

# Technology and Community in a Rural Culture: The Amish

Randall E. Basham

University of Texas at Arlington, Texas, United States

The Amish are a marginal outgroup in the United States who have remained far from the center of the dominant society in their nearly 400 year history. This is in part due to a judicious acceptance and adoption of newer technologies, as these are not viewed as vales free. This highly religious community is promoted as a tourist attraction by various states where their communities flourish. Their culture seems quaint or antiquated, though this is partly due to a preference for older methods of labor and production that have stood the test of time and serve to maintain integrity of the culture. The Amish have been persecuted in past for choosing to be a non-violent culture, which has also prohibited their exposure to various technologies. Their history in America runs counter to the culture and experiences of the dominant social culture, as well as many minority cultures. Their endurance and success run counter to much of the development of social welfare milestones and policy in America. Yet, the Amish represent marginal and oppressed people in immigrant history. Many who promote their culture continue to exploit them based upon the misunderstandings of the larger society. Some who write about them perpetuate these misconceptions. This paper seeks to examine critically via the selection of available historical evidence, and through the historical observations of earlier writers raised in Amish tradition, how the Amish view themselves and concerning technology within their culture.

*Keywords:* community, culture, religion, rural, technology

## Technology and Culture: The Amish

When seen in formal attire, the Amish women often wear black or white bonnets covering their hair. Amish men often wear black hats low of the brow and wide of the brim. Amish children may be seen to dress for worship in black jackets without collar, pockets, or buttons. Absent are flourishes of dress or personal technical devices seen in modern cultures.

Community church services are held in a farmhouse kitchen, and nearly all travel is done in a gray or black horse drawn family carriage. Thirty to forty families meet on Sunday, at a pre-selected farm, on a rotating basis, for church. Those attending services sit three to four hours on hard-backed benches. After the service, the hosting family feeds the entire community in attendance. Though it is a highly supportive and sustained culture for members, these practices do not require electronic or informational supports common in other cultures.

Spoken accents are an odd dialect, and members refer to themselves as “plain” and others as “fancy”. Children attend one-room schools, and when free from school, toil in the fields of farms. Young boys drive several horses, pulling wide tillers while balancing just atop the blades barefoot. Young girls are up before dawn milking the family’s cows. Language is itself a technology; the directives and instruction provided for next generation members are a technical and engineering vocabulary lost to modern cultures no longer needed

earlier era skill sets.

Some family barns are marked with odd hex symbols. An artifact of long held belief systems makes the Amish cautious about engaging with what are often seen as strange outside cultures. Barnyard mountains of manure are considered a symbol of family prestige. Members avoid contact with others, or even being photographed. Families purchase little, and care even less, for progress and technology.

To attempt to understand their perspectives, we must see through Amish eyes. The following recorded documents and testimonies of the Amish are taken from several sources and reveal an Amish presence different from that promoted by regional tourism interests. A reliable source of their perspective may be found among those rare few that were raised in Amish traditions and became historians. Other sources are from their limited correspondence and available historical evidence.

### **Misconceptions and Misunderstandings**

To most Americans, “Amish Country” is a tourist destination. This is in part due to several Internet web pages that are operated by state governments and departments of tourism. These have promoted small cottage industries that are often not operated by the Amish. The bed and breakfast facilities are also not operated by the Amish. Souvenirs purchased by visiting tourists are not of Amish manufacture.

For some naive observers, Amish communities were thought to have strange occult and healing abilities. Officially, the Amish faith does not condone the practice of magic in any form. However, some Amish were heavily influenced by tales of miracles of those members martyred in Europe. A smaller group of the Amish was influenced in the past by superstition and practiced folk medicine for ailing members. Some currently consult various references on herbal and folk medicine, but are also permitted to seek traditional medical care (Hostetler, 1993, pp. 339-342). The identification with magical practices may have been due to the colorful designs on their barns, which have been called hex signs, as well as, their distinctive black clothing. Hex signs were thought to be a ritual marking of protection or curse by some visitors who did not understand their meaning as wishes for friendship, health, and prosperity (Kraybill, 1989).

In addition to religious values, the Amish may be defined by “rationality in service of family, community and religion; separation from the world; a preference for small scale communities and enterprises; a love of manual labor, of animals and of nature; and, above all, a strong sense of humility” (Foster, 1984, p. 11).

### **Origins**

The Amish faith and the origin of the Amish people began in portions of what are now the nations of Switzerland, France, and Germany in the late 1600s. A church leader for which they are named, Jakob Ammon, represented the most conservative component of the Anabaptist movement (Gross, 1997). Following the Reformation in Europe, the Catholic Church split with members. This split resulted in a sect known as Protestants. These Protestants eventually split into the increasingly more conservative movements of Anabaptists, Mennonites, and finally, the Amish (Kraybill, 1989).

Other portions of the established religious community include Catholics, practiced excommunication, or denial of participation in communion, for those who did not practice church doctrine. The Amish sect, however, believed in rigid adherence to Bible teachings and the withdrawal of both church and social support, or “shunning” of unrepentant members (Hostetler, 1993, p. 34).

### **Marginalized and Oppressed in Europe**

The Amish, who practiced non-retaliation, humility, and held extremist, but non-violent views, were violently persecuted. Some Amish were placed into sacks and thrown into water, without resisting, and drowned during these persecutions. Persecution by other churches and their members continued until the Amish became nearly extinct. They sought to be joined to the land and sought places of religious tolerance. Some gained religious tolerance from William Penn, leader of another religious movement (the Quakers), within what became the State of Pennsylvania in the New World. As a result of the original and continued persecutions, there are now no Amish remaining in Europe (Holycrossilvonia.organization, 1998).

### **The Search for Tolerance in the New World**

Leaving the land, which was so dear to the Amish and their extended family, was a severe sacrifice for the “plain people”. This was historically common for many immigrants. The following passage relates in part the effort of a people to seek tolerance (Hostetler, 1989, pp. 26-27).

The journey across the Atlantic was a dreadful ordeal. Passengers who kept diaries speak of numerous customhouses between Switzerland and the Netherlands, each involving a long delay and additional expenses. One person who made the trip in 1750 speaks of passengers packed as closely as herring into large boats. There was a stench from fumes, vomiting, dysentery, and scurvy. Filthy food and water were major sources of misery, as well as lice, disease, and severe storms.

The Amish were like many immigrants who could not afford the rising costs of passage and became indentured-servants. Some acquired this status unwillingly. Lewis Riehl was seized at age eight, “stolen from his mother in Europe by a man named Kurtz. According to historical correspondence Kurtz paid his passage, and the child became his indentured servant. Lewis had no bed and slept with pigs for warmth in winter” (Luthy, 1972, p. 7). He was eventually taken into the community and church of the Amish. Later, as an adult, he married an Amish girl.

### **Marginalized and Oppressed in the United States**

The promised tolerance and religious and political freedoms sought in the New World were more difficult to achieve, in the Colonial Era, than realized by the Amish. Consider this brief description of the plight of the Amish at that time:

During the War of Independence from Great Britain, the Amish and Mennonites retained the principle of nonresistance. Their opposition to taking the oath of allegiance and joining the militia was interpreted by patriots as an alignment with the British. The Amish, unlike the Quakers generally paid the war tax but disclaimed any responsibility for its use. In refusing to take the Oath of Renunciation and Allegiance they were told they would be disqualified from serving on juries, suing at law, holding public office, or buying or selling land. The Amish, along with the Mennonites and Quakers, refused the oath not only on religious grounds but also because they had promised allegiance to the Crown and feared to perjure themselves. Several Amish people were charged with treason and held in jail in Reading, Pennsylvania. (Hostetler, 1993, p. 64)

The Amish paid dearly for being a people who tended to honor collectively a pledge made to the Crown. By keeping their word, they moved farther from participation in the center of social development in the colonies. The Amish continued to work their land without reliance on the institution of American slavery.

During the Civil War years of the United States, Amish communities were destroyed, exploited, or moved to avoid destruction due to contact with military forces both Union and Confederate. Houses and properties,

food, tools, other materials, and livestock were confiscated. Amish households were directed to perform services, including the working of families and their children, through the night to prepare Amish food inventories for the encamped military. At times, the Amish family was paid in the counterfeit currency if paid (Hostetler, 1989). Some Amish recounted being threatened with their lives, and unknown numbers suffered abuse.

### **Social Welfare Issues and History in the United States: Amish Perspectives**

Separateness from the outside world has caused problems and created some benefits for the Amish. The Amish have avoided some pitfalls common to other immigrant groups, as a result of community efforts to remain self-sufficient. Members strive toward self-sufficiency but remain at the mercy of some market and social influences. Inflation and increasing land costs periodically threaten their way of life. Large family size serves as a form of social protection. Whenever land can be purchased and owned, additional children provide economic security that the farm will have sufficient laborers. Members must seek work elsewhere “in the world” or start a cottage industry whenever land is expensive (Foster, 1984, p. 5).

The Amish way of life may be threatened more in times of war, prosperous worldly conditions which increase land costs, or by outside regulation. During times of national economic hardship, the Amish fare better than most groups. However, “Some Amish farmers today are keenly aware of the Depression and its consequences when grain and livestock were worth very little on the market” (Fisher, 1978, p. 60).

Much of the political and economic turmoil of the gilded age of the post Civil War Era and The Progressive Era bypassed their isolated communities. The Amish did not depend on the labor of other marginalized groups but have been criticized for exploiting the labor of their own children, and for not promoting higher education beyond the eighth grade. During times of economic adversity, they have collectively fared well due to principles of frugality and land ownership. Many had money for essentials during the Great Depression (Foster, 1984).

As a principle, the Amish do not subscribe to any form of social insurance and depend on their community during times of disaster or need (The Pennsylvania Dutch Convention and Visitors Bureau, 1998). An example was recorded by an author who witnessed cooperation by barn raising after a tornado had destroyed four Amish barns in Wooster, Ohio:

I watched the raising of that last barn in open mouthed awe. Some 400 Amish men and boys, acting and reacting like a hive of bees in an absolute harmony of cooperation, started at sunrise with only a foundation and a floor and by noon, had the huge edifice far enough along that you could but lay in it. (Logsdon, 1986, p. 75)

The Amish have developed the concepts of social cooperation and community responsibility, as an alternative to several social welfare program initiatives.

The Amish community arranges for supports for widows and the elderly. Their members do not subscribe to receiving benefits from the social security system, or unemployment funds. They do pay into required taxes when employed outside of the Amish community, and pay into plans to protect any contracted non-Amish employees, or contracted help (The Pennsylvania Dutch Convention and Visitors Bureau, 1998). This taxation, however, is only a recent requirement.

The concept of community caring is evident in other areas of Amish life, as well. Amish community members suffer from both health and mental health conditions. Some of these are related to occur due to high

proportions of consanguineous marriage in closed communities (Dorsten, Hotchkiss, & King, 1996). Amish females are reported to suffer from slightly higher proportions of depression than males, which are speculated due to the stresses of their traditional roles (Egeland & Hostetter, 1983; Hostetler, 1993, p. 332). The Amish treat mentally handicapped members as functional members of their community. Distinctions are not made between community members who contribute their toil to the farm effort (Hostetler, 1993, p. 334).

Amish and Mennonites have developed their own medical and mental health services, which are available to members. They maintain three private mental health hospitals where members may be referred by the community bishop (Hostetler, 1993, p. 332).

### **Ordnung, Meidung, and Separateness as Social Control**

The Amish principally employs three methods of maintaining the integration of the social community.

The first method of maintaining social integration is "ordnung". Social ordering in the Amish community includes the passing of regulations (ordnung), which represent the consensus of its leaders. These special meetings are held twice a year. Community members know most rules. Rules passed at these meetings remain oral and are not written down. Some rules are printed which are agreed to at special conferences of the Amish held less frequently (Foster, 1984). These rules serve as guidelines for members and identify what is considered sinful. Some rules have biblical support while others do not.

The second method of Amish social order is known as "meidung". Excommunication from membership of the Amish community is referred to as meidung. The practice, more commonly called "shunning", will be instituted after a member has been warned and will not refrain from a transgression. If the offender repents to the community and wishes to make amends, the repentant offender will be accepted back into the community (Kraybill, 1989).

The third method for maintaining social integration is separateness from the world. Separateness includes not affiliating with, marrying, or entering into businesses with members of the world outside the Amish community. This teaching, which is fundamental to the Amish way of life, has literal biblical support. Christians are to keep themselves separate from the influences of the world, and the Amish practice distinctive dress as an expression of their faith (Foster, 1984).

### **Class and Gender Issues**

Although members of other groups may not consider class and gender issues relevant to the Amish culture, there are some, which should be noted.

Cooperation between husband and wife prevails in many ways, depending upon their personalities. In practice, much authority is shared. The wife's domain is the home and its management, including cooking, cleaning, sewing, and gardening. The most important activity for husband and wife is child rearing and training. The farm is the husband's kingdom, for he plants, harvests, cares for the animals, and buys and sells livestock and farm products. In Amish life, there is no provision for divorce. (Hostetler, 1989, p. 94)

Amish women are known to have high rates of depression and anxiety (Hostetler, 1993), and infants suffer from higher rates of mortality than many other social groups (Dorsten et al., 1996).

### **Military Conscription and Conscientious Objection**

In other ways, the Amish are a peaceful, conflict avoiding society as opposed to community or family violence. Members quickly lose expressions of faith and identity when removed from their environment.

The Amish were often conscripted into military service, separated from family and community, made to wear non-Amish clothing and to reside in communities, unlike anything that they had ever known. Non-violence was not tolerated in the military.

I have been asked why I chose prison instead of service in I-W. It was a hard decision, but I tried to go by my understanding of the Scriptures. I have heard the statement, "Oh, you can do a lot of good working in a hospital taking care of sick people, and learn a lot of valuable information that will come in handy later in life". Read Romans 3:8 and 6:1 "Shall we do evil so that good will come from it?" Is God not able to protect or destroy us? (Hostetler, 1989, p. 162)

The Amish were required to give at least two years of service after conscription and were constantly pressed to conform to military customs (Hershberger, 1951). Efforts of passive resistance were met with abuse.

But our trials started again and July 28th was one of my hardest days. It was on Sunday and they were determined that we must work. They ordered us to pick up all the cigarette stubs that lay on the parking grounds and when we refused we were thrown to the ground. We were kicked and knocked around and finally, I was taken to a building where the company commander said he would teach me to fight. He began hitting me in the face with his hands until I began going down, then he would quit for a moment. Another fellow helped him and they kept on till I started to fall, and one of the men would catch me so I would not fall down. (Hostetler, 1989, p. 223)

### **Resistance to Higher Education and Technology**

A Supreme Court decision was required for the Amish to resist conforming to state laws, which mandated that Amish children attend school until age eighteen.

In *Wisconsin vs. Yoder*, the Supreme Court reached a unanimous decision that the Amish would no longer be forced to have their children attend mainstream high schools (The National Committee for Amish Freedom, 1998). The requirement was against their beliefs. Amish parents had been jailed, fined, and their children placed in foster care with non-Amish foster parents for not complying (Kraybill, 1993).

The Amish do not believe in confrontational defense methods. An outside legal group opted to represent their interests in this case (The National Committee for Amish Freedom, 1998). The Amish historically fail to comply with any law passed which is inconsistent with their community law (Zook, 1998). They do not address their rights in the American legal system (Hostetler, 1993). Attorneys who defend their interests are usually acting in a voluntary capacity (The National Committee for Amish Freedom, 1998).

### **Social Welfare Reform**

Amish communities do not condone investment in insurance policies. Members are, therefore reluctant to participate in social security programs, medicare, or medicaid. "Old order Amish believe that if the church is faithful to it's calling, many government programs and commercial insurance are not needed" (The Pennsylvania Dutch Convention and Visitors Bureau, 1998). Members testified before Congress that they preferred not to receive these benefits, and wanted the right to care for their own elderly (The Pennsylvania Dutch Convention and Visitors Bureau, 1998). Similarly, Amish passively avoid participating in most Social Welfare programs.

As a separate society, they have had little reason to conceptualize themselves as marginal, or as a deprived outgroup. They have essentially had no involvement in civil rights movements, and have not sought to diversify their movement. Even though often held up as a model of functional rural community, their standards would be considered oppressive to other outgroups not involved in their lifestyle.

The Amish would, by course of values, be opposed many modern cultural norms and values to include: abortion, homosexuality, feminism, children's rights, any form of school desegregation for Amish children, assisted suicide, and affirmative action. Amish avoid many other modern day dilemmas within their closed community. As pacifists, however, they would not restrict the rights, or lifestyles of those who were not in their community. Members of the Amish community, who violated norms, would be shunned by church and community. Violators would be free though to pursue their lives elsewhere.

### **The Threat of Commercialism and Technology**

What do the Amish think about commercialism, tourism, progress, and the prosperity brought to their communities by the recognition, curiosity, and increasing admiration for their culture? Can we believe the promotional material forwarded by many local departments of tourism?

Perhaps a letter written to Governor Thornburg of Pennsylvania in 1985 can give some perspective.

First, we Amish feel we are being used to lure tourists to our community. We do not have any resentment against tourists, but it is the tourist attractions that work against us. The making of the movie and then advertising it "as seen in the movie Witness" (by the Pennsylvania Dutch Visitors Bureau) means that more motels and amusement centers will be needed. Where will these places be built? On farmlands? This makes it very hard for us as farmers. We are gradually being crowded out by commercialism! (Hostetler, 1989, p. 275)

### **Misinformation in the Literature: Non-Amish Authorship**

The Amish have scarce interest in the higher education necessary to write in authoritative journals about their own beliefs, customs, history, and an abhorrence to many forms of modern technology. Much of what has been written derives from the academic community of non-Amish scholars attempting to make sense of their way of life. Writers with relationship ties to the Amish are sensitive to the dominant ideological errors in perspective.

In the academic community, several models have been advanced for understanding Amish society. Social scientists, like other Americans, have been influenced by the upward push of an advancing civilization and changes in the social discourse between the dominant society and its minorities. University teachers have traditionally taught their students to think of Amish people as one of many old-world cultural islands left over in the modern world. The Amish have been considered "a sacred society", a "familistic society", as maintaining "organic solidarity", and "an integrative social system", "primary" (face-to-face) rather than secondary relationships, and "Apollonian" instead of "Dionysian" orientations to life. They may be viewed from any of these perspectives, but such objective models and abstractions leave out things that are important for understanding the whole perspective of Amish society. (Hostetler, 1993, p. 4)

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Some outgroups are marginalized because of race, class, or gender. Other groups become marginalized due to difficulty assimilating into the dominant society, such as the case of handicapped or immigrant groups. Still others are persecuted because of religious or ethnic orientations.

The Amish fit into each of these categories, with the added aspect of self-marginalization; with respect to adoption of emerging and modern technologies, Amish communities have historically represented the lower

socioeconomic portion of the dominant class structure. The Amish have not assimilated into the dominant society by their own choice. Additionally, Amish faith represents non-dominant religious and ethnic orientations.

However, the Amish rarely view themselves in comparison to others. Amish communities are marginalized by beliefs, which are reinforced by social control mechanisms and limits to external infusion of ideas. Within their community norms, the disciplined child, the depressed female, and the shunned unfaithful, often do not perceive themselves as oppressed. When faced with laws from the dominant society which the Amish do not agree with, they fail to obey the mandate. Oppression is a factor of Amish life when the dominant society imposes penalties for ignoring laws, which are not relevant to Amish culture. In most cases, the Amish are not a party to participation in the culture promoting the legal statute.

The Amish in Europe had historically been oppressed to near extinction. In America, the Amish have been exploited during military conflict, and their interests not considered by both social welfare reformers and elected officials.

The Amish have demonstrated uncommon social responsibility for caring for members of their social network. Their communities have endured nearly unchanged and stable during periods of social and economic upheaval in the dominant society. As a marginal community, their social integration has contributed to their permanence within a dominant society where little is permanent.

The Amish in America have often been misunderstood and have been viewed by some “fancy people” as prisoners of their quaint belief system. However, the “plain people” who see themselves as God’s chosen people may well view members of the dominant culture in much the same way and as prisoners to their own developments in technology.

## References

- Dorsten, L. E., Hotchkiss, L., & King, T. M. (1996). Research communication: Consanguineous marriage and early childhood mortality in an Amish settlement. *Sociological Focus*, 29(2), 179-186.
- Egeland, J. A., & Hostetter, A. M. (1983). Amish study 1: Affective disorders among the Amish, 1976-1980. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 140(1), 56-61.
- Fisher, G. L. (1978). *Farm life and its changes*. Gordonville, Pennsylvania: Pequea Publishers.
- Foster, T. W. (1984). Separation and survival in an Amish society. *Sociological Focus*, 17(1), 1-15.
- Gross, L. (1997). *Background dynamics of the Amish movement*. Retrieved from <http://www.goshen.edu/~lonhs//GCPUBLICATIONS/GROSS.html>
- Hershberger, G. F. (1951). *The Mennonite church in the second world war*. Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press.
- Holycrosslivonia.organization. (1998). *The older order Amish*. Retrieved from <http://holycrosslivonia.org/amish/origin.htm>
- Hostetler, J. A. (Ed.). (1989). *Amish roots: A treasury of history, wisdom, and lore*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Hostetler, J. A. (1993). *Amish society*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Kraybill, D. B. (1989). *The Riddle of Amish culture*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Kraybill, D. B. (Ed.). (1993). *The Amish and the state*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Logsdon, G. (1986). Amish economics: A lesson in life for the modern world. *Whole Earth Review*, (Spring), 74-76.
- Luthy, D. (1972). The Peight Family. *Family Life*, (November), 21-22.
- The National Committee for Amish Freedom. (1998). Retrieved from <http://holycrosslivonia.org/amish/intro.htm>
- The Pennsylvania Dutch Convention and Visitors Bureau. (1998). *Frequently asked “Ask The Amish” questions!* Retrieved from <http://www.800padutch.com/amish.html>
- Zook, L. (1998). The Amish. *Luther College*. Retrieved from <http://www.luther.edu/~library/pages/courli/amish.htm>