

# Ralph Waldo Emerson and Economic Socialism

Dr. Somalika Sahoo, Dept of English, Christ College, Cuttack

## Abstract

Emerson's concept of self-reliance and individualism dissuaded him to join the utopian communities of Brook Farm and Fruitland's. His decline to join the socialist living has been an absolute event to appreciate Emerson's complex connection to as sociationism and his reasons to avoid utopian doctrines. He believed that individual change is more essential than societal transformation. In his letters and journals, Emerson has authoritatively denied the invitations and has upheld his Transcendental theory. Emerson was not opposed to the community's aspirations; rather he was skeptical of its methods, making him to conclude that a man's independence was more fascinating than the organizational complexity of Brook Farm and Fruitlands.

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individual; to guarantee the highest mental freedom by providing all with labor adapted to their tastes and talents and securing to them the fruits of their industry. (Swift 15)

The members led a simple life at the Brook Farm. Domestic service was abolished and all labor was performed by the members themselves. Their school was idealistic and followed their own curriculum and method of instruction. The community living became quite famous in New England and many notable intellectuals like Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Parker Robert Owen, Albert Brisbane, Alcott and Channing visited it. Fraternal association and cooperation were the guiding principles at Brook Farm. But the entire management became highly regimented when it was legally incorporated as a Fourierist Phalanx in 1845. This was the beginning of its doom. The once flourishing and successful school was neglected as its attention was diverted to industries. In 1847, Brook Farm was closed due to a fire, followed by small pox and bankruptcy.

Even though Emerson declined the invitation to join Brook farm as a member, numerous passages in his journals, lectures and letters show that he watched the experiment with keen interest from its conception. Emerson's main objection with the Brook farm was that it did not emphasize on individual himself but focused on association. Emerson believed that an individual himself must effect betterment on his own. He should self-reform from his sloth and cowardice. Emerson was convinced that this plan does not help the individual himself but overlooks his problem by giving him a chance to hide his weakness in the crowd. Emerson notes in *The Journals*: "I do not wish to remove from my present prison to a prison a little larger. I wish to break all prison. I have not yet conquered my own house" (5: 473-74). Any scheme that did not enhance the supremacy of individual and self-reform had no place or use in Emerson's philosophy. He believed that man's solitude is more beneficial to him rather than staying in a crowd. Hence he showed little enthusiasm to join the Brook farm community. But he did not reject their proposal outrightly as he was aware of the commendable humanitarian work of its planner. But after a period of soul searching and pondering on the dictates and objectives of the Farm against his own philosophy he finally decided not to join it.

Emerson again emphasized on self-reliant individualism and reforming oneself rather than reform

## INTRODUCTION

Emerson was well aware of the economic socialism which was resulting in experimental communities. In place of cooperation, generosity and thoughtfulness among the people, an element of greed, competition and a sense of unconcern was highly visible. He found it difficult to bring together the socialist principle with his self-reliant individualism. Emerson's ideal economic system was a combination of capitalistic means with socialist end and a capitalistic order with the competitive sting removed.

Emerson refused to endorse any economic reform which did not begin with the individual and self-reform, hence he was not confident on the socialistic utopias of his age notably the Brook Farm and Fruitlands experiments in group living which emphasized on human institutions and a protest against the evils from mechanization and industrialization. The founders of Brook Farm and Fruitlands aimed at creating an ideal community which would bring about a better social order where the focus is on high thinking and plain living. Brook farm was founded by George Ripley in 1841 who was a Boston Unitarian Minister and a member of the transcendental club. According to Ripley, the objectives of the community were:

To ensure a moral natural union between intellectual and manual labor that now exists, to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same

through the interference of other agents. Brook Farm by then had not yet become a Fourieristic Phalanx. In February, 1842, Emerson dined with Horace Greeley and Albert Brisbane in New York. Greeley and Brisbane were champions of Fourieristic brand of socialism and both of them tried to convert Emerson to their doctrine. Fourier understood the term 'civilization' to mean the social system in which we live, with all its defects and the little good it may possess. The present social system is "not adapted to the nature of man and his passions" (Brisbane 2). Civilization's incoherence lies "in our system of separate households or as many distinct houses as there are families". This state of affairs "absorbs the time . . . of one half of the human race, in an unproductive function which has to be gone through with as many times as there are families" (6). To avoid such waste and duplication of effort, Fourier planned to rearrange the human race into communes called phalanx with 1680 persons to a phalanx. On account of Brisbane's efforts, over forty Fourierian communes were formed in the United States during the 1840 and Brook Farm was one among them. Fourier considered the present social order dominated by what he called "repulsive industry" and by wholesale repression of the passionate impulses natural to human being. Fourier proposed to remedy this repressed misery by implementing a system of "attractive industry" based on a full recognition of "passional attraction" as the main motivating force of human nature. Brisbane's book *Social Destiny of Man* mentioned the theory tantalizingly but never went beyond saying what was really wrong with modern civilized industrial society. The truth was that everyone was either taught or forced to repress most of his passions. But Emerson was not convinced with these schemes and hence finding that Emerson was not up on Fourier, Brisbane went to Emerson hotel to educate him.

In his famous lecture, "New England Reformers" read two years later, Emerson raised specific objections to the socialistic and community experiments. He agreed that these societies comprised of men and women possessing superior talents but he doubted whether these phalanxes will continue to attract talented members once the initial excitement subsides. He states in *The Complete Works*: "Whether such retreat does not promise to become an asylum to those who have tried and failed, rather than a field to the strong; and whether the members will not necessarily be fractions of men, because each finds that he cannot enter it without some compromise" (3: 264).

Emerson always stressed on the importance of individualism. He never compromised his principles for the sake of association and that is why even though Ripley approached him several times, Emerson did not accept to join Brook Farm. He believed that when a man engages himself in a crowd, he dwarfs himself. He stressed the incompatibility of individualism and community. Even

though Emerson did not become an active member of Brook Farm, he was still interested in the experiment.

Another Utopian community, Fruitlands was started by Emerson's friend Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane in 1843 and Emerson's view and attitude towards it was the same as Brook Farm as both the communities conflicted between individualism and community. Even though he liked its ideas, he firmly refused to be a part of the group. In November, 1842, Alcott explained his scheme to Emerson, building up a charming picture of a farm of hundred acres in excellent condition with good construction and orchard. Emerson felt that the entire scheme emphasized more on materialistic development rather than spiritual growth. If hundred of young minds are sheltered in a serene atmosphere, then such a situation will truly hamper educating their mind. Further, Emerson believed that a man is strengthened if he is exposed to the unpleasantness of the world and he cannot grow if he is sheltered and protected in a farm. He writes in *The Journals*: "...unaided, in the midst of poverty, toil and traffic, extricates himself from the corruptions of the same and build on his land a house of peace and benefit, good customs and free thoughts" (6: 307).

Fruitlands was founded in 1843 on a ninety acre land near the town of Harvard. The land was purchased solely by Charles Lane. The idea behind the establishment of Fruitlands was based on self-sufficiency and economy. The members of Fruitlands separated themselves from any form of world economy as they believed that the present economy was immoral and sinful. Hence they did not hold property, labored themselves and abstained from trade. They never produced more goods than they would consume as the belief was that excess amount of worldly goods would hinder spirituality. Hence, they limited producing goods to make sure that they would not become engaged in trade. Thus, the members of Fruitland's held an independent economy as the highest objective and philosophy of their community. Even though Emerson did not approve of Alcott's plan, he still paid a visit to Fruitland's and noted his impressions in *The Journals*:

The sun and the evening sky do not look calmer than Alcott and his family at Fruitlands. They seemed to have arrived at the fact, to have got rid of the show, and so to be serene. Their manners and behavior in the house and in the field were those of superior men, of men at rest. What had they to conceal? What had they to exhibit? . . . I will not prejudge them successful. They look well in July. We will see them in December. (6: 420-21)

Emerson's suspicions came true. When December came, due to intense winter and ineffective farming methods

combined with erratic leadership of its founder, Fruitlands met with disaster and by January 1844, it had to be liquidated. Despite this, Emerson held Alcott in high esteem for his idealism and selfless dedication to the cause of reform but at the same time he was aware of Alcott's limitation to translate ideals into achievements. Emerson's main objection to Fruitland's was that, it tried to effect man's emancipation through community living and not by his own efforts at self- renovation. Emerson was critical of the success and effectiveness of Brook Farm and Fruitlands as they ignored an individual's self-reliance and individualism. But Emerson himself attempted what might be explained as communistic experiment in his own residence when he invited the Alcotts to stay with them. He even introduced communism in his house where he propagated the idea of dining at a common table. His family and his servants should sit together and dine. But his cook was against his idea.

### CONCLUSION

Emerson's attitude towards the socialistic and community utopias of his age is an affirmation of the faith in individual integrity and self-reliance. Even though he was aware of the noble motives of Owen and Fourier but still he didn't support it as none of the reforms made an individual better. A passage from "New England Reformers" sums up Emerson's disposition:

These new associations are composed of men and women of superior talents and sentiments; yet it may be easily questioned whether the members will not necessarily be fractions of men, because each finds that he cannot enter it without some compromise. Friendship and association are very fine things, and a grand phalanx of the best of the human race, banded for some catholic object: yes, excellent; but remember that no society can ever be so large as one man. He, in his friendship, in his natural and momentary associations, doubles or multiplies himself: but in the hour in which he mortgages himself to two or ten or twenty, he dwarfs he below the stature of one. (*Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Comprising His Essays* 264)

Emerson makes this statement in reference to the communal societies that had started in Massachusetts on the notions of Saint-Simon, Fourier and Robt Owen. A man will dwarf himself if he pledges and commits himself to communal living. He insists: "Each man, if he attempts to join himself to others, is on all sides cramped and diminished of his proportion; and the stricter the union the

smaller and the more pitiful he is" (*The Essential Writings* 410).

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