

Royden Loewen, *Horse-and-Buggy Genius: Listening to Mennonites Contest the Modern World*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2016. Pp. 256. Softcover, \$27.95.

This book is the product of an interdisciplinary team under the supervision of the author, who himself also participated in all stages of the project. In just over 220 pages Loewen sheds light on the so called “horse-and-buggy” Mennonite way of life, or what he terms “genius,” focusing on the different ways in which these groups have dealt with modernity.

The book brings together excerpts from interviews and observations from Old Colony and Old Order Mennonites from Canada, Belize, Mexico, Paraguay, and Bolivia. The book is divided in two parts, one dedicated to Canada, the other to Latin America. Within each part, we are presented with various chapters where Loewen articulates first-hand observations and excerpts from interviews on different topics that act as the focus points: changelessness, orthodoxy, simplicity, genius, family, boundaries, moral economy. Loewen takes us through the horse-and-buggy universe with great sympathy for his interlocutors, while constructing a convincing image of how they see, act, and relate to the world (inside as well as outside the colony system). We learn about their family life, from everyday religious regulation to life cycle rituals. We learn about how they work, bring up their children, grow old and care for their elderly. We learn about their institutions, and the challenges of maintaining a community way of life. We learn about how they see their migrations, their history, their place in the world, the reasons for their rejection of certain aspects of modernity, as well as their creativity in the adaptation of foreign cultural elements that might otherwise endanger their belief system and way of life. It fulfills its stated goal of recording “what members of these communities said they remembered about changes that they had made to preserve their communities within the modern world”

(vii). However, the geographical breadth, and large number of narratives, prevents in-depth insights into particular places or people. The reader interested in in-depth details of particular countries or cases will be well served by following the commented bibliography at the end.

The book has the explicit intention of “not using social scientific theory to explain the horse-and-buggy people” but rather it “reports on answers to questions that we as researchers posed”(6). This I find methodologically naïve, as questions always presume a theory, whether implicit or explicit. Implicit is, for example, the narrative of modernity that privileges technology as indicator of historicity (hence the choosing of “horse-and-buggy” instead of “Old Order and Old Colony Mennonites” as a label). Moreover, the insistence on the idea of “anti-modernity” to characterize these communities (a recurring concept that appears in the conclusions to almost every chapter), which is clearly an imposed term by the author as the reader could not find a quotation produced by the interviewees. The active opposition implied in the prefix “anti,” does not do justice to the Old Colony Mennonite attitude to the world as described throughout the book in their own words (more one of retreat, resistance, avoidance and selective appropriation) and lastly, runs counter to their espoused ideology of non-resistance. A less active and oppositional term would have probably been preferable. I also have issues with the historical discontinuity implied in the two-part structure (128) that fails to see the continuity in both communitarianism and contextual adaptations that runs through their history from the Netherlands to Latin America.

Despite differences regarding theoretical, and methodological positionings (which are not the explicit core subjects of the book), Loewen admirably succeeds in portraying a summary of how Old Order and Old Colony Mennonites throughout the Americas see themselves, the world they live in, and how they deal with modernity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This should become a “must read” for anybody interested in starting research in this field.

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