American Nationalism and the Rural Immigrant: A Case Study of Two Midwestern Communities, 1900-1925

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American Nationalism

Focusing on the culture of a German-speaking, rural, ethnic group—the American Mennonites—in the context of an urbanizing and industrializing society, this study seeks to understand how such a community-based group adapted to a differentiated, individualistic society. It traces the manner in which community members created a culture, that is, a sense of identity, a system of meaning, and strategies of perceived continuity in such a society.[1] Nationalism provided one way in which these immigrants and their descendants adapted to the new society. Nationalism, the affinal identification with a nation-state that can command a primary sense of duty, also provided a satisfying sense of identity for the dislocated immigrant. Historians of American ethnic groups have documented the way in which immigrants assumed different layers of identity, with both the wider, national community and the local, ethnic enclave.[2] But, for Mennonites, nationalism was also a nemesis.

They were, as their histories indicate, a sectarian and pacifist people whose very identity was based on social and cultural separation from worldly society.[3] In the context of the American nation-state, the conflict between group members who valued social boundaries and a host society that espoused a common, civic identity, was especially pronounced and often disruptive.[4]

American nationalism, after all, has been described as an especially dynamic phenomenon that signified more than membership in a nation-state. As S.N. Lipset has argued, "the United States is unique among developed nations in defining its raison d'etre ideologically."[5] As such, residents of the United States often argued that "becoming an American was a religious [act, and not so much]....a matter of birth."[6] Being an American included a belief in the American anti-statist political system, a celebration of the country's historical choices, and an affirmation that its destiny was secured by a special covenant with God. As Robert Bellah has argued, being an American meant subscribing to a "civic religion" in which "ultimate sovereignty has been attributed to God" and which was able "to mobilize deep levels of personal motivation for the attainment of national goals."[7] The exceptional strength of American nationalism had other sources. Crevecoeur provided one explanation in his 1782 argument that "the American, this new man" was a member of a new race arising from a "strange mixture of blood" and resulting in the abandonment of all "ancient prejudices."[8] This idea was echoed in Frederick Jackson Turner's famous 1893 "frontier thesis" which argued that the "formation of a composite nationality for the American people" arose from custom-breaking experience of life on the frontier, that "crucible...[in which] immigrants were Americanized, liberated and fused into a mixed race...."[9] The American ideology with its notions of "covenant" and "new race" was a potent social force that Mennonite immigrants could not avoid.

Indeed, American-Mennonite history is often described in terms of reactions to the spirit of nationalism that was associated with uniquely American events. The recently published volumes of *Mennonite Experience in America* series, for example, emphasize Mennonite interaction with nation-shaping events.[10] Richard MacMaster's treatment of the eighteenth-century American-Mennonites has argued that the Revolutionary War, and especially the "Test Acts" of 1777 that disenfranchised most Mennonites, entrenched their two-kingdom theory which drew boundaries around their pacifist communities and reaffirmed a social identity in which Mennonites saw themselves "more than ever a people apart."[11] Similarly, Theron Schlabach's volume on the nineteenth-century Mennonite experience notes the importance of the Civil War, and especially Lincoln's July 1862 compulsory military service bill, in causing Mennonites to reassess their participation in civic elections and to reaffirm their practice of nonresistance.[12] Finally, James Juhnke's history of the American Mennonites between 1890 and 1930 notes how events like the Great War, and particularly the experiences arising from the "Selective Services Law" of May 1917, at once "strengthened the voices of conservatives who wanted to

keep the [sectarian and nationalistic] kingdoms apart" and "brought many Mennonites...into new contacts with the outside world."[13] The story has a common thread: Mennonites in the United States were forced to encounter and react to the nationalism endemic in this egalitarian, meritocratic, warring nation-state.

There is another way to read American-Mennonite history. The books by MacMaster, Schlabach and Juhnke are rich in descriptions of agrarian Mennonites creating symbols of meaning and culture in a land possessed of an industrializing economy, a secular state, and a polyethnic, immigrant society. This, however, should not be an aside to the story of American-Mennonites and nationalism: it is the crux of that story. Recent studies have argued that nationalism was a cultural expression rooted not in ancient tribalism, but in the relatively recent phenomenon of industrialization. This social revolution caused people to migrate from village communities to urban societies, shift their focus of work from the household to the marketplace, and to adjust the scope of social interaction from closed, self-sufficient ethnic enclaves to the open, integrated, wider society. In the process historical actors were compelled to envision new concepts of time, progress and cosmology. According to Benedict Anderson, this social revolution also "engender[ed] the need for a [new] narrative of identity." Because old community boundaries and networks were reshaped, social identification was now directed to the nation, a new "imagined community."[14] Nationalism, thus, rose from the quest for identity in everyday life. As Eric Hobsbawm has recently argued, nationalism, while "constructed essentially from above" came to life "from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people."[15]

Nationalism was, thus, more than an ideology advanced by the state leaders, and a false doctrine rejected by immigrant sectarian leaders.[16] The place to study nationalism is within the community. This is not because Mennonite church leaders were not influential, but because it is in everyday behaviour that we find the creation of ethnic life, and in the ordinary person's quest for meaning and identity the lure of nationalism. The "challenge of nationalism" came not only during the great American national events, but also between those times when Mennonites faced the everyday challenges arising from work, family life, and community interaction. Nationalism was not only an external idea foisted onto the Mennonite communities; it was also an internal phenomenon, a search for identity by community members in the context of specific, historically located, social developments.

What were those specific social contexts that propelled Mennonite sectarians to accept varying degrees of nationalism? To answer this question I will compare two strikingly different American-Mennonite communities; the Mennonite-descendant community of the town of Jansen, in Jefferson County, Nebraska, accepted nationalism fully; the rural Mennonite community in Meade County, in western Kansas, vigorously rejected this identity.[17] What a comparison of Jansen and Meade can do is to help establish the social context

of the appropriation of nationalism among Mennonites. Unlike other Mennonite communities that were divided by substantively different geographies (east and midwest), and by different historical origins (Swiss and Dutch-Russian), the Jansen and Meade Mennonites shared common elements. Both were midwestern farm-based communities, distant from large cities; both were descendant communities of the Dutch-Russian migration to the United States in the 1870s. In fact, both communities had roots in the tiny, 60-family, Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde church that settled in Jefferson County, Nebraska, in the 1870s: the town of Jansen lay in the heart of that county; the Meade community was a sub-colony founded in 1907.

Jansen and Meade are not as representative of the majority of American-Mennonite communities at the turn of the century, as they are representative of two poles in the paradigm of Mennonite identification with the American "nation state." Between the Jansen and Meade experiences are many variations representing a continuum of different Mennonite communities accepting nationalism to different degrees. Meade was representative of the closed, sectarian, two-kingdom-oriented communities such as those of the Amish Mennonites and the Old Order Mennonites of Pennsylvania, Ohio and Indiana who avoided many associations with the state, including voting in elections and the holding of public office.[18] More accommodating were the evangelistic, Pietist-influenced, and sometimes millenarian groups such as the Mennonite Brethren and General Conference Mennonites of central Kansas; although mostly rural, they advocated an identification with the rest of American society, expressed especially by their sense of a duty to reform it. But these groups were still more conservative than were the liberal profession-oriented Mennonites; they worked within urban settings and sought to participate in the language of the secular American nation by offering it long-held Mennonite ideals of "community" and "pacifism."[19] Finally, there were the "Abgefallenen," those Mennonite descendants who lived in towns and cities and who espoused a complete identity with the new country, either by amalgamating with the wider German-American community or by simply accepting the "civil religion" of the Anglo-American community.[20]

The main focus of this study is on the two sides of this paradigm. It attempts to account for the polarization of Mennonite views of nationalism by examining the social context in which they arose. Further, it seeks to understand these expressions as culture, that is, the structures and symbols of meaning appropriated to interpret and to function within certain social contexts.

An Agrarian Community Transplanted

The original Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde settlement in Jefferson County was a picture of Old World continuity. Here conservative Mennonite immi-

grants established a closed, agrarian, status-oriented society in which the idea of nationalism had little relevance. As historians of the Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites have argued, this congregation established in Russia in 1812 was a quintessentially Mennonite group: it gave religious meaning to a simple agrarian lifestyle, a congregational-centered community, non-resistance and separation from worldly society and did so within the modernizing context of the Russian Empire.[21] This was the community Kleine Gemeinde members sought to transplant to Jefferson County.

They were highly successful, even though in the new setting members faced the more rapid, commercialized and integrative community of the United States. Jefferson County was in the heart of one of the most populated parts of the Midwest. Indeed, the very opportunity for members of the Kleine Gemeinde to purchase land here rose from a rising population base that by the mid-1870s had given a market value to railway-owned land blocks. Mennonites, therefore, would not comprise the charter group of Jefferson County. Indeed, the host community in the County placed a special value on assimilation: in August 1874, when Peter Jansen, a progressive Mennonite immigrant leader and Nebraska booster, led the conservative Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites through the county, local newspapers lauded him as "almost thoroughly Americanized" and "an intelligent man," and contrasted him to his Kleine Gemeinde cohorts, "a rather elderly looking lot of men, of dark complexion and large stature."[22] Then, too, the legal, civic and economic structures of Jefferson County precluded any hope of fully reestablishing the Mennonites' European *Strassendorf*, the closely-knit village complete with open fields, local government, parochial schools, and church-run credit institutions.[23] Unlike the Canadian Kleine Gemeinde, those of Jefferson County began their settlement with no *Privilegium*, that is, with no set of government-issued privileges of private education, exclusive land blocks or local government.[24]

Despite these obstacles, first generation Mennonite settlers in Jefferson County were able to erect strict social boundaries. They were convinced that conditions in the United States presented no undue difficulties in the reestablishment of a closed, sectarian community. Indeed, as a letter from Nebraska to Manitoba indicates, Jefferson County Mennonites believed the assertions of Peter Jansen's family "that the state of freedom was the same here as in British [countries]."[25] Furthermore, the Homestead Act of 1862 that prescribed a square-grid land division system, and the defeat in the American congress in 1874 of the "Mennonite Bill" that squelched Mennonite hopes for land blocks on which to transplant their *Strassendoerfer*, put no damper on the confidence of Jefferson County Mennonites. Farmers simply divided the land into rectangular, legally registered lots that allowed farmers to live within a quarter mile of each other; community members confidently promised prospective Mennonite immigrants that in Jefferson County "you will not remain alone on your own homestead quarter...it is quite possible to operate our farms here according to Russian ways."[26] This system also allowed for five different

farm-based villages with familiar "Old World" names—Blumenort, Neuanlage, Rosenfeld, Rosenort, Rosenhof—to rise within a single township.[27] And given the fact that the Kleine Gemeinde had in effect purchased a contiguous land block, they were able to re-establish their self-sufficient agrarian households, and focus on a life set within a congregation-based community and seek as a primary lifegoal to secure the generational succession of their holdings.[28]

The Mennonite community in Jefferson County may have been an agrarian society without need for a national identity, but it was not a community of bucolic harmony. The transplanting of the Kleine Gemeinde church from Russia occurred within a hotbed of discontentment, conflict and schism. By 1880 the Kleine Gemeinde had been forced to share its ecclesiastical turf with two other significant Mennonite groups, the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren (KMB) and the Petersgemeinde, later known as the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren.[29] It is significant, however, that schisms themselves did not lead to a disintegration of Mennonite identity. In a sense conflict bolstered that identity. In part, discontentment was merely a sign of continuity; the church schisms of 1880 had their roots in the religious conflicts between Pietists and traditionalists that raged in the Mennonite colonies in Russia during the 1860s. More importantly, perhaps, the conflicts set an agenda for ethnic discourse that kept these warring Mennonites from engaging in the language of wider America.[30]

Other points of conflict within the Jansen district also ensured continuity. Folk customs—bawdy Low German street songs, socially disruptive charivari, and unsettling poltergeists—flourished in Cub Creek. The accusation by one observer that charivari, the pranks played by youth on wedding parties, was due to "Young America acting as wild beasts" did not signal the influence of American values; it merely underlined the continuing perception of "us and them," that anything disruptive in the community could be blamed on "worldly society."[31] The schisms and the charivari did not undermine Mennonite identity; they guaranteed that community discourse would be rooted in Mennonite issues.

Social and economic conditions that arose during the 1890s, however, did begin to undermine this homogeneous culture. By 1900 landlessness and urban growth had fundamentally begun changing the social context of the Jansen district. Indeed, these changes were so substantive that in 1907, the families of the conservative Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde remnant relocated to Meade County in western Kansas. The Mennonites who remained in Jansen adapted themselves to the new setting and increasingly assumed an identity with the wider American society. The Meade Mennonites successfully recreated a closed, status-oriented, church-centered community and maintained an agrarian society where identity lay within a closely-knit community of everyday social encounters. Within these different social contexts, the Jansen and the Meade Mennonites would develop divergent views of nationalism.

Nationalism in Jansen, Nebraska

The social changes in Jefferson County at the turn of the century were substantive. Rising commodity prices, easy access to mechanization and a high birth rate had caused land prices to triple in the preceding decade; the consequence was rising land tenancy and a growing class of landless labourers.[32] Census records indicate that by 1900, 40 of the 102 Mennonite households in Jefferson County owned no land; moreover, 21 of these households' heads, averaging 33 years of age, reported that they were "farm laborers" or "general laborers.[33] Families began moving into the railway town of Jansen, which had been founded in the heart of the settlement in 1886. Some of the residents were attracted to the economic promise of town life; John P. Thiessen, the son of a Kleine Gemeinde preacher, breached the Mennonite taboo against merchandizing and became the town's first hardware store owner and a prominent town booster with newspaper articles "promis[ing] great profit for business people of all fields."[34] But among the residents, too, were people like 23-year-old John Friesen who, finding himself without land when he married in 1899, moved into a rented house in town and began work as a carpenter.[35] By 1910 almost half of all Mennonite households in Cub Creek township—37 of 86—were located in the town of Jansen.[36]

Jansen represented a new social reality for Jefferson County Mennonites. Having been built in the very heart of the homogeneous Mennonite farm settlement it shook old social boundaries. The town's founder, Peter Jansen, advertised in local newspapers, declaring that "our town is booming" and that "everybody [is] invited to invest in Jansen before it is too late, and all the lots are gone."[37] In 1900 the town represented a polyethnic community comprised of Mennonites, German Lutherans and Anglo-Americans.[38] By this time, too, Jansen had come to represent a raucous frontier town, complete with a theatre and several saloons. Concerned Mennonites wrote to their ethnic inter-settlement newspapers decrying the moral decadence of the Anglo and German-American town residents; they cited its saloons for instigating violence and its medicine shows for leading "many young people astray."[39]

Letters, however, also complained about a new class of Mennonites. One Jansen writer in 1908 noted: "there are many who willingly allow themselves to be called Mennonite and yet don't realize that the name Mennonite itself does not mean that they are a born-again child of God. It is to be doubted that many of the Mennonites...study or follow the teaching of Jesus and Menno."[40] What the writer had in mind was clearly more than Jansen's seedy side; other writers noted that the dynamic and open society in Jansen was fundamentally redrawing traditional attitudes to the outside world. Symptomatic of this was the increasing participation of Mennonites in the political discourse of the nation. The attraction of this preoccupation was strong; Jefferson County was the hot bed for intense political exchange. By 1892 local newspapers reported that even within the town of Jansen both "Republicans and Democrats held caucuses," resulting in the fact that "good men were put up by both parties and

will deserve the support of their colleagues."[41] By the turn of the century Jansen Mennonites were responding to such calls for political participation. By 1906 one writer noted that our "beloved church brethren are coming more and more...to the realization that it is for us Mennonites not only lawful to vote, but that it is our duty to vote for good legislators."[42] Statistics for the 1908 and 1912 presidential elections indicate that at least 75% of Mennonite males were voting.[43]

The Jansen district did not lack models for this shift in identity. One especially articulate proponent for a refocusing of loyalties from ethnic community to nation was Peter Jansen, the progressive Mennonite who had founded Jansen and who lived on a large ranch close to town which he ran with hired hands in "an atmosphere of bigness." Peter Jansen quickly associated his entrepreneurial success with American culture; later, on a trip to visit the old homeland in Russia, he boasted about his new country, declaring that under "our free institutions...any man may become whatever he has the power to become."[44] It was this promise that led him to join the Republican party; as he noted in his memoirs, "the achievements of the great men who founded it appealed to me."[45] Peter Jansen soon became enmeshed in the party, serving as a delegate to the National Republican Convention in 1884, winning a seat in the Nebraska Legislature in 1898 and in the state senate in 1910.[46] At the root of this activity was Jansen's rejection of traditional Mennonite teachings against voting and his new controversial identity as an American citizen: "The Mennonite Church had never permitted its members to take an active part in politics," he wrote in 1922, but "I soon formed the conclusion that the man who failed to do his part in maintaining good government was not a good or useful citizen." Within his new-found identity, old associations became less important: "My people at first rather resented my attitude," wrote Jansen, "but I did not pay much attention to this."[47]

The embryo of American nationalism among Jansen Mennonites had another cause: a close identification with the large Nebraska German community. Frederick Luebke has argued that despite their diverse origins, Nebraska's German-speaking "immigrants were drawn together by their common language, heritage and problems" and in time "they became aware of themselves as a cultural minority."[48] Despite their sectarian tradition, a growing number of Jansen Mennonites by 1900 seemed to see in their very "Germanness" the ground for their acceptance into American society and as an expression of identity with that society. Indeed, the German language prevailed even among those Mennonites who had left the farms for a life in town. The census of 1900 indicates that 43% of pre-school Jansen Mennonite children age four to six spoke no English, a sign that the prevailing household language among Jansen Mennonites was still German.[49]

An increasing identity with the wider German Nebraska community can also be seen in events associated with Jansen's private German-language school and especially in the way in which Mennonite parents defended the

school in the face of Anglo-American opposition to it. In 1901, when the German school had out-grown its old building, its teacher, J.W. Fast, rented a large vacant house from an Anglo-American. After the school children had been moved into their new premises, the landlord became aware that his house was being used for German education and immediately evicted Fast. What is significant about this story, however, is not the landlord's declaration that "'Dutch' has no place in America," but that Fast and the Mennonite parents vociferously defended themselves by identifying with the larger German-American community. As one parent wrote, "these sort of people who purport to be reformers of the Germans and boast that this country could not go on without the Yankees, are, themselves, so often in such financial straits that the sun must be ashamed to shine on them."[50]

The Jansen Mennonites' identification with German America was easily transferred to the American nation itself, a phenomenon seen in the life of John P. Thiessen. In 1902 and 1906 Thiessen ran as a candidate for the state legislature; the first time he lost, the second time he was elected with a large majority. In both elections, however, his central appeal was to German-speaking voters. In 1906 one of his supporters predicted in the *Mennonitische Rundschau* that Thiessen would win because "he is a good representative of our German people" and it is "crucial that we have a man in the legislature in whom we Germans can trust."[51] In 1906, when Thiessen ran again, he had to do so against charges from Anglo-Americans that he was "not religious enough...occasionally enjoyed a glass of beer, and [was] an alien."[52]

It is significant that despite this association, Thiessen also trumpeted his American identity. Indeed, during the 1902 campaign, Thiessen had introduced to Jansen its first "Fourth of July" festivity and boosted the event in the Mennonite newspaper the *Rundschau*, promising that the celebration would be carried out according to "American custom" and predicting that up to 4000 people would attend.[53] When Thiessen's opponents pointed out during the second campaign that the candidate had "never taken out his final naturalization papers as an American citizen," he quickly "remedied" the problem and was able to convince Jefferson County voters that "he was one of the best and most honest citizens."[54] By the time World War I broke out, Thiessen had aligned himself fully with the viewpoint of the Anglo-American majority. During the war he served on the Nebraska Council of Defense and became an outspoken critic of the conservative Mennonites' refusal to identify with the war effort. Mennonite conscientious objectors, he wrote in April 1918, "should be taught by their parents and the preachers of their church to do anything and everything the government requests of them as non-combatants and they should do it gladly." His most provocative statement, however, was his conclusion that "our government has...a right to our money and property as it has to our boys and we should gladly give...give it [sic] up as required."[55]

The experience of Jansen Mennonites during World War I indicated that many of the Kleine Gemeinde descendants had fundamentally shifted their

primary social identification. During the national day of registration in May 1917 Jansen merchants, many of them Kleine Gemeinde descendants, joined the rest of America in "clos[ing] their businesses during the greater part of the day and...tak[ing] part in demonstration of patriotism...."[56] Of the 35 Mennonite boys who signed up "with a rash" to the sound of a band playing "patriotic music," several went off to active military service. This fact was less important than that they wrote to *Jansen News*, proudly describing their lives in regional military training camps and on the front in France. In January 1918 Sergeant H.J. Heidebrecht wrote from Camp Grant at Rockford, noting the daily eoutine, and then ending with the remark that he would have to sign off, for as "you know a soldier is not supposed to keep late hours."[57]

Militarism was but one sign of the acceptance of a new identity. In the years following the war Jansen Mennonites acquired the very language of American society, speaking of "civic duty" and often within the contexts of public office. It was a Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde descendant—J.J. Fast—who served as Jansen's village clerk during the height of the war hysteria, another descendant who ran as the Justice of the Peace—M.B. Koop, and a third—H.T. Fast—who served as the Jefferson County Republican Caucus chairman.[58] Jansen Mennonites also actively participated in the local literary society, discussing with Anglo-American neighbours issues of "Community Improvement," debating the contents of national newspaper columns, and singing the songs of America—"Old Black Joe," "The Nebraska Corn Song," and "Let's all be Americans Now."[59]

The degree to which Jansen Mennonites could measure their Americanness was now a standard test of personal worth. In 1925 when Jacob Bartel and Katherine Flaming of Jansen celebrated their 44th wedding anniversary, it was said that Bartel was a particulary good American. Despite coming to the United States in 1874 at the age of 17 and having been married in the conservative Kleine Gemeinde church to a fellow Mennonite, Bartel had adapted quickly. It was less significant that the *Jansen News* noted that Bartel "was here but six months when he talked the American language well" than that in 1925 this statement was offered as a measure of his value.[60] By the 1920s there was a corps of Jansen Mennonites which had successfully accepted this standard and had been accepted by the wider community. When an Anglo-American who had lived in Jefferson County during the 1880s returned in 1924 he noted with enthusiasm, "how fast the [Mennonite] children have assimilated the American ideals and are now grown up ideal citizens."[61] The motivation for this assimilation was simple. As Sociologist Paul Miller, who examined Jansen in the 1950s, noted, as the community became "secularized...[it] was able to operate functionally as a participating part of the larger society."[62] Jansen Mennonites had embraced a new "imagined" community.

Rejection of Nationalism in Meade County

For a generation now ethnic historians have questioned the pervasiveness of assimilative experiences such as those in Jansen between 1900 and 1925. Rudolph Vecoli noted in 1964 that even for the most disadvantaged of immigrants, like the Chicago Italian *contadini*, "adjustment to American society was dictated by their 'Old World traits'....which proved very resistent to change."[63] More recently, historians of even the most assimilable groups in the United States, the Germans for example, have argued that ethnicity survived alongside of American nationalism as a form of social identification for immigrants. Each suggests the importance of complex social constructions in ensuring this cultural development. New York Germans, argues Robert Nadel, "were integrated by numerous overlapping affiliations and associations into a common ethnic metropolis."[64] Studies of rural German and Dutch communities emphasize even more strongly the importance of everyday social ties in formulating a sense of ethnicity. Robert Kroes' study of Dutch settlers in Montana argues "that consolidation in the life of the Dutch Community...pulled itself together around the...church," which provided them with symbols of special, covenanted peoplehood and set the agenda for all encompassing discourse.[65] Kathleen Conzen has concluded from her studies of German Catholics in Stearns County, Minnesota, that "[farm] family strategies to...work the land and to pass it on to the next generation influenced every aspect of the peasant family [including]....its external links to the wider world."[66] Clearly, there were social contexts that encouraged old communal, particularistic identities to continue and contexts that compelled new, national ties to develop.[67]

It was the ability of Meade County, Kansas, Mennonites to reestablish an even more closely-knit community than that described by Nadel, Conzen and Kroes above that explains in part their antipathy to the language of the American nation. The settlement that the 31 Kleine Gemeinde Mennonite families founded lay some 15 miles southeast of Meade City in an "empty space," in a geographically secluded area. Here the vast majority of associations were with members of the ethnic community. For not only did the agrarian household determine patterns of work, life cycle and lifegoals, it also shaped a set of social networks that included only familiar faces. The church congregation, for example, was synonymous with the very notion of community: the church gave community leaders their legitimacy; it exercised its authority to set social boundaries; it determined the agenda of community discourse.

In so far as the Meade Mennonites were able to establish what Benedict Anderson notes as a *real* community, they also withstood the need for an identity with the wider American community.[68] While the Dutch of Amsterdam, Montana, and the Germans of Stearns County, Minnesota, began to develop dual identities—described by Kroes as a "blend of vocabularies" and by Conzen as the coexistence of "sidestreams and main channels"—the Meade County Mennonites during their first generation in Kansas were single-minded in their

antipathy to the language of the American nation.[69]

In large part their consciousness was derived from ideas of the conservative Kleine Gemeinde church congregation. Indeed, its position of importance in the new community was never in doubt; the very decision to move to Meade had been taken by a congregational vote.[70] Its teaching bore a strong degree of authority. It articulated a world view reflected in Rev. Jacob Friesen's February 1926 sermon; in it the community was portrayed as being pitted against "worldly society" comprised of "fleshly lust and arrogant minds," and in it there were promises that the "cross carried by the faithful is the essence of happiness."[71] The sermon also recalled the Mennonites' historical identity and appealed to the writings of sixteenth and seventeenth century Anabaptists who warned that business and social associations with the outside world would lead to "pride and ostentation."[72] The identity with the closely knit community was also ensured by debate and discourse within the church; it was a discourse molded during this time by discontented conservatives who chided the Meade church for tolerating too many emulations of the outside world. In 1920 the church suffered a schism when these ultra-conservatives comprised of a dozen families, formed a separate body and eventually relocated to even greater isolation in northern Mexico.[73]

The teaching of the church leaders was strengthened by a recreated agrarian society. The foundation of the Meade community was the self-sufficient farm household. The importance of this social construction was realized most profoundly by the church members. The argument that the Kleine Gemeinde migrated from Jansen to Meade because "isolation was becoming more and more difficult" is, of course, simplistic.[74] From their own perspective, they moved to ensure that the household basis of a sectarian community could be reproduced. Historian Henry Fast's suggestion that the reason for the relocation was that "it was becoming more and more difficult for a beginning farmer [in Nebraska] to compete with the established farmers for the short supply of available farm land" is supported by several contemporary sources.[75] A letter to relatives in Manitoba in 1904 noted that the move was being contemplated simply "because the land is too expensive in Nebraska."[76] And Anna Doerksen Friesen, a young married woman in 1907, recalled in later years that the move to Meade was undertaken in order to establish "a community where poor and landless people could find a new home" and proved to be a success because the "the older people helped the younger ones get started."[77] The strategy of Meade safeguarded the old value of a landed agrarian existence.

Meade ensured that the entire community could find work within a familiar environment. The 1925 state census records only four Mennonite families in Meade City, but more than 60 in the wider Meade County. Diaries indicate that within the rural community there was an intricate and all-encompassing community. The October 1907 diary of 24-year-old farmer Jacob F. Isaac, a recently married man and preacher in the church, is illustrative of the social network of an "island community." During that month, Isaac interacted with

strangers only on the three trips he made to the market place and railway station in Meade City. Isaac's primary social network during that month was comprised of 37 different encounters, more than one per day, with relatives and church members within the Mennonite community. Despite October being a planting month, Isaac and his wife entertained guests or visited Mennonite neighbours on 17 different occasions. On six occasions he visited with his or his wife's parents; on 12 different days he worked for and was helped out by a neighbouring farmer; on five occasions he patronized or sold a service or commodity to a Mennonite neighbour; and on each of the four Sundays he attended church.[78] A similar social life is illustrated by the October 1920 diary of 26-year-old Helena Doerksen Reimer, a young married farm woman. During this month she and her husband recorded 45 social encounters, only one of which included a visit to Meade City. While numerous encounters came as a result of joint field work and church attendance, the vast majority, 29 encounters, were merely recorded as weekday or Sunday visits with Mennonite neighbours and relatives.[79] The Mennonite disregard for nationalism lies in this world of work and community interaction; as Ernest Gellner has argued, it is once "work ceases to be manual and becomes semantic....[and involves] communication between strangers" that it leads to "cultural homogeneity...the underlying root of nationalism."[80] And so when the idea of nationalism was introduced to the Meade Mennonites it had little to offer and was seen only as an external threat to this community. When it was perceived in that way, it only served to bolster the agrarian-based sense of ethnic difference.

An incident in which the Meade Mennonite view of sectarian community clashed with the American nationalism of the wider county society is illustrative. According to an undated letter written by a Meade Mennonite to his relative in Manitoba sometime during World War I, a serious confrontation developed between the elders of the Kleine Gemeinde church and county officials over the issue of children saluting the American flag in school.[81] According to the letter writer, the incident began on a Friday in a public school attended by the children of a Mennonite family who had become estranged from the church. Despite his tenuous relationship with his fellow Mennonites, the father, Abram E. Friesen, had instructed his children to avoid patriotic exercises. Thus, when the teacher, described as "eine Englische und sehr patriotisch," instructed her pupils to salute the American flag a clash of culture and of will occurred. The teacher reported the incident to the county school superintendent in Meade City, who in turn summoned Friesen to come to town to account for his children's behaviour. The ill-reputed Friesen quickly blamed the incident on the "regressive" teachings of the Kleine Gemeinde church elders. The officials, reportedly "very agitated," threatened Friesen, ordering him to return on Monday to salute the flag or face execution. As the pious writer notes, "full of fear and anxiety [Friesen] came to church in the village on Sunday," beseeching the preachers for help as this surely was to be "the last Sunday in his life."

The preachers, including the church Ältester, Jacob Isaac, responded by travelling to Meade on Monday where they faced the officials and a large assembly of irate and vigilante local citizens. After a short period of questioning, the writer notes, the "brethren were harshly criticized for desecrating the flag of the country and for being traitors." And soon the meeting became disorderly with the entire assembly screaming, according to the writer, "in the same manner that the throng shouted 'crucify, crucify' to Christ before Pontius Pilate." This was followed by an array of threats: the townsfolk would send a mob to shoot all the Mennonite men; they would place all women and children under the custody of the Red Cross; they would confiscate all their moveable and immoveable property; they would tar and feather the preachers; they would boycott all commodities produced by the Mennonites.

According to the letter, the brethren were courageous, remaining "completely calm, and trying to explain that it was not the flag itself, only its saluting, to which they objected, and this only because the Word of God gave [them] no permission to do so." They explained that "we are not opposed to our, or any other country's flag, so long as it stands as symbol of designation of the country, but...to honour the flag, or to greet it, is against our conscience and a contradiction of our nonresistance." Ältester Isaac did most of the talking and, as the story teller notes, when he "finished speaking, it seemed as if the stormy climate had subdued somewhat." In fact, those in the audience were reportedly moved, declaring that Isaac had surely spoken "not from the basis of any learning, but rather...by another spirit." In the end the officials, without explanation, rescinded their demand that the Mennonites salute the flag and the story was relegated to the text of oral tradition.

The clash between the two cultures had served to bolster the Meade Mennonites' sense of ethnic distinction. The careless Abram Friesen had been forced to return to the church, and the hero, Ältester Jacob Isaac, had rearticulated the Mennonite social boundaries; American nationalism had shown its monstrous side. The incident, as put into story, underlined the existing social and cultural strength of the Mennonite sectarian community. In this context nationalism was irrelevant. Identity with the wider community served no purpose.

Conclusion

American nationalism was a powerful force. The United States was a secular state welded together by an ideology of common citizenry, individual rights, and covenant with Providence. And because of its early hiatus with European rulers, the deluge of immigrants that descended on this land, and its rapid industrialization, nationalism was more pronounced here than elsewhere. But it was similar to other forms of nationalism in the sense that it was a cultural expression that articulated a system of meaning and identity for a people in the context of social

change. That change in the United States as elsewhere has been linked to the transition of an agrarian, localistic society into an open, individualistic, industrializing one. In this setting old explanations of life no longer sufficed, old social networks faltered, work became linked to constant interaction with the outside. As Robert Wiebe has described it in his classic study of the Progressive era in the United States, the society of autonomous "island communities" had come to an end by 1900, and a "new set of values" affirming continuity was required. For common people in everyday life, one aspect of that "new set of values" was an enhanced identification with the nation-state.[82]

Like other immigrants caught up in this transition, some Mennonites saw in nationalism a new sense of continuity and community. Because traditional Mennonite thought perceived of ethnicity only in relation to separation from worldly society, nationalism was not easily received. Thus, there would be many shades of the Mennonites' acceptance of nationalism; often they were able to bring their past values into a dialectic with the new national religion, accepting an identity with the nation-state and a duty to help steer its progress, while rejecting its militarism and the excesses of "civil religion." By 1900, however, there was a polarization that stemmed from the commitment of Mennonites to maintain and reproduce the basis of a closed, agrarian society. Those who succeeded continued to espouse a two-kingdom view that separated the closed congregational community from the nation-state; here was a sense of loyalty to government without an association to the nation itself. Those who entered fully the new urban-based society of merchandizing and wage labour were compelled to forge a new sense of community and meaning. They found in nationalism an "imagined community" and a satisfying ideology.

Notes

[1]See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), pp. 5 & 12; Hans Medick, "'Missionaries in a Rowboat'? Ethnological Ways of Knowing as a Challenge to Social History," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29 (1987), p. 82.

[2]See Arthur Mann, *The One and the Many: Reflections on the American Identity* (Chicago, 1979); Kathleen Conzen, "Mainstreams and Side Channels: The Localization of Immigrant Cultures," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 11 (1991), pp. 5-20.

[3]For the classic mid-twentieth-century interpretation of Mennonite history see, Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *Church History* 13 (1944), pp. 3-24.

[4]For studies of these conflicts see, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 65 (July, 1991), which published the proceedings of the conference on "American Civil Religion and Pacifists," Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, February 15-17, 1990. See also, Louise Hawkley and James Juhnke, eds., *Nonviolent America: History Through the Eyes of Peace* (North Newton, KS, 1993).

[5]Seymour M. Lipset, *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada* (New York, 1989), p. 19. For a similar portrayal see, Hans Kohn, "Towards a New World: The Promise of Free People," *The Idea of Nationalism*, 1944 (Toronto, 1969), pp. 263-325.

[6] Lipset, *Continental Divide*, p. 19.

[7] Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *The Religious Situation*, pp. 335 and 348.

[8] Quoted in, Robert Swierenga, "Ethnicity in Historical Perspective," *Social Science* (1977), p. 34.

[9] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 1893, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920), p. 216.

[10] See Richard K. MacMaster, *Land, Piety, Peoplehood: The Establishment of Mennonite Communities in America, 1683-1790* (Scottdale, PA, 1985); Theron Schlabach, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America, 1890-1930* (Scottdale, PA, 1989); James Juhnke, *Peace, Faith, Nation: Mennonites and Amish in Nineteenth-Century America* (Scottdale, PA, 1988).

[11] MacMaster, *Peace, Land, Nation*, pp. 264, 277, 280.

[12] Schlabach, *Peace, Faith, Nation*, pp. 143, 172, 176, 257, 296.

[13] Juhnke, pp. 245 and 246.

[14] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1992), p. 205.

[15] E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1870: Programme, Myth, Reality* (New York, 1990), p. 10.

[16] For coverage of nineteenth-century Mennonite leaders—Christian Burkholder, John F. Funk, John S. Coffman—who articulated their opposition to nationalism, see Schlabach, *Peace, Faith, Nation*, pp. 143, 197, 317.

[17] For histories of these communities see, Daniel J. Classen, "Kleine Gemeinde Church at Meade, Kansas," Research Paper, Bethel College, Newton, KS; Henry L. Fast, "The Kleine Gemeinde in the United States of America," *Profile of the Kleine Gemeinde, 1874*, ed., Delbert F. Plett (Steinbach, MB, 1987), pp. 87-140; D. Paul Miller, "An Analysis of Community Adjustment: A Case Study of Jansen, Nebraska," PhD Diss., Nebraska, 1953; Walter S. Friesen, "History and Description of the Mennonite Community and Bible Academy at Meade, Kansas," MA Thesis, State Teachers College, Emporia, KS, 1957; Theodore Schmidt, "Mennonites of Nebraska," MA Thesis, Nebraska, 1933.

[18] Chapters of the Old Mennonite Church and the tiny conservative groups like the Holdeman and Bruderthaler Churches could also be included in this category.

[19] They could, arguably, include Kansas professor Cornelius Wedel who advocated the notion of "Gemeindechristentum" in the 1890s and Indiana professor Guy F. Hershberger who spoke of a circumspect, rational "true patriotism" in the 1920s. See, James Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America, 1890-1930* (Scottdale, PA, 1989), pp. 101-105; Donald F. Durnbaugh, "War and Patriotism from Historic Peace Church Perspective," *Non Violent America: History Through the Eyes of Peace*, eds., Louise Hawkley and James Juhnke (North Newton, KS, 1993), p. 165.

[20] For examples see, Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War*,. pp. 202-204.

[21] Delbert F. Plett, *The Golden Years: The Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde in Russia, 1812-1849* (Steinbach, MB, 1985);*Storm and Triumph: The Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde, 1850-1875* (Steinbach, MB, 1986); ed. and trans., *History and Events: Writings and Maps Pertaining to the History of the Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde from 1866-1876* (Steinbach, MB, 1982); *Profile of the Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde, 1874* (Steinbach, MB, 1987); *Pioneers and Pilgrims: The Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde in Manitoba, Nebraska and Kansas, 1874 to 1882* (Steinbach, MB, 1990).

[22] Quoted in Clarence Hiebert, *Brothers in Deed to Brothers in Need: A Scrapbook About Mennonite Immigrants From Russia, 1870-1885* (Newton, KS, 1974), pp. 165 and 166.

[23] For a discussion of the social nature of the *Strassendorf*, see John Warkentin, "The Mennonite Settlements in Southern Manitoba: A Study in Historical Geography." PhD Diss., York University, Toronto, 1960.

[24] For an examination of the evolution of the "Privilegium" in Russia see: David G. Rempel, "The Mennonite Colonies in New Russia: A Study of their Settlement and Economic Development from 1789 to 1914." PhD Diss., Stanford, 1933; James Urry, "The Closed and the Open: Social and Religious Change Amongst the Mennonites in Russia." PhD Diss., Oxford University, 1978.

[25] Jacob Klassen to Heinrich Ratzlaff, October 4, 1874, John K. Loewen Papers, C.J. Loewen Family, Giroux, Manitoba.

[26] Jacob Klassen to Heinrich Ratzlaff, October 4, 1874, JKLP.

[27] M.B. Fast, *Mitteilungen von etlichen der Grossen unter den Mennoniten in Russland und in Amerika: Beobachtungen und Erinnerungen von Jefferson Co., Nebraska* (Reedley, CA, 1935), p. 31.

[28] See, Royden Loewen, "Ethnic Farmers and the 'Outside' World: Mennonites in Manitoba and Nebraska, 1874-1900." *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 1 (1990), 195-213.

[29] Fast, "The Kleine Gemeinde," pp. 118-120.

[30] For a similar point see: Robert Kroes, *The Persistance of Ethnicity: Dutch Calvinist Pioneers in Amsterdam, Montana* (Urbana, 1990), p. 4.

[31] *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 18 March 1902.

[32] For a detailed account of this transformation see: Royden Loewen, "Market Farming and the Mennonite Household," *Family, Church and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Urbana, 1993), pp. 125-149; Martyn John Bowden, "Changes in Land Use in Jefferson County, Nebraska, 1857-1957," MA Thesis, Nebraska, 1959.

[33] "Twelfth Census of the United States, Schedule No. 1 - Population," Nebraska, Jefferson County, Cub Creek Precinct, 1900," Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln Nebraska; "Land Platte, 1900, Cub Creek," County Court House, Fairbury, Nebraska.

[34] *Mennonitische Rundschau*, January 5, 1887.

[35] "Twelfth Census of the United States" (1900).

[36] "Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910 Population," Nebraska, Jefferson County, Jansen Village, NSHS.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 138.

[38] Only 54 of the 56 households can be identified; of these, there were 23 Mennonite, 19 German American, and 11 Anglo-American housholds.

[39] Quoted in Fast, "Kleine Gemeinde," p. 116

[40] *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 23 July 1908.

[41] Quoted in Miller, "Jansen," p. 163.

[42] *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 11 August 1906.

[43] During the 1908 presidential election 172 votes were cast in Cub Creek precinct and in the 1912 election, 160 votes cast; during 1910 there were a total of 207 males age 23 and older in the precinct, 96 of whom were Mennonites. If 90% of the non-Mennonites voted, then at least 75% of Mennonite men voted in 1908. Miller, "Jansen," p. 167; "Population Census, 1910."

[44] Quoted in Miller, "Jansen," p. 180.

[45] Peter Jansen, *Memoirs of Peter Jansen: The Record of a Busy Life* (Beatrice, NE, 1921), p. 54.

[46] *Ibid.*, pp. i, 33, 55, 57.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 54.

[48] Frederick Luebke, "The German-American Alliance in Nebraska, 1910-1917," *Germans in the New World: Essays in the History of Immigration* (Urbana, 1990), p. 14. Luebke has argued elsewhere that Nebraska was inherently less imbued with the New England morality and nativism than was the state of Kansas and thus was more open to expressions of German-Americanism. See, Luebke, *Immigrants and Politics: The Germans of Nebraska, 1880-1900* (Lincoln, NE, 1969). For studies in nativism in Kansas see: Walter T.K. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas, Populism and Nativism* (Chicago, 1963); James C. Juhnke, *A People of Two Kingdoms: The Political Acculturation of the Kansas Mennonites* (Newton, KS, 1975).

[49] "Population Census, 1900."

[50] *Mennonitische Rundschau*, March 20, 1901.

[51] *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 11 August 1906.

[52] *Jansen News*, November 20, 1906.

[53] *Ibid.*, 4 July 1902.

[54] Quoted in Miller, "Jansen," p. 172.

[55] *Jansen News*, 11 April 1918.

[56] *Ibid.*, 31 May 1917.

[57] *Jansen News*, 10 January 1918. Later that year, in November, young Albert Friesen wrote from France, reporting on his life in the American army camp and arguing that if "Mennonites could see the backwardness of France they would buy war bonds." *Ibid.*, 4 November 1918.

[58] *Jansen News*, September 20, 1917; Miller, "Jansen," 182.

[59] *Ibid.*, 18 January 1917; 18 January 1918.

[60] *Ibid.*, 29 January 1925.

[61] *Ibid.*, July 24, 1924.

[62] Miller, "Jansen," p. 349.

[63] Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Contadini in Chicago: A Critique of *The Uprooted*," *Journal of American History* 53 (1964), p. 416.

[64] Stanley Nadel, *Little Germany: Ethnicity, Religion and Class in New York City, 1845-80* (Urbana, 1990), p. 2.

[65] Robert Kroes, *The Persistence of Ethnicity: Dutch Calvinist Pioneers in Amsterdam, Montana* (Urbana, 1992), p.

[66]Kathleen Conzen,''Peasant Pioneers: Generational Succession Among German Farmers in Frontier Minnesota,'' *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation*, eds. Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude (Chapel Hill, NC, 1985)., p.259.

[67] Kathleen Neils Conzen, David Gerber, Ewa Morawska, George Pozetta, and Rudolph Vecoli, "The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the USA," *Altreitalie* (1990), p. 43.

[68] Quoted in, Doug Smith, "Ideas," on Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Radio, Toronto, 3 May 1993.

[69] Kroes, *Persistence of Ethnicity*, p. 91; Kathleen Conzen, "Mainstreams and Side Channels: The Localization of Immigrant Cultures," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 11 (1991), pp. 5-20.

[70] Fast, "Kleine Gemeinde in the U.S.," p. 85ff.

[71] Jacob J. Friesen, "Predigt," 14 February 1926, Corny Z. Friesen, Meade, KS, pp. 4, 7, 8, 22, 26, 34, 44, 45.

[72] Interview with John and Anna Siemens, Meade, October 1987.

[73] Interview with Cornelius Classen, October 1987.

[74] Miller, "Jansen," pp. 190 & 339.

[75] Fast, "Kleine Gemeinde in U.S.," p. 85.

[76] Isaak Loewen to Johann Janzen, February 23, 1904, JKL.

[77] Meade, *Pioneer Stories*, p. 144.

[78] Jacob F. Isaac, "Tagebuch, 1907," Henry Fast, Steinbach, Manitoba.

[79] Helena Doerksen Reimer, "Tagebuch, 1920," John D. Reimer, Meade, Kansas.

[80] Quoted in Smith, "Ideas."

[81] N.n., Meade County, Kansas, to Gerhard Kornelson, Steinbach, Manitoba, n.d., Dave Schellenberg, Steinbach, Manitoba.

[82] Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York, 1967).