

## On Books

### Review of *Living Walden Two: B. F. Skinner's Behaviorist Utopia and Experimental Communities*

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Kuhlmann's *Living Walden Two* (2005) offers a social history of the actual experimental communities that were inspired by Skinner's (1948) utopian novel. In the course of her examination, the author presents a reasonably accurate overview of the key cultural design elements described in the novel, of behavioral philosophy applied to cultural design, and of the academic reaction to the behavioral philosophy embodied in the fictional community. She is critical of several key behavioral tenets, but generally remains analytical rather than emotional. Kuhlmann concludes that contextual and individual factors undermined the capacity of most of the experimental communities inspired by *Walden Two* to sustain themselves.

*Key words:* B. F. Skinner, *Walden Two*, experimental communities

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*Living Walden Two: B. F. Skinner's Behaviorist Utopia and Experimental Communities* (2005), by Hilke Kuhlmann, is a book about us—the intellectual heirs to B. F. Skinner's behaviorism. It is about who we *are*—not about what we *do* as scientists, clinicians, or teachers. It is a history, by a nonbehavioral author, of what unquestionably is the central philosophical and conceptual unifier among committed behavior analysts: a shared understanding of the deterministic nature of human behavior and its implications for cultural design, first articulated by Skinner in his 1948 utopian novel *Walden Two*. To this day, the novel plays an important role in sustaining the core behavior-analytic tenet that control of behavior is an inescapable fact; the only issue is whether the control will be planned or unplanned by humans. *Walden Two*, of course, described in detail a community in which societal control is achieved through the comprehensive scientific application of behavioral principles. It advocated social change through “nonpolitical

empiricism” (Rakos, 1992a), reflecting Skinner's faith in science over politics:

An important theme in *Walden Two* is that political action is to be avoided. ...The great cultural revolutions have not started with politics. ...What is needed is not a new political leader or a new kind of government but further knowledge about human behavior and new ways of applying that knowledge to the design of cultural practices. (1976, p. xvi)

Skinner's ideas excited his behavioral colleagues, who maintained his keen interest in cultural design; this inclination comported well with the zeitgeist of 1960s America, which embodied an activist approach to social change. It is no coincidence that behavior modification, a combination of behavioral ideology and scientifically supported interventions, emerged as a potent clinical force in the 1960s and 1970s. This was a time when American society was in the process of massive redefinition in response to powerful environmental forces, most notably the war on poverty and the civil rights, antiwar, environmental, hippie, and women's movements. The behavioral movement, though less visible, shared much in common with its contemporary social forces: It was fiercely loyal

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to its ideology, aspired to achieve grand goals, challenged dominant cultural assumptions, and advocated social justice and fairness through changing the environment. The behavioral movement was energized by its confident belief that both therapy *and* society would be improved by replacing nonscientific approaches to behavior control with those generated by the science of behavior. We had our cause for which to fight. Those days were exciting indeed, made even more so by the unending intellectual jousting that seemed to occur with almost everyone else, who saw us as arrogant and naive and our ideas as simplistic and dangerous.

Amid this turbulent social and academic background, *Walden Two* was reissued in 1976, years after its unnoticed initial publication. It blared on the cover: "Including 'Walden Two Revisited,' a new commentary by B. F. Skinner on the relevance of his novel 28 years after publication." The work of fiction, which Skinner (1976) in retrospect considered a description of "a pilot experiment," was rediscovered and inspired experimental communities in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Together, these communities, many founded and guided by ardent behaviorists, comprised a distinct segment of the growing antieestablishment, socially active alternative community movement. Kuhlmann examines these behaviorally based experimental communities in her succinct and often engaging book. She offers a reasonably balanced and often insightful historical appraisal of a powerful idea and the real-world communities it stimulated.

This is a serious work of scholarship. Behaviorists, so used to hyperbolic, uninformed, and emotional critiques of their philosophy, will be gratified that their thick skin and high blood pressure medication will not be needed while reading Kuhlmann's book. A welcome strength of her examination is consistent respect

for her subject matter—the ideas that underlie the novel—even while offering thoughtful critiques and perceptive analyses that are supported by contextually accurate uses of oral and written sources. Kuhlmann appreciates the centrality of determinism to the behavioral approach to human nature and accurately presents the core doctrines of behavioral philosophy and their relevance to cultural design. Although she is unconvinced of the soundness of several key behavioral tenets and occasionally slips in an understated but unmistakable barb, Kuhlmann's intellectual approach to her subject matter and her reasonably accurate understanding of behaviorism's essence undermine any threat that might attach to her appraisals. She is forthright in discussing the aspirations and actions of the central characters in each experimental community, illuminating well the consequences of the choices that were made. This produces portraits of people with deeply human qualities, some of which are assets whereas others are imperfections. And she identifies important differences between the novel's designs and real-world experiments, such as Los Horcones' distinctive approach to education that empowers children by imparting to them the behavioral knowledge that is the foundation of effective countercontrol responses.

Kuhlmann divides her examination into four parts. First, she devotes three chapters to the key cultural design elements described in the novel, to behavioral philosophy applied to cultural design, and to issues of control and values as they relate to cultural design. Next, Kuhlmann looks at smaller behavioral community experiments, including token economies, Sunflower House, Lake Village, and Walden Three. The third part delves into the history of Twin Oaks, the largest, least behavioral, and longest lasting of the communities inspired by Walden Two, and the

offshoots it inspired such as the Dandelion Community in Canada. Government, child care, and the labor-credit system are analyzed in detail. She concludes with an interesting discussion about Twin Oaks' very high turnover rate that consistently replenishes the population of the community, thereby fostering the perception of firmer stability than in fact exists. The final section devotes five chapters to the enduring Mexican experiment offered by *Comunidad Los Horcones*. Kuhlmann suggests that *Los Horcones*' policies and ideology are as much organized religion as applied behaviorism, implying that some people express their faith through prayer, others through scientific experimentation.

A short final chapter summarizes Kuhlmann's findings; in the end, she observes that each community combined some level of Skinnerian ideas within a complex of existing social, economic, religious, cultural, and political factors to produce outcomes that varied greatly. For instance, her dissection of Twin Oaks and *Los Horcones*, the two communities that have maintained stable presences over several decades, reveals fascinating differences and the likely sources of those differences. Twin Oaks, with its regular turnover of communards, reflects American individualism and pragmatism within its secular and relativistic philosophy. *Los Horcones*, on the other hand, adheres to the behavioral ideology through grounding in family networks, Catholicism, and hierarchical and charismatic leadership that maintains commitment and reduces turnover to an infrequent event. Kuhlmann concludes that "while the experiences of the Walden Two communards all unearthed fundamental problems with Skinner's paternalistic vision, the experience of actually aiming at creating a Walden Two community appears to have been of lasting value" (p. 170). After all is said and done, something like a misguided

but still worthwhile learning experience!

In the course of her historical survey, Kuhlmann discusses the core philosophical issues about which the behavior-analytic community differs heatedly from those outside the community. Can values be determined scientifically? Kuhlmann is quite skeptical. Can the problem of selecting and controlling the controller be solved? Kuhlmann found that power remained a vexing issue for most of the communities. Is behavioral ideology scientific or religious in nature? Kuhlmann discerns several parallels between the two that can serve as useful warning signs for behavior analysts.

She also uncovered interesting findings that inform us about human nature. For instance, autonomy appears to be centrally important even for the fervent behaviorists who founded most of the experimental communities. The majority of the communards experienced the hierarchical and nondemocratic Walden Two government system as unpalatable: "Despite the behaviorists' careful planning, there was an almost instant emotional reaction against having somebody else make all the decisions as soon as the groups moved beyond theory" (p. 165). The communards' desire to influence group decisions may have been particularly intense because many joined a behavioral community specifically to be part of a scientific experiment in cultural design. In effect, most communities had too many experimenters and too few subjects (participants). A second example that sheds insight on the human condition is how the power of a radical idea—in this case, behaviorism—can wither unless it is supported by community norms that not only reinforce it but also establish boundaries that limit dissent. In this sense, *Los Horcones*' religiosity provides a critical support for a harmonious but fairly conformist behavioral community.

Kuhlmann occasionally makes small errors, such as noting that “by 1968, behaviorists ... came together for conferences organized by the Association for Behavior Analysis” (p. 45). In the conclusion, she suggests that the novel “can be read as a blueprint for a behaviorist utopia” (p. 164), which was not Skinner’s intention (see Morris, Smith, & Altus, 2005). The few minor missteps, however, do not detract from Kuhlmann’s thorough scholarship, exemplified by her utilization of important material in the small but enduring journal *Behavior Analysis and Social Action* (now titled *Behavior and Social Issues*; and its predecessor *Behaviorists for Social Action Journal*), which served as an important outlet for reports by the Los Horcones community in the 1980s and early 1990s, as well as for occasional reflections by others in the Walden Two community movement (e.g., Graham, 1984). Although the impact of smaller niche journals may at times seem unclear or even wanting, Kuhlmann demonstrates that they too can play an important role in the advancement of knowledge.

Throughout history, dissatisfaction with unplanned cultural control has prompted many to search for alternative social and economic arrangements, ranging from small communes to large bureaucratic states (cf. McCord, 1989). Although analyses of these utopias typically dismiss the behavioral vision with little if any consideration (Rakos, 1992b), *Living Walden Two* relates the story in detail. And the tale is humbling: Committed behavior analysts, confident in their understanding of human nature, were unable to sustain most of the small-scale behaviorally based experimental communities.

Nevertheless, the uneven and in some ways disappointing outcomes of the real-life experimental communities are quite predictable (Altus & Morris, 2004) and will not persuade behaviorists to abandon their interest

in, and emotional attachment to, *Walden Two* and its implications for cultural design. Recently, for instance, Wolpert (2005) continued the behavior-analytic dialogue on the novel with her multicultural feminist critique. She, like Kuhlmann, argues that *Walden Two* is infused with masculine perspectives despite its elimination of traditional gender-based social roles. But Wolpert also contends that the community embodies middle class and white values. Although *Walden Two* advanced a markedly progressive vision for its time, Wolpert points out that behavior analysis, as “a field interested in social justice,” must be all inclusive and incorporate nonwhite, feminine, and economically disadvantaged class perspectives in its analysis of cultural practices. In critiquing *Walden Two* from a social construction perspective, Wolpert demonstrates again the extent to which the novel’s ideas and philosophy remain firmly rooted in the culture of the behavior-analytic community.

Thus, Kuhlmann’s critical analysis fails to mount a serious challenge to the robustness of behavioral philosophy. After all, in theory at least, the issue of sustainability is solvable: There are more experiments to conduct, with a different mix of variables. And we must be patient: Social change evolves slowly in stable societies. It is even possible that at some time in the future, Kuhlmann’s scholarly appraisal will influence constructively the next round of scientifically inspired experimental communities. But for now, the book serves as an important source of the behavioral movement’s history. *Living Walden Two* is a worthwhile read for any behaviorist, made more so because the author is not a member of the behavioral community. Older readers will resonate with recollections of a spirited intellectual crusade and with memories of good friends and colleagues. Younger readers will acquire a deeper understanding of and

appreciation for the intellectual legacy that drives—and sustains—the behavior-analytic community.

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