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Beyond Counterculture

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Jentri Anders, *Beyond Counterculture*. 1990, Washington State University Press, \$20.00 (U.S.) paperback.

There are currently many thinkers who would agree with John Bodley, professor of anthropology at the State University of Washington, that industrialism and the industrial state are failing humanity in a number of crucial areas, not the least in the all-important ecological dimension. Bodley has explained his viewpoint and put forward some compelling evidence in his book *Anthropology and Contemporary Human Problems 1*, wherein he also advances the idea that post-industrial, "synthetic" intentional communities are important to the future of the developed world.

Jentri Anders, formerly a Ph.D. candidate working under Bodley, has given us a most insightful and intriguing account of a region of North America in which there have not only been attempts to found sustainable intentional communities but in which people have participated in what amounts to a regional level experiment in sustainable culture.

The back-to-the-land movement that began in the late '60s and gathered momentum in the early '70s was closely associated with the counterculture of that era. This movement was enlivened by experiences and concepts that had been incubated in the bohemiae, college campuses, and city parks of urban centres. It embraced celebrative community, egalitarianism, sensitivity to nature, and experience of deeper dimensions of the human self. Anders undertakes a probing exploration of one outcome of this vision, "Mateel."

Mateel, Anders explains, is "a community, a culture system, and the space it occupies." Mateel's geographical space encompasses forested watersheds of the Mattole and Eel Rivers, near the Pacific Coast in northern California's Humboldt County. What makes this community and culture system widely interesting is that it could pass for the archetype of many similar developments in various parts of North America.

Anders applies the term "Mateelians" not just to any of the thousands of people who have congregated in the Mattole and Eel watersheds in roughly the last 15-20 years, but specifically to those people who subscribe to a constellation of values such as tolerance, mutual aid, psychological and spiritual growth, and care for the land.

Anders has explored Mateelian life patterns with a social scientist's eyes. Her book is enlivened by the fact that she herself has been a back-to-the-lander in Mateel, having lived here for many years. Anders obviously loves the region and

has kindred feeling for Mateelians in their attempts to build an enduring new culture. Yet she clearly retains enough objectivity to contemplate Mateelians' strengths and weaknesses, achievements and failures.

What would be visible to "outsiders" is that from the early '70s a large number of long-haired (mostly young) people moved onto rural land in Mateel's hills and valleys. Here they learned to grow gardens, do carpentry, raise chickens and goats, manage rural water systems, and live with an emphatic minimum of money. But Anders has the insider's grasp of this situation: these dropouts from the mainstream had come here to reject violence, the military-industrial complex, social stratification, and personal duplicity in everyday roles and social interactions. They began by learning to do without the ready-made economic positions and the material comforts of modern North American life. Although Mateelian life patterns and economic philosophies underwent change during the next decades, according to Anders' observations, Mateelians managed to remain admirably unfazed by the conformism, materialism, and thumbs-up jingoism of the Reagan years.

Many of the Mateelians started their new lives in a dirt-poor commune. Over the years, these leaderless but often thematic or "intentional" enclaves tended to de-collectivize into smaller quasi-kin groups or "partnerships," and many nuclear households acquired a piece of land of their own. Early socialistically inclined economic conceptions gradually mutated, as a network of interactive small-scale businesses evolved. However, Anders doesn't view this as a loss of values. Rather, she advances that through it all the Mateelians have struggled for self-reliance on the level of the broad Mateelian community.

Anders views the Mateelian cultural experiment as having its origin in a personal experience of "discontinuity" within each of the individuals who came to live here: altered states of consciousness induced people to break with mainstream society in order to search for a meaningful way of life beyond the futile shams and ceaseless status seeking of the rat-race world. In seeking to identify the results, Anders expertly investigates such inscrutable realities as the Mateelian sense of time (which is "polychronous," including biological and sacred time, for instance, as well as clock or calendar time). She also takes pains to explain the process of "magical anarchy," a sort of folksy dialogue circle that, in relation to almost any topic of general concern, moves into ad hoc consensus decision-making.

Both the time sense and the decision-making process relate to the Mateelian worldview, and result from experiences of novel states of consciousness. Some Mateelians now systematically pursue such consciousness states through meditation, Sufi dancing, African drumming, Tai Chi, and other means.

Yet whatever the personal experiences that have led them to move here, the region's reinhabitory residents have characteristically become fervent environmentalists; no doubt their critics would claim they've made a fetish of ecological

awareness and ethics. Still, the Mateel experiment is perpetually engaged with learning to live within ecological limits (which has included the development of "home technology" and the development of institutions for blending environmentally scrupulous habits and values with face-to-face community life). Here is an emphatic rejection of dehumanizing, alienating, and ecologically unsound "Amerikan" life (Anders uses Kafka's spelling when referring to those aspects of American life spurned by Mateelians). Consequently, she argues, Mateel's real achievements can't be appropriately judged in mainstream terms at all.

Though Mateelians frequently see their way of life as similar to primitive society, Anders-the-anthropologist finds limited parallels between Mateelian culture and primal cultural models. The latter have discernable and abiding social structures, roles, and self-regulation mechanisms, all preserved in ancient tradition. When Anders laments, "One negative ramification of the extreme tolerance of Mateelians is that individuals who drain collective resources or create unnecessary confusion cannot be restrained," she is noting a crucial deficiency. "Magical anarchy has no mechanism for preserving the integrity of the social system under threat, although it has many mechanisms for preventing the occurrence of conflicts." Given that Anders lives in Mateel, her impartiality in confronting such social flaws is admirable.

Particularly when it comes to Mateelian marriage and family life, the reader ponders whether the patterns are merely an exaggeration of the ephemerality of late-industrial-age, mainstream America - the "Amerika" that the Mateelians disown. According to Anders, when Mateelians end a quasi-marital relationship, "they are very likely to explain it by saying 'he/she was blocking my growth.' This statement may, but does not always, indicate that the speaker's growth was dependent on a sexual relationship with someone else." There can be no doubt that it will take more than a single generation to work out, among other things, new patterns of "marriage" and social responsibility within the community.

This is clear to Anders. Referring to opinion of the late '60s and early '70s, she writes, "Many social scientists, prematurely dismissing the counterculture as an emerging cultural system, stated that it was only one generation thick. The real test was whether it would be passed on intergenerationally." What, a reader in the 1990s might ask, ultimately happens to the countercultural kid whose parents have, since his/her birth, each re-mated two or three times? In Mateel, Anders says, the typical immediate result is an expansion of the child's "extended family," usually a loving family at that. (In many other Mateel — like places, by contrast, there may be less of a tendency for both parents to remain resident within the community after a split.)

Anders is intensely interested in numerous dimensions of the process of raising Mateelian children and helping them ease into adult life and interface realistically with the larger world. On the positive side, kids raised in Mateel tend to be notably independent and self-confident. But Mateel has also produced some young people who, having made money in marijuana farming, "drive reckless-

ly, remain near-illiterate, and display none of the positive Mateelian values.” Anders thinks there is now too little information on which to judge the real results, because such a small proportion of Mateelian children have yet reached late adolescence.

Anders feels the renowned Humboldt County marijuana industry has presented a major hindrance to the Mateelian experiment. She points out that when a 1980s U.S. ”marijuana boom” lifted the fortunes of that segment of Mateelians who grew cannabis commercially, it thereby introduced a ”class structure” based on relative spending power. Interestingly, it was often those of working-class background who wound up with more money, compared with those of middle-class background.

Denounced by the mainstream world, commercial marijuana farming has also been passionately controversial within Mateel itself, though due to a somewhat different set of considerations. For one, it attracted a ruthless, sometimes violent social element into the region. In an appended note, Anders observes that by 1980, the Mateelian culture was ”submerged intact” beneath waves of immigration encouraged by the marijuana boom, the values and goals of Mateelian life thereby becoming difficult for the uninitiated to discern.

Yet, even aside from this, Mateel’s young tradition would seem at the present stage to be a lack of tradition, a ceaseless improvisation. Anders, with the patience of a good social scientist, reminds us things are still at an early stage.

Is Mateel part of the promise of something new and positive, or just the frayed edge of a disintegrating late twentieth- century industrial culture? Of course, this is difficult to answer, because the region’s borders are soft ones, and the influence of the larger world can’t be effectively screened out.

Hence the task of sorting through things and identifying those aspects of contemporary life that may be of some genuine value is part of even the sincerest Mateelian endeavour.

Mateel’s shortcomings haven’t driven Anders to hopeless cynicism. She judges the value of the experiment by the fact that it offers a sort of living laboratory that has something to contribute to a widespread effort to develop ways of life that embody non-violence, human wholeness, and ecological sustainability. In a word, the community is ”in-process”.

As much as any place significant to the recent wave of reinhabitation, Mateel holds the potential to offer society a model for change from within. ”If there is hope anywhere,” Anders concludes, ”there is hope in Mateel, where the advice to the aspiring is ’you start with yourself’.”

That’s a bit of advice echoed in countless North American regions where people are exploring sustainable lifestyles.

Note

1. Bodley, John. *Anthropology and Contemporary Human Problems*, Mountain View, California: Mayfield, 1985.

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