Gender, Generation and Social Identity in Russian Mennonite Society

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In the beginning Divinity made man.
Divinity looked upon the result and said: "I must be able to do better next time."
And then Divinity made woman. (Origin myth of the Ahekap of Aotearoa)

In recent years the topic of gender has become a very fashionable field of study in the social sciences and the humanities. For a long time it has been dominated by literature on women, especially adult women, but more recently the discussion of men has increased. There is still a tendency to discuss these topics in isolation, both of the other gender and in terms of other social factors. More recently the emphasis has shifted from social to cultural considerations with discussions about what it means, or has meant, to be a woman, and now the consideration of masculinities, what it means to be a (real?) man, is topical.

When Roy Loewen first approached me about contributing to this symposium he suggested I do something on Mennonite masculinities. Looking through my notebooks from the early 1970s based on interviews with Mennonites born in pre-revolutionary Russia, I did find occasional references to stern, dominant farmers whose wives walked a step behind them. There is an awareness of the changes across generations and in the emerging middle-class families of the

bourgeoisie, a contrast between indulgent fathers and sad, distant grandfathers, unable to express emotion. There are also references to Russian noble women married to Mennonite estate owners, emotionally charged and chaotic in lifestyle, a stark contrast to the more dour and orderly ways of the Mennonite farmer's wife. My more recent research in southeastern Manitoba has confirmed changes to gender over time, but has not uncovered any closet Mennonites with machismo. To do so I might have to do research among Mennonites in Mexico or Paraguay!

So instead of concentrating on the cultural content of maleness or femaleness, in this paper I wish to examine the place of gender in the structure of Mennonite social life and in the formation of personhood. More specifically I will argue two points of view:

- First, that gender is just one aspect of how social systems are constructed, produced and reproduced. Viewing gender apart from these other social aspects distorts our understanding of the place of gender both in past and present societies.

- Secondly, that in terms of social identity the emphasis on gender as a singular or dominant aspect of personhood reflects a very "modern"concern with individuated identity found predominantly in industrialized societies. Concentrating on gender as an individuated aspect of personhood does not assist our understanding of gender identities in the past.

Gender, generation and other aspects of social structure

The three basic building blocks of social life, common to all societies, implicit in the biological, material reality of all human beings involve age, sex and connectedness. As humans we are a sexually reproducing animal species with males and females, we are mortal and therefore have a lifespan; finally we are social animals. The social nature of humans is particularly important as infants are highly dependent on their parents, particularly their mothers and more than any other mammal, for a long period after birth. This dependency is built upon and builds upon already established connections between people. This is the reality of our evolutionary inheritance and all human beings share this common inheritance. In other words our biology lies at the base of our social life.

All modern humans also share another common evolutionary inheritance linked to dependency of infants and the long period of care in early age. This is a capacity for cultural meaning, most spectacularly apparent in our capacity for language (but not for any particular language). Again the roots of this lie in our biology, even if this is a very recent evolutionary inheritance. In spite of variation in phenotype—in skin colour, eye form, hair etc.—all humans are very closely related genetically. We are all brothers and sisters; our cousins are the apes who have social organization, but lack cultural meaning able to be transferred from generation to generation.

This cultural inheritance has produced great elaboration in the meaning and functions ascribed to the three basic building blocks of social life. In general terms, however, we can say that age differences have become culturally elaborated into distinctions of generation; sex differences have been elaborated into notions of gender and connectedness developed into complexes associated with kinship (forms of relationship associated with descent and marriage). New aspects of social organization developed later mostly associated with increased social complexity as human populations increased and plants and animals were domesticated (Agraria). This resulted in larger, more settled and concentrated populations associated with the accumulation of property, complex political and judicial organization and ritual changes. In such situations distinctions based primarily on kinship became elaborated into distinctions of social status. These resulted in changes in marriage patterns, the accumulation of wealth and property and the appropriation of labour.

Questions about gender cannot be considered separately from this complex of social features. Gender must be related to age/generation, connectedness/ relatedness and social standing. None of these factors can really be considered in isolation.

For instance, it is insufficient to ask questions about gender roles, status and identity without asking the age of the person concerned and the cultural ideas of the generation involved. This is because all people are involved in the developmental cycle of life associated with the production and reproduction of society. Other considerations include how a person is connected through ties of kinship and how their social standing is given through membership of a kin group situated within a hierarchy of such groups.

Pre-modern (Agrarian) Mennonite society in many ways conforms to the structural models of most agrarian societies. The roles men and women play and their status changed markedly with age, particularly in terms of authority and spheres of influence.

- Girls were prepared for the responsibilities of caring, the woman's lot, early in life by looking after siblings and the children of other relatives. Long before marriage they were already socialized and enculturated into the domestic sphere. Some might have spent time acting as maids for relatives, helping with household chores if the woman had many children. Then they married. As they grew older, the busy years of childbearing passed and they became the matriarchs of the family. Families could often be matrifocal—that is focused on the mother. This does not mean Mennonite society was matriarchal as I have seen it described in some recent Mennonite publications. Matriarchal refers to "rule by females" over the whole of society, a state unknown in the historical record. However, often it was a senior woman who became the keeper of the knowledge of family affairs: details of deaths, births and marriages. I recall hearing an elderly Chortitz woman in Grunthal reciting an endless series of family names and connections, with their dates of birth, death and marriage complete with the day, month, year and in

certain circumstances even the hour involved. Trying to keep notes I was grateful that she was not aware of the minutes and seconds.

- Boys tended to assume their responsibilities of adulthood later with a less easy transition from childhood to work, (in spite of the endless chores in the yard and field). Work took them beyond the domestic sphere and eventually into the public world of congregation and business. Again this was age specific but the transitions were not as smooth as for women. Patriarchy is as much a problem for men of different generations, especially sons and fathers, as for people of different genders (although mother/daughter relations also can be troublesome). Men know who is related to whom in general terms; their knowledge is often politically relevant. But details of birth order and age may be less important in their world and most do not know the date, the month or the day of relations outside the immediate family.

In spite of the realities of gender distinctiveness in the life-cycle, it is insufficient to consider a single gender in isolation from the complex of gender identities, which are qualified by age and relatedness.

- Men and women in Mennonite agrarian society complimented each other in the life cycle, especially married couples. The division of labour was clearly marked. Men could not cook, as many Mennonite humorous tales reveal, and men could not/would not milk the cows. In an age of gender non-specificity this clear division of tasks and the lack of sharing work, appears sexist to enlightened people. But older women told me that they did not want a man touching the teats of their cows, thereby possibly damaging them. And they wanted to eat food properly cooked as well! Once, it is told, the woman of the house was so ill she could not rise from her bed, so the family cow had to be brought to her bedroom for milking as her husband refused to touch it.

This issue of the division of labour by gender (and age) points to an important consideration: the relationship between social structure and the organization of work tasks. This in turn is related to the material conditions of existence involved in the production and reproduction of society over time. Gender roles are closely tied to the basic biological reality that only women bear children (after of course the minimal and momentary involvement of men). They are also responsible for the early sustenance of dependent infants. In material terms this is far more important in the ascription of gender roles than just pure labour strength. Women are as capable as men at most physical tasks involved with agricultural production and could be more involved if pregnancy and the demands of infant children did not take first call upon their time. Women were involved in the field labour at periods of intensive work: seeding and harvesting.

The division of labour connected to the spheres of influence has consequences beyond roles. The women's sphere, the domestic, included not just the house and kitchen, but also the home garden where the essential foodstuffs for

everyday sustenance, vegetables and fruits, were grown. They also cared for the animals required to support the domestic sphere, especially milk cows. Men mostly worked beyond the domestic sphere and household and increasingly produced goods for external commercial markets. Whereas the market production of men is recorded in the historical record, women's production is rarely quantified or recorded. In economic studies of Mennonite communities this produces a skewed result, with the household economy, except for external monetary purchases, missing. The increasing role of money is significant here as it affected the structural social roles of age (children did not have money) and gender (men tended to control it).

- In southeastern Manitoba the men controlled the little money that circulated in the household well into the 1940s. The economy was still largely based on self-sustenance with any money being used to pay taxes and purchase essentials for production. Money was also used to buy household essentials not produced at home: coffee, sugar and later ground flour. But men did the shopping, leaving the wives at home. The visit to the store also permitted men an opportunity to escape the house and congregate with other males embarked on the same task, often at the same time of day. As the exact price of items was often unknown and money in short supply, the housewife's list was written in terms of priority of need. But the husband's list was often different and another item such as his tobacco, although not included, usually was the first item purchased in the store. Such was the male dominance of shopping at this period that differences from the normal pattern were noted. In southeastern Manitoba there is a story about an odd couple, he thin, she stout who reversed the normal shopping practices. Men usually drove the horses to town; but in this case she always drove. In ordinary situations, if a woman came shopping, she often stayed on the wagon while he entered the store; but in this case he sat on the wagon while she purchased the supplies. I might note that men in this area now rarely demean themselves with the grocery shopping, but the old ritual is preserved. At an appointed hour men charge into town in their pick-ups in order "to pick up the mail" but end up in the neighbouring coffee shop for an hour or more.

Another structural aspect to consider is the place of children in the total social system. The importance of children (male and female) in the social life of agrarian communities has been underestimated or ignored. It is often forgotten by modern scholars born beyond the demographic transition that a considerable percentage of the population of most agrarian societies consisted of children, ranging from as high as 40–50% of the total. There is, however, very little literature on the world of children; adults (males and now females) write history. More importantly both men and women as adults cooperated to sustain children while at the same time conspiring to keep them in their place. The separation of men and women in terms of the division of labour was matched by a marked divide between children and adults in which adult men and women were far from divided about how to deal with the young. Children were to be kept in a

subordinate state as befitted their junior status; as the English has it, "children were to be seen and not heard"; in front of adults they were expected only "to speak when spoken to."

- Talking to Mennonite adults about the world of their parents is sometimes met with a frustrated cry that the world of adults was a mystery to them. When parents had visitors they were expected to go out and play and keep well clear of the important activities of the adults, which involved visiting, sharing gossip and catching-up on social connections. Children ate separately although here there was an interesting distinction between Russländer and Kanadier practice in southeastern Manitoba. In Russländer households children were fed before the adults, their plates were cleared away, rewashed and then the adults could get down to serious business. But in some Kanadier households children ate after the adults and often off the same, unwashed plates of the adults who had finished their meals. Exactly what this means is unclear, but I would suggest tentatively that it may reflect more than just the Russländer's acquisition of bourgeois manners, and indicates a changing attitude to children and their subordinate role in social life (juniorization).

This issue of subordination/juniorization is important because of current concerns with social inequality, especially gender inequality. This is a major theme in recent scholarly literature connected with the pursuit of "equality." In fact this concern with "equality" reflects very modern developments in society associated with changes in the concept of the person (see below) and ideas of human rights developed in association with the emergence of industrial societies and the rise of nation states. In human history and prehistory, however, age is probably the most widespread and profound form of inequality experienced by humans. But age in relation to equality is relative; people grow-up and assume new identities and powers. It is probably from this source that the idea of equality stems, as inequality is an experienced social reality whereas equality is a concept, an ideal. In the past, the qualities of inequality ascribed to other people and groups often follow the language of age rather than that of gender: peasants and savages were often described as simple and child-like. Where there was a sub-text referring to gender this was often phrased in combination with age, suggesting the subordination of women by age (referring to a woman as a "girl" and in terms like "old maid") and the dominance of men in terms of maturity.

Social differentiation by status, however, does not always follow gender lines. There are kings and queens, and male peasants and female peasants are subordinate to queens as well as kings. In the Mennonite world such status inequality is not merely modern because social differentiation connected to wealth, often inherited, is of long standing.

- In Russia, before the Revolution, a young unmarried seamstress dies of disease in the village of X in Molochna. She was well-known in the village

having worked at one time or another for nearly all the farmer's wives. She was seen as a very pious young girl, clever and charming and no one had a bad thing to say about her. But none of the leading families attended her funeral.

The reasons for the situation described above are complex. It is not just that the woman was female, or even young, although both these factors as well as the fact that she was unmarried, were significant. People who have lived a long life, who have produced many offspring fill the churches when they pass away. But the most important aspect to consider here is the girl's inherited status. She came from one of the poor families living on the outskirts of the village, from a family with a reputation for laziness, drunkenness and petty crime. So her own self was subordinated to the status of her relatives; she could not shake off the reputation of her kin. With her personal attributes, if she had lived long enough to marry a farmer's son of moderate standing and had borne healthy children, her status would have become removed from that of her family and transferred to that of her husband's clan. But in this instance death intervened condemning her to a poorly attended funeral. Similar patterns can be found in the history of Kanadier families in southeastern Manitoba, but I will not name the infamous clans involved!

The story of the poor seamstress points, however, to another issue. How far is a person's social identity given by their circumstance, externally defined and difficult to alter? Here issues of personhood need to be considered.

Personhood: partible and individuated

People are born into existing social systems and worlds of cultural meaning. They do not invent these social systems or cultural meanings; they are already present in the world and a person is immediately fitted into the social structure and acquires the knowledge to act competently in the world without exercising reflective choice. The social identity and roles of a newborn are already given: they are by age and status dependent infants, they are assigned a gender on the basis of their perceived biological sex and they already are connected to living people, the most important of which are their parents, then siblings and then others through ties of descent and affinity. They acquire a name and a series of social identities tied closely to their expected social roles which come with predefined rights, duties and obligations. While some identities and obligations remain constant across the life cycle, others change in significance. During a life-time a number of new identities and roles are assumed, usually at predetermined stages in the life cycle; others are replaced and some surrendered. All these changes in social identity and roles affect the meaning of gender during the lifetime of a person.

Let me provide some examples to make things clearer. A person is born and is a gendered as a male or female, as a son or daughter of a man and a woman. If

they have siblings they also acquire gendered identities as brother or sister. One could expand on these social categories of personhood to include grandparents and grandchild (note how this can be gendered—granddaughter—or remain neutral–child). In certain societies cousins are differentiated linguistically by gender as in High German and Low German, unlike in English usage (but then cousins are increasingly unimportant in industrialized society).

There are three important points to note here:

1. The child has not self-defined these identities or their associated roles. The child is externally categorized by their position in an existing network of relatedness;

2. The child may have more than one identity at any one time depending on the social situation;

3. The child's identity is not a single whole, but consists of a number of identities. At no time is a person's identity distinguishable from the roles they play.

Across their life-span a person assumes new identities and roles, some associated with developments in the life cycle—husband/wife, mother/father and others connected with positions of responsibility beyond the immediate world of kinship. In such systems there is a certain inevitability about the shaping of a person's identity and the subordination of their sense of selfhood. To use the technical term a person's sense of self and social identity is "partible" rather than singular; bound into the social matrix rather than standing apart from it.

- The path to full adulthood in Mennonite communities passed through a number of stages marked particularly by baptism and marriage. These two events were connected. As a member of the community a person could not marry until they had been baptized. Nevertheless, it was clear that they were also stages in the assumption of adult responsibilities, further confirmed by the birth of children which signalled the assumption of additional duties and obligations involved with the creation of a new generation and the continuance of community, congregation and the faith.

Marriage, as a major marker of adulthood for both men and women, was also connected with the establishment of a separate household and the development of new patterns of authority and responsibility based on gender. When people married their roles as son or daughter to their living parents were superseded by new roles, identities and responsibilities although a sense of subordination to parents remained until their passing. The new couple became husband and wife and later assumed the duties and responsibilities of parenthood. These new roles were highly gendered but interconnected and complimentary.

In this regard it is interesting to consider those who did not marry but achieved physical maturity and a kind of adult status: bachelors and spinsters. Here gender and generation differences were significant as the linguistic terms suggest:

- A bachelor was usually referred to as *oola Jung* ("old youth" in English, the "old" in this case meaning 'past the age at which one would normally expect him to be married.'). More 'polite or refined' Mennonites would speak of a single male *eentletzja Maun* or *eentletzja Jung* (*eentletzig* meaning single or alone). A spinster would be referred to as *oole Mejal* or more politely as *eentletzje Mejal.* The word *Mejal* is derived from the Old Prussian word *Margell* and refers to any maid or maiden. Some regard the word *Mejal* as disparaging, which it is not. (Details on Low German terms here and below are courtesy of Reuben Epp)

Note how the category "old" here referred not to being aged, but merely to a state beyond the age when people were expected to marry. Bachelors and spinsters had 'passed the window of opportunity' and 'missed the boat' (if I may be allowed to mix my metaphors). On the other hand *Jung* referred to an immature male who was not a child, but not yet an adult. *Mejal* also referred to a young female as yet unmarried. Those who were sensitive about using the term *Mejal* to refer to a spinster use either *oolet Mäakje/Mäatje* or more politely *eentletzjet Mäakje/Mäatje* The terms *Mäakje* or *Mäatje* refer to a baby or very young girl. The suggestion of budding sexuality implicit in the term Mejal was thus avoided, and the spinster's barren state was confirmed by moving her back beyond puberty.

In a sense therefore, there is a contradiction in the terms which is best expressed as "the young person/child who never grew up" or "the grown-up who is still a junior/child". Unmarried males, irrespective of their age were referred to by their first name and always as the son-of someone else (hence "Janzens' Peter") in the same way as children and youths. If a person was married they were referred to by their full adult name (ie as "Peter Janzen") (courtesy of John Dyck). But whereas bachelors were permanent adolescents, spinsters were juniorized further back into childhood a move that further denied them status and authority.

- Southeastern Manitoba pre 1945. Two brother Mennonite bachelors lived like many bachelors in a run-down house with a dirty yard, they rarely washed and dressed in filthy overalls. One day they were brought to task by their father, a local minister. Not only did he want them to clean-up themselves and their yard, but he also wanted to see them in church the following Sunday. He had noted their long absence from services. Sure enough the brothers turned up at church the next Sunday, washed and suited. They satin a prominent position in the front row. But as the *Vorsänger* led the first hymn the bachelor brothers suddenly pitched the opening note higher, causing consternation among ministers and congregation. At the start of the next verse they pitched the note lower, again causing confusion. And so it continued throughout the service. After that service their father never complained to his sons again about their yard, their dress or their absence from church.

The story reveals how bachelors could maintain the irresponsibility and unaccountability of youth well into an age associated with adulthood, could escape the authority of their parents and in many ways still be tolerated in a community which would not have tolerated such things from a married man. Spinsters were more restricted. The fair maiden who might marry turned into the classic "old maid". As I already have suggested, most young women assumed the responsibilities of caring at an early age and made a smooth transition from young girl, to maiden, to wife, to mother. In the life course before marriage some were indeed "maids" to family and relatives. One possible source of the negative connotations associated with *"Mäjal"* referred to by Reuben Epp among later Russian Mennonites may be connected with the wide spread employment of non-Mennonite Russian or Ukrainian maids in later Russian Mennonite households in late Imperial Russia. These often replaced the role young Mennonite females, often relatives, once played in the life cycle. Given the increased wealth and social differentiation within Mennonite society in late Imperial Russia, the term "maid"(*Mejal*) became associated the idea of a "hired female servant" and subordination by age, gender, ethnicity and status. The presence in a Mennonite household of a young female in many ways outside the moral strictures of kinship and congregation and the suggestion that the term is obscene and denotes loose morals, may say less about the failings of the servant, and more about the actions of some Mennonite males (young and old)!

To return to the subject of spinsters they were women who become carers not of children, but of their aged and ageing parents (and sometimes unmarried brothers). In a world where there was no institutionalized social security, one reason for having children was to support parents as they aged. In a sense the care and support given by parents to children was returned in kind later in life; it is the necessary reciprocal exchange of generations. Usually one of the daughters, often the youngest, was charged with this role and remained unmarried. It might not have been intended; the youngest may have lived in hope that one day she might marry, but this would require wishing her parents dead. But as the daughter moved beyond the window of marriageability she also took on a new, singular identity, that of a spinster, and became trapped in this role even after her parents had passed away. I should note that bachelors often "cared" for parents as well although in a very different way. It was often the case that the mother"cared" for the bachelor son but once she passed away he was left in a parlous state, unable to perform domestic functions such as cooking and washing. And, of course, the cows never get milked quite the same again!

The term *eentletzja* derived from "single' and 'alone' indicates that bachelors and spinsters were isolated not just physically but also socially from the normal life of the family cycle. They stood apart and were not connected in the same way as others. This referred both to their social identities and their duties and obligations, especially for bachelors. Bachelors were permitted to act like children, even to break the rules which constrained ordinary youth and adults

and basically could remain unaccountable in ways no married man could.

In one sense bachelors and spinsters were not partible persons in the same way as those who were involved in the reproduction of social life through the bearing and raising children. Undefined by circumstance and not bounded by responsibilities for the production of future generation, they did not undergo major changes in status as they aged. They could self-define themselves, often grew more eccentric and singular as they aged. In many ways they were the only true individuals in the agrarian Mennonite world. Of course ties of kinship still existed but not in a truly connected sense. There were no children to care for or to socialize, they had no responsibilities for future generations. Their death would mark the end of their branch; it would not bud again. By not marrying and not having off spring, their line of descent ceased; they would not become ancestors which children and grandchildren would honour and later genealogists will assign them only a minor footnote in their listings.

While in all societies people have a degree of freedom to emphasize their distinctiveness, in agrarian societies a great deal of a person's social identity is given. In reality they have little choice in the matter. So gender is part of the matrix of belonging, and should not be considered separately from other parts of social identity. It is only in modern, industrialized societies that people build personal, individuated identities, fabricated by self from a mass of possibilities. Some aspects of social identity connected with relatedness remain, but they are rarely primary markers. If you ask someone the question "who are you" anywhere but in a coffee shop in Steinbach or at a Mennonite reunion of the"Klippensteins" in Altona, the answer usually will be based on a person's occupation. And in the search for eternal youth giving your age may be embarrassing unless you are under age and trying to enter a bar in Winnipeg. However, in an era built around the politics of self-identity, gender can be an important feature to include in the portfolio of selfhood. While this might involve membership in a particular group, it more often involves merely identification with a generalized category: "the sisterhood" or to a lesser extent(?) "the brotherhood" of humankind.

I cannot discuss here why change has occurred in the concept of the person, but it obviously is connected to the massive changes in social structure which have accompanied the industrialization of modern society. The agrarian way of life based on ties of kinship and continuity of community, has given way to new social forms and discontinuities shaped by social and physical mobility. While modern Mennonites still remain connected with their agrarian roots, they too are part of this major transformation in social structure and identity formation.

The very fact that you are met to engender the past is because you have all been engendered by this process. Be aware of this when attempting to understand a past which is so different from the present and a society so different from your own.

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