding recordings that have been protected, archived for further reference, and cited at the end of this paper. The four interviews that are not cited were conducted informally in conversation throughout my participant observation and can be found in my field notes.
best way to govern a community of its size, and to live at Twin Oaks is to agree to be accountable to the group. The prevailing view at Twin Oaks, therefore, is that egalitarianism can best be sought by considering the entire community as one entity, rather than distinguishing individual needs and trying to accommodate all of those harmoniously.

At Acorn, members take a starkly contrasting approach to negotiating their egalitarian ideal with reality: they emphasize responsibility. Rather than using formal systems and policies to govern the group, as Twin Oaks does, Acorn virtually requires members to negotiate problems and discuss decisions on a case-by-case basis. Acorners want every individual to feel as if they can come forward with a problem and expect the community to help resolve it, no matter how small or personal it may be. The size of this community aids this verbal communication structure nicely and fosters a more familial, intimate environment. In contrast to the practice at Twin Oaks, Acorners do not write anything down; instead, they talk about everything extensively in meetings and in a conflict prevention and resolution process called “clearnesses,” which I will explain later. Acorn, with its large budget and small population, has more flexibility in which to consider the needs of individuals. They develop different problems in their struggle to achieve their egalitarian ideal, and also employ different solutions.

In the following pages I will argue that ideal egalitarianism, or Equality, the concept on which both Twin Oaks and Acorn are founded, is impossible to achieve fully. However, both Twin Oaks and Acorn members strive very hard to attain egalitarianism, despite the innumerable inequalities of day-to-day life in community. The two communities use very different approaches in their attempt to achieve egalitarianism, but these differences are less important than both communities’ intense dedication to seeking egalitarianism within the system of their choice. It is this commitment to the struggle for egalitarianism, rather than achievement of the pure ideal itself, that sustains the communities and allows them to continue thriving.
What are Twin Oaks and Acorn?

Twin Oaks was founded in Louisa County, Virginia, in 1967, and currently has about eighty-two full members and fifteen children. The community’s primary cottage industries are the production of hammocks and tofu, with several smaller income industries in heirloom seeds wholesale and ornamentals. Hammocks have been the lifeblood of Twin Oaks for most of its history. The community had a contract with Pier One for many years, and at its peak made about 14,000 hammocks a year, all by hand. Due to the economic recession and a globalizing economy, Twin Oaks could no longer compete with cheaper outsourced labor, and Pier One dropped their contract in 2007. Twin Oaks bought the tofu business from an ex-member who lived nearby, and that business has grown steadily over the years to a point where now the community can hardly keep up with the demand. In 2014, Twin Oaks purchased—at significant cost—a tofu machinery upgrade that will significantly ease the hard and unpleasant labor of making tofu, but for a variety of reasons the machinery has yet to become operative. This delayed return on a large investment has caused some economic strain on the community, and the tofu business is a point of contention among members of Twin Oaks for this reason and several others.

Twin Oaks is a highly structured, organized, policy-driven community with a written culture and an internal democratic government. The community does not have regular general meetings, but rather uses a manager-planner system to make critical mass changes in the community. Change happens slowly at Twin Oaks, and the community has extensive policy handbooks and processes to facilitate the efficiency of legislation in the community. Becoming a member at Twin Oaks is also a very controlled and thorough process. The community takes time to get to know you in order to make the most informed decision about whether or not you would be a good fit and a valuable addition to Twin Oaks.

Acorn was founded in 1993 about seven miles away from Twin Oaks in Mineral, Virginia, and currently has about twenty-five full members, five children, and five interns. In the early nineties, Twin Oaks had a waiting list two years long, and so a few members of the community got together with some friends they knew from the Communities Conference and decided to start a sister community very near Twin Oaks. From the very beginning, Acorn aspired to less structure, in hopes that the people who were
drawn to that kind of flexibility would shape the culture of the community through their active and engaged membership. They developed a strong verbal culture, in contrast to Twin Oaks’ written culture, in which nothing is written down and everything is talked about on a “case-by-case basis” as individuals see fit. Acorn has two community meetings every week, one to discuss a specific topic that may be especially on the minds of the community at that time, and one general meeting that is broken into two parts: one part for all visitors/guests/members to sit in on, and one part open only to full members (Interview 10).

Acorn uses consensus decision-making. They try to make decisions that best meet the needs of members and that everyone can, at the very least, consent to. Acorn’s verbal culture insists that all conflicts be hashed through and discussed to reach some form of resolution. The community works hard to develop a culture in which if you have a problem with someone you talk to them about it. Acorn, as a community, is tirelessly dedicated to meeting the needs of every individual member. Acorn’s cottage industry is an heirloom seed company called Southern Exposure Seed Exchange that has flourished in the past decade and generated a lot of income for the community. As a consequence, Acorners live very comfortably within their means. The contrasts between Twin Oaks and Acorn are summarized in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Contrasting Features of Twin Oaks and Acorn**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Twin Oaks</th>
<th>Acorn</th>
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<tr>
<td>Highly structured</td>
<td>Flexible structure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Written culture</td>
<td>Verbal culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Democratic government</td>
<td>Consensus decision-making</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recorded labor</td>
<td>No recorded labor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
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The Historical Moment of Each Community

Twin Oaks and Acorn were conceived at two very distinct moments in time for intentional communities, and with different inspiration. Twin Oaks was founded in 1967, at the very beginning of what would become the 60s counterculture. Thousands of communes sprang up during this era. Timothy Miller, author of *The 60s Communes: Hippies and Beyond*, wrote that in 1967 and ’68 “such community-oriented hippies began to leave the city” and go “back to the land” (p. 2). The 60s counterculture movement initially emerged out of the Beat Generation in the 50s and used the Beats’ version of counterculture to point them in new, radical directions that coincided with technological innovations and political current events of the time. It is important to note that the majority of individuals living in communes in the 60s were young, white, and middle-class (Miller, p. xxiv). While there are exceptions to this generalization, this trend of a predominantly white, middle-class membership persists at Twin Oaks and Acorn fifty years later.

The other important historical point about Twin Oaks is its founding inspiration: the behaviorist philosophy of *Walden Two*, a novel written by psychologist B.F. Skinner in 1948. *Walden Two* is about a visitor who happens across an ideal, highly egalitarian intentional community that uses the “relatively new social science of behaviorism to provide its members, living in a near-paradise, with lives of agreeable work, abundant leisure, and intellectual stimulation” (Miller, p. 56). Skinner’s book developed a wide following in the 60s, but few communes were founded on the concept as directly as Twin Oaks. The Skinnerian system on which Twin Oaks was founded has largely been abandoned now, though some important features, like the manager-planner government and labor credits, are still in place. However, I would argue that remnants of Skinner’s ideas, specifically the idea of Equality, remain deeply instilled in the values of Twin Oaks. The value placed on equality applies in financial terms (few communes have remained all-income sharing so effectively for so long), and also quite seriously to gender. Anthropologist Jon Wagner noted, after studying Twin Oaks and another sister community, East Wind (in Missouri): “These communities may be among the most nonsexist social systems in human history” (quoted in Miller, p. 59). Twin Oaks values equality deeply and unequivocally, their values are enormously
important to them, and they have served them well for a long time—much longer than almost any other 1960s-era commune. Miller writes, “Twin Oaks has been a formidable survivor among the 1960s communes, and the inspiration for several later communities. Few have embodied the spirit of the 1960s era so long or so well” (p. 59).

Acorn, on the other hand, was conceived of in the early 1990s, a completely different era. By this time, the spirit of the 60s had faded and the world had been introduced to neoliberalism and globalization, giving birth to a new generation of young people: Generation X. While Kat Kinkade, the founder of Twin Oaks, was also one of the founders of Acorn, she never lived there for very long. Acorn, from the very beginning, had its own distinct flavor and intention, and as Ira, co-founder of Acorn, remarked: “it was always a separate place from Twin Oaks” (Interview 6).

When I spoke to Ira, she told me, “I wanted to make it easier [than at Twin Oaks] to accept people from various backgrounds and incorporate people’s lives into Acorn life . . . we didn’t know who we were going to be! That would be determined by the people who came to live here. We thought it would be interesting to start with less structure and see what evolved” (Interview 6). Ira’s words are especially relevant when thinking about the generation of young people Acorn would be attracting at the time they got started. Generation Xers are born in the years 1965-1980 and are alternatively known as “latch-key kids” because so many of them had divorced or career-driven parents that the children would come home from school to an empty house. Government and big business mean little to this generation; they are known for being individualistic and for valuing the individual over the group. Raised by WWII-era parents in a time of disappointment over governmental authority and the Vietnam War, this generation is generally defined by a lack of loyalty and a wariness of commitment. All of their values are relative, and they are suspicious of any and all organization. They are known for being unimpressed with authority and simultaneously self-reliant—and to this day this describes the way Acorn operates as a community (Novak).

It makes sense that a lot of these “latch-key kids” would be seeking community when they got to an age where they could make their own decisions; it also makes sense that they would then choose a
community in which they could still maintain a lot of autonomy over their lives and their schedule, satisfying their desire to be self-reliant and independent. Through thinking in these generational terms, it starts to become clear that maybe the appeal of Acorn is still a reaction to the 60s era; though these young people in the 90s were not reacting directly to disappointment in government authority or the Vietnam War, they were reacting to the decisions their parents made as they were raising them in the 70s and 80s. These parents of the latch-key kids would have been coming of age in the 60s and passing down the aftershocks of this time to their kids as they raised them in the way they saw fit. Therefore, even though the early 90s was not a commune era in the way the late 60s was, there are important patterns to note about the population coming to Acorn at that moment in time, and recognize distinct aspects of Acorn’s identity as a community that may be indicative of that first population of members who arrived at the community’s founding.

**Striving for the Egalitarian Ideal**

In their efforts to uphold the egalitarian ideal, Twin Oaks and Acorn have developed distinct approaches to combating inequalities in their community; each commune has its own unique set of systems and procedures that best suit the size, culture, and preferences of the members living there. In this section I will argue that Twin Oaks uses a set of systems that emphasizes accountability among its membership, while Acorn takes an approach that encourages responsibility. Despite their sharp differences, both systems help each community work towards their central value of Equality.

The distinction I make between accountability at Twin Oaks and responsibility at Acorn amounts to a distinction between an external and an internal emphasis. At Twin Oaks, the community uses external systems, like recorded labor and the O+I board (discussed below), to hold members accountable for their behavior in community. At Acorn, by comparison, the community does not have external accountability systems; rather, they encourage members to be responsible for their own behavior and to act according to their own values, which should align with Acorn’s values as a community. Members of Acorn have a lot of freedom to live their lives the way they want to—more than Twin Oakers have—but this freedom
comes with significant individual responsibility for the community’s smooth functioning. Differences in Twin Oaks and Acorn’s approach to seeking egalitarianism can be found in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Differences in How Twin Oaks and Acorn Seek Egalitarianism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Twin Oaks Approach</th>
<th>Acorn Approach</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rational</td>
<td>Intimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impersonal</td>
<td>Intentionally Personal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Efficient</td>
<td>Consensus-based</td>
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Accountability at Twin Oaks

Within five minutes of arriving at Twin Oaks I noticed how meticulously organized the community was. In the middle of June, with everything in full bloom, the gardens and lawns looked beautifully neat and maintained. The buildings were all well-kept and oriented logically like a small village, with the main office located right next to the parking lot where I drove in. When I walked into the office to check in, a woman greeted me warmly and told me that another member would arrive shortly to pick me up and walk me to my residence. It was clear that everything had been scheduled prior to my arrival, and the community stuck to this schedule closely. I would soon learn that everyone’s schedule—members as well as visitors—is well-defined, manifested primarily through personalized assigned labor sheets. On my first day at Twin Oaks, I noted in my field notes, “People stick to their labor sheets like glue” (Field notes 6.17).

Inspired by Walden Two and instilled as a pillar of Twin Oaks life since the very beginning, the assigned labor system governs the schedule of every member in the community. Every week there is a labor assigner or two, and these individuals use the labor budgets from all the different work areas in the community to assign forty-two hours of labor to each member for the coming week. These hours take the form of shifts from a variety of work areas, including kitchen, garden, chickens, and hammocks among others—all different schedules based on an individual’s skills and interests. Members can assign their own labor if they have been living at Twin Oaks for a long time and know what kind of schedule works best.
for them, but for visitors and newer members the labor assigner will take requests based on someone’s
interests and availability and then fill out a paper schedule for each person for the week. Members turn in
their labor requests by Monday at 7 p.m. for assigning and receive them back from the assigners on
Wednesday. The schedules distributed on Wednesday are drafts, and members can revise them as they see
fit before the beginning of the Twin Oaks week, which starts on Friday morning. Once the week begins,
members are responsible for showing up to the shifts they are scheduled for—the managers of those shifts
will be expecting them. Assigned labor works well in that it helps newer members meet their forty-two
hour quota each week. If they do not, they will enter what is called the “labor hole.”

The “labor hole” is a member’s labor deficit compared to quota, and it can accumulate week to
week. If a member is forty hours in the labor hole, for example, that means that the person has not worked
forty hours that he or she was supposed to over the course of some weeks. Twin Oaks takes the labor hole
very seriously. Because the community is all-income sharing, individuals “earn” their income through
working full quota. If someone is not working full quota, then the entire community suffers, especially at
this point in time when Twin Oaks has low membership to begin with. If a member becomes a full two
weeks (or eighty-four hours) in the labor hole, or if a member has been in the hole for four months, that
individual gets approached by Twin Oaks’ labor and mental health teams to see what is going on and
provide them with any resources they might need. “There’s usually a reason why people aren’t making
quota,” the Twin Oaks labor manager told us in our visitors’ labor orientation (Fieldnotes 6.19). The labor
team will present this individual with a preventative contract that specifies goals for the individual to
make up the labor deficit (e.g., fifteen hours/month), and normally that preventative contract is all the
individual needs to get back on track. If for some reason the preventative contract does not cause the
individual to climb out of the labor hole, the community will then issue a required contract with an
associated process called a feedback.

A feedback is a meeting in which the community comes together to “increase transparency and
empathy” around the individual who is in the labor hole or facing some other community problem
(Fieldnotes 6.19). This focus person gets one advocate during the meeting, in which the community will
discuss the best way in which to proceed with this individual’s situation. The idea of a feedback is that the individual has a chance to explain his or her situation to the community, and the community has an opportunity to brainstorm/support the individual in solving the problem. This is not, however, how feedbacks often feel, especially to the focus person. Though the intention of these meetings is love and support, many view them instead as a “punishment.” Feelings are often laid bare at these feedbacks, and the focus person almost always knows by the end whether or not they feel welcome to continue living at Twin Oaks. If the feedback does not resolve the problem, the community would consider expelling the person. However, this has never happened in the memory of anyone I spoke to at Twin Oaks. It was explained to me that normally by the time a feedback has been called, the individual knows whether they should stay or leave the community. In the past, every individual in question has left voluntarily without a formal expulsion.

Twin Oaks’ labor system holds its membership accountable for pulling their weight in the community. This system works effectively as long as the labor assigners and managers stay on top of people as they fall into the labor hole. The community learned this lesson the hard way. About a year ago, it had a labor manager who failed to hold members accountable for their labor deficits. At this time, one third of Twin Oaks members were in the labor hole. “We are not always great at boundary setting,” one member said to me, as they explained how this labor crisis came about (Interview 16). The labor manager at the time simply felt uncomfortable calling out his friends and fellow communards for being in the labor hole; he did not want to be too harsh with the people he lived with, and so the systems of the community started to fail. “Over and over and over again, people end up being hundreds and hundreds of hours in the hole because the people whose job it is to keep them on track, they don’t want to be a hardass, they don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings . . . it’s just hard to do that with people you live with,” one member explained. “We’re compassionate people--we want to treat each other as humans and cut each other slack when we need to . . . and that’s a dance” (Interview 16).

In addition to the labor quota system, one of the most obvious ways in which Twin Oaks holds its members accountable is by maintaining a strong written culture on the O+I board. O+I stands for
Opinions and Information. This space is where members write papers, essays, or letters expressing some opinion they have, putting forth some new policy idea, or informing the community about some issue they want everyone to be aware of. All papers must stay up on the O+I board for ten days, regardless of how popular or unpopular they might be. Anyone is allowed to post, and everyone, including visitors, is encouraged to read the O+I board to find out what is going on in the community. Members can get labor credits for writing comments on these O+I papers if appropriate, and these written comments are how discussions happen at Twin Oaks, the way they might at a meeting in another community.

Partially because of the size of Twin Oaks, written communication works well because then every member of the community does not have to be present to be updated on what is going on. Written communication also allows Twin Oaks to keep a record of all the discussions, debates, proposals and policies that have arisen in the community’s history. Paper trails prove efficient in that they allow members to refer back to past conversations to find out what had been resolved in the past. Though the process of poring through community archives might be tedious, Twin Oaks does have the opportunity to learn from itself and avoid rehashing decisions that have already been made at an earlier date. These archives hold the community members accountable for their decisions, allowing little flexibility for policies to be reversed once enacted. Change happens slowly at Twin Oaks, and this is intentional on the community’s part. “When change happens, it is critical mass change,” one member explained. “It’s a change the community wants. And I think that keeps us from making bad decisions. We change slowly, and we are what we are” (Interview 17).

We have a reputation in the communities movement and the FEC of being an uptight, middle class, rule-bound, policy-bound community, which is not that unfair a depiction, in ways, and—that has served us. That way of being has worked for us, kept us hugely thriving in the world for fifty years. Nothing is ideal, but that is clearly working well for us. (Interview 16)

Twin Oaks loves its systems. Over and over again in interviews, members admitted to me that Twin Oaks may be “ridiculously over-administrative and bureaucratic,” but that the community absolutely relies on its systems to function, and that they would never give them up. Other members insisted that bureaucratic systems are how Twin Oaks manages to keep community relations
depersonalized— a necessity for handling conflict and upholding community priorities. When I asked members of Twin Oaks what their community does well, numerous informants told me that Twin Oaks does a great job with its “underlying systems and structures. The labor system has served us extremely well. . . . Our decision-making structures provide rooted, consistent structures that remain even as members flow in and out over the years” (Interview 16). This is perhaps one final way Twin Oaks’ structure holds members accountable: by using such a regimented, bureaucratic set of systems, the community ensures that new members coming in will not be able to change the way the community functions. As my visitor group was told in our Values Orientation at Twin Oaks: “We have this system and we hope you will get with it if you want to live here . . . we’re happy to have you here if you fit in with our systems, but you can’t just do whatever you want: we have these values and we stick to them” (Field notes 7.2).

It seems contradictory at first for an egalitarian commune to embrace a hierarchical structure like bureaucracy. As Max Weber wrote, “a bureaucracy, once created, will immediately move to make itself indispensable to anyone trying to wield power, no matter what they wish to do with it” (quoted in Graeber, p. 150). But in fact, there are some exceptionally good reasons to employ a bureaucratic structure at Twin Oaks. As David Graeber (p. 153) pointed out, “the simplest explanation for the appeal of bureaucratic procedures lies in their impersonality.” He also referred to Weber’s remark that “bureaucracy is the very embodiment of rational efficiency” (p. 153). Twin Oaks values rationality, efficiency, and impersonality when it comes to addressing the pragmatic realities of living in a large egalitarian community. Though Twin Oakers understand the power dynamics implicit in a bureaucratic structure, they feel confident in their ability to navigate this structure in ways that avoid inequities. They believe that this system is still ultimately the best way to uphold Equality for all members in the community.

Weber said that bureaucracies chiefly wield power by “attempting to monopolize access to certain key types of information” (quoted in Graeber, p. 150). While Twin Oaks loves the efficiency and rationality of bureaucratic systems, it firmly rejects this monopolization of information that Weber refers
to. Twin Oakers very intentionally promote and perpetuate transparency of information in their community. They put everything in writing and post that writing publicly for every member to process and comment on at will. The O+I board serves Twin Oaks’ values of efficiency and impersonality: all members have access to all the information available at their own convenience, meaning no community meeting has to be coordinated with ninety members’ conflicting schedules, and the written form of communication depersonalizes information to any readers who may take issue with the content.

Weber argues that “bureaucracy develops more perfectly, the more it is ‘dehumanized’, the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational and emotional elements” (quoted in Hull, p. 255). Although Weber’s description seems to fit Twin Oaks, to many Twin Oakers the O+I board does not, in fact, feel dehumanized; on the contrary, several members told me that they do not even like to read the O+I board because the content can get too “nasty” interpersonally (Interview 15). “Things can be taken out of context in writing,” one member explained to me (Interview 13). The tone can be misconstrued. Some members attributed this displacement of tone to written culture in general.

Written culture is potentially more dangerous because there’s more potential for passive aggressiveness when it’s not in real-time. But at the same time, verbal culture doesn’t solve problems, or at least it confronts them more directly. I really like verbal culture, or at least a mixture. Of course, there’s no perfect place. Some people don’t like to talk much. They prefer to let problems lie. (Interview 12)

I heard this sentiment from many Twin Oakers—that written culture might not be the best way to communicate, but that everyone has different styles they prefer, and so there is not any one method that works best for a community as large as Twin Oaks. Members agreed that meetings are not productive, because attendance will always be low due to conflicting work schedules. For this reason, the O+I board seems to be the best option. “I actually don’t read the O+I almost ever,” one member told me. “I find the experience stressful, but that doesn’t mean I don’t know what’s going on” (Interview 16). Another member said they read the board sometimes: “often when I read it, I end up wishing I hadn’t. But I have trouble seeing written material and just passing it by, not reading what it says” (Interview 18). “I hate reading the O+I board,” another member said. “I think it’s nasty. People get so nasty on the O+I, and
since I’ve started being more selective about what I read and comment on, my quality of life has improved dramatically. Which makes me a little sad, because I don’t wish to be woefully ignorant, but I also don’t wish to absorb so much vitriol on an everyday basis” (Interview 15).

While individuals seem to dislike the O+I board personally, they acknowledge that the structure serves its purpose as a public bulletin of information, and I would argue that this explicit written structure promotes egalitarianism in the way it unmask social power. Jo Freeman, in her 1970 article “The Tyranny of Structurelessness,” argues adamantly for the necessity of structure in successful democratic systems: “there is no such thing as a ‘structureless’ group . . . this is organizationally impossible . . . the more unstructured a movement is, the less control it has over the directions in which it develops and the political actions in which it engages” (Freeman, p. 4). The O+I board airs the grievances of the community for everyone to see, and in this way minimizes the damage of other more hidden forms of aggressive social behavior, such as gossip. In the same way that politics is a psychological outlet for aggression in the Kibbutz (Spiro, p. 104), the O+I board channels interpersonal aggression at Twin Oaks in a communal, constructive way: while individuals may still find some written comments insulting or unkind, these remarks are embedded within a political context designed to engage the entire community and move it forward. Therefore, the O+I board succeeds as a bureaucratic structure that promotes efficiency and impersonality, while also upholding an egalitarian ideal as every Twin Oaker has a platform to use his or her voice towards political ends. This negotiation with an inherently hierarchical structure paradoxically succeeds in promoting egalitarian communication and community sustainability at Twin Oaks.

**Responsibility at Acorn**

While Twin Oaks takes a rational, efficient, and impersonal approach to striving for an ideal egalitarianism, Acorn prefers a much more intimate, consensus-based, and intentionally personal means to the same challenging end. Unlike Twin Oaks, Acorn has almost no policies and no internal government. Acorners prefer to discuss everything on a case-by-case basis on principle. “I am fairly obsessed with Acorn . . . that’s my interest. I do best with people who want to talk about Acorn stuff all
the time,” one member told me (Interview 10). They value independence, responsibility, self-starters, and innovation (Interview 9). Acorn wants its members to take initiative to do the work they are excited about and expects members to bear the responsibilities that they assume without having to be checked up on. At Acorn, no one will ever tell you what to do or how to do it. If no one feels like cooking the communal dinner that night, there will be no dinner. If no one does the dishes, they will pile up. Because of this ethos, visitors to Acorn can be turned off by the disorganization of the place, or how messy it is, or how unstructured. It takes a specific kind of person to be able to handle the flexibility that Acorn provides and the responsibility that Acorn expects. As a result, the community tends to self-select people who are motivated by the freedoms and the challenges that come with this approach.

Acorn equalizes its work culture by valuing and attracting self-starters. One member, recalling five years ago when a significant percentage of current Acorn members arrived, said, “I think a lot of the young people wanted responsibilities, and Acorn culture encourages that, generally in a helpful way” (Interview 2). “There are a lot of big personalities here,” another member explained. “If you’re not at least somewhat walking in your own power here, and able to self-start, self-motivate, self-direct, it’s not going to work out so well and you won’t last long” (Interview 9). This demanding self-directed work culture can be intimidating to newcomers. So many members do individual work that it can feel hard to join in or know what to do to contribute. This individualized work life can be viewed as clear evidence of egalitarianism in work, but this labor style is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, “people are doing the work they are excited about doing”; a lot of Acorners are self-motivated and passionate about their own projects, and this often leads to people working by themselves (Interview 7). “There’s so much room to create and implement projects that you’re excited about, and obviously they need to be contributing to the needs of the community in some way, but . . . the sky’s the limit,” one member explained (Interview 8). On the other hand, working individually on projects “definitely slows us down, and definitely self-selects what kinds of projects we take on,” one member reflected. “We could have half as many projects, and twice as many realized to a fuller extent/completion” (Interview 8).
Ultimately, Acorn chooses a less “efficient” work life in exchange for the luxury of personal autonomy and exploration. “I think it’s great to lower the stakes on people’s time. I’m super grateful for being able to take some pretty big gambles with my time and projects and be like ‘sure I’ll just figure it out . . . something will happen . . . I’ll become qualified’ . . .” one member explained (Interview 8).

Acorn has a forty-two hour work quota, just like Twin Oaks, but full members do not assign or record labor: each member simply has a personal responsibility to the community to work full quota. Acorners find this approach to work life more “authentic” than the assigned labor system at Twin Oaks, because “everyone is doing the work they are excited about doing” (Interview 7). If the community does not prioritize certain kinds of work, that work does not get done, and this method works for Acorn. “It just seems to work fine with everyone doing the amount of work they want to do,” one member confirmed (Interview 10). “If Acorn didn’t have the solid base of authenticity, it would be really hard for me to live here,” another member confessed. “The upside to being a disorganized community is that things happen when people want them to happen . . . those collective moments . . . if there isn’t energy to make something happen, it won’t. And Acorn doesn’t fall apart when that occurs” (Interview 7).

In addition to facilitating a self-starting, innovative culture, Acorn also has a couple of formal processes in place that reinforce egalitarianism in the community: consensus decision-making at weekly meetings and clearances. In an ideal world, consensus creates change that every individual supports with his or her own vote--this concept is egalitarian in the purest sense. Ira explained that Acorn conceived of its consensus process “with a Quaker point-of-view; Quakers, for example, think what you’re trying to do with consensus is make sure that you are making a decision everyone can live with, but not that you necessarily created the decision that everyone wants” (Interview 6). This remains Acorn’s method to this day: members admit that their consensus is not “by the book,” but the community works hard to make sure that everybody feels like they can live with every decision made.

“Sitting in a room and actually looking at each other being how consensus works is really important,” one member told me (Interview 7). This statement conveys how significantly consensus is married to meetings at Acorn. Many members have a “love/hate relationship” with meetings, and
attendance week to week is often low (Interview 9). “Meetings are an important forum,” one member told me. “It’s an important thing to do if you want to know what’s actually going on around here” (Interview 2). However, not all members feel this way. “Changes are made in the culture, in people’s lives,” another member argued (Interview 9). This member told me that they only go to meetings if it’s an emotional topic being misconstrued as a policy issue: “I go to try to refocus people into understanding that we are talking about a real person with feelings . . . that’s one of the ways in which I’m helpful to Acorn,” this member explained (9). From an outsider’s perspective, I found this emotional quality of Acorn’s formal meeting process to be one of the community’s strengths. Even though I was not allowed into the member-only meetings, where interpersonal conflicts and membership decisions are discussed, I still witnessed individuals’ feelings being prioritized at the top of the community’s agenda.

When asked, one member replied, “yes, I think consensus works well. It’s not always easy, and it can be streamlined . . . but as long as ignorance of a situation doesn’t constantly block the group from doing things, consensus functions generally as it should” (Interview 2). Not everyone feels comfortable in meetings. “Different people have different modes of communication they’re most comfortable with,” whether that be meetings, email, or one-on-one conversations. The community puts “lots of effort into making meetings more comfortable for people who don’t feel comfortable,” and yet “it’s still messy” (Interview 5). Decisions get delayed, and people get frustrated; membership decisions, I’m told, are hands-down the hardest part of meetings.

I like meetings, I like occasionally trying to change things through policy or talking about a need. However, not everyone likes to participate in meetings. As far as making decisions, I think it’s okay. The people who really care go and other people don’t, and that’s fine. Right now I just struggle with these membership go-arounds . . . membership has always been the hardest thing, and right now it’s really hard. (Interview 10)

Membership decisions can often cause interpersonal rifts and hard feelings in the community, and many would argue that Acorn needs its communication culture most in the midst of these hard times. “So much of our culture is, if you see a problem, you have the power to do something about it . . . I always hope that we can continue to develop a culture where if you have an issue with someone, you go talk to
them,” one member said, emphasizing the responsibility that Acorn places on its members to take authentic communication seriously (Interview 10).

If Acorners need to talk about a conflict they are having specifically with one other individual, they resort to clearnesses, the second formal communication process Acorn employs. “Upsetness is not going to go away in meetings . . . it is super important to talk to people one-on-one. That has to happen in conversations outside the meeting” (Interview 10). Clearnesses are a pillar of communication at Acorn; they provide a “very decentralized,” depersonalized opportunity for two individuals to request a one-on-one, face-to-face conversation with each other (Interview 1). Provisional members have to do clearnesses with every member of the community every four months, and full members have to do them once per year. This is the way Acorn ensures that communication lines stay relatively open among members, and that individuals have a depersonalized way of initiating an authentic conversation with another member. When “getting clear” with someone, each person asks how the other is doing, how their life in community is going, and what he or she could do to make the other’s life easier. Sometimes these conversations resolve closeted conflicts that had not even explicitly surfaced, while at other times, members simply get a chance to know each other better, or express appreciation for each other’s role in the community. One member noted, “certain relationships opened for me because of clearnesses” (Interview 3).

While “in theory, meetings serve the purpose of meeting the needs of all the people who live at Acorn,” this is not always the reality: some people prefer to share their thoughts in more intimate conversations, while others find meetings long and tiring, and still others find some meeting facilitators to be coercive (Interview 5). Therefore, in order to meet the needs of each member’s communication style and ensure that all voices are heard equally, Acorn uses this dual communication structure of meetings and clearnesses. The community hopes that by using these two processes in tandem, and relying on each member to take personal responsibility for their own role as a social actor at Acorn, the community is successfully seeking and approaching social and legislative egalitarianism.

Compared to Twin Oaks, Acorn members employ very little bureaucracy. They do have a notes culture, which they use very casually, but because of its smaller size Acorn can afford to rely more
heavily on verbal culture than Twin Oaks. With most members seeing most other members several times every day, word-of-mouth communication is much easier. Acorn’s formal structures support this verbal culture: regular meetings, consensus decision-making, and clearnesses are all exclusively verbal processes that define the community. Acorn’s verbal culture is non-bureaucratic and can even be considered anti-bureaucratic, characterized by Graeber (p. 181) as “the systematic negation of everything bureaucracy stands for.” I argue that Acorners reject bureaucracy for ideological reasons and instead choose a more flexible institutional structure that encourages egalitarian improvisation and creativity. Acorners think that bureaucracy gets in the way of authentic communication in community, prohibits humanized interaction, and minimizes emotion—all of which the community values greatly. “We’re an authentically minded culture,” one Acorn told me. “We’re trying to act in a way that’s true to how we’re feeling and the desires we have” (Interview 7). Sentiments like these drive Acorn to seek a countermovement to bureaucracy: anti-bureaucracy.

**Games and Play**

David Graeber argues that Americans secretly love bureaucracy, and he pioneers a theory that the nature of play, games, and freedom all lie at the core of bureaucracy’s covert appeal. Graeber positions institutional bureaucracies as a game, explaining, “Games allow us our only real experience of a situation where all ambiguity is swept away” (p. 190). He describes the pleasure people feel when they agree to engage with a predictable and navigable set of rules. He argues that individuals feel a sense of freedom when they accept a bounded set of rules, because then they know what is going to happen and they feel an unprecedented amount of control over their lives. “At some point along the way, rules-as-constraining pass over into rules-as-enabling, even if it’s impossible to say exactly where. Freedom, then, really is the tension of the free play of human creativity against the rules it is constantly generating” (p. 199).

This “tension” between rules and play can be found at Twin Oaks. The community’s extensive set of rules, policies, norms, and systems create a “game” that Twin Oaks members like because it is predictable. Members enjoy knowing exactly what to expect. “I feel like when you live in a group, the clearer things are the better. Clarity leads to more clarity,” one Twin Oaker reported (Interview 16). This
“clarity” recalls Twin Oaks’ value of the transparency of information and the egalitarian ramifications of that transparency in the community. If everyone in Twin Oaks is clear on the community’s expectations, then everyone can be held accountable fairly and equally according to that single set of rules. Another member told me, “there are people here who feel safe with policy . . . they want things spelled out; when things are ambiguous, they feel unsafe” (Interview 14). Having a physical labor sheet, assigned work for the week, and policy handbooks to refer back to makes Twin Oakers feel comfortable and in control of their own lives. Within that set of rules and systems, however, they are then free to craft their time however they wish. Some Twin Oakers work over sixty hours per week for nine months to make their quota for the year and then leave the farm for three months of vacation. Others have hobbies like furniture making or road biking that they easily incorporate into their nontraditional work schedules. In these ways, Twin Oaks employs the “tension” Graeber discusses: they predominantly use a “gaming” strategy to manage play efficiently, allowing their members to feel the freedom that results from navigating this tension.

Acorners also use Graeber’s tension between games and play, but they prioritize differently than Twin Oaks—they prefer to play more and game less. Play, to Graeber, is different from playing a game. Quoting Indian intellectual Shiv Visvanathan, Graeber illustrates the differences between games and play: “A game is a bounded, specific way of problem solving. Play is more cosmic and open-ended. Gods play, but man unfortunately is a gaming individual. A game has a predictable solution, while play may not. Play allows for emergence, novelty, surprise” (quoted in Graeber, p. 192). He continues, “what ultimately lies behind the appeal of bureaucracy is the fear of play” (p. 193), and this point is precisely where I see Twin Oaks and Acorn’s divergent approaches to egalitarianism crystallizing. Twin Oakers are wary of “playing” without rules to guide them. Acorn, as a smaller community, has more of an option than Twin Oaks to resist society’s natural tendency to “game” and follow rules. As a self-identified alternative culture, Acorn chooses to “play” in their community instead, encouraging individuals to embrace their own creativity rather than look for a set of rules to constrain those innovative ideas. Acorners prefer to have faith in improvisation and believe in the power of individuals’ feelings to create the community they
want to live in. The consensus process aligns with Acorn’s desire to “play” and also provides an institutional form through which individuals are not limited, but simply required to reconcile their individual “cosmic and open-ended” ideas intelligently with a group.

This formal consensus process gives Acorn a necessary structure that balances the community’s otherwise insatiable desire to constantly “play” and almost never “game.” “The more unstructured a group is, the more it adheres to an ideology of ‘structurelessness,’ the more vulnerable it is to being taken over by a group of political comrades,” Jo Freeman writes in “The Tyranny of Structurelessness” (p. 4). This statement captures why it is so important for Acorn to balance its individualistic approach to community and play with a formal consensus process: consensus reinforces egalitarianism, providing structure that prevents informal social groups from wielding power over anyone else in the community through social play. As Freeman concludes, “there is nothing inherently bad about structure itself—only its excessive use” (p.4). Acorn sustains itself and effectively upholds its egalitarian ideal because of the negotiation the community nurtures between the structure of its consensus process and the flexibility of individual “play”: if this negotiation did not exist, Acorn would crumble as a result of too much individualism and not enough egalitarianism.

**Conclusion**

I’ve been frank enough about the problems of communal living. Obviously Twin Oaks isn’t paradise. For one thing, I’m no angel, and if you were here, you wouldn’t be one either. Ordinary mortals can’t create paradise. We can, however, strive for Utopia. Never mind that we haven’t quite gotten there yet. We’re working on it.

--Kat Kinkade

Both Twin Oaks and Acorn, from the moment they were conceived, endeavored to create a new model of society that embodied cooperation, nonviolence, sharing, and most importantly, Equality. The founding members of these communities hoped that the world would watch what Twin Oaks and Acorn were doing and follow in their footsteps. However, embodying Equality, even in very small communities like Twin Oaks and Acorn, has its distinct challenges. Members invest different amounts of time in
community, people come and go, they freeride, cash flow rises and falls. These are inevitable realities in everyday life that create or reproduce inequalities among people and disrupt an egalitarian ideal. Twin Oaks and Acorn have each developed their own system of negotiating with these realities in a way that compromises their community values as little as possible. These two systems bear very little resemblance to each other, and yet both communities have survived for decades.

There is no question that the size of a community and the time of its founding shape the kind of culture that evolves there. Twin Oaks has at least three times as many members as Acorn and has existed for twenty-five years longer, and these differences play out visibly in each community. Twin Oaks could not afford to be as disorganized as Acorn; it would have a much harder time managing its various businesses, internal government and over a hundred work areas effectively. Acorn has a much more streamlined income model, fewer work areas, and not nearly as much infrastructure to maintain. Therefore, as long as everyone is working together and putting in an equal share of effort at Acorn, fastidious organization and scheduling are not required. Despite these differences in size and time of founding, however, both communities share the same desire and definition for Equality.

In this paper, I argue that pure egalitarianism is impossible. However, I also argue that the impossibility of egalitarianism is not important so long as the members of a community are tirelessly committed to upholding an egalitarian value and struggling for that value in their imperfect community systems. Twin Oaks and Acorn have chosen very different systems, but these differences are reconciled in the communities’ common collective dedication to strive towards their founding value of Equality. Twin Oakers and Acorners seek the same ideal because Equality was the founding principle of both these communities: they have always advertised themselves as such, and individuals with aligned ideologies joined to see that vision manifested in the collective. Despite the innumerable and stark differences in structure and culture, both Twin Oaks and Acorn sustain themselves as long as they continue to collectively strive for their egalitarian ideal. Not all communities are as dedicated to Equality as Twin Oaks and Acorn are, and they do not have to be. But all intentional communities do have to be dedicated
to the idea that the constant struggle for a common and unifying value is worth the hard work and necessary for community sustainability.

Works Cited


All 20 interviews were conducted between June 9-July 7, 2016 by Summer Jones.

All field notes were written between June 1-July 7, 2016 by Summer Jones.