The early- and mid-nineteenth-century United States produced a bewildering variety of individualists, in the sense of people who advocated the primacy of the human individual politically and of the particular thing metaphysically, and in the sense of seriously idiosyncratic persons who followed their own odd genius wherever it dragged them. It was, in many ways, a religious revival, but it soon sacrificed God on the altar of nonconformity. It produced undoubted geniuses of the caliber of Emerson, Fuller, Thoreau, Melville, Whitman, and Hawthorne. It produced social reformers as pure and intense as any that the world has known—such as William Lloyd Garrison, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Captain John Brown. And it produced utopians who thought they could found a new social order—including Adin Ballou, John Humphrey Noyes, Amos Bronson Alcott, and Josiah Warren.

Like almost all of these astonishing and exasperating people, Josiah Warren hailed from New England. Like Garrison (and Ben Franklin,
Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and Albert Parsons) he was a printer. Like John Brown he was a revolutionist, though Brown was violent and Warren, by his own declaration, peaceful. Like Emerson and Whitman, he sang, or in his case lectured, about free individuality and connected it to an understanding of the universe. Like Thoreau he loved simplicity and skill, and displayed them prodigiously as qualities of character and thought throughout his life. And like Ballou—and the rest of these people at one time or another—he loathed the state and took steps to fashion a life without it.

You could think of Warren as an Emersonian avatar, someone who lived what “The American Scholar,” “Self-Reliance,” “Nature,” and even “Fate” taught at the very same time that Emerson was formulating those fundamental statements of the American character. He practiced wilderness self-sufficiency, anticapitalist economy, radical democracy that entailed extreme decentralization of decision making, and a metaphysics of particulars. In short, his philosophy was “transcendentalism,” and he practiced it as early as Emerson did. But unlike Emerson, he was devoted not to stating this philosophy beautifully, but to realizing it practically.

Josiah Warren was both a genius and a crank of nearly the first order. He has often been called the first American anarchist, though he called himself a “Democrat.” And though I am certain he wasn’t the first American anarchist (since every state breeds skeptics, and since radical Protestants of all sorts had vowed to live outside or against the state in the previous two centuries), it is not an entirely inapt characterization. In the usual histories of anarchist thinking, only William Godwin comes earlier, and Warren’s Peaceful Revolutionist (1833) has plausibly been called the first anarchist periodical. Through Stephen Pearl Andrews and Benjamin Tucker—also extremely idiosyncratic thinkers—Warren became known as the founder of “individualist” anarchism. Though “first American anarchist” is an appropriate reflection of his importance, it would be more accurate to say that he was the first American to publish his views whose anarchism was not primarily religious.¹
He was also—until now, I believe—nearly unreadable. He himself never regarded writing as his most important work, but rather his practical experiments in living. His prose is undoubtedly that of a man who developed a less expensive and time-consuming process for manufacturing his own type and printing his own books, pamphlets, and periodicals. Warren’s is some of the most typographically perverse writing produced before surrealist poetry. For example, he often uses several sizes of small caps for different degrees of emphasis, tossing in a half dozen exclamation marks for effect. I calculate informally that among his works about a third of the sentences end in at least one exclamation point; in his notebooks, the percentage is far higher. He introduced marginal indexing systems and tables of reference so that one could either follow a single theme through a book or read in different thematic orders, a kind of hyperlink typesetting that yields perverse organizations worthy of Spinoza. In his handwritten journals he used a system of underlining meant to add absurd shades, degrees, and intensities of emphasis, building to a bathetic crescendo of hyperbole. Bracing and fundamentally original ideas are studded with mere enthusing, as in this typical sentence from his fundamental work, *Equitable Commerce*: “Consider on what foundation rest all customs, laws, and institutions which demand conformity! They are all directly opposed to this inevitable individuality, and are therefore false!!! and the great problem must be solved with the broadest admission of the absolute right of supreme individuality.”

Even as American anarchists appealed to him as their founder and to his ideas as their solution, he was something of an embarrassment. The texts in this volume are edited to remove emphasis and to excise redundancies and expressions of mere enthusiasm. I hope that at least some of the texts can be scanned and placed online so that scholars may compare the edited to the original versions. At any rate, the American literary and political figures mentioned above may or may not have been smarter or better human beings than Josiah Warren. They may or may not prove to be greater benefactors of humankind. But they were undoubtedly better prose stylists.
Why, then, revive the sage of . . . Utopia, Ohio? Warren developed and tried to put into operation practical plans for a complex society in which unity does not rest on coercion. He is our most practical anarchist. Further, his political philosophy derives from a set of profound insights that were astonishing and perverse when they were articulated, and which are perhaps even more astonishing and perverse today—but which also confront us with a fundamental and plausible theoretical possibility or alternative. For those reasons I have striven to produce readable texts of Warren’s most important works.

Warren’s Life and His Leading Ideas

Moncure Conway, describing an evidently sprightly sixty-year-old Josiah Warren in 1858, wrote, “He was a short, thick-set man about fifty years of age, with a bright, restless blue eye, and somewhat restless, too, in his movements. His forehead was large, descending to a good full brow; his lower face, especially the mouth, was not of equal strength, but indicated a mild enthusiasm. He was fluent, eager, and entirely absorbed in his social ideas.”

For someone who dedicated much of his life to writing and self-publishing, Josiah Warren revealed surprisingly little about himself. He was born in 1798 in Boston, and during the economic depression of 1819 he married (he and his wife, Caroline, eventually had a son, George, and at least one daughter who did not survive to adulthood), moved to Cincinnati, and set up shop as a performer and teacher of music. An inveterate tinkerer, he invented a lamp that burned lard as opposed to the more expensive tallow, for which he obtained a patent in 1821. In the mid-1820s, Warren established a concern to manufacture his invention. Inspired on hearing a lecture by Robert Owen—the great Welsh industrialist and utopian projector—Warren and his family removed to the socialist community of New Harmony, Indiana, where he served as the bandleader. Returning to Cincinnati after the failure of the initial New Harmony experiment in 1827, Warren established the first of his Time Stores, which gave rise to a small cooperative economy, illustrated the labor theory of value, and put into
Introduction

circulation the first version of Warren’s currency, the labor note. In 1835, he established the first of his “trial villages” in Tuscarawas County, Ohio, which was followed by experiments at Utopia, Ohio, commencing in 1847, and the wild anarchist free-love paradise or hell of Modern Times, on Long Island, in 1851. Warren’s priority in all cases was to make it possible for people with no means to build homes, and the communities were successful in that regard. In 1833, he published what is often termed the earliest anarchist periodical, The Peaceful Revolutionist, the first of a number of periodicals and pamphlet series he was to disseminate. Throughout his life, small-scale publishing ventures were conjoined with dramatic innovations in type production, typesetting, and printing, including what was perhaps the world’s first continuous-feed press, which he perfected in the 1820s and 1830s. This is often seen as a precursor of—or as essentially identical to—the Hoe press that revolutionized publishing late in the nineteenth century. In 1844 he published the first version of his new “mathematical” system of musical notation. He moved to Modern Times in the 1850s, then to the Boston area by the 1860s, and was active in the nascent American labor movement of that era, as well as in a number of cooperative enterprises for ameliorating poverty. He died in 1874.5 For more details, consult the timeline of his life (appendix A).

Throughout his adult life, Warren thought of his philosophy as easily captured in a few simple principles. He listed them in various enumerations. Here I give them in four: individualism, self-sovereignty, the cost limit of price, and the labor note as a circulating medium.

(1) Individualism, as an ontology and as a science; that is, as a statement of what there is and of the principle for finding out what there is, by ever-finer appreciation of the specificities of every event, thing, or person.

Warren is one of the most extreme of American individualists, a group that includes such iconoclasts as Emerson, Thoreau, Garrison, Lysander Spooner, and many great American reformers of the period, including feminists and advocates of peace. Though individualism is
now associated primarily with the Right, it was the consensus position of radical American reformers of the first three quarters of the nineteenth century, that is, during Warren's lifetime. It is a political position, or at least it entails political positions, but it is also a metaphysics and an epistemology, developed systematically by the obscure American genius Alexander Bryan Johnson, and unsystematically by a great many other American radicals.

First, let us consider individualism as a metaphysical and epistemological system. The study of anything, as understood since the earliest Greeks, is the process of generalizing from particulars. That's the origin of the pre-Socratic cosmologies of Thales or Democritus, and it's the essence of Platonism, where generalities are the only truths, to say nothing of Augustine or Plotinus. Aristotle qualified but did not abandon this approach to disciplinary taxonomies and the actual nature of things in his physics, logic, metaphysics, ethics, poetics, and politics. Medieval Islamic and Scholastic philosophy displays the Aristotelian negotiation between the purity of ideas and the particularities of phenomena. Science—in its initial bloom in the hands of Bacon, for example, and certainly through the "scientistic" late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—is sometimes thought of as a refinement of everyday induction: one makes a series of observations and draws generalizations from them. In this sense, we might say that science is the art of generalization, the practice of observing and capturing the shared qualities of phenomena in principles or laws. Newtonian physics is a good example, of course, but perhaps an even clearer one—and one closer to Warren's spirit and moment—is Darwin's theory of natural selection. Devising, refining, and defending the theory required that Darwin observe countless particular organisms in relation to the particularities of their environments. But its value became manifest at the moment a generalization emerged that encompassed and accounted for all the particularities. This generalization, in turn, could be used to understand and potentially control further particulars. The specific phenomena, we might say, were instrumental in the process of generalization, and were expunged into it, comprehended by it, and turned to useful work within it.
Warren formulates the opposite principle, which he himself called the first principle of all his work: “The Study of Individuality, or the practice of mentally discriminating, dividing, separating, or disconnecting persons, things, and events, according to their individual peculiarities” (Equitable Commerce, see below, p. 56). Provincial though he was, Warren was steeped in the rhetoric of modern science and in the atmosphere of British empiricism, and saw the world being continually demystified as principles yielded to observations. This tradition emerged from the revival of republicanism and skepticism and the rapid improvement of technology. Nevertheless, the goal of science was conceived to be an adequate taxonomy of nature (the primary project of eighteenth-century science, as in Linnaeus). To arrange the world by categories was to comprehend its laws, which opened the globe to navigation using ships and lenses, and thereby created prosperity.

Nevertheless, in complement, science thus conceived fundamentally involves unprecedented attention to the individual object and an attempt to account for the bewildering array of experience through a multiplication of specific categories. In Equitable Commerce, Warren argues that if you want to organize your correspondence or a box of tools, you individualize and separate them. But of course you also conflate them into categories. Indeed, the two processes are complementary and inseparable. It was Warren’s goal to emphasize what we might call the subaltern moment in this dialectic.

In application to human beings, Warren’s particularism takes the form of an affirmation of the irreducibility of subjectivity and a critique of language, in particular written language. For Warren, the problem at the heart of a political order is that it necessarily de-individualizes its subjects, treating them en masse or in classes. In his view, the worst imaginable approach would be to subject human beings to laws or constitutions, which are inevitably interpreted differently by each person, or even by the same person at different times. To freeze a dynamic social order into a document is mere folly: you simply launch into the interminable, and in principle insoluble, process of interpretation. Words are the tools of persons (as in the conception of
the “rule of law”), and that cannot be changed until human subjectivity can be eradicated. The eradication of subjectivity—the dream or nightmare of Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx—would be the eradication of persons and the world they experience. In other words, subjectivity is a dimension of the massed specificities of each person, a human aspect of the pluralism and dynamism of the universe. Indeed, the political movement of modernity, which depends in almost any of its formulas on some system of combining interests and identities, is—according to Warren—simply a fantasy and a recipe for interminable conflict. In his view, people clash when their interests are the same, not when they are carefully distinguished, and conflict can be minimized by extricating people from one another, not by rolling them up in ever-larger human bales.

For Warren, one last move remains in the history of science considered as a program: total acknowledgment of and knowledge about specificity, in which the value and character of each incomparable object, event, and person becomes manifest. It is a hyper-nominalist fantasy, and it potentially re-mystifies experience. In the Western tradition it has antecedents in Heraclitean flux, Cynicism, medieval nominalism, and Scottish commonsense philosophy. And surely this is also an idea scouted by Emerson, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Particularism of this variety can look either like anti-scientism or the triumph of scientism over the Western tradition that returns us to the brute truth of reality, as the tradition shows, by its own epistemic standards, its own untruth. The truth lodges in particulars, not in principles. Every abstraction from the world is . . . an abstraction from the world, a digression or diversion from it, and a devaluation of it. For millennia, we have been bundling things together to try to comprehend them; now the point is to appreciate their strangeness, their resistance to categorization. Individualism is an attempt to remake the world by affirming it.

Indeed Warren, à la Saussure, treats symbol systems, including his own musical notation, as organizations of differences, and he points out that signs mean anything only because they are syntactically distinct and separated from one another spatially or temporally. The
world is an indefinitely large plethora of particulars, and so are the representational systems by which we show it forth or grasp it.

The critique itself, of course, is self-refuting. As soon as Warren starts founding disciplines and capturing in a term (“individuality”) the essence of the universe, or the basis of all justice and social arrangements (“self-sovereignty”), he is doing what the discipline he invented demands he not do. But his own discipline demands that he do it. In any event, Warren is located at the heart of this conceptual tornado. No one has flatly stated what he believed to be the truth more comprehensively in just a few sentences, and no one has inveighed more extremely against drawing any generalizations from experience. For precisely these reasons, he is both an extreme and emblematic figure, one who has delved as far into a certain dilemma as anyone the Western tradition has ever gone.

Two broad strands of religious/political individualism emerged from the Protestant Reformation. Both of them took with some literalness Luther’s call for a “priesthood of all believers,” a basic statement of religious individualism most emblematically expressed in the United States in Quakerism. Luther placed each person in charge of his or even her own relationship with God; there were to be no intercessors, none of Catholicism’s layers of beings between the peasant and the Lord (though to some extent Luther thought that Scripture performed this function, a view Warren would utterly oppose). As Reformation Europe tried to throw off clerical institutions and remake political institutions, it focused on the individual believer and assigned to her the task of becoming apparent before God, as the Lutheran lay preacher and Warren contemporary Kierkegaard put it. Like many individualists, Warren almost ritually invoked Luther, though Warren was not a Christian: “We want a Luther in the political sphere, and another in the financial sphere, another in the commercial, another in the educational sphere, to rouse the people to use their own experience” (True Civilization, 155).

It is worth mentioning that the Reformation’s aesthetic was minimalist and utilitarian. It held that a Catholic aesthetic of teeming imagery and encrusted decoration was a form of idolatry. Each more
radical sect simplified further the principles of design. The aesthetic of Warren’s system is extremely clear, simple, and consistent from the 1820s to the 1870s: a Shaker chair of a philosophy, and thus opposed temperamentally to, let us say, Hegel or even Emerson. Though Luther aligned himself with the secular state to ward off the Catholic Church, the political implications of his individualism became apparent in a variety of radical movements, many of which recognized no authority over the individual but God—that is, no human authority. This was important in the development of modern democratic political theory, and it is in my view the precursor of all modern forms of anarchism.

One form of individualism that emerged from the Reformation arose among the educated classes, especially in England, where it is called the “liberal tradition.” We see it in Hobbes’s notion that people can only be brought out of a state of nature by their own consent. This becomes, with an admixture of academic Thomism, the notions of natural rights and of government instituted by contractors or independent agents in something similar to a business transaction. The tradition is of course associated with republicanism as a political system, above all with Locke and Madison. And it is associated with capitalism as an economic system, the classic statements being made by Smith and Ricardo. It eventuates in British utilitarianism in the writings of Bentham and Mill (an admirer of Warren). It is empirical, this-worldly, emphasizing inalienable individual political and (above all) economic rights. By the time of its maturity in Hume or Gibbon, it loses even the veneer of theology (in Locke, God is still close at hand), and it leads as well to what are called the social sciences, in the works of Comte, Spencer, or Mead. It seeks limitations on government power without an actual descent into anarchy. Its real center is an elitist but civic-minded republicanism of a sort compatible with a Protestant monarchy or a representative republic.

The other strand was an individualism not of scholars and gentlemen but of half-mad enthusiasts or even fanatics. Consider the radical peasant movements of the German Reformation, such as radical Anabaptism, which eventually extended into North America. These
movements recognized no authority over the individual, either religious or temporal, because they asserted the unconditional obligation each person was under to obey the commands of God as God was manifest in the life and mind of that person, though they also practiced various forms of social discipline. We might mention radical Protestant dissenters in England, including religious anarchists such as the Diggers and, more mildly, the Quakers and their ilk. The earliest expression of this attitude of “antinomianism” on the American continent is the movement of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson to secede (or court expulsion) from Plymouth Colony and establish communities of conscience. They did not conceive of their activities as the effusion of reason and science, but as the direct inspiration of God, His intervention into every aspect of life. It was an individualism among persons for the sake of the union with God: individualism as the abandonment of individuality. Its mood was not genteel or scholarly or commercial, but ecstatic. This is the idea that swept the United States in a half-beautiful and half-farcical movement in the early nineteenth century and led from an enthusiasm for God to an enthusiasm for . . . enthusiasm, a hyper-provincial romanticism.

At any rate, these two strands of individualism—the genteel and the ecstatic—conflict at times; they are as much temperaments as opinions, and though in some ways the opinions dovetail, the temperaments are fiercely incompatible. But we might think, for example, of the American Revolution as patrician liberal individualists leading ecstatic Protestant individualists. Certainly the average person in western Pennsylvania or Virginia was not reading Locke. But he was going to church. A good example of an authorship poised on this borderline is that of Lysander Spooner. Never have liberal principles (natural rights) been given a clearer exposition, or a more extreme statement. Meanwhile, Spooner was founding an alternative postal service and plotting to liberate John Brown with a raid into Virginia. But as a scholar of English legal theory or of anything else, Warren is no match for Spooner. Warren is a pure product of the American utopian vision, drifting westward to make the lands bloom, a beautiful idealist and a semi-cracked enthusiast.
American ecstatic individualism reveals its essence in Warren’s work, where it is thoroughly secularized. Warren has none of Emerson’s and Thoreau’s distance or erudition or poetry, none of Spooner’s or Garrison’s polemical mastery. But he delivers a central formulation of the motif of American reform, circa 1840, a political theory to match his pre-Thoreauvian ontology of particulars. And he states an extreme response to Western metaphysics even as he insists on a utopian vision.

One of the most interesting aspects of Warren’s authorship is that he is an individualist and an advocate of liberty with no sophisticated notion of natural rights. He says the individuality of each person is ineradicable and hence in the strictest sense literally inalienable. Then the question is, how are we to deal politically and economically with this reality?

(2) The sovereignty of the individual; that is, each person is to have absolute control over his own body and actions, at his own cost or responsibility.

The ideal of self-sovereignty is central to the reform movements of early-nineteenth-century America, and it is a direct, secularist development out of religious conviction of the sovereignty of God. True commitment to the authority of God, according to the radical Reformation, meant that one could not come under any lesser authority. One must always be free to obey God’s command, which is paramount over any lesser command, whether of ruler, priest, or master. You don’t find Locke or even Jefferson talking about self-sovereignty; in their hearts these are republicans who are sensitive to the construction of civic identities, who urge us to identify ourselves with the interests of the polis. But the radical Reformation, represented, for example, by the preacher of the Great Awakening, George Whitefield, tore at even this fairly mild bundling of identities.

What crystallizes the idea of self-sovereignty as the pure expression of American individualism is the abolitionist movement. Along the same timeline as the life of Josiah Warren, this viewpoint emerged from an extreme ecstatic Protestantism to a fairly secular vision of
universal freedom. The problem of slavery appeared to Garrison, Henry Clarke Wright, and the Grimké sisters as the overarching sin of their own nation and people. And the problem with slavery was not merely its cruelty, but the source of its cruelty: its claim to ownership of persons. This position appeared to be poised in precise opposition to the teachings of Jesus, above all the Sermon on the Mount. Ownership of other people was conceived as the essence and acme of all evil, the justification of every violation. To say that this has anarchist implications is overly mild. Government—with its authority that rests on coercion and a policy of expropriation of property, its conscription and use of people as cannon fodder, its pretensions to oversee the values of its citizens—is thoroughly incompatible with each person’s ownership of herself.

The key figures in the abolitionist movement simply asserted (a typical statement is Thoreau’s in “Civil Disobedience”) that government cannot possibly impose actual duties on its citizens that they do not already possess, government or not. For one thing, the government of the United States, as embodied in the Constitution, recognized the institution of slavery, as did various Christian denominations. Since dominant institutions plainly can permit or encourage the greatest of evils short of soul murder, it was obvious that governments could actually be satanic; Garrison famously called the Constitution a pact with the devil.

The ancients characterized forms of government by forms of sovereignty. Aristotle sorts regimes according to whether one person, a few persons, or all persons rule. Once you have the insight that freedom means individual self-sovereignty—the rule, we may say, of each—it is evident that you cannot countenance human government. One might also reach this conclusion directly from Christian pacifism of the kind embodied by Garrison and Adin Ballou, later taken up by Tolstoy and King: if physical violence is wrong, human government is illegitimate. One way to capture the pacifist intuition is that to physically attack someone is to tear away their self-ownership, literally to violate their humanity and hence one’s own. Indeed, the early American anarchist movement—as it was constituted by such figures
as Warren, Ezra Heywood, and a young Ben Tucker and Voltairine de Cleyre—was explicitly pacifist.

Eventually, the idea of self-sovereignty became something of a euphemism for license, and the residents of Modern Times in the 1850s were referred to with a bit of derision as “sovereigns.” Under the tender ministrations of Stephen Pearl Andrews and Ezra Heywood, self-sovereignty came to be associated with extreme eccentricity and free love. But for Warren, self-sovereignty was as much about responsibility as liberty. One problem with social combination is that it tends to obscure the lines of responsibility, and surely we should say that modern government has brought this offloading of responsibility and hence personhood to near perfection. Warren was particularly concerned to emphasize individual productivity and responsibility—in short, self-reliance—early in his career, as in *The Peaceful Revolutionist*.

(3) Cost as the limit of price; that is, the price of something should be fixed by the cost of producing it, measured by the labor or pain expended in producing it, rather than by what a given person is prepared to pay for it.

Of the figures usually described as “utopian,” only Warren actually founded a place called “Utopia,” a town in Ohio that still exists by that name. It had some success, primarily because Warren’s vision of how social living might be arranged was realistic, grounded in the basic skills and trades it took to keep people alive. Warren always concentrated on the circulation of commodities, improvement of standards of living, technological development, and pride in individual ownership. And yet there was to be no accumulation of capital or profit because business would be conducted according to Warren’s doctrine of equitable commerce. This taught that the price of goods was to be fixed not by what they would bring on the open market, but by what they cost to produce.

Obviously, this is a radical conclusion in the face of Smith-style capitalist economics. Yet it is also strikingly simple as an economic law. According to Warren, the alternative—that demand fixes
price—is morally and politically repellant: it explicitly authorizes blackmail and coercion. He always returns to the same reductio ad absurdum of the law of supply and demand: What is the value of a glass of water to a man dying of thirst? Everything he has. It would be contrary to self-interest, the supposed essence of all human motivation, not to take it all. At times people do take everything that someone has, justifying themselves by the supposed law that price is fixed by demand and the corollary of debt at interest, which treats money itself as a commodity. Ought they to, and must they? At the macro scale, one works on fleecing one or another segment of the economy, alternately underselling to destroy competitors and inflating prices to exploit local monopolies; prices are entirely capricious, as speculation rests on and exacerbates price fluctuations; economic crises inevitably result, and so on. This of course recalls Marx’s analysis of capitalism, the common strand between Warren and Marx provided by Robert Owen’s socialism (discussed below).

For Warren, the profit motive devours people and the economy. It is an indulgence in greed, not a natural condition of human beings. Speculation and lending at interest occur at every stage in the circulation of goods in a capitalist economy, and each person’s greed provides a motivation and justification for the greed of everyone else. By the time a commodity arrives at use, it has layers of inflated and imaginary costs associated with it, and because one needs the wherewithal to obtain it, one must oneself seek to maximize profits from all activities. Great hoards of useless wealth coexist with grinding poverty, homelessness, starvation, and terrible exploitation. In a rational system where price is fixed by cost or value measured in labor, a modest industriousness would be enough, according to Warren, to provide each person with what she needs and even a bit more.

It is not entirely clear whether, for Warren, cost as what fixes price is a mere utopian ideal or an economic law. But it is not completely out of place as a description of mature, small-scale capitalist economies, even as a conclusion of the usual laissez-faire arguments. Warren actually proved time and again by practical experiment that businesses conducted on this principle would undersell businesses
Introduction

that operated on the motive of maximum profit. This seems obviously true in the sense that prices cannot fall short of costs without the concern failing, while a firm operating at a large profit will be undersold unless they can enforce a monopoly. It seems likely that in a situation of free competition, prices must approach costs, thereby eliminating profits.

The idea that price must be fixed by cost shows us why Warren cannot be annexed to the greed-is-good crowd of libertarian egoists (e.g., Ayn Rand) or to Smithian rational utility maximizers. In his history of American utopian movements, John Humphrey Noyes called them “American Socialisms.” The word “socialism” is of course impossibly vague (actually, both words are), but it is meant to encompass Christian anarcho-communism of the sort that Noyes taught at Oneida and Warren’s equitable communities. Possibly Robert Owen coined it while working on his projects. Eventually “socialism” just indicated plans for social improvement, and then was used in the sense of state projects for social amelioration and control of the economy. But Warren is one of the few thinkers ever to propose ownership, even of capital, without greed: a modified capitalism—deleting the profit motive—that could be based on a sober assessment of one’s actual interests but could also be an inspiring ideal of a decent life of moderate ownership and useful work.

Warren, as should already be evident, was an adherent of the labor theory of value, which was already something of a commonplace when he wrote. Vernon Parrington, discussing the theory as professed in the mid-eighteenth century by Benjamin Franklin, gives the notion the following pedigree. “In his Treatise on Taxes, written in 1662, Sir William Petty . . . clearly elaborated the principle of labor-value; it was restated by Vauban in 1707, . . . by Hume in 1752, and later by the Physiocrats; and when Adam Smith wrote it was pretty widely known.” One might remark that it is implied in Locke’s account of property. Obviously it was an article of faith for Marx and later communist theorists. Indeed, one supposes that it is an ancient insight, a kind of inevitable conclusion. As an exclusive account of
why things actually have the value they do, of course, it has its limitations. In Warren’s version, however, the labor theory of value is an ideal: he asserts that expenditure of time and pain is the only rational and stable means of fixing price; that all other systems, in particular specie, entail arbitrary fluctuation of price, speculation, usury, and poverty.

His account was refined over the decades of his writing. Initially he argued that all labor was of equal worth: that one hour’s work of a washerwoman was worth one hour of lawyering. As he went on, he came to think that cost was equal to pain, and hence, for example, that the work of a washerwoman was worth substantially more than that of a lawyer, and far, far more than that of a musician (such as himself), whose labor was for the most part an actual pleasure.

(4) The labor note as circulating medium; that is, the only rational medium of exchange is a representation of a certain definite quantity of labor of a certain type, which is equivalent to a certain quantity of a commodity.

This idea follows, according to Warren, from the labor theory of value, and formed the basis of Warren’s Time Stores in Cincinnati, New Harmony, Utopia, and Modern Times. He admitted that a circulating medium was desirable for commerce. Warren attributes the idea of a labor-exchange economy to a few remarks by Robert Owen. Owen’s biographer Frank Podmore credits Warren with the first practical trial of the idea (at New Harmony in 1827), and says that when Owen himself tried similar experiments, he had Warren’s model in mind.

Warren’s account of economics is radical in its attack on money, and beautifully clear as a theory of economic representation and circulation. He argues that money, in the then-current capitalist economy, is a commodity like anything else: its price is fixed by its value, or what it will bring. For precisely this reason, money—regardless of whether it is backed by gold—is unsuited to be a circulating medium: one can never fix the value of money from one moment to the next. Currency and credit, like corn in an irrational capitalist economy, are
subject to sudden inflation because of speculation or limits on the supply, and sudden deflation because of overproduction or people dumping hoarded supplies. A stable, rational circulating medium must be nothing but a representation of a certain amount of goods or labor, a sheer placeholder for things of intrinsic value. Goods are, in turn, resolvable into labor; the two are interchangeable.

Various collections preserve labor notes from different eras of Warren’s career, and most of them are proposed to be negotiable for a certain amount of labor of a certain type (e.g., sewing) or good of a certain quantity (e.g., bushels of corn). Warren had from his earliest experiments devised a strategy for weaning people from currency to labor notes. At the Time Stores he established, one would pay for goods usually in legal tender, repaying the storekeeper for his time in purchasing, stocking, weighing, selling, and so on with a labor note, calculated by a large clock (hence “Time Store”). Eventually, if the cooperative became large enough, the labor notes of a variety of people would be desirable; goods could then be purchased with labor notes, or labor notes could be exchanged as people made their needs known to one another by posting them on a notice board at the Time Store. Thus the Time Store would eventually mutate into a labor bank that would be the basis of a local cooperative economy. This would be of inestimable help to the poor and homeless, who have wealth in this context if they dispose of their own labor; indeed, at Utopia and Modern Times people were able to build homes with almost no outlay of money by exchanging their labor with one another. In other words, Warren regarded this approach as a solution to homelessness and poverty.

In addition, the labor note as a circulating medium solves the problem that Warren came more and more to conceive as of central importance: securing for labor, which produces all wealth, its just reward. For each person to be self-sovereign entails that each person controls her own labor. If labor is equitably exchanged along the lines explored at the Time Stores, each individual will receive the equivalent of her actual production. This is Warren’s “socialism,” his way of addressing the emerging polarizations of class along the lines of
ownership in labor, which many American radicals of the era regarded as a mode of ownership in persons or a development of slavery (i.e., “wage-slavery”).

There are many possible objections to a labor note economy. For one thing, nothing apparently stops people from issuing an indefinite number of labor notes, then absconding or failing to make good when the labor is (or goods are) demanded. Further, there could be speculation in labor notes (e.g., one might seek to monopolize an industry by buying up the notes of those who work in that industry). But Warren (especially as elaborated by Heywood in the essay “Hard Cash”) argued that a credit system would evolve along with the labor-note economy, so that people whose notes were not good would soon find themselves unable to have their notes accepted. Potential speculators, not having anything to begin with but their own notes, would be unable to amass wealth in that form. The economy could in essence be self-regulating, the only coordination being provided by a central clearinghouse of needs and abilities.

Another objection might be that such a system is appropriate only to a small-scale economy: it is a craft or artisanal model of production and could not work on an industrial scale. On the contrary, the model is more plausible the larger the economy and the more specialized the tasks that people perform, because each such increase increases the likelihood that one will find in a labor exchange a person able to perform the exact task one requires. Warren was an advocate of division of labor, but he also hoped that each person could learn several trades and thus be able to gravitate toward the productive sectors of the economy. He evidently thought that seeking to cut labor costs combined with sheer irrepresible human ingenuity would continue to produce technological innovations.

As mentioned above, at first Warren believed that all labor should be valued at the same rate. Over time he came to believe that the value of labor varied not only with time expended but also with the onerousness of the task, so that the tasks people were least happy to perform should be paid at the highest rate. That is, the labor note was a calculation of pain. This too could be left to the free market in
notes, as the notes of those able to perform the most painful tasks would be the least common, and no one would be able to perform such tasks for many hours at a clip. Thus, if anything, the class order would be inverted, and those engaged in purely artistic or intellectual tasks would pay a (small and reasonable) price for the pleasantness of their professions.

Warren certainly believed that with his “experiments” he had demonstrated the practicality of labor notes as a circulating medium, and their effectiveness at pulling people out of poverty and realigning class interests.

New Harmony and American Utopias

Josiah Warren is a central figure in what is sometimes rather derisively termed the American “utopian” movement, or the attempt to set up ideal communities, often on the edge of the frontier. Though relative to the total populations of Europe or the Americas the movement was small, the utopians showed something essential about how America was conceived, particularly in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and the first half of the nineteenth centuries: as, precisely, a “new world,” a place to begin again without the burdens of monarchy, rigid class structures, religious institutions, and irrational traditions. In short, it was seen as a place of freedom and possibility. Many, including the transcendentalists, toyed with the idea that America could be the salvation of humankind.

Warren’s thought and projects fit with difficulty into the idea of utopia. As this is usually set out, from Plato’s Republic to More to Fourier, a utopia consists of a form of society designed—often to a quite absurd level of detail—a priori and imposed on reality. Nothing could be further from Warren’s thinking. He wanted to create the possibility of an open future, an unpredictable and uncontrolled development of human individuality. Whereas utopian projectors starting with Plato entertained the idea of creating an ideal species through eugenics and education, as well as a set of universally valid institutions inculcating shared identities, Warren wanted to dissolve
such identities in a solution of individual self-sovereignty. His educational experiments, for example—possibly under the influence of the great Swiss educational theorist Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (via Owen)—emphasized the nurturing of both the independence and the conscience of individual children, not the inculcation of preconceived values. In this, Warren is strikingly connected to the work of the transcendentalist pedagogue Bronson Alcott, though I know of no evidence of direct interchange.

Before Owen’s community at New Harmony, Indiana, the American ideal communities were religious, organized by radical Protestants, and often included “primitive Christian communism” (i.e., community of property). We might mention in this regard Ephrata in Pennsylvania, the Shakers in a number of locations, and the “Rappites” or “Harmonists” who originally built Harmonie, Indiana, on the banks of the Wabash River and sold it lock, stock, and barrel in 1825 to Robert Owen, who renamed it New Harmony. The New Harmony experience was central to Warren’s life and thought, and many of his ideas can be seen as attempts to understand and correct the failures of that community while retaining the energy and idealism that first drew him there.

It is difficult to know whether to write the story of Robert Owen as an inspiring tale of uplift or as a comedy. He made his fortune running a textile mill in New Lanark, Scotland, and in the context of a successful business venture had introduced a number of reforms, including a shorter workday, a reduction in child labor, and educational projects based on the work of Pestalozzi. People came from all over Europe and the United States to see Owen’s industrial paradise at New Lanark in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. But Owen quickly became a controversial figure due to his explicit atheism, which was perhaps one reason he decided to try a socialistic venture in the United States. New Harmony was something of a disaster, and persisted as an attempt to realize his initial vision for about two years, on the scale of thirty thousand acres and about nine hundred people.
Owen must have been an extremely compelling speaker, because many people, including Josiah Warren, changed their lives entirely after hearing him. John Humphrey Noyes—the founder of Oneida and historian of American ideal communities—attributes Owen’s communism to his contact with the Rappites; in any case, it is clear that by the time of the New Harmony experiment, Owen was no longer content with benevolent capitalism of the sort he practiced at New Lanark. As idealists and others gathered in New Harmony, Owen promoted the project relentlessly. It is a measure of the seriousness with which he was taken that he addressed a joint session of Congress and met President James Monroe, President-elect John Quincy Adams, and former president Thomas Jefferson. He proposed to make the whole of the United States into a system of “phalansteries,” or square-shaped building-complexes surrounding courtyards, a style later advocated by Fourier, Owen’s inheritor in utopian socialism.

The Owenite trend was based perhaps more on his personal charisma than on the soundness of his schemes. As he promoted New Harmony here and there, his young son William and others tried to set up a community based on his vague set of suggestions, in contrast to the meticulous contracts establishing a community of property that had been entered into by the Rappites. Property was to be held in common, but the terms under which resources were pooled led immediately to all sorts of disputes. One area of such disputes was the common store; people recorded credits for labor and debits for what they obtained at the store, which proved a matter of constant bickering.

Warren, then in his twenties, served as the leader of the band and a music teacher at the school, which, as Kenneth Rexroth points out, were “the community’s only two successful institutions.” Observing the extreme difficulties surrounding the store, his sense of how this procedure could be improved led to his plans for the Time Stores, a much more practical approach to this particular set of problems. In particular, he believed that the whole project foundered on disputes originating in communal ownership of property.
The failure of one other feature of New Harmony left its mark on Warren. The community was filled with eccentrics, scientists, and poets inspired by Owen’s vision. The founder’s son Robert Dale Owen described the population as “that heterogeneous collection of radicals, enthusiastic devotees to principle, honest latitudinarians, and lazy theorists, with a sprinkling of unprincipled sharpers thrown in.”

Conspicuously lacking were farmers, mechanics, laborers, artisans, carpenters, blacksmiths, and competent manufacturers. One of the many reasons the community failed was its lack of practical know-how, which is obviously entirely essential to establish a working economy on the frontier. Though Warren eventually faced a similar situation at Modern Times—the eccentrics of which made those of New Harmony look conventional—he set himself to acquire a set of practical skills and recruit for and inculcate them in the people with whom he worked.

By 1826, people were abandoning the town, and schismatic movements and rival villages were springing up. By early 1827, Owen sold property to the people occupying it, thereby ending the communism that in fact was based on the ownership of the area by Owen, and beginning the chaotic transition of New Harmony to a more conventional American community. This failure is the origin of Warren’s individualism and what we might term “anticommunism”: he came to believe that people entered into conflict when their resources and interests were the same, not when they were different. Above all, he turned against the basic idea of utopian socialism, in which an a priori scheme (embodied above all in the phalanstery) was imposed on a group of people. His vision of an ideal community shifted to the idea of creating circumstances in which each person might be free to perform whatever experiments in living arrangement they saw fit.

Though Owen, Fourier, and others presented their schemes as “scientific,” Warren held that they were just the opposite, in that they imposed a preexisting plan rather than relying on careful observation and continual adaptation. As William Wilson observes in his history of New Harmony, by 1826 Owen “had reached a point in his life from which he would thereafter never retreat, a point where, for him, the
truth was only what he wanted to believe and facts were of no importance.” And though Owen and Fourier presented their schemes as liberatory or democratic, Warren detected in their ideas an element of benevolent tyranny based on charismatic leadership. Such criticisms certainly contained an element of truth. In such matters, Warren expresses a vision connecting radical democracy (or anarchism) with science and practical technology that originates in the connections of republicanism with science and technology in such figures as Franklin and Jefferson and would be taken up in modified form by thinkers such as John Dewey. But the element of radical individualism that Warren appropriated from his contemporary atmosphere distinguished his ideas from those of his predecessors and successors.

One way into this issue is his observation that even if a utopian plan could be perfectly formulated—for example, in a book or a constitution—each person would interpret the plan differently. Whatever your procedure, the individuality of the participants is ineradicable, a hard fact to which any scheme—even the best of them—must bend. The biographer William Bailie quotes Warren a quarter century later, reflecting on his experience at New Harmony: “If the world could only assemble on these hills around and look down on us through all these experiences, what lessons they would learn! There would be no more French Revolutions, no more patent political governments, no more organizations, no more constitution-making, law-making, nor human contrivances for the foundation of society.” Indeed, two weeks after a constitution was adopted at New Harmony, its application was so chaotic that the citizens requested Robert Owen to assume dictatorial power. One might also say that Warren formed his anti-charismatic style of leadership in response to Owen. Charles Codman observed Warren at Modern Times thus: “Mr. J. Warren was a poor leader. He had no magnetic qualities so needful in persuasion or gaining converts. Also he was a timid man and hated to wrangle.” Of course, this was Warren’s actual personality, but it was also his principled approach to leadership. He didn’t want to inspire converts; he wanted each person to do what expressed
her individual personality. In short, it was in response to Owen’s fail-
ure at New Harmony that Warren formulated his basic approach to
philosophy, reform, and leadership style.

It is worth remarking, however, on one of the basic ideas that War-
ren retained from Owen. A remarkable feature of Warren’s advocacy
of individual liberty is that he takes it to follow from environmental
determinism. Even more radically, and, one might think, oddly for
an extreme individualist, Warren takes a deflationary attitude toward
the human self; in his view, it has no core, but rather is an ever-
changing bundle of experiences. In fact, that is precisely wherein in-
dividuality consists: in the incomparability of the experiences of each
of us, and the pressure on each of us of a unique set of uncontrollable
circumstances.

One correlate of this is that punishment for crime is wrong and
ineffective. If one does not want people to commit some class of act,
the environment that gives rise to that act must be altered. Controlling
people under threat, trying to erase their individuality according
to some text or model, is worse than hopeless. Facilitating the greatest
possible flourishing of human variety and eccentricity is the only ap-
proach that respects the circumstances and hence the character of
each individual, and it is the approach best suited to finding, by prac-
tical experiment, how to live. In all these positions, Warren strikingly
resembles his contemporary John Stuart Mill, who credited Warren
with lending him the idea of self-sovereignty.

Warren is notably reticent on matters of religion. It may be that,
under the influence of Alexander Bryan Johnson, he believed that re-
ligious claims were literally senseless, or that they referred only to the
emotional states of the speaker. Certainly, under the influence of
Owen, he believed that religion had been a disaster for the social de-
velopment of humankind. But he rarely addressed the matter explic-
itly, and in keeping with his basic philosophy he thought of religious
beliefs as an individual prerogative. Nevertheless, I think it’s fairly
certain from a few stray remarks—notably very early, in *The Peaceful
Revolutionist*—that Warren was an atheist or perhaps a deist. In *True
Civilization* he defines “the Divine” as whatever is not human, or as
the natural, a fascinating and extraordinarily problematic assertion that of course emphasizes his connections to thinkers such as Thoreau. At any rate, he never believed in the human soul, that kernel of inexplicable individual essence. Rather, he believed in the self as an ever-changing kaleidoscope of experiences, fragments of glass through which the world shone.

One other figure connected to New Harmony must be mentioned: Fanny Wright, one of the boldest and most radical reformers of the period. Scottish by birth, she was associated with Owen’s reforms but was even more radical; as she toured the United States, she urged religious skepticism, equality of the sexes and races, and many other controversial positions. Anticipating the role of female lecturers in Garrisonian abolitionism, she was the first woman in the United States to lecture to audiences of mixed gender, which she did at New Harmony in 1828. She founded perhaps the most astonishing ideal community of the period: Nashoba, in Tennessee, a mixed-race community based to some extent on Owen’s ideas, though Owen himself did not explicitly advocate race or gender equity. At the same time, she advocated miscegenation as the cure to the race problem, which was perhaps the most provocative position possible at that place and moment. With Robert Dale Owen, Wright edited the *New Harmony Gazette*, which later mutated into the *Free Enquirer*, a publication remarkable for its constant representation of views hostile to those of its editors. This provided Warren with some of his sense of the power of the printed word and the importance of free expression, which led to his later printing inventions. A poem he wrote on the death of her sister Camilla (see appendix A) suggests that they were friends. That puts Warren’s work in a somewhat different perspective, positioning it as a direct result of radical British and American reform of the 1820s. Warren therefore came earlier than Garrisonian abolitionism but persisted well past it, as he had some connection to most of the reform causes undertaken into the 1870s.

Of Warren’s Time Stores, Fanny Wright wrote, “Unaided by money, unbacked by influence, and unseconded save by his own conviction of the value of the principle he had seized and the beneficial
consequences of the practice he was prepared to explore, he suc-
cceeded in exhibiting to the understandings, and bringing home to the
worldly interests of thousands the perfect facility of living in plenty
with one third of the labor and without any of the anxiety inseparable
from the existing monied exchange of the world." Warren, like Gar-
rison, stands out for his advocacy of women’s equality, and he treats
the individuality of women in precisely the same way he treats that of
men. One of the advantages of being an individualist is that it will
make you skeptical of racial and gender categories; Warren always ar-
gued that placing people into a few neat categories was fictional, and
that even words such as “man” or “woman” were ultimately too
crude to apply to particular persons.

Shortly after the New Harmony period, both Warren and Wright
were exposed to the work of a remarkable philosopher, Alexander
Bryan Johnson, who emigrated from England as a teenager and set up
shop in Utica, New York. (This intellectual affinity again suggests that
Warren and Wright were in dialogue through the 1820s.) Johnson was
a successful banker and husband of a granddaughter of John Adams
who wrote numerous works in philosophy, political commentary, and
fiction, none of which seems to have made much of an impression on
anyone at the time, or indeed since. The one exception, for reasons
that remain a trifle obscure, occurred in Cincinnati in the late 1820s,
when Johnson’s *Philosophy of Human Knowledge; or, A Treatise on
Language* received ecstatic reviews from Frances Wright and others.

Johnson’s philosophy of language would have been an influential
contribution to human thought had it been more widely read. It
looks back to and elaborates the classical empiricists and common-
sense philosophers in one direction, and strikingly anticipates logical
positivism and pragmatism on the other. For Johnson, the meaning
of a statement or theory is the means that would be used to prove or
give evidence for it; a statement means the difference its truth would
practically make in experience. He attacked language on the grounds
that might be termed radically nominalistic. Nature, he said, ap-
peared only in particulars, whereas the words applied to these partic-
ulars were always general. That is, in every instance of a different
thing to which a word refers or which falls into its extension, the same word is applied, but in each case the particular phenomenon is distinct. This leads philosophers and the rest of us into a massively fallacious interpretation of nature, in which it is viewed as a series of instantiations of universals. Rather, language should be adapted to the ever-more-precise delineation of particulars: “Individuality is characteristic of nature. Language unites under one name, as identities, what is only partially identical. Individuality is no anomaly of nature. It is nature’s regular production, and boundless riches. No two parcels of calomel possess the perfect identity which the sameness of their name implies. No two men possess the perfect identity which the sameness of their manhood implies; nor possesses any one man, at all times, and under all circumstances, the complete identity with which language invests his individuality.”

Johnson was a phenomenalist: he believed that the fundamental data of experience were what Hume termed “sense impressions” (Johnson calls them sights, sounds, feels, smells, and tastes), and that what we term “individual objects” were composed of or identical with such impressions. Any term that could not be referred to a specific impression—someone’s experience at some time—was asserted by Johnson to be without meaning: it was returned to nature as a pristine, blank sound. He did not follow this into a Berkeleyan idealism, however, but to a radical realism (which, to be fair, is one reading of Berkeley):

My hand is red, hair is often red, the moon is sometimes red, fire is red, and Indians are red. These objects possess a congruity of appearance that entitles them to the appellation of red; but the precise meaning of the word in each application is the sight itself which the object exhibits. Whether an object shall or not be called red is a question which relates to the propriety of phraseology, and with which nature has no concern; but the meaning of the word red in each application, is a question which relates solely to nature, and with which language has no concern:—at least, language possesses over it no control.

This is a remarkable doctrine, taken by Johnson to be a direct result of his nominalism: it returns us to nature and, explicitly, to language
as a mirror of nature, albeit a dark mirror. Language is serviceable and sensible insofar as it reflects nature in its massed specificities. A perfect language would have a different name for each phenomenon of nature, but such a thing is beyond our power to wield. We must keep speaking in generalities, but we must also open ourselves to the specificities of reality: real knowledge would consist of a de-generalization or an ever-closer approximation to nature, which consists in nothing but unique particulars. Warren sought a politics that could thus respond to particularity—in other words, a nominalism of persons.

Throughout his career Warren also displayed an interest in notational systems and what we might call practical semantics, and his philosophy at its best is expressed in a notably precise style. He devised new systems of musical notation and stereotyping, and was followed by Stephen Pearl Andrews, whose first works introduced Pitman’s phonetic shorthand to American audiences. The problem of reference and a critique of language were never far from Warren’s mind. Warren absorbed Johnson’s proto-pragmatism, his critique of language, his nominalism, and his celebration of individual things and moments as the reality underlying experience. Indeed, Warren’s life can in some ways be read as the attempt to live out Johnson’s anti-metaphysics, to make it into a social philosophy as well as a philosophy of language. Though he defines himself initially in opposition to Owen, he later defines himself by alliance with Johnson.

In any event, immediately after the experience of New Harmony, Warren launched on his series of experiments: Time Stores (the first of which was established in May 1827 at West Fifth and Elm streets in Cincinnati), ideal communities, and innovations in printing, all of them designed at once to reverse and to make good Owen’s utopian vision. Noyes acutely observes, “The village of ‘Modern Times,’ where all forms of social organization were scouted as unscientific, was the electric negative of New Harmony.” In the initial presentations of his thought, for example in The Peaceful Revolutionist, it is obvious that his internal dialogue with Owen drove many of his ideas.
But he did not reject all of Owen’s precepts. He retained Owen’s determinism, translating it into a variety of individualism: if people are what their circumstances make them, their differences are ineradicable. He also retained Owen’s religious skepticism. And he retained the secularized millennialism, a tone of limitless optimism, and the anticipation of a transfigured world. As a matter of personal style, we might speculate that Warren, in the face of Owen, rejected leadership in its entirety because of his enthusiasm for and then disappointment with Owen, his feeling that he and others had been seduced by Owen’s passion. His own style of leadership was pointedly self-effacing. He did want followers of his compelling personality, or followers at all, but only people compelled both by the power of his ideas and inventions and by their own.

**Transcendentalism and American Reform**

More widely, we must connect Warren’s work with the mania of reform sweeping the United States—particularly New England—during the three decades beginning around 1820. Emetic cures and spirit visitations, all the motley of apocalyptic cults, celibate saints, community-of-wives trigamists, primitive Christian communists, violent abolitionists, come-outers, hydropathists, absolute nonresistants, temperance fanatics, and so on, each with a vision from on high and a plan to redeem the world or abandon it completely: Adin Ballou and John Humphrey Noyes, Shakers and Mormons, mentally ill or divinely instructed. Some of these people were, in fact, cranks. Others were, in fact, saints, and William Lloyd Garrison and Nathaniel Peabody Rogers—beautiful souls by any standard—are as characteristic as anyone. Their ideas were entirely serious though no doubt extreme: immediate abolition of slavery; absolute nonresistance; anarchism, on the grounds that the state consists fundamentally in violence; feminism (Garrison insisted that women act as full participants and leaders in the abolitionist movement); and the inviolability of the human person. All of these positions emerged directly for Garrison from a reading of the Sermon on the Mount, and Garrison was
in every sentence and every gesture a profoundly religious man. And even though Warren was not a religious man, he agreed with every one of these positions.24

On one level, Josiah Warren is about as levelheaded and practical a man as it is possible even for a backwoods philosopher to be. At heart, he’s a pragmatist in the early sense and professes no interest in theory even as he writes it. On another, he’s a pure second-revival millenarian, over the moon for the ecstasy at the imminent end of history. In this, Warren was in keeping with the mood of both secular and religious society, of scholars and fanatics, geniuses and dolts, ascetics and libertines: it hovers over the era like a fog or a sun, depending on your view. The divergent Protestant sects of Europe awaited the apocalypse, and they brought that expectation to North America. The Shakers anticipated the millennium, and John Humphrey Noyes said that it had already occurred. The Mormons taught a version of the rapture, and Owen and Fourier showed the way to a social paradise. Marx and Hegel predicted the inevitable, paradisiacal end of history. Emerson and Thoreau kept hinting that human beings were just about to get much, much better. The abolitionists, the transcendentalists, the spiritualists: none was immune to the atmosphere.

I’m not sure that such a mood can be explained. We might think of the radical displacements and rapid economic and environmental changes of the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, but one might say the same of practically any era. The typical millennial vision participated in the optimistic implications of an apparently open continent or world: a penchant for starting over in a direction that would lead to perfection or salvation, a renewal of or return to the garden that would bring this sorry tale to a close, the ecstasy at the end or beginning of history. Warren is as close to the radical Protestant sects in this matter as he is to Owen, and the overflow of his typography is his ecstatic testimony, his shaking and quaking and speaking in tongues. Even late in his life he retains an optimism that arises from faith rather than reason, though his own mood is tempered (as is, by then, the mood of all the apocalyptic cults aside from those of Marx and Hegel).
What is remarkable about several of these figures—certainly Noyes, for example, and the Shakers (under the leadership of Frederick Evans, Warren’s fellow veteran of New Harmony)—is their combination of extreme, eccentric faith with Yankee ingenuity and know-how. These were people with the ability to perform the practical tasks before them in an extremely effective manner. Indeed, Warren’s paradise was above all a place where practical skills were inculcated, practiced, and valued to their fullest. These were people likely to clear the land, survey it, build structures on it and furnish those structures, and then build institutions or anti-institutions (e.g., Time Stores) of remarkable practical value. This highlights a key problem in the Owenite communities: whereas skill was a form of prayer for the Shakers, the Rappites, and Thoreau, the population of New Harmony was feckless.

By the time American philosophy transformed from transcendentalism to pragmatism, the mood of optimism had shifted from millennialist to meliorist. And meliorism would have been more than enough to fund Warren’s experiments, and more in keeping with his experiences: small-scale, qualified successes, with a total transformation toward equity or self-sovereignty nowhere in sight. Warren’s successes were modest, especially in relation to his world-transforming ambitions. Yet his faith, like that of many of those around him, remains touching, and he retained it more truly than most in the face of war and industrialization. The perversity and quixoticism with which he pursued his vision made him occasionally the object of ridicule, but it also, as with Quixote, retained an underlying nobility or even sublimity even as it occasionally threatened to lose contact with reality. And what ultimately redeemed the experience of the people he worked with and for was the element of the practical that we see accompanying the American dream of that era: the concerted economic practicality of the Rappites or Mormons—or for that matter Ben Franklin—growing rich on the frontier; Thoreau’s pencil-making and surveying; Warren the pointedly practical economist and inventor, improbably inventing a vision of redemption for humankind.
By 1860, and after that, many of the surviving enthusiasts lost their idealism and descended into decadence, rolling from fad to fad, like Warren acquaintances Victoria Woodhull and Mary Gove Nichols. One might find oneself believing or at least trying to believe anything; precisely the implausibility of an idea became its compelling quality; individuality descended into mere eccentricity. But by the same token, Warren’s presence in reform organizations—such as the New England Labor Reform League—increased in the postwar years, no doubt because after the establishment of Modern Times, the equity community on Long Island, he lived in New York and Boston rather than on the edge of civilization.

Indeed, it is not too much to say that in the decade before his death in 1874, he turned from trying to introduce small-scale models of social reform toward mass organizing. His influence in the American labor and banking reform movements around 1870 was pervasive. Many of the postwar reformers—people such as William Batchelder Greene, Ezra Heywood, and Stephen Pearl Andrews—had been abolitionists, and each of them claimed Warren as an inspiration of their views. A young Benjamin Tucker emerged from this environment and ended up as the most eminent American individualist anarchist. These figures themselves were soon superseded by leaders influenced by such European radicals as Marx, Stirner, and Bakunin. The Warren style of political activism—in particular, his individualism—had been superseded by 1880.

Emerson and Thoreau stand in fascinating relation to the American reform tradition. For Americans, they were the most cosmopolitan of Harvard men, casually dropping into ancient Greek. Yet they emerge in the culture of religious and political enthusiasm and in many ways crystallize it, even as they maintain a wry distance, seen with absurd clarity in Emerson’s essay “New England Reformers.” The radical history of the United States becomes, in them, an American literature. Thoreau was, despite his own oaths to swear off, more directly interested in political matters than was Emerson, as was made clear after
John Brown’s raid. But the political themes are also visible throughout his books, journals, and correspondence. Both men expressed themselves equivocally about engagement in reform movements, though they wished them well and were willing to make contributions from time to time of one sort or another.

Again, Warren could be regarded as an Emersonian avatar, and he continually put into practice the idea of self-reliance as Emerson formulated it in his great 1841 essay. And Warren’s great practical competence, tendency to gravitate to the wilderness, basic individualism, and rejection of government authority could all be thought of as Thoreauvian. But the connection is that they all emerged in the same atmosphere rather than that there was direct influence either way. Emerson and Thoreau were younger than Warren, but I know of no evidence that the transcendentalists were acquainted with Warren until late in all their lives, and no evidence that he was acquainted with them.

Perhaps the most important distinction between Warren and Emerson/Thoreau is that Warren was not, essentially, an intellectual, but rather by his own account a practical projector. While Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, and others were reading Carlyle and Coleridge, the Tao Te Ching and the Bhagavad Gita, and rejecting eighteenth-century empiricism in favor of more grandiose and spiritual orientations, including forms of pantheism, Warren was never influenced by these developments. He retained a basically empiricist orientation, under the influence of Alexander Bryan Johnson, and never speculated on the nature of God, much less Emerson’s “Oversoul.” He was remarkably isolated from the intellectual currents of the day, even as he developed a system of thought that was related to them in complex ways.

But that very fact confirmed Emerson’s and Thoreau’s ideas about the United States in a variety of respects. Even as they speculated about the birth of a characteristically American spirit or genius, the transcendentalists remained engaged in the European debates and taxonomies, though they also shifted them in various ways. That Warren was operating in Ohio and Indiana in very much the way
they suggested, and with remarkably little intellectual history at his
disposal, would have been a lovely confirmation of their sense of the
American spirit, had they been aware of Warren’s work. Emerson,
Thoreau, Fuller, and Theodore Parker were engaged in learning for
its own sake. Warren had little time or inclination for information
that did not have a direct practical application, yet his activities strik-
ingly mirrored their ideas.

In my view, however, the transcendentalists are less transcendent
than they are sometimes portrayed as being. Thoreau’s basic commit-
ment is to the everyday world: labor, skill, and the close observation
of nature. The transcendentalists are certainly not “idealists” in the
grand German sense, à la Schelling, Hegel, and Schopenhauer. They
intentionally had no systematic metaphysics. They were continuously
attentive to the particular, and not merely as a sign of the general
or as an expression of the Oversoul. Whatever Thoreau believed, he
endeavored to put into practical operation.

The transcendentalists were, of course, examples of what came to
be known as romanticism, and in particular were committed to the
cult of nature most famously expressed in Wordsworth and now associ-
ated with Thoreau above all. Thoreau famously thought that wild-
ness could redeem the world. But a man trying, with small groups of
fellow travelers, to carve out a living in the semi-wilderness is likely
to view nature, first, as a provider of resources and, second, as some-
thing to be overcome. Warren was more interested in how to make
an efficient sawmill than in how to experience oneness with the trees.

Nevertheless, the commonalities between Emerson/Thoreau and
Warren are striking. Emerson wrote many times of America as a new
start for humankind, and there is an almost ecstatic tone in his specu-
lations about what might be achieved socially and politically. In a typ-
ical passage, he writes, “The land is the appointed remedy for
whatever is false and fantastic in our culture. The continent we in-
habit is to be physic and food for our mind, as well as our body. The
land, with its tranquilizing, sanative influences, is to repair the er-
rors of a scholastic and traditional education, and bring us into just
relations with men and things.”

Indeed, many a European and
American regarded the United States in precisely this way: as a place where humanity could be created anew. Warren certainly regarded it that way, and as much as anyone set out to make it a reality. Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott, Whitman: all hinted that America would redeem the species. Warren tried to make it so.

Emerson taught that human individuality was sacred, or was a spark of the divine. It was our duty to cherish it, develop it, guard it in ourselves with jealous care. It was in some sense our participation in the reality of the universe, and therefore we should not to submerge it in a social unity, but rather nurture it even in its perversities and contradictions. Indeed, if there were to be true cohesion, it would need to be a unity of individual selves in their reality. Further, he taught what was already a commonplace of American radical Protestantism, especially among Quakers and Unitarians, that the ultimate moral arbiter for each person must be that person’s own conscience, which is God or the Oversoul made manifest. It follows that the institutions by which we try to bring one another to heel, or to impose our own conscience on that of others, are violations of our nature and of Nature. And he also taught that as human individuality came to be cherished, institutions facilitating the power of persons over persons must dissolve, since ultimately they were violations of reality. “The less government we have the better,—the fewer laws, and the less confided power,” wrote Emerson in his essay “Politics.” “The antidote to this abuse of formal Government, is, the influence of private character, the growth of the Individual.”

Emerson developed these ideas with an incredibly compelling and passionate literary style aided by immense learning. Warren—as I say, without apparently any direct influence in either direction—sought to make these visions real. He had little interest in their religious origins or implications, but he asked whether it was possible to develop a society—economy, education, arts—that took the human individual as the fundamental fact, as the source, motive force, and purpose of social life. He wanted to show that an actual social system could be made that was based on respecting our differences rather than seeking to deny or expunge them. Even his experiments in printing and music
were aimed at this result: he wanted to make it possible for every person to express and develop herself through publishing ideas and creating art.

The question of whether Emerson was an anarchist is a difficult matter; he was reticent to declare a straightforward political program. But Thoreau certainly was an anarchist, and his hymns to individual conscience and inviolable liberty would have been profoundly congenial to Warren, as would his experiment in rural economy at Walden. Here is a passage from *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* that, but for excellence of the prose, could have been written by Warren:

> I love man-kind, but I hate the institutions of the dead un-kind. Men execute nothing so faithfully as the wills of the dead, to the last codicil and letter. . . . We bear about with us the mouldering relics of our ancestors on our shoulders. If, for instance, a man asserts the value of individual liberty over the merely political commonweal, his neighbor still tolerates him, that is he who is *living near* him, sometimes even sustains him, but never the State. Its officer, as a living man, may have human virtues and a thought in his brain, but as the tool of an institution, a jailer or constable it may be, he is not a whit superior to his prison key or his staff. Herein is the tragedy; that men doing outrage to their proper natures, even those called wise and good, lend themselves to perform the office of inferior and brutal ones. Hence come war and slavery in; and what else may not come in by this opening?27

For Thoreau, it is the attempt of human beings to escape from their ineradicable individuality—both their liberty and their responsibility—through laws, institutions, roles, and rules, that has led to the worst outrages in human history. And he believed that this is a traffic in delusions, that casting off one’s freedom and one’s responsibility was always impossible. On all these points Warren entirely agreed, including the idea that we were in thrall to the dead, specifically through their “letters and codicils,” their texts and institutional arrangements. As Thoreau sought to realize his principles in his own life, Warren sought to realize them—with a slight touch of paradox—in larger social arrangements. The test of such arrangements
was precisely whether they left the lines of liberty and responsibility clear.

Indeed, one might think of Thoreau’s two years at Walden as a utopian experiment, along the lines of George Ripley’s Brook Farm or Bronson Alcott’s Fruitlands. But it more closely resembled Utopia, Ohio, than either of these: it was an experiment in individualism and basic economics of precisely the sort that Warren undertook with more than one person. And the simultaneous overweening idealism and pointed practicality of Thoreau’s Walden was present in the same measures in Warren’s communities.

Modern Times

Relatively little is known of the two communities (Equity and Utopia) Warren formed in Ohio, between his sojourn at New Harmony and the founding of Modern Times, though Warren does describe some aspects of them, including something about the educational and economic structures. This probably boded well for their success. Publicity was part of the difficulties faced at New Harmony and Modern Times; even revealing the precise location of the communities might attract speculators in land, which actually did wind up putting an end to a number of American ideal communities. Modern Times, on the other hand, became a sensation and a scandal, though we might point out that this had little to do with Warren and much to do with his partner, Stephen Pearl Andrews.

Andrews, though born in Massachusetts, had lived in New Orleans in his youth, where he became a radical abolitionist, and he had practiced as a lawyer in Texas, where he hatched an abortive scheme for the abolition of slavery. (This was an unusual arc but not unique; Bronson Alcott, for example, worked as a traveling peddler in the South as a young man.) He returned to the North an ardent abolitionist, and like many of the reformers of his era he derived his libertarian conclusions from his opposition to slavery. In the run-up to and aftermath of the Civil War, Pearl Andrews—again like many
American reformers—advocated a smorgasbord of radicalisms, including free love (in fact, his society, the Grand Order of Recreation, was busted by New York City’s vice cops), spiritualism, and a merger of all human languages into his own Alwato, which would bring in its train the millennium of peace and brotherhood.

Josiah Warren met Stephen Pearl Andrews in Boston in 1848 or 1849, where Warren was giving a series of talks to reformers on equitable commerce. Though they seemed for a brief time to agree about everything (because Andrews loudly endorsed Warren’s views, which never seemed to alter one iota), it would be hard to imagine two more different men. Whereas Warren was straitlaced (his son George said he never drank, smoked, or cursed) and extremely direct, Andrews was something of a libertine and an obscurantist. Whereas Warren’s ideas and their expression were characterized by simplicity and straightforwardness, Andrews eventually built an incredibly elaborate and more-or-less incomprehensible philosophical system called Universology, explaining absolutely everything from the ground up. Whereas Warren had a rudimentary education and a great deal of practical skill, Andrews supposedly read thirty-two languages and was drenched in French and German thought, especially that of Fourier and Comte, and his ideas and career were more wild and astonishing than practical. Whereas Warren was self-effacing, Andrews was spectacular.

On the other hand, the alliance was complementary. Andrews was a scholar (let me express some reservations on that), a writer (ditto), a speaker, and an organizer. These were all qualities Warren lacked. But Warren had a series of fundamental, comprehensible, and compelling ideas, elements that eluded Andrews throughout his career. Andrews called Warren “the Euclid of the social sciences,” a nice tribute to the simplicity and scope of Warren’s views. He converted to Warren’s position but always tried to mingle Warren’s ideas with developments in European thought, even though a synthesis of Warren and Fourier is, as Warren saw, impossible. Andrews’s *The Science of Society* (1851) elaborates Warren’s principles and places them in relation to Comte’s sociology and Fourier’s socialism. But its statements of Warren’s positions are, when the infelicities of Warren’s prose are
attenuated, both less clear and less systematic than Warren’s original texts.

Madeleine Stern, in her biography of Andrews, describes the founding of Modern Times (now Brentwood) thus:

The two reformers set out together to search for their new Eden—the short Yankee inventor and the tall, forceful discoverer. Early in 1851, when the frosty air nipped his long Roman nose, Andrews ferried to Brooklyn with the saint of equity and then, after a two-hour journey by railroad, arrived at Thompson’s Station in Long Island.

The Pine Barrens of Long Island, some forty miles east of New York City, had little to recommend it to the objective viewer. The area was filled with a heavy growth of scrub oaks which would have to be uprooted. Water would have to be carried in buckets from Dr. Peck’s farm. The soil was impoverished. Sparks from the railroad might start forest fires, and there was not even a cow path in sight.

Pearl Andrews dismissed such minor flaws with a wave of the hand. The air was pure; the ground was solid. Roses would bloom where the scrub oaks stood. Broad avenues could be marked out. . . . He would call it “Modern Times” and the era of its founding would be known as the “Utopian Era.”

Andrews wrestled *Equitable Commerce* (1852)—Warren’s fundamental statement of his own philosophy—into some sort of shape; indeed, their respective roles in the final text are hard to sort out. But with regard Modern Times their roles were clearly defined. Warren would be on the ground overseeing the practical details of home building and keeping a Time Store to serve as a labor exchange. Andrews, a leading light on the reform circuit in New York City, would serve as agent, recruiting, raising money, and garnering publicity. In the matter of publicity, he succeeded well beyond expectations, and one suspects that Warren, then in his fifties and frustrated by his limited achievements in transforming society, overcame his misgivings in the hope that renown would lead to the widespread dissemination of his ideas.
Modern Times, in existence from 1851 to 1864 or so, eventually housed about a hundred residents. But initially, Warren, in a typical demonstration of self-reliance, moved alone to a shanty in the scrub oaks, where he surveyed a handsome hypothetical town and started manufacturing bricks with which he built a house, promptly sold. Lots were sold on the cost principle, so land was notably inexpensive, and New York City was accessible by rail. Moncure Daniel Conway, who visited Modern Times in 1858, said that he wasn’t sure whether to travel to the town “by railway or by rainbow.” Warren stated the purpose of the community in a somewhat more down-to-earth manner: “If we do not secure homes to the homeless, we work to no purpose.”

The town managed to establish many institutions, such as a fire company, a theater, a gymnasium, a library, and a school, on the cost principle. Warren’s Time Store, once again, was the hub of the labor exchange that drove the building. Charles Shiveley writes: “The character of Modern Times appeared in the dining hall, which was quite different from those of New Harmony or Brook Farm. Mr. Clarke Orvis, the inventor of a velocipede, established an ‘eating saloon’ which was set up like the modern cafeteria. Mr. Orvis cooked and prepared a wide variety of dishes for the members; he determined the price of his labor; to this he added the basic cost of the foods. When a settler came to eat, he paid for his food in the familiar time money, which Warren had printed.” Warren used his bricks to build a two-story “mechanical College” to inculcate skills both practical and philosophical. Chambers’ Edinburgh Journal skeptically described the economy in terms Warren would have approved: “The most disagreeable work claims the highest remuneration. Washerwomen, shoe-blacks, and scavengers, constitute the aristocracy of Modern Times; while lawyers, clergymen, and litterateurs are at the foot of the scale.” The community marketed its fruits and vegetables in New York City, the primary source of income. Warren no doubt thought that Modern Times could build slowly and unobtrusively until it could be displayed as a success.
Andrews had other ideas and invited Thomas Low Nichols and Mary Gove Nichols to take up residence. The Nicholses were free love, plural marriage, and sex education activists, and this agenda—shared by Andrews though decidedly not by Warren—swamped every other aspect of the community in public consciousness and was the subject of sensational press coverage. It is worth noting that many of the American ideal communities—including the Shakers, the Rappites, the Mormons, and the Oneida settlement—experimented with various reconceptions of the marriage and family relation. Though Andrews was an activist in this cause, and later coedited *Woodhull and Claflin’s Weekly*, in which the astonishing Victoria Woodhull (an occasional visitor to Modern Times) put forward her views on free love, Warren regarded free love as a terrible idea and a distraction. On the other hand, he was completely committed to letting anyone live however they liked, and he held that a few disastrous experiments would put an end to the whole program.

Andrews, Horace Greeley, and Henry James, Sr.—each a great reformer and a notable eccentric—debated the matter in Greeley’s *New York Tribune* in 1852–53. The debate extended to Warren’s basic principles, as Greeley identified self-sovereignty as license, an equation made all the easier by Andrews’s direct advocacy of free love. He wrote, “Your sovereignty of the individual is in palpable collision with the purity of society and the sovereignty of God.” Meanwhile, Modern Times was associated with atheism and other heresies. But it should also be said that all the experiments in different family arrangements had a feminist edge, and this was explicitly so with Andrews and the Goves; the destruction of traditional marriage was seen to be a necessary condition of the liberation of women. They also advocated sex education and birth control as a way to make sure every child was wanted and that no woman was trapped.

The association of Modern Times with free love was enough to attract all sorts of eccentrics to the town, including anyone who felt oppressed because of their nonstandard marital arrangements. Edgar Allan Poe described Mary Gove Nichols in 1848 as “a Mesmerist, a Swedenborgian, a phrenologist, a homeopathist and a hydropathist,”
and she shared some or all of these enthusiasms, and a number of others, with the people who began to gather at Modern Times. The town became for a time the center of American spiritualism and a haven for almost any variety of quackery. Warren cannot but have seen this as a replay of New Harmony, and the community again lacked practical skills and hardworking people. Further, Warren did not want to be associated with “free love,” as he made clear when he circulated a petition that read, in part, “The Sovereignty of every Individual’ is as valid a warrant for retaining the present relations, as for changing them.” Nevertheless, Modern Times persisted as a remarkable and notorious experiment into the 1860s, at which point it slowly disintegrated and became something like a standard town. William O. Reichert writes:

The effect of this unwanted publicity, as Warren described it, was an influx of “crochets,” each dragging with him his “particular hobby” by which he projected the total and immediate salvation of the world and all in it. One of the “imposters” assured the community that the liberation of mankind would follow at once if all its children were brought up without the burden of clothing. So reasonable did this proposition appear to another of the newcomers that she immediately put the theory into practice, forcing her child to go naked despite the severity of the bitter winds that blew from the Sound during the winter. One old man of German origin sought to cure the infliction of blindness from which he suffered by walking the street sans clothing, while some of the female residents took to the habit of dressing themselves in men’s clothing as a sign of their emancipation. More serious in its consequences were the dietary notions of another female inhabitant who would eat nothing but beans on the theory that it was good for her health. “She tottered around a living skeleton for about a year,” according to Warren, “and then sank down and died.”

This is comical of course, and tragic for the bean eater. But it is also a rather delightful portrayal of a Temporary Autonomous Zone, an actual bizarre anarchist community, and Warren even managed a crack about “the great sacred right of freedom to do silly things” (Practical Applications, p. 212).
And in a small way, Modern Times remained an inspiration to reformers all over the world, including John Stuart Mill, then developing his own theory of “self-sovereignty” on utilitarian grounds. In his autobiography, describing the works that influenced *On Liberty*, he wrote:

>[A] remarkable American, Mr. Warren . . . had obtained a number of followers [at Modern Times] (whether it now exists I know not) which, though bearing a superficial resemblance to some of the projects of the Socialists, is diametrically opposite to them in principle, since it recognises no authority whatever over the individual, except to enforce equal freedom of development for all individualities. As the book which bears my name claimed no originality for any of its doctrines, and was not intended to write their history, the only author who had preceded me in their assertion of whom I thought it appropriate to say anything, was Humboldt, who furnished the motto for the work; although in one passage I borrowed from the Warrenites their phrase, the sovereignty of the individual.  

Apparently the publicity had some effect after all. Many an idealist in the United States and in Europe projected on the community their fantasies of a new world. Auguste Comte—scientist and utopian—corresponded with Henry Edger at Modern Times, to whom he wrote: “Modern Times . . . constitutes the full development of Occidental anarchy. I am glad that you are not frightened by it. You have appreciated well the seed of reorganization in that bizarre mental *milieu*. . . . I share your hopes concerning the possibility of finding in Modern Times the nucleus of a true positivist Church.”  

*Warren and Anarchism*

As politics, the principle of individuality is a direct attack on the whole of modern political thought: the Hobbes Leviathan, the Lockean contract, Rousseau’s general will, and Hegel’s state. And it also runs against more or less the entire stream of political reality since Warren’s time, dominated by Marxist communism squaring off against welfare-state, bureaucratic capitalism. We must understand
that Warren’s thought gravitates no more toward modern capitalism than it does toward Marxism, nor the other way around: it is outside and prior to these categories, having been composed in the middle of nowhere (deepest Indiana, to be precise) in the early decades of the nineteenth century. It’s worth saying that there is no evidence of his reading Locke, Hume, Smith, or (later in his life) Marx or Proudhon, or, for that matter, Emerson or Thoreau, though by the 1840s every literate American had heard of Emerson and had some idea of his teachings. In fact, between spasms of journal writing, Warren was not engaged in scholarship, but rather in developing novel processes for manufacturing bricks or printing up new varieties of currency.

Warren is also precisely prior to and outside the split between what I am going to call left- and right-wing anarchism. The left wing proceeds from Proudhon, and then develops as a movement against Marx in the late-nineteenth-century battles for leadership of the radical industrial labor movement. Mikhail Bakunin follows Proudhon as Marx’s opponent, and Peter Kropotkin is easily the most able nineteenth-century theoretician of this view. Kropotkin was certainly aware of Warren and regarded him as an inspiration, despite all their differences. Kropotkin mentions Warren in his famous *Encyclopedia Britannica* article on “Anarchism” as a precursor of (and influence on?) Proudhon:

It [mutualism] had also its precursor in America. Josiah Warren, who was born in 1798 . . . , and belonged to Owen’s “New Harmony,” considered that the failure of this enterprise was chiefly due to the suppression of individuality and the lack of initiative and responsibility. These defects, he taught, were inherent to every scheme based upon authority and community of goods. He advocated, therefore, complete individual liberty. In 1827 he opened in Cincinnati a little country store which was the first “Equity Store,” and which people called “Time Store,” because it was based on labor being exchanged hour for hour in all sorts of produce. “Cost—the limit of price,” and consequently “no interest,” was the motto of his store, and later on of his “Equity Village” near New York, which was still in existence in 1865.41
The Bakunin/Kropotkin strand came to be called “communist anarchism.” It was marked by an attack on private ownership and called for a true union of human beings: a spontaneous unanimity and cooperation enshrined in Kropotkin’s concept of “mutual aid” as a factor in evolution: a profound refutation of social Darwinism. Communist anarchism reached its American height under the aegis of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, Russian Kropotkinians importing their ideas to Greenwich Village. This tendency came to be despised between the time of the Haymarket riot and the anarchist Leon Czolgosz’s assassination of President William McKinley. The prevailing image of the anarchist became a bomb-wielding, immigrant, nihilist, terrorist scourge of modernity.

“Right-wing” anarchism uses Warren as the Left uses Proudhon. Lysander Spooner moves straight from Locke and Jefferson to a militant defense of deism and individual rights. If anarchism could have a legal theory, Spooner in his capacities as a self-taught lawyer and freakish polemical talent would have been its theoretician. Benjamin Tucker—another provincial New England printer—used Warren and Spooner as twin supports without fully exploring the tension between them. But Tucker, as time goes on, adds an admixture of the egoism of Max Stirner, of whom he was the first American publisher. Stirner’s work, though striking in its diagnosis of modernity as the cult of the state and in its continual paradoxes, would be an absurd guide for social reform and is actually sort of pathetic: the assertion by a tiny man of his unbelievable gigantism; the alleged fact that his self is or commands the entire world. Despite Stirner’s notion of a “union of egoists,” his philosophy is too solipsistic to serve as a political guide.

Because they precede and transcend the schism between stateless communism and Stirner-style egoism, between left- and right-wing anarchism as it has played out ever since, it is particularly interesting to recover Warren and Proudhon’s thought. Of course the communist anarchists rejected Marx’s statist solution, but they accepted to a large extent his analysis of history as class struggle. Indeed, Bakunin’s thought is little more than a pastiche of Marxism and
Proudhon. The communist anarchists held property to be at the root of capitalist exploitation, and hence proposed its outright elimination. This analysis was to some extent discredited by the development of capitalism into a modified socialism, bolstered by a huge state sector, regulation of the economy, and redistributive schemes, as well as by the success of the labor movement in increasing wages and benefits and decreasing hours. In addition, the communists organized internationally instead of trying to achieve local transformations, emphasizing world proletariat revolution rather than local community formation.

The egoists, on the other hand, came to celebrate exploitation itself as the result of voluntary contract, and to recommend self-seeking acquisitiveness. This point of view tried to manufacture the overman: the independent ego who needs no assistance and brooks no interference, who dares to do injustice, the blond beast or little gray chair of the Federal Reserve. The egoists refuse organization of attempts at societal transformation, and often think of activism, community construction, or even charity as little more than an expression of social slavishness, and dismiss justice and morality as a plot of the little people. Warren fits this picture no better—or perhaps considerably worse—than he does the communist ideal, despite his own brand of extreme individualism. The question for Warren is how decent folk can achieve a nonexploitative economy in which they contribute not only to their own material gain but also to social well-being, which he considers one of our natural impulses. It is one of the greatest errors in superficial readings of Warren to connect him to the later thought of Benjamin Tucker, Ayn Rand, and Murray Rothbard, even though the term “individualist” is used to describe them all.

A division in anarchist theory persists between those who wish to proceed by community formation—by carving out, within existing society, a zone of autonomy—and those who propose a global social revolution. To some extent this tracks the American/European and individualist/communist splits within anarchism. The Americans emerge from dissenting Protestant prophets and abolitionist saints. The Europeans emerge from the 1789 French Revolution and the works
of Rousseau. Each despises the other and thinks the other impractical and defeatist. But each has also had some successes. The pre-immigrant American tradition takes the course of practical experiment (e.g., Lysander Spooner’s postal service and challenges to licensing procedures), along with an accompanying polemical publicity that serves as a record of experiments and a recruiting brochure. Warren, at any rate, belongs squarely in what is called by its opponents “lifestyle anarchism”: that strain concerned with creating alternatives within the interstices in the existing system rather than arming to overthrow it. In any case, the opposition is tendentious; the approaches ought to be complementary. Build a world, then take it public.

To consider yet another strain of anarchism, Warren was no primitivist (à la the contemporary theorist John Zerzan), though his own preference for small-scale, local economies might lend some comfort to anarchists of this bent. His continuous activity as an inventor shows his enthusiasm for technology. An article about Warren in the journal *Printing History* is aptly titled “Every Man His Own Printer”; and, given his obsession with self-publishing, Warren would no doubt at this point be a blogger. He conceived his own economics as practical, encouraging industry and trade. He is neither a technological optimist in the mode of so many thinkers of his time and afterward (such as the pragmatists), nor a pessimist of the back-to-the-land movements of the 1960s. For Warren, technology cannot redeem us, but it can contribute to a decent human life in many ways.

At any rate, to understand Warren it is crucial to grasp the political spectrum of early-nineteenth-century American politics, in particular radical politics. The most radical, progressive elements were by and large religious fanatics. What we might think of as the far Left—the feminist movement, abolitionism, the peace movement—attacked the very idea of state power. Individualism was the political currency of the American reform movement. The division of the Left and Right, understood as statist socialism or communism versus libertarian, laissez-faire capitalism, just wasn’t in play.
There is evidence that Warren sympathized with most of the major reform movements of the nineteenth century, especially feminism. He is among the few nineteenth-century authors you will find using gender-neutral locutions such “he or she”; in the texts that follow, these expressions are not the result of my editing. Warren explicitly and at length decries the limitation of women to a certain set of professions, and frankly proposes equality of the sexes along with practical measures to make this possible (including day care).

Extreme religious forces in early-nineteenth-century America were on the far Left. What we would call “conservatives” were leftover Federalists or slavery enthusiasts, big-government Hamiltonians or bold pseudo-Cavaliers. Reform still meant freedom from “tyranny,” meaning control by a foreign power. But the term “tyranny” soon came to mean simply any interruption of self-sovereignty—in short, slavery. That is why we need to return precisely to the moment of Warren: because this split between Left and Right as it developed under Marxism is invidious, extraneous, and arbitrary with regard to the subject matter. The Hegelian solution of the ever-growing state has in fact been adopted by nearly everyone on the political spectrum: the extreme Right and the extreme Left, as well as the moderate Right and the moderate Left. In a way, the history of American reform movements was co-opted by international statist socialism, which prevented the emergence of an indigenous radical understanding. After Warren, the apocalypse: the Civil War and the world wars, the genocides of colonialism and state terrorism.

Put simply, Warren was neither a communist nor a capitalist. True, the economy he imagined was regulated by the invisible hand of competition and the inexorable laws of supply and demand. He emphasized private property and free transactions. He never tried to out-nice his capitalist competitors, but rather to underprice them. Yet his entire program depended on the elimination of profit in all transactions, and he always proposed his “experiments” as a way to help the laboring classes as well as the destitute.
Warren’s published texts are the result of multiple editings and reorderings, by Warren and others (in particular, Stephen Pearl Andrews). Most of the material no doubt originated in notebooks (now lost except for “D”). The two book-length works of political/economic philosophy published in his lifetime, and intermittently reissued in tiny editions since, are known as *Equitable Commerce* and *True Civilization*, the contents of which overlap. The first of these was presented explicitly as an attempt by Stephen Pearl Andrews to organize the mess of Warren’s notebooks and periodicals. The second seems to have been Warren’s attempt to do likewise, incorporating material emerging after about 1850. Both works are eccentric in their printing and organization. *Equitable Commerce* features Warren’s marginal indexing. There is a numbered list of themes at the beginning, with numbers appearing in the margins opposite the paragraphs connected to the theme corresponding to that number. Warren appears to have entertained the idea that the work could be read in a number of different orders, allowing the reader to create a self-guided tour. *True Civilization* features (only) a nonlinear, thematic table of contents. These are typical Warren innovations—individualistic, ingenious, and premonitory (for their resemblance to hyperlink text structures)—but they tend to make the text even more off-putting, bristling with odd notations. I have not tried to reproduce these effects, except by including a conventional index to the book as a whole.

What I have attempted to produce, out of the welter of bewildering writings, is a reading text, and to accomplish that I have taken a number of steps, which could be summed up by saying that I retained textual order and performed no additions, but rather only deletions and corrections, as follows. I have severely curtailed Warren’s penchant for emphasis, which could include several sizes of capitals, italics, underlining, and multiple exclamation points. I have liberally changed or corrected punctuation; Warren’s is inconsistent and often infelicitous, and in the notebooks and letters, careless, as one would
expect. I have also made many excisions, which are not specifically marked in the text; the plan is to present facsimiles of at least some works online. Producing a readable text of Warren’s writings has presented a problem for his editors ever since his earliest publications. There could be other solutions, of course, especially an attempt to reproduce the various early typestyles and indexing systems. For the sake of clarity and simplicity, I decided to move emphatically in the other direction.

I want this volume to convey the practical value and continuing relevance of many of Warren’s ideas. These ideas are fundamental to an important school of American political thought and deserve to be represented to a literate audience, so far as possible, in their originator’s words. I wanted to produce something that, in short, people could or might actually read. To accomplish this, I typed my way through all the Warren material, trying to think both like the person who composed them and also as a writer.

I do regret having smoothed out some of Warren’s eccentricities as a writer. But I think that as a consequence both his eccentricities and his universality as a personality and as a thinker stand out more clearly.
The thematic table of contents and marginal indexing system Warren developed for *Equitable Commerce*. 

**important points illustrated.**
1. Emancipation, freedom, individually the principle of order, honesty, and progress. 
2. Different arrangements of the same language although of identical existence; but we seek to expunge any other than that one popular among the greatest number of people, because we believe, and because we consider it a principle of order, honesty, and progress. 
4. Warren being made the basis of another, becomes the principal element of social contract. 
5. Temporaries, for personal reasons illustrated. 
6. Respect for legal unity and property. 
7. Illustrations of the same as necessary for prosperity. 
8. Union of labor the greatest source of gain in society. 
9. Weightage species upon the principle of delay, and exchange or commerce, and against the principle of any species of commerce. 
10. Failure of practical necessities. 
11. Stability, by the act, or by the principle, makes a benefit to all, in full, however, for the principle. 
12. The same who are not necessary. 
13. Should the law make personal. 
14. The law of nature, and more, except those of the kind of property, and the great common. 
15. Respect for the rule of law. 
16. Every woman, and in the same principle. 
17. Some principles, to mention a few that he possesses which is not the way.

**The application.** If by any other name than that one popular among the people, because we believe, and because we consider it a principle of order, honesty, and progress. 
1. In the English language, enough advanced; and the same principle of property, because we believe, and because we consider it a principle of order, honesty, and progress. 
2. In the English language, and the same principle of property, because. 
3. In the English language, and the same principle of property, because. 
4. In the English language, and the same principle of property, because. 
5. In the English language, and the same principle of property, because. 
6. In the English language, and the same principle of property, because. 
7. In the English language, and the same principle of property, because. 
8. In the English language, and the same principle of property, because. 
9. In the English language, and the same principle of property, because. 
10. In the English language, and the same principle of property, because.

**The application.** In the English language, enough advanced; and the same principle of property, because we believe, and because we consider it a principle of order, honesty, and progress. 
1. In the English language, enough advanced; and the same principle of property, because we believe, and because we consider it a principle of order, honesty, and progress. 
2. In the English language, enough advanced; and the same principle of property, because we believe, and because we consider it a principle of order, honesty, and progress. 
3. In the English language, enough advanced; and the same principle of property, because we believe, and because we consider it a principle of order, honesty, and progress. 
4. In the English language, enough advanced; and the same principle of property, because we believe, and because we consider it a principle of order, honesty, and progress. 
5. In the English language, enough advanced; and the same principle of property, because we believe, and because we consider it a principle of order, honesty, and progress. 
6. In the English language, enough advanced; and the same principle of property, because we believe, and because we consider it a principle of order, honesty, and progress. 
7. In the English language, enough advanced; and the same principle of property, because we believe, and because we consider it a principle of order, honesty, and progress. 
8. In the English language, enough advanced; and the same principle of property, because we believe, and because we consider it a principle of order, honesty, and progress. 
9. In the English language, enough advanced; and the same principle of property, because we believe, and because we consider it a principle of order, honesty, and progress.