

opportunity in the Homestead Act to become landowners *with* religious freedom, but Kaufman—a “skeptic” (132) of private property—sees this as a first step to the individualist culture most farmers adopted. Kaufman calls for today’s well-“positioned” communities to revitalize and re-form by drawing in part on Mennonite “creation care” theology (215) and a strong ethnic “cultural capital” (186). Recent developments in organic farming, local food systems, land tenure, and generational transmission, and the market potential of nearby urban food constituencies, suggest to Kaufman a repopulation of the countryside to the 1950s agrarian golden age might be possible.

Kaufman is best when describing Anabaptist history and Freeman’s German-Russian agrarian cultures. Descriptions of the community’s growth and decline read as well-informed local history. His appealing discussions of later generations largely through his family’s history (broadened with census, land, and church records) do not substitute for the richer primary sources Kaufman uses to portray immigrant generations. Attempts to relate Freeman to larger historiographies, relying on too few and sometimes dated studies, succeed only partially. The effects of the location of Freeman on the western edge of the corn belt and at the eastern reaches of the Great Plains are not fully explored as important factors for farmers’ decisions. Despite his goal of reviving communal culture, a robust discussion of Hutterites who chose to form still-thriving agricultural colonies on the James and Missouri Rivers is curiously missing. He included study of only Prairieleut Hutterites who chose individual homesteads. Kaufman’s call to repopulate the countryside borders on utopian, if he does discuss important small-scale programs that represent new rural thinking.

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Lindsay Ems, *Virtually Amish: Preserving Community at the Internet’s Margins*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022. Pp. 200. Softcover, \$35 US and open access.

When you upload a selfie on Facebook, you are unconsciously swept up into a system of implicit values. Egocentrism, for one: “Hey, look at me!” you are saying. And consumption: “Look at what I’m eating!” And status seeking: “Look how many ‘likes’ I got!”

These values are antithetical to Amish values of humility, simplicity, and community. Most Amish elders who know anything about Facebook recognize this, intuitively. Still, plenty of Amish young people use Facebook, because it is such a convenient way to keep in touch with acquaintances you do not see every day. This is just one example of the quandary that cell phones, the internet, and social media create for Amish society.

Virtually Amish: Preserving Community at the Internet's Margins, by communications scholar Lindsay Ems, examines how Amish communities are dealing with this quandary. Ems hopes, too, that others can learn from the Amish example about how to use new communication technologies in healthier ways. In fact, there is plenty of evidence that the kind of Facebook values described above, which are endemic on the internet, may be unhealthy, for individuals and for societies.

Amish negotiations surrounding the use of “modern” technologies like electricity, motorized vehicles, and telephones have always been a matter of trial and error. One especially entrepreneurial or adventuresome member of an Amish community will try out something edgy or new. Others in the community will notice the innovation and either copy it or want to call it out. This will lead to a lot of conversation about whether it is appropriate, starting with gossip and possibly culminating in a meeting where ministers and bishops make a ruling on the matter. Amish innovators may then try to skirt such rulings with clever workarounds, which will result in more conversation, and so on. Ems unpacks many examples of this process around cell phone use and business on the internet.

Much of the pressure for the adoption of new digital technologies, Ems finds, comes from Amish business operators, who need to use the internet for purchasing and marketing or who want to use cell phones to contact clients and co-workers, for example. When they are allowed to use the new technologies, it invariably involves compromises, like bringing on a non-Amish partner to handle digital marketing and sales, or clever technical workarounds, like a “black box” that receives and transmits cell phone signals but that you must plug a wired phone into to use. In conservative Amish districts of southern Indiana, such compromises tend to take the form of behavioural rules, which require little interpretation and are simple to enforce. In the more liberal districts of northern Indiana, Amish leaders tend to seek voluntary compliance, by appealing to Amish values like respect for tradition and separation from the world.

What guides such rules, negotiations, and compromises in all Amish communities, Ems argues, are certain foundational principles: specifically, “a dedication to recognizing the mutual humanity

of members of the community and on seeing holistic connections between people, spirituality, and nature” (12). Ems’s words here reflect her own ideals. While they may well be congruent with Amish ideals, the values that come through the many quotes of Amish people in the book are far more pragmatic and down to earth. Even when the Amish speak abstractly of saving souls, they seem to really be referring to practical matters like internet porn and frivolous entertainment. My own sense, from talking to Amish people and from reading the works of Amish studies scholars like Donald Kraybill, is that the Amish have a highly developed but largely intuitive understanding of what kinds of behaviours will sustain and strengthen their local communities and what kinds will weaken or undermine them, and that this intuition, more than anything else, guides their negotiations with new technologies. With respect to Facebook, for example, if you use it to stay in touch with a small circle of friends that you also get together with in person from time to time, that is mostly good, because it fosters community. This is the way many Amish young people use Facebook, judging from their profiles. Unfortunately, Ems’s research reveals very little about how Amish youth use cell phones and social media, since she mainly interviewed older men. If, on the other hand, you are seeking attention on Facebook from people that you scarcely know, that is bad, not because it is intrinsically sinful, but because it takes time and energy away from more fulfilling in-person interactions.

Genuine fulfillment comes from essentially two places, Ems supposes: one is close personal relationships with the people we rely on, fostered by regular face-to-face contact; the other is a relationship with the divine, experienced through satisfying, meaningful work and a connection to nature. Ems bundles these together under the term holism. She maintains that what is most distinctive and essential about Amish culture is the pursuit of this holism, manifested in lifestyle choices. This is obviously an idealized view of Amish culture, but it is nevertheless an illuminating one, particularly with respect to the question of what the rest of us can learn from the Amish about how best to use new communication technologies.

Like the Amish, Ems concludes, we ought to be suspicious of new communication technologies. We tend to think of communication technologies as neutral. In fact, they shape how we interact with others and can even influence our priorities and values. Plus, they are designed by big corporations, chiefly to make a profit. So, it behooves us to be deliberate about where and when and how we use them. Because people naturally slip into mindless habits, it helps if, like the Amish, we have practical rules or restrictions in place, to govern how we use cell phones, social media, and the internet: speed

bumps, Ems calls them. A simple example might be “Never take out your cell phone when you are with other people.” For such speed bumps to be meaningful and beneficial, we need to be clear about our priorities. The best way to do that is to talk about our values with the people close to us, as the Amish regularly do.

The central argument of *Virtually Amish* is that, in figuring out whether, when, and how to adopt new communication technologies, Amish communities rely on two litmus tests. One is whether the technologies serve to make their users feel productive and useful, to flourish, to lead what Aristotle called a good life, full of purpose and meaning. The other is whether the technologies serve to sustain or strengthen the social and emotional bonds that tie families and communities together, that lead people to help their neighbours out, when their neighbours need help, and to turn to them for help, when they themselves do. To these ends, *Virtually Amish*, is a welcome example of a new trend in academic publishing called open access, which provides free online access to the text.

Applying these tests is no simple matter. As Ems’s research shows, the process is typically quite messy: it involves trying things out in communities, making rules and bending them, inventing speed bumps and negotiating compromises, and doing all this repeatedly, when new technologies appear or new social pressures arise. We are only likely to expend this effort if, like the Amish, we are constantly concerned that new communications technologies may be commandeering our attention and thereby undermining our communities and corrupting our souls—as indeed they may. This, too, is a useful lesson we can take from *Virtually Amish*.

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Gerhard Sawatzky, *Wir selbst: Roman*, ed. and documentary appendix by Carsten Gansel. Berlin: Galiani, 2020. Pp. 1,081. Hardcover, €36.

Eduard Benkler, together with his deathly ill daughter-in-law Anna and granddaughter Elly, is on a train fleeing his home because of the threat of the imminent arrival of the Red Army. He has lost contact with his son Oskar, who had been in the Imperial Russian Army in the war but is now in the White Army. At a station where they must change trains, he manages to board the next train with only his suitcase full of money and securities, leaving behind Anna and Elly. The next morning, Bolshevik soldiers, among them