Speaking of "Peter Money" and Poor Abraham: Wealth, Poverty and Consumption among Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia

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In a sense, accumulation of wealth, valuing material goods for anything but their use value, and ridiculing poor people could be perceived as deviations from what we generally think of as Anabaptist and Mennonite ideals.[1] Still, life in contemporary Mennonite colonies in Bolivia provides ample evidence that they all occur. This fact hardly surprises anyone, yet from an anthropological perspective, it does constitute an incentive to consider how such deviations harmonise and/or disharmonise with fundamental community goals. The overall aim of this article is, thus, to illustrate how issues such as wealth and poverty, as well as consumption of material goods – and particularly members' ways of dealing with these matters – relate to community maintenance in the Mennonite Old Colony of Durango, in Eastern Bolivia.

Drawing on three periods of extensive fieldwork,[2] this article builds on how people in Durango talk of poverty and wealth, and how they account for their own and others' economic situations and choices regarding material goods. As will be shown, these accounts illustrate

how and why individual members' economic situations and choices become a crucial concern for all community members. The main argument of this article is that the community members' culturally constructed image of the past and idea of that which shall come, which is referred to here as the *forthcoming*,[3] influence Old Colonists' reactions to individual consumption and material goods as well as to wealth and poverty. Initially, the two men Abraham and Peter[4] from the Bolivian Old Colony Durango will be introduced. Even though both of them have been born into and remained committed to the Old Colony way of life,[5] their lives have turned out very differently. Moreover, the ways in which fellow community members look at and speak about each of them differs greatly. These two cases will serve as a starting point for a discussion on how the Old Colony Mennonites' outlook on wealthy and poor community members relates to questions of conformity, deviation, and community maintenance. The article will conclude with an attempt to illuminate the ways in which fundamental community goals govern how material goods are valued.

"Peter Money" and Poor Abraham

In May 2004, when I came back to Durango after having been away to the Bolivian capital La Paz for almost two weeks, I asked people in the colony to update me on the latest news. Not much seemed to have happened during my absence, but people recurrently noted the death of a man nicknamed "Peter Money."[6] Peter was a man in his 60s, who had passed away after a lengthy serious illness. Usually, the cause of the death would be the topic of attention when a person has passed away in the colony, but in this case, it was rather the fact that it was a very rich person who had died. Peter was not from a well-off family, but had been rather poor before becoming a very wealthy man. People in Durango often referred to Peter as "the richest man in the colony," and some even claimed his net worth to exceed the entire colony's assets. He had married twice, and when he died he left behind his wife with fourteen children, seven of them being his own. Community members speculated widely on the size of the inheritance, with people mentioning amounts exceeding $100,000 (USD) for each inheritor.

No matter the actual size of Peter's wealth, a common denominator of peoples' individual versions of this narrative was that no one could explain how Peter got rich. Regardless of whether people actually knew how he earned his wealth or not, all informants claimed ignorance. Instead, they offered possible explanations: for example, some suggested he had had "a lot of good luck," as rumours held that he had found gold on his land. Others, like one informant named Jakob, dis-

missed such rumours. Jakob said he had gone to see Peter only a short time before he passed away, and claimed to have asked the sick man about the alleged gold. Peter, he reported, had denied it. At that time Peter knew he did not have much time left. "And why would he then lie about how he got hold of all the money?" Jakob asked, rhetorically. For Jakob, the fact that Peter persisted in denying any such findings even on his deathbed was proof enough for overturning the gold theory. Yet Jakob could not, or did not want to, offer me any alternative explanation. As people in the colony speculated on the issue, the gold theory and the assumption that he had simply been very lucky were the most common explanations regarding Peter's accumulated wealth. One expected explanation that no one ever gave voice to, however, was that Peter might have earned his wealth through hard work. In fact, no one ever described him in terms of a hard working person. Another possible explanation that was never pronounced was that Peter's fortune could have emerged from drug trading, or some other illicit activity. Of course, people might not be willing to share such knowledge with an outsider. Despite the many reports about South American Mennonites (Old Colonists and others) being involved in drug trading, presuming here that Peter had been engaged in such business would be pure speculation.[7] Henceforth, the discussion in this article will proceed on the assumption that the Old Colonists were unfamiliar with the sources of Peter's economic success.

On a general level, Peter's posthumous reputation depicted a generous and helpful person, often ready to lend a helping hand to someone in need. For instance, people often recalled when, shortly after they had arrived in Bolivia, a failed cotton harvest prompted the colony to take a bank loan. Due to high interests, the debt had soon grown considerably and people had problems paying their instalments, so Peter settled the debt and let his fellow community members pay him back at very low interest. When Peter passed away in 2004, most borrowers still owed him money. Many families in the colony worried that Peter's inheritors would demand the debts be paid, even though each heir would probably be allotted far more money than needed to make a living. As Peter had passed away, three questions seemed to cause considerable concern in Durango: Would his survivors demand having unsettled debts paid off immediately? How did Peter actually earn his wealth? And, finally, was it really true that Peter had buried three jars of money on his land? Rumours in the colony held that his wife had found two of them, but that there was one left. People in Durango were unmistakably fascinated by this, and they were very anxious not to let their Bolivian neighbours know about it, since they did not want outsiders to come to the colony and look for it. Many of my informants attended Peter's funeral, and their reasons for doing so were more or less identical:

"Peter used to be a very good friend of mine"; "Peter once helped me out"; or "that man was very good." In sum, Peter was remembered as a good, likable, and – not least importantly – rich person.

At the other end of the economic scale on the colony, there was a man named Abraham. He was in his mid 30s and married to a woman named Susanna, with whom he had four sons. I got to know Abraham at an early stage of my first fieldwork in Durango in 2004, as he showed up at my hostess's house wearing a ragged Panama hat and worn-out clothes. He immediately made an impression on me. Due to his curiosity, his fairly odd physical appearance, his unusual interest in books, his lisping, and not least due to his constant talk of money (or rather his lack thereof), he soon became a noteworthy character for me. Abraham and Susanna's family is one of the poorest families in Durango. When Abraham invited me to their small house for the first time, he was apparently embarrassed by the fact that he had only cleared the land closest to their house. "I'm almost ashamed for having so much forest [on my land]," he said. "People say I'm lazy for not clearing my land. But when there is no money, you have to go out to work outside your home to have something to eat. And there is no time or money for clearing the land…" Instead of working his own land, Abraham earned his income by working for others. The couple owns 15 hectares of land, but only a small part of the area is opened up. Felling the trees is hard work, and paying someone to come and work for them would cost around 25 Bolivianos ($3.12 USD) a day. Since the family lacks money to pay for such work, the forest remains. As Abraham accounted for their economic situation and also commented upon the fact that people call him lazy, he noted that Bolivians sometimes "receive money from the government" and in that way they are given at least something to live on, whereas the Mennonites do not ever claim or receive anything. "And there are people who think that the Mennonites get money from their parents, but it's not like that," he added. "My father has never given me anything."

During my fieldwork, Abraham tended to show up in the most unexpected situations, such as on the road to another village where he was going to work, in the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra selling cheese, cookies and honey in the streets, or in a backyard in the nearby town Charagua, where he was mending a business woman's sewing machine. A grown-up Mennonite man walking along the road makes up a very unusual sight in Durango, but Abraham had to do it when he could not afford to repair his buggy. Mending sewing machines for Bolivians is not a "normal" occupation for men in Durango, either, but in order to make a living, Abraham did it. The fact that some of the work he performed is, to some extent, overlapping the sphere of activity that is normally regarded as female, presumably adds to

people's perception of Abraham as odd, and as having deviated from the ideals of the community. Altogether, people in Durango often make fun of Abraham and laugh at his failure to successfully live the Old Colony way of life, calling him "lazy" and "incapable," or "silly." Even Abraham's own parents-in-law often commented on the incapability of their daughter's husband. From an outsiders' perspective, however, Abraham appeared very intelligent, extremely hard working, and constantly trying to figure out how to increase his income. However, his way of making a living does not quite fit within the framework expected by Old Colony practice, and this, apparently, makes him an anomaly worthy of ridicule.

Community Ideals and Responses to Wealth and Poverty

The Old Colony Mennonites in the Durango colony of Bolivia clearly attempt to live in accordance with their image of the ideal society, the *Altkolonie*. It is striking that they do not refer so much to *where* or *when* it used to be, but rather to *how* it used to be. By continuing the Old Colony way of life of remaining non-conformed with the outside world, the Mennonites in Durango maintain community, and increase their chances of achieving their ultimate spiritual quest, which is to reach salvation in heaven through common effort. In other words, there is a crucial relation between the community members' culturally constructed image of the past, and the idea of what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the *forth-coming*. The *forth-coming*, coined by Bourdieu as *l'à-venir*, alludes to that which is to come, something to which one can look forward and aspire, although it is never achieved and never happens, since it would then lose significance in its capacity as *forth-coming*.[8] In the Old Colony case, the idea of the *forth-coming* becomes manifest through the notion of eternal life in the heavenly kingdom, *Himmelreich*. I argue elsewhere that the idea of the *forth-coming*, combined with all members' mutual responsibility for this common concern, influence practice and thought on several levels in Durango.[9] Moreover, this perception adds further to the community boundaries, since it separates the chosen ones, the Old Colony Mennonites,[10] from all others. In this community, people are expected to obey the *Ordnung*, the oral set of rules that regulates most aspects of life, including economic practice, means of subsistence, as well as the members' relationships to material goods and money.

On a general level, there is what can be considered an obsession about money in Durango. Possessing money, lacking money, borrowing money, earning money, spending money, and so forth, constitute recurrent topics of discussion among community members. Most likely, one

significant reason for this focus is that Durango is a relatively poor colony. Compared to other Mennonite colonies in Bolivia, the inhabitants in Durango are financially weak. Many community members argue that this is partly due to the low prices at which most families had to sell their houses as they left their former colony, Colonia Nueva Durango, in Paraguay in the mid-90s. Due to inner disagreements concerning modernization processes and adjustments to the surrounding society, the colony in Paraguay split. Those members who had resisted change sold most of their belongings and moved to Bolivia, where the new colony started in the Bolivian Gran Chaco, about eight hours by bus south of Santa Cruz de la Sierra. In this process, many families suffered considerable economic losses, and after two decades in their new location, many still consider themselves poor. Nonetheless, compared to their Bolivian neighbours in the nearby Guaraní communities of Izozog, most Old Colonists in Durango are reasonably well-off economically and materially. The Izoceño-Guaraní population in the region is generally very poor, and to some extent dependent on subsidises from the state and foreign NGOs. A common conception among the Mennonites in Durango is that low moral standards constitute the main cause of their Bolivian neighbours' problematic economic situation. The Mennonites in Durango have developed valuable (and to some extent indispensable) business relations with their Guaraní neighbours, particularly with the neighbouring community of Isiporenda.[11] Nonetheless, my informants in Durango often disclose disparaging notions of the people in Isiporenda, calling them lazy, and suggesting they spend their money on vices while sitting in the shade waiting for someone else to solve their problems. In regards to the causes of their own economic challenges, however, people in Durango often complain about how they have to fight against the dry Gran Chaco climate, blaming the drought and failed crops as factors that negatively impact the Old Colonists' farming economy. Like most Old Colonists, the inhabitants in Durango demonstrate an outstanding work ethic, often noting that "we can't just sit in the shade like the people in Isiporenda. That doesn't give me and my family any food at the table. We have to work." In short, my informants see the solution to their troublesome economic situation as being in God's hands, while all they can do is continue working.

Egalitarianism and sharing of wealth constitute theological ideals of the Old Colony community, and when it comes to wealth and poverty, accumulation of wealth for personal purposes should thus be desisted and the poor should be cared for and assisted. Yet, life and practice in Durango present a far more complex picture. Each household in Durango constitutes an independent economic unit. Thus, like in most other Old Colonies, some families in Durango are very poor, most fam-

ilies are coping fairly well, and a few are very well-off.[12] Even though there is some economic support to be received from the community, in terms of dispensing aid from the *Armenkasse* or minor loans, people are basically left to manage on their own. Of course, the fact that people do not act the way they say they do, or should do, is nothing unusual, but rather a universal human trait. Among others, anthropologist Lorenzo Cañás Bottos pays attention to the discrepancy between "openly held values and actual observable behaviour." Although referring primarily to an Old Colony Mennonite context, Bottos' arguments are valid in basically any human community. He rightly advises us not to confuse "ideology and actual behaviour," since people's behaviour is easily overlooked if we let ourselves be blinded by the assumption that the official values, or ideology, constitutes an accurate description of reality.[13] Moreover, it is worth recalling Max Weber's notion of human beings' economic choices as determined by context, thus sometimes directed by self-interest, sometimes by values, and at other times by tradition.[14] Drawing on this, the paradox, or gap, between the Old Colony community's openly held values and actual behaviour may very well be explained by context, and by the circumstances under which the community emerged.

During the several months I spent socialising with members of Durango, I never heard people disparaging wealth or asserting that wealth is the cause of pride or materialistic values. Rather, to judge by the Mennonites' practices and comments, it seems clear that in the colony, wealth confers status. Accordingly, the unequal economic conditions among community members have resulted in imbalanced relations within an informal power structure. Wealth does not, for instance, explicitly constitute a reason to appoint someone in an official position such as chairman of the colony. Nonetheless, drawing on the inhabitants' immodest way of examining and commenting on the economics of others, it seems clear that wealthy people evoke fascination and curiosity among the other members of the community. People in Durango have often asked how much I earn, what my clothes have cost me, how much I have to work in order to by a return ticket between Sweden and Bolivia, and what my living expenses in Sweden are. This is understandable, yet the unconcealed fascination was fairly unexpected. This fascination with wealth is perceivable on other levels as well. Many community members visited the auction that was held about three weeks after Peter's death, for example. One informant, Johan, told me that although he went to bid on one of the tractors that were for sale, he returned home empty handed because, as he explained it, everything had been too expensive. The tractors were sold for about $15,000 (USD), which was very expensive compared to regular prices in Durango, which were normally around $8 – 10,000

(USD). He also mentioned that other things had been valued much higher than normal. Johan shook his head thoughtfully and said that when a rich person dies, people tend to pay more than at the auction after a poor person has died. "When a poor person dies, everything is sold very cheap, as if people seem to think that the items are not worth very much," he explained. "But if it's a wealthy person who has died, people are prepared to pay more, as if the items would be more valuable just because the owner was rich." Drawing on Naomi Klein's notions of brands and social belonging, this could very well be understood in terms of buying entrance into, or at least achieving some sensation of getting access to, a higher social class by consuming certain goods – even (or perhaps especially) if they are too expensive for you.[15] In this sense, buying expensive articles may provide a feeling of being "almost" rich.

While there is some evidence in Durango to indicate that being wealthy is considered desirable and that rich peoples' belongings are valued higher than poor persons', wealth can also provoke critical reactions within the community. However, well-off members who have been exposed to wary opinions due to relative wealth often explain fellow community members' disapproving reactions in terms of envy, rather than in terms of legitimate sanctions as a consequence of sinful behaviour. Isak, for instance, is young man who has made himself a minor fortune thanks to a harvesting machine he invested in. He is proud of his success and does nothing to hide his contentment or his gain. Nor does he signal any intentions of redistributing some of this gain among less successful members. Despite his satisfaction, he often complains about people slandering him "because they are being envious" of his thriving deals and economic successes. Disparaging comments about rich or well-to-do members could very well be understood as symptoms of envy rather than as reactions to accumulation of wealth as sinful conduct. Just like in many other farming societies, envy in Durango might very well arise due to some notion of limited good.[16] Whereas negative opinions regarding accumulation of wealth and wealthy members are, however, strikingly seldom given voice in Durango, acts or expressions of solidary with poor people appear to be even more rare. As we learnt from the case of Abraham, people quite openly look askance at poor members. Poverty-stricken members of the congregation can, as already mentioned, obtain some support from the *Armenkasse*, which is funded through the other members' offerings. In that sense, they are given some mercy, although few members appear to show much compassion with the poor families in any further action or thought. On the contrary, since laziness is commonly perceived of as the main cause of poverty, and poor people thus personify an anti-ideal, they are more commonly looked down upon. Changing status from

being rich to becoming poor may also evoke certain condescending reactions among fellow community members, indicating that a poor Old Colonist is to some extent a failed Old Colony Mennonite, and has only himself to blame. Another informant, Cornelius, used to be a successful entrepreneur. He conducted business with both Mennonites and Bolivians, and at the time I got to know him, he was making grand plans for the future. Every now and then other informants asked me what Cornelius and his wife offered me to eat when I had visited them, often assuming that we had had something very tasty and special, insinuating that "this Cornelius has a lot of money, doesn't he?" When I was back in my home in Sweden, Cornelius occasionally called from a public phone in the nearby town Charagua. I was not surprised when he one day related that he and his wife had bought a new and bigger house in the colony. He said I had to come and visit him and his family there next time I came to Bolivia. However, when I actually got back only three months later, he had lost all his assets and he and his family had had to leave the house and move in with Cornelius' parents. Many people in Durango discussed this, and while Cornelius' claimed he had been cheated and used, many community members argued it was because he had not used his head in business, that he had been too daring, and that he had consumed too much beer. Regardless of the reason for his bankruptcy, no one ever expressed that they felt sorry for him, and no one seemed to pity him. On the contrary, people (including his sisters and brothers) shook their head and seemed to think he had only himself to blame.

Drawing on recurrent conversations with people in Durango, it is clear that wealth evokes fascination and curiosity in the colony, whereas poverty is generally blamed on laziness and incapability, regardless of whether it appears among Mennonites, Bolivians, or in any other group. Apparently, the poor person him- or herself (primarily the husband of the family) is perceived to be the one to blame. In accordance with the *Ordnung*, an Old Colony Mennonite should behave, act, and look in specific manners, and people are expected to conform to this normative ideal. Seemingly, neither Abraham, who is too poor, nor "Peter Money" (or Isak for that matter), who is too rich, conforms completely to the Old Colony way of life. The fact that Abraham and Isak are both targets of fellow community members' askance gazes, whereas Peter is not, constitutes an incentive to consider the significance of the manner in which Old Colonists challenge fundamental community ideals.

Conformity in Poverty and Wealth

The fieldwork that constitutes the basis of this article was particularly focused on activities and practices taking place at the margins of the community, and the study was greatly affected by an "anthropology from and at the margin." This alludes to a methodological perspective that approaches the community and its members at and from the margins of Old Colony daily life.[17] Consequently, during fieldwork, I followed my informants as they moved between the colony and the outside world[18] and interacted with their Bolivian neighbours and host society. The motives for doing so were many. Among other reasons, this sphere of Old Colony life is interesting because it is during such interactions that deviations from colony conventions are more easily observable and arguably more frequent than at other points in this relatively controlled society. Moreover, following community members as they act and interact outside of and at the margins of their community, made it possible to observe how Old Colonists from Durango interact with outsiders and how community boundaries are being maintained and accentuated in that process.

Most informants in Durango would probably agree that rules must be obeyed and inappropriate behaviour must be held in check. Otherwise, the colonists will "become like the Bolivians," as many informants put it, which means that they will depart from the Old Colony way of life, succumbing to immoral and undisciplined behaviour. Disobedience is considered hazardous because it challenges the rules and boundaries of the community, and because it could influence fellow community members to act in similar ways. Thus, anyone disobeying the rules runs the risk of being excommunicated or banned. Nonetheless, months of observations in Durango have shown that there is rule breaking taking place and, even more interesting, there is actually some leeway allowed for breaking rules without being confronted or exposed to sanctions. Primarily through the Durango Old Colonists' interactions with Bolivians, it becomes apparent that Durango community members negotiate and bend colony rules. For instance, as I helped my hostess in neighbouring Isiporenda in her little store on an almost daily basis, I often witnessed that when costumers from Durango buy articles that are not allowed in the colony (beer, liquor, tobacco or coca, for example), they often ask for a black plastic bag to hide what they have bought to bring to their home. Ironically, these black bags are never asked for or used when less devious articles are being purchased. In similar ways, people conceal other activities that could be perceived of as disobedient, by means of quite recognizable practices. For instance, beer cans and cigarettes are hidden behind one's back and happy jolly singing is replaced by serious facial expres-

sions as another buggy shows up on the road. In similarly transparent ways, young boys from Durango sneak away to Isiporenda to smoke, listen to popular music, and drink. All adult members know they do it, but no one interferes as long as the boys do not act drunk when they return to the colony, and as long as they only do it on Sundays – just like their fathers used to do before them.

There is nothing unique to the fact that inconsistent behaviour occurs and that members break rules, even in this relatively strictly controlled community. The interesting point, however, is that while community members need not always obey the instituted order of the community, they must be careful not to openly challenge it. Therefore, disobedience follows a fairly uniform pattern in Durango, and members of the community usually break rules and norms in accordance with how they "should be broken." The black plastic bag for hiding banned items, for example, or the suddenly lowered voices and serious faces displayed when fellow community members unexpectedly catch a cheerful and noisy group of Old Colonists in the act, are ways of signalling conformity and obedience, even in the midst of breaking rules. Undisguised illicit behaviour, on the other hand, signals low morals and insubordination to the right way. Most members are aware that rule breaking takes place, but usually no one chooses to interfere and sanctions are rarely meted out, so long as the violation is carried out with discretion. This reveals that *the way* in which disobedient behaviour is undertaken determines whether it is considered as challenging the *Ordnung* or not. Rules broken in the "appropriate way" indicate that rules are somehow still respected, or even, when rules are being disobeyed in the correct way, they are in a sense also being confirmed. To relate to anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner, breaking the rules is also an active engagement of the rules.[19] Moreover, the way that disobedience and rule breaking are carried out could be perceived of as representing a willingness to conform to the community and to adhere to its norms.[20]

This emphasis on obedience and submission to form among the community members indicates that attitudes in regards to wealth reflect, to great extent, ideas about the significance of conformity, rather than a particularly normative dislike or aversion concerning the accumulation of wealth. Arriving to Durango with the preconceived idea that accumulation of wealth is more or less equal to sin among Old Colony Mennonites, it initially seemed contradictory that "Peter Money" was so high in status. That people did not principally believe he had earned his wealth through hard work, but rather by means of good luck, made the situation appear perhaps even more intriguing. In light of what we have uncovered regarding the appropriate ways of rule breaking, however, it seems likely that Peter "saved face" by being

generous and helpful – to individuals as well as to the Old Colony community as a whole. As anthropologist Calvin Redekop has suggested, it must be recognized that "rank in the Old Colony is based ultimately on the behaviour of individuals as they help the Old Colony to achieve its objectives."[21] Peter did this in two ways. Firstly, he helped his fellow community members, which is an early Anabaptist virtue.[22] Secondly, he maintained living the way he should, namely, in accordance with the Old Colony way of life, by continuing farming, maintaining his horses and buggy in good shape, attending church, and so forth. Abraham, on the other hand, has failed to follow the conventions of the community. Although he is also a frequent churchgoer, he displays too many flaws: he basically works for others only, his buggy is often out of order, he carries out tasks not perceived of as male activities, he spends much of his time reading books, he did not get married until he was 30, and he often wears second-hand trousers with braces since he lacks money for buying or making a new bib-and-brace. In other words, his behaviour and manners deviate from that expected of an Old Colony Mennonite, and he is thus considered to be breaking the order. He becomes the anomaly, and as such, fellow community members watch him with ambiguity and treat him with disregard.[23] Since all members have to contribute to the common quest for salvation, the Old Colony community is dependent on generalised reciprocity.[24] Members like Abraham, who do not contribute the expected input, are simultaneously breaking the order *and* causing imbalance in the community's web of reciprocal relationships. In other words, Abraham is not looked down at or socially stigmatized merely due to his breach of the *Ordnung* of the Old Colony. The issue at stake is rather his inability to make his expected reciprocal investments in the venture of maintaining the right way of life, and thereby he fails to contribute to the common concern. Peter, who was rich, could very well have been met by the community members' disapproval, especially if it had been found that drug trade or other criminal activities had generated his wealth. If that had been the case and people had known about it, other members' view on his fortune and status would most likely have been affected. This is not of decisive importance here, however, primarily because Peter chose to make use of his wealth in a manner that communicated his commitment to the community and its striving for the common spiritual quest. Thereby, he did "wrong," but in the "right" way.

Conformity in Consuming and Valuing Material Goods

People in Durango frequently reveal great curiosity and desire for material goods and wealth. In daily conversations, informants often

give voice to dreams and wishes for goods and things not allowed to them, such as harvesting machines of a type not allowed in the Old Colony, cars, telephones, cigarettes, and beer. At times, a desire for money – a lot of money – also rises to the surface, in serious as well as in more playful terms. Countless times, people have jokingly asked me to bring them along to Sweden so they could work and earn enormous amounts of money, to bring them a Volvo straight from the factory in my country, or to teach them how to use my Visa-card, so that they can take what they need to buy a new tractor. Just as often, although in less joking terms, people have also asked me to lend or give them money.

According to anthropologists Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, "[g]oods assembled together in ownership make physical, visible statements about the hierarchy of values to which their chooser subscribes."[25] In a similar manner, Daniel Miller emphasizes how the study of objects not only contributes to an understanding of artefacts but is also an effective means for studying social values and contradictions.[26] This leads us onto what Arjun Appadurai pointed out quite long ago, namely that things and goods carry cultural meaning and social implications, and that their meaning varies with culture.[27] In short, objects have no inherent immanent meaning – people ascribe them meaning. As such, we should treat material goods in the Colony – both as they are discussed, and as they are consumed – as being culturally and socially meaningful, or, to paraphrase Miller, as if they actually matter.[28] Accounting for the consumption and ownership of material goods, or what money *is* being spent on, is important because the conformation or divergence from the Old Colony way of life, or what money *should* be spent on, has much to teach us about the values held by individual community members.

Regardless of what material goods people actually desire, there are some things people in Durango *should not* have, whereas there are other things that are considered more acceptable. In addition, there is also a third category, namely things that members of an Old Colony *should* have and are expected to possess. Even though community members could probably do without a buggy, for example, they are expected to own one. The homemade bib-and-brace overalls that men in Durango wear constitute another, perhaps even more illustrative, example. The original model for these overalls had a small label with the brand name attached to one of the breast pockets. There are similar labels – most commonly inscribed with the fictitious brand name *El Cisne* ('the Swan') – for sale in the grocery store, and the women buy them to attach them to their homemade products. If there are no *El Cisne*-labels available, or if there is no money for buying one, a blank white piece of cloth in the same size is often sewn onto the pocket

in its place. This piece of cloth has no use value whatsoever, yet it is obviously ascribed a symbolic value and hence considered important.

Significantly, the Old Colony system of classification deciding which material goods are acceptable and which are not is dynamic and changeable. As in any cultural context, new objects and phenomena might initially be looked upon with suspicion, but with time they can very well become considered familiar and "appropriate." The process of converting a foreign element into an "authentic" component of a system or culture, in this case the adoption of a certain piece of material goods as "Old Colony", could be referred to as *domestication*.[29] This resembles the process of "redefining" an anomaly, described by Mary Douglas, in order to make it fit within an already existing category.[30]

It is also worthwhile paying attention to explanations about why some goods should not be purchased, used, or possessed by an Old Colonist. People in Durango often explain that worldly goods are not necessarily evil in themselves, but they might bring evil consequences that would threaten the overall cohesion of the community. There are numerous stories circulating in Durango about Mexican Old Colonies that have morally collapsed due to the introduction of cars, radios, mobile phones, and other "worldly" items. The lesson to be learnt from these stories is that it is safest to keep the world at a distance. Moreover, even though banned things, such as radios, TVs, and cameras, are secretly desired, many refer to them as unnecessary and making people lazy. On a general level, colony members suggest that money should not be wasted on superfluous articles but should be spent on food, clothing and other fundamental needs. Thus, people in the colony look askance at those fellow colony members who drink large quantities of beer, not necessarily because it is explicitly prohibited, but because of the money and time they waste on it. Inhabitants in Durango doubtlessly see the economic and material benefits that trucks, cars and more advanced technology would imply for the colony. Still, the ban on such things is a means to maintain continuity and non-conformity to the "world." Technological innovations are regarded with scepticism and "modernity" is perceived of as threatening or undermining basic Old Colony beliefs.[31]

As already mentioned, due to their ascribed meaning, objects communicate aspects of their owner's values. Old Colonists give voice to the belief that by avoiding and desisting from certain things, they will stand apart on the final day; by not possessing some things and by possessing others, they demonstrate their belonging to the community, and accentuate the boundary between who is in and who is out. To a perceivable extent, "religion" is a common point of reference in Durango, and part of the general discourse through which material goods are understood. For instance, as people tell of relatives in Canada and

Mexico who dress in "worldly" clothes and who use cars, telephones, and watch television, they generally refer to them as having changed religions, or as having left religion behind. One informant, Johan, once related that his wife's sister from Mexico had recently visited them travelling in a pickup and dressed in other types of clothes than Old Colony Mennonites wear. "Now they have already changed everything; they have got everything. Now they have a different religion," he said and shook his head as if he found it almost amusing yet at the same time regrettable. Whereas other Mennonites are referred to as having "another religion," a common way of referring to other Old Colonies is to say that "there they have the same religion as us." In sum, the Old Colonists provide an example of how material goods communicate to others who you are, and thus also who you are not.

Concluding Remarks and Reflections

People in Durango display some ambiguous ways of thinking about money. On the one hand, informants have been raised and educated into a socio-cultural context asserting that personal accumulation of wealth should be avoided and consumption should be constrained. Yet at the same time, fascination over Peter's money jar as well as the inflated prices at auctions after a rich person's death suggest that community members are not completely disapproving in regards to the possibility of getting rich or to acquiring something that provides a sensation of being "almost wealthy." When we consider how Old Colonists in Durango deal with material goods, poverty and wealth, we must not forget to take into account the economic circumstances under which they live. Poverty has certainly shaped the strategies by which people in Durango deal with these issues. Nonetheless, a parallel factor that probably has some impact on the community members' responses to wealth is the idea of the *forth-coming*. To conclude, I wish to dwell on the influence this conception appears to have on Old Colony Mennonites' notions of, and reactions to, wealth and poverty, as well as to consumption and material goods.

To a considerable extent, Durango members' attitudes towards most aspects of daily life reveal that they are very anxious to conform to the Old Colony way of life, which is perceived of as the most probable means to reach the fundamental goal of salvation in the heavenly kingdom. This goal, their *forth-coming*, requires non-conformity to the world. The members' interaction with the world indicates that the principle of non-conformity among Old Colonists in Durango is manifested as a desire to accentuate boundaries by articulating a clear relation to the world, rather than by having no contact at all. Done in

the appropriate way and with the right attitude, non-conformity is expressed even during interaction with the world. Likewise, practices such as consumption and accumulation of wealth could undoubtedly challenge fundamental values of the community. Yet, carried out with the right attitude and in the right manner, even these practices can become a means of showing one's conformity. For instance, since material goods communicate aspects of its owner's attitudes and commitments, abstaining from some goods while consuming others constitutes a way of communicating one's commitment. Likewise, redistributing some of your accumulated wealth for the good of the community constitutes an additional means of conforming to vital principles of the community, even though personal accumulation of wealth as such is considered conflicting with the Old Colony way of life. Peter's generosity and the efforts he made to be a contributing member of the community helped people to regard him as someone conforming to certain fundamental ideals of the community. Isak's arrogance and refusal to share his wealth, on the contrary, meant that he was regarded as challenging fundamental community values in an inappropriate manner.

The material goods that rich as well as less affluent members consume and the manner in which they deal with money are important means of accentuating the boundaries towards others, and thus of contributing to the preservation of the Old Colony way of life. No matter if you are rich or poor, your ability to carry out the Old Colony way of life determines to what extent fellow community members consider you to be participating in the generalised reciprocity of the colony, contributing to maintenance of community and thus to the Old Colonists' common concern. While Old Colonists in Durango are not solely concerned about what fellow community members will see and think about their behaviour, it is of immense importance. The reason people are more concerned with the opinions and judgement of others than whether they go against God's will or not is that there is probably nothing more important than to be included as part of the community. The one who meets the requirement of the community's maxims on discipleship and loyalty is counted in as part of something greater. The one who fails, on the other hand, is considered a weak link threatening the maintenance of the community and its striving for the common concern. Hence, a poor member like Abraham is distrusted and sometimes even ridiculed due to his lack of means, though not lack of will, to contribute.

Yet one more question remains to be considered, namely, the paradoxical fact that great economic differences, giving rise to uneven informal power structures, prevail in Durango despite the Mennonite theological ideals of egalitarianism and sharing of wealth. These are

doubtlessly fundamental values of the Old Colony congregation's official ideology. Still, life in contemporary Old Colonies demonstrates that these ideals are far from fully reflected in people's actual behaviour. Drawing on the Weberian notion that context decides the rationale for individuals' economic decision making, we can say that the economic pressure under which people in Durango have lived for nearly two decades may well have reinforced a differentiation between rich and poor members, rather than diminishing it. This remains, of course, to be explored in greater depth.

Notes

1 See James Urry, "Wealth and Poverty in the Mennonite Experience: Dilemmas and challenges." *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 27 (2009):13.

2 Fieldwork was carried out during 13 months between 2004 and 2006.

3 Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

4 In order to protect the identity of my informants, all names in this article are fictive.

5 "The Old Colony way of life" refers to life modelled after today's Old Colony Mennonites' notions of life in Chortitza, the *Altkolonie*, in Russia in the 16th and 17th centuries, and which implies living separate from the outside world.

6 The nickname *Plata* (Bolivian slang for 'Money'), refers of course to Peter's economic status, and was initially ascribed to him by Bolivians, thus primarily used by Bolivians. Yet, also Mennonites communicating with Bolivians and other outsiders like myself, make use of this epithet. Thus, he was always referred to as *Pedro Plata*, or 'Peter Money', when people in Durango spoke about him with me.

7 If this type of criminal activity had been carried out to such an extent that it could generate a fortune, it would, with all probability, have been common knowledge among community members, as it would have come to the church authorities' attention and thus not have been much of a secret. Of course, this is speculation. If his wealth did come from criminal activities, and if people in the community were in fact aware of this, it would clearly have significant implications for the conclusions drawn in this paper.

8 Bourdieu, 207ff.

9 Anna Sofia Hedberg, *Outside the World: Cohesion and Deviation among Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis/Uppsala Studies in Cultural Anthropology, no 42. 2007), 28f.

10 Similar to many other Christian groups, the Old Colony Mennonites express an idea of themselves as being a people chosen by God, and as such they are ascribed certain responsibilities and expectations.

11 Isiporenda is an Izoceño-Guaraní community that borders the colony. The interactions taking place between the inhabitants in Durango and their neighbours in Isiporenda have constituted an important aspect of my study and during all periods of fieldwork I stayed – for several reasons –with a family in Isiporenda, even though my project primarily focused on the people in Durango.

12 Calvin Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1969).

13 Lorenzo Cañás Bottos, *Old Colony Mennonites in Argentina and Bolivia: Nation Making, Religious Conflict and Imagination of the Future* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 6.

[14] Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968). Ref. in Richard R. Wilk, *Economies and Cultures: Foundations of Economic Anthropology* (Oxford: Westview, 1996), 108.

[15] Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (Stockholm: Ordfront förlag, 2004), 99ff.

[16] George Foster, "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good." *American Anthropologist*, 67 (1965): 293-315.

[17] It has to be emphasised, however, that the aspects of life captured through this perspective are by no means marginal to my informants. Moreover, I have also included the activities at the centre of colony life into my scope of study.

[18] For the Old Colonists the "world" refers, in short, to the realm outside of their *Jemeent* – i.e., the Old Colony congregation.

[19] Sherry B. Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, 1 (1984):126-166.

[20] Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge. *Religion, Deviance and Social Control* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

[21] Redekop, 96.

[22] Urry, 13.

[23] Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood. *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* 1979 (London: Routledge, 1996), 342; Tova Höjdestrand, *Needed by Nobody: Homelessness and Humanness in Post-Socialist Russia*. (London: Cornell University Press, 2009), 2f.

[24] Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (London: Tavistock, 1974), 193f. See also Mikael Kurkiala, *I varje trumslag jordens puls: Om vår tids rädsla för skillnader* (Stockholm: Ordfront förlag, 2005), 227ff.

[25] Douglas and Isherwood, ix.

[26] Daniel Miller, "Why Some Things Matter," in *Material Culture: Why Some Things Matter*, ed. Daniel Miller (London: University College London Press, 1998), 3-21.

[27] Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.)

[28] Miller.

[29] Melissa L. Caldwell, "Domesticating the French Fry: McDonald's and Consumerism in Moscow," in *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader. I*. ed. Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); Cristina M. Alcalde, "Between Incas and Indians: Inca Kola and the Construction of a Peruvian-Global Modernity," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 9, no.1 (2009): 31-54.

[30] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (London: Routledge, 1976), 39f; Kurkiala, 211ff.

[31] John J. Friesen, "Old Colony Theology, Ecclesiology and Experience of Church in Manitoba." *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 22 (2004): 133.