

The Material Culture of American Utopias

Mark P. Leone

The problem I am interested in is why our culture has produced a set of utopian groups whose mundane objects--material culture--often operate explicitly at a religious as well as a utilitarian level. Both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries American utopian groups isolated themselves from mainline American society and in doing so often established a direct relationship between their religious principles and the objects in daily use. This was, and remains, very different from the rest of America. We today do not have large ranges of objects whose religious or ideological significance is explicit and apparent to the population at large. There are, of course, iconographic items but these are in a different category since their explicit function is to represent the ineffable; they have no primary utilitarian value. Further, utopian groups usually consciously eliminated all such items. They were not concerned with crosses, emblems, statues, colored windows, and the rest of traditional Christian representationalism. Utopian groups often explicitly contained anti-iconographic statements in their doctrines.

Both Mormons and Shakers, two groups immediately familiar to everyone, can serve as examples of the unusual and, from the perspective of the rest of America, anomalous relationship between artifacts and religion. First, let me say that I want to use the terms, "material culture," "objects," and "artifacts," as synonyms. This is opposed to technology which includes the narrower range of objects concerned only with primary subsistence activities. Technology is only one part of material culture.. In utopian groups,

both technological items and assemblages and non-technological items--say, household furniture--could be sacralized. For that reason, it seems more reasonable as well as more general to talk about material culture as opposed to technology.

There are a lot of data to show that for Mormons and for Shakers many standard objects had explicit religious significance. The historical record as well as living Mormons are very clear on the different sets of meanings and functions which objects had for them. Dams, settlement plans, fences, houses, hay lifts, rows of trees, lawns for Mormons and furniture and buildings for Shakers were endowed with concrete meaning. Meaning that was held not just as esoteric knowledge by a ritual elite but by all the faithful. Any Mormon knew about fences and any Shaker knew about craftsmanship. They not only knew about it, they talked about it at length. These are not artifacts that have an overlay of religious meaning. These are objects which operate in ecological and economic spheres simultaneously with their operation at the religious level. And they are successful in one because they are successful in the other. Mormon townplans and water control networks and Shaker furniture would not have had those details crucial for success had they not also been fully informed by religious meaning. All this is opposed to the virtual absence of a direct relationship between meaning and use in our own objects in both nineteenth and twentieth century America.

To illustrate the tie between object and ideology for Mormons, the case I have spent most time with is their fences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Fences have no iconographic value, first of all. They are made of pickets or wire, or are hedgerows or lines of trees, or several other types of material. They keep out wind and windblown sand

and as such are absolute prerequisites to successful agriculture in the semi-arid Great Basin, especially in that part of it along the Little Colorado River in east-central Arizona. In order to grow anything a fence is essential. But the business of growing is also the business of helping to redeem the earth for Christ's immediate Second Coming. The garden from which He is to reign is to be recreated by the Saints both as his fit abode and as a demonstration to Him that the Saints are worthy to dwell there with Him during the Millenium. The more successful and wider-spread the redemption of the earth, the greater the imminence of the Coming. Fences allow a Saint to demonstrate his active participation in redeeming the earth, hence his worthiness before both his fellow Saints and before the Lord.

Because of the tie between successful agriculture and demonstrating successful redemption, those objects involved in mediating between the two domains took on a special caste. Fences were not holy or sanctified objects but they did enter the realm of metaphor. They began to stand as a part of a greater whole. They symbolized what they were not inherently. This can be shown briefly. Mormons believe in Biblical literalism and yet produce many excellent scientists; Mormons exclude blacks from full participation in the church, yet claim to have no difficulty supporting civil rights legislation. For many on the outside of Mormonism, these are paradoxes because in order to hold such beliefs simultaneously the contradiction many Americans see between these categories has to be resolved. Mormons do operate successfully in these categories and many people think they do so by compartmentalizing mental categories. To use a metaphor, they have fences in their minds around the areas that do not mix together.

The intensely subdivided ground that Mormons construct with fences is

duplicated by a similar pattern in their heads. As an observation, that is probably accurate but says little more than an intelligent observer could pick out. Then the big question is how do these two levels of reality operate on each other. How do artifacts help form and maintain mental categories and how do those categories reproduce themselves in artifactual representations? It will be awhile before an answer to that one is in hand but part of the answer takes the following form. Recently I heard a talk given by a Mormon in a service before his fellow Mormons. The talk was devoted to raising children and the role of parents and so on. Not an unfamiliar topic to Latter-day Saints. The speaker reported a conversation between a woman who was a mother and her father, the children's grandfather. The mother said, "Kids need fences." To which the grandfather said, "Yes, and they need to dig some of the post-holes." The context makes this aphoristic statement, this proverb, into a guideline for childrearing. Kids, we are told, need to know beyond doubt where boundaries are. And they need them, so the mother says, for their own safety. But the grandfather points out that to be effective the fences have to be erected by those being protected as well as those doing the protecting. The proverb and its use of fence technology as a metaphor serves, if I can use another metaphor, as a sandwich between the reality of erecting protective borders between exclusive compartments in space and protective borders between exclusive domains in the mind. The proverb, "Kids need fences. And they also need to dig some of the post-holes," tells a Mormon family how to go about the job of actually building those mental compartments so essential to keeping a faithful Mormon faithful by building them on the ground.

As we will see with Shakers, the actual process of building or making was an act--a continuous act of worship. For Mormons, too, the erecting

of visual domains as well as seeing how they worked once erected is a critical part of the fence-building process. Therefore digging the postholes, presumably standing for the whole process of fence-building, has as much to do with creating divisions as does the fence once completed and operating.

The proverb stands as a general principle applicable to a universe of daily problems faced by Mormons. From the principle, a Mormon may deduce down to solving problems in daily life and induce up to the more general Mormon religious principle of redeeming the earth. There are many other ways to specify the link between fences and fence-building among Mormons and their conceptions and behavior, but the ethnography on that remains to be done.

I want to mention two other categories of objects which for Mormons have a sacred as well as a utilitarian function. The first is the water control network. The dams, canals, and the associated items had a whole overlay of religious significance in the nineteenth century. Agriculture in the Great Basin was not possible without irrigation and since the Mormon economy was based on farming, water control was essential to survival. Dam-building was a frank religious activity and water then as now, especially water flowing in canals--or at the command of man--was not just water but the chief substance behind the earth's redemption and making the desert bloom as the proverbial rose. The condition of dams and canals and the consequent condition of all the life dependent on them stated the spiritual condition of the Mormons who built them and the individual who maintained his portion. Dams and canals did not serve as models for human cognition and behavior the way fences seem to, but they nonetheless were items endowed with sanctity, at least insofar as their condition was thought to be a direct expression of God's pleasure and displeasure with his latter-day elect. I

will take that point up in a few minutes.

The other category of items I want to mention briefly is the garments Mormons wore under their daily clothing. As a form of underclothing these are given a Mormon man or woman in a sacred, ritualized context and have an explicit range of meanings which Mormons may not discuss either among themselves or with outsiders. Nonetheless, the spiritual efficacy of wearing this clothing many Mormons have been willing to discuss without betraying the rules of secrecy. The garments had direct magical significance especially in the nineteenth century when they acted like medals, amulets, and charms to keep danger away. That same context exists today although in attenuated form. Here, then, is a domain of objects nearly universal among Mormons which have religious meaning taught to an individual and of which every wearer is aware. There are other domains of material objects among Latter-day Saints that have religious meaning and added efficacy because of that religious meaning. Rather than citing those, let me say that although the tie between religion and object is not always the same from case to case, it is there and that is the observation needing explanation here.

I want to spend a moment with the Shakers now. My purpose here is not to present an analysis of them or their famous material culture but to illustrate the point that what is true for Mormons is also true for a second American religious society. Everyday objects of a wide and mundane variety had explicit religious significance which in turn often allowed the objects to function more effectively at a utilitarian level. Creativity and craftsmanship were acts of worship for the Shakers. Their furniture represented a completed act of worship and was a physical object embodying divinely revealed principles. Creativity in manufacture led to such Shaker inventions as the screw propeller, automatic spring, threshing machine, cut nails,

circular saw, the common clothes pin, and the flat broom now in universal use. There are literally hundreds of similar inventions. The Shakers formulated an ideology "...which at the same time standardized and stimulated material production. On this plane, material culture functioned as a reinforcer of the transcendental spirit which was the essence of Shaker life. In every chair the joiner built the perfect world: an object of harmony, perfect proportion, and eminently suitable for use by peaceful, orderly, spiritual men. All believers were active in one way or another in creating the new order. Craftsmanship constituted an affirmation of faith, a recreation of heavenly principles on earth, and a reassurance that the Shakers actually were living in the one true millenium. When we look today at a product made by Shaker artisans, we see only the tip of the iceberg. We should not assume that its function was merely domestic; ultimately the object represents a dynamic process, the building of a new life from scratch with one's bare hands."

Taken together, we see the Mormons and the Shakers with a set of items that have meaning beyond their primary function. These are objects with religious meaning, but objects without iconographic function. What accounts for the deep embedding of religious meaning in the artifacts of these utopian groups? To address that question, I would like to use and adapt an idea from Roy Rappaport's "Ritual, Sanctity, and Cybernetics" (American Anthropologist 73:1:72-73). Rappaport is trying to explain why in technologically primitive societies the supernatural is so deeply involved in ecological and economic reality. Previously he demonstrated in Pigs for the Ancestors how the long-term ecological balance between half a dozen variables was maintained through the ritual cycle of a group of New Guinea horticulturalists. And now he suggests that it is the very

primitiveness of the technology, and hence the frailty of the adaptation, that requires the active solicitation of the ineffable in the course of regulating the economy. When the technology becomes sufficiently complex and sophisticated, it will automatically place sufficient real power in the hands of leaders who can regulate the ecological round without invoking the supernatural in every aspect of the economy. At this point, the use of the supernatural would be isolated in churches and be increasingly removed from subsistence reality.

To state the argument again: We know that in some technologically primitive societies the sacred domain is one of the main regulators of ecological processes. This is also true for nineteenth century Mormons. For them major portions, if not all, of the subsistence base was regulated and orchestrated by religious ritual. I have been able to specify this in great detail so that although Mormons in the nineteenth century in the Great Basin do not take on the cast of New Guinea agriculturalists, they fit Rappaport's model extremely well, maybe even better than Rappaport's own people do. The same relationship probably holds also for Shakers and other utopian groups but that has not been demonstrated yet. The close relationship between aspects of the religious system and the economy exists because of the technological primitiveness of the adaptation in the first place. Religion and economy can be combined when religious experience is defined and maintained in terms of the effectiveness of its own controls to manage the subsistence base effectively. Obviously if religious experience is tied to the pragmatic aspects of existence, then those objects closely tied to making life work will share in the sanctity conferred by close touch with the supernatural. It should be just as clear that with the development of technological complexity, the authority that

was once maintained by ties to the supernatural, that is, through sanctification, is freed to the degree that technology has provided it with coercive instruments.

If that is the argument in general, I want to add two factors to it. One is that when religion and economics are closely tied as in the primitive societies mentioned, then some or all of the material culture, especially that tied to basic subsistence, may also be expected to have religious meaning. Given that the artifacts are operating simultaneously in two domains, then they should show the results of it--not necessarily show it through iconography but through the native meanings attached to the objects.

The second addition to Rappaport's idea is the inclusion of utopian societies, or frontier societies. These are not primitive in the anthropological sense, but they are technologically primitive. Early Mormons in the Great Basin were even without steam engines. And often any group on a frontier will experience decline from the level of technological complexity enjoyed by the group it leaves behind. Rather than supposing these to be cases of technological primitiveness, I think we can define the variable as a technologically frail or fragile adaptation. The hypothesis would then say that until successful adaptation is reached or a former level of complexity is again achieved, there will be a close tie between religion and the economy.

If this hypothesis has any validity at all, it explains why, in addition to the tie between religion and subsistence activities, (1) utopian groups have and still do seek out and reestablish technological primitivism, and (2) the decline of these groups comes not so much from economic bankruptcy, or pressure from surrounding governments, but through the introduction of more sophisticated and complex technology. Certainly the

literature on Shakers suggests exactly that. Shakers felt their sect go into spiritual decline as soon as they began using machines to make their furniture. And the real absorption of Mormondom into the Union occurred not so much with federal legislation, although that was an undeniable factor, as with the introduction of an adequate supply of advanced machinery and allied techniques into the Great Basin. With that, the utopian aspects of Mormondom fell apart.

Among societies of the kind I have been talking about, it is clear that the religious system is a critical factor in successful adaptation. And that involves sanctifying the technology and other aspects of material culture. How then does all of this work? It has been obvious to materialists for a long time that religion works because it is a reflection of a more basic reality. Indeed, that has been an assumption. But what Rappaport has shown and what my data on Mormon and Shaker society shows is that subsistence reality works well only because it is so closely tied to a somewhat less empirical, but nonetheless effective, level of reality: religion and ritual.

Mormon dams and water-control systems worked so well under unbelievably stressful conditions in the nineteenth century because the organization of the dams--in fact, all aspects of their construction and frequent rebuilding--lay within the domain of ritual and religious meaning. As I have specified elsewhere, the dams were built by priests, were built as a religious activity, and were replaced after being washed out as a direct response to what was thought to be a trial sent by God to test the worthiness of his elect. Frequent replacement of dams was necessary because, given the way they were constructed, the dams were collapsible when oversilted. Rebuilding not only demonstrated a withstanding of God's most

recent test but once again allowed the redemption of the earth and guaranteed a sooner Second Coming. In a very complex process not adequately described here, Mormonism--the religious system--acted as a feedback loop keeping an essential ecological variable within a range of variation consonant with subsistence success.

Mormon fences do the same thing. By guaranteeing a successful demonstration to himself and the rest of the viewing world that he is a worthy Saint helping to redeem the earth, a Mormon in the nineteenth century was at the same time guaranteeing the subsistence success that allowed him to survive in some primary sense in the Great Basin. I think the relationship between ecological management and the meaning imposed on those tools essential to successful ecological management is clear by this point. Less clear, but also less obscure, is the relationship between spatial categories, as spelled out by fences, and mental categories. In no real sense do modern Mormons have a primitive technology. Then what are they still doing with sanctified objects? Objects whose explicit meaning would astonish any American. The answer resides not in Rappaport's hypothesis but in understanding the economically subordinate relations Mormons in the desert West maintain outside that area with the East and with California. These are their markets and sources of capital, and they are subordinate to them having themselves both an inadequate market and largely non-competitive industry. To let the world in--a world on which they are utterly dependent--and to keep it out lest they compromise their Mormonism, a set of exclusive categories is maintained. The categories are manifold and separate science from creationism, and scientific experimentation from notions of absolute truth and authority. The categories keep Mormons distinct and identifiable to themselves and the rest of the world and yet closely in touch with the

demands of the world they are utterly dependent on. Those categories surround Mormons with metaphorical fences that can be built anywhere, around anything. And because they build real fences and in so doing somehow come to understand how to build and maintain mental fences, we can begin to see the connection between fences and mental sets. We can also see why it must be essential for a child to be brought up surrounded by fences, as well as why it is essential for him to see how they are built and to help build them.

I have tried to show here why technology is sacralized in some American communities and is not for most of us. The prime concern has been with technology and material culture regardless of where it occurs in time, and not with the past as opposed to the present.