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“The News That Stunned the Most Jaded Americans”: The North American Press and the Arrest of Two Amish Drug Dealers in 1998

The Amish are one of North America’s most successful ethnic sub-communities. From a few Swiss-German families in the early eighteenth century, the numbers of Amish have grown to over 120,000, spread across twenty-two states and Ontario, Canada. They have maintained a high degree of cultural autonomy, through careful management of their interactions with those outside their sect. Most Americans in the 1990s had their view of the Amish established or shaped by the highly successful film *Witness* made in 1985, directed by Peter Weir and set among the Amish in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania (the second largest grouping, after Holmes County, Ohio). But the Amish are not just another religious sect. As a number of studies have demonstrated, they have become a potent symbol, representatives of an ideal, and as a consequence the object of large-scale tourism.¹ The Amish were described by the *Los Angeles Times* in 1998 as no less than a “national treasure.”² Richard Kidder and John Hostetler have postulated that an “Amish cocoon” exists, which serves to protect this “national treasure” and to project a certain image of it within the United States and Canada. This short research paper will examine the part played by the newspaper press in relation to this cocoon, at a time when the image it purveyed could have been under serious threat, with

the arrest in June 1998 of two Amish men in Lancaster County for dealing drugs to members of their community.

The Amish form a counter-culture that rejects certain American core values, such as individualism, and they live in a rigidly patriarchal society, yet outside academic circles they are most often discussed in terms of the lessons they offer to American culture and society. The Amish have not always been regarded in such a light. Earlier in the twentieth century their passive resistance against the encroachments of the state, such as the refusal to send children to public schools, or to serve in the military, aroused resentment.⁴ They still attract some local hostility, most often manifested in attacks by young males on Amish buggies. However, the Amish now have many defenders, and to criticise them is to incur wrath at the very idea of finding anything wrong with these quiet, self-sufficient people.⁵ A favourable image of the Amish is purveyed by the combination of a number of different interest groups. Kidder and Hostetler see this protective cocoon to be made up of several groups with different reasons for their interest: co-religionists like the less conservative Mennonites, sympathisers, including some academics, organised in the National Committee for Amish Religious Freedom (a highly effective legal lobby group), and the bundle of economic interests connected with the tourism industry in the areas where the Amish live. These groups act as gatekeepers for the Amish reputation.⁶ The Amish themselves are not included in this grouping. Their guiding philosophy is separation from the rest of the world. Their supporters claim the Amish have no interest in protecting their reputation. However, some scholars have suggested that they are concerned at how they appear to the outside world – their hostile reaction to *Witness* tends to confirm this – and furthermore some Amish businessmen and craftsmen are prospering as a result of the fascination for Amish crafts such as furniture, leather harnesses and quilts.⁷ They do not, though, play an active part in the propagation of their image to “the English” (as they call outsiders) in literature, tourist

information material or the like. That is frequently done by Mennonites. Their interest in marketing their products – and the market is sustained by tourism – means they are implicated in the maintenance of the image, even if at the same time the Amish community as a whole claims to be uninterested in tourists.

The activities of the members of the cocoon are abetted by a phenomenon noted by Dachang Cong. Both left and right in the US have found admirable qualities in the Amish. For the left of centre, their refusal to serve in Vietnam may have been the turning point. Since then, their farming methods, which involve little modern machinery or chemical fertilisers, have attracted admiration as environmentally friendly, and their lifestyle as holistic.⁸ They are neither active in, nor dependent on, large-scale capitalism. For many, their presence testifies to the religious tolerance in the American constitution. They represent an ethnic minority that has successfully maintained its identity against the pressures of assimilation.

At the other end of the political spectrum, there are plenty of reasons why President George Bush made a high-publicity visit to the Lancaster County Amish in 1989. To the Republican right, they represent rugged independence from government (it is interesting how their anti-individualism is conveniently screened out). They are also a fine exemplar of traditional family values, and particularly of the extended family which looks after its elderly and the infirm without calling on Social Security. They are firmly anti-abortion.⁹

Before 1998, the common assumption, encouraged by tourism promoters and not contested by academic studies, was that the Amish were remarkably free of crime. In general, as Cong has noted, it had come to seem to many that the Amish had avoided the problems of

thereby solve their problems. The more prominently problems of crime and alienation appear to Americans, the easier it is for supporters of the Amish to present them as a model community of wholesome living and traditional virtues.¹⁰

Interest has broadened more recently, onto their handmade crafts and organic foods (there is an Amish market in New York City now, serving middle-class urbanites), and on the success of their business practices (while opposed to running large businesses, the Amish are not anti-capitalist as such, though the individual is not supposed to put his interests above those of the community). Articles in *Forbes*, *American Enterprise* and *Inc* praised their acumen, as archetypal small businessmen, free from subsidy – and extended their eulogies to encompass discussion of the culture and lifestyle which produced such qualities. *American Enterprise's* article entitled “Plain Independent: What the Amish Can Teach Other

plethora of books and articles with titles such as “What we can learn from the Amish,” or “Should we live like the Amish?” One such exemplary text is Ruth Hoover Seitz’s *Amish Values: Wisdom That Works*, which contains the memorable phrase, ‘life is simpler with no choice of hair style or length’ – the theme is that simplicity brings order and conformity, which is desirable.¹⁴ Lavishly illustrated books on the Amish lifestyle are ubiquitous. They focus on “Amish Country,” a rural idyll, buggies and horses, quilts. In Carol Highsmith’s book, *The Amish. A Photographic Tour*, she writes: “Life in rural Amish country is picture-postcard neat, efficiently organised and severely peaceful. The toil is hard but satisfying, and support is everywhere.”¹⁵ Hard work and order, such literature implies, are the preconditions for serenity and harmony.

Such images reinforce the lyrical, pastoral depictions of Lancaster County and Amish farming in *Witness*

numbers of journalists to Lancaster County, attracted by the juxtaposition of the romantic image purveyed in places like *The People's Place*, and the sordid world of drug-dealing, and in particular by the association of Amishmen with a biker gang called the Pagans, who supplied the drugs. They searched for information on aspects of the community that were previously unknown to all but locals and experts: the teen rite-of-passage called *rumschpringes*, and the fact that a significant number of Amish men earned their living away from the farms with which the Amish were so strongly identified.¹⁷ Academic experts like Donald Kraybill and Daniel Lee were consulted for insights on these specific issues – but the terms in which both Amish culture and the drugs case itself were described owed more to the prevailing images purveyed to tourists by the active Amish cocoon. By reiterating many of the assumptions in these images, rather than taking the opportunity to explore the foundations of Amish life, the press effectively located themselves as part of the Amish cocoon, and the tone and nature of their reportage of the case served to reinforce, strengthen and confirm the terms in which the other parts of the “cocoon” had endeavoured to depict the Amish to the rest of North America. Even while aware of the nature of the “seductive narrative,” newspapers preferred to stay at the level of popular understanding and interest (technology and dress styles, for instance), rather than delve into arcane theological issues.

The tone of reportage varied little across the United States and Canada, though naturally that from Pennsylvania showed more depth and nuance, as editors could assume a certain level of knowledge in their readership. Elsewhere, it was felt necessary to preface early reports with an introduction to the Amish, the language of which is very suggestive of the terms of the present cultural narrative on the Amish in American culture. While revelations about the freedom of Amish youth to drink and party were new and shocking when put against the established image, the terms in which the Amish were portrayed were entirely conventional. For their readers, newspapers identified the Amish with reference to

Witness (which was regarded as prescient in its depiction of the encroachments of outside society). The primary identifier of the Amish, the defining aspect of their culture in all reports, was their technological denial. The first focus in newspapers was always on Amish attitudes to technology, and the archaic nature of their dress. These outward and obvious manifestations of their uniqueness are what bulked large. This was summed up in the standard identifying statement that they “eschew automobiles, electricity, computers, fancy clothes and other modern conveniences.”¹⁸ The *Montreal Gazette* claimed that they shun as sinful post-seventeenth-century innovations, from cars and plumbing to electricity and television.¹⁹ The *Washington Post* described them as using not only no electricity, but no plumbing either, and the *Las Vegas Review Journal* added that they do not use running water.²⁰ Unsurprisingly the use of horse-drawn buggies was a universal identifier. The *Ottawa Citizen* summarised the community’s main characteristics thus: “the Amish isolate themselves from the outside world and shun modern conveniences. They dress in plain, black clothes and ride horse drawn buggies.”

mentioned in the bible. Thus *The New Yorker* declared that the Old Order Amish “consider the use of tractors, electricity and even zippers violations before God.” They strive to be separate, and to be “without spot or blemish.”²³

This explanation of the reasons behind the Amish attitudes to dress and to technology was at odds with what academic studies have described. The *Ordnung* – the unwritten rules each community has that govern lifestyle issues – is not shaped simply around biblical fundamentalism. The intent is to preserve the cohesion of the community. Biblical precepts are certainly the guide, but more directly influential is the concern for *Gelassenheit* (humility, obedience, submission). The plain clothing is to avoid the sin of pride and to maintain community values over individual advancement. Items of technology are accepted

Thus, to the newspapers, as in the tourist literature of Lancaster County, Amish culture is presented as “quaint” (because their dress is quaint) – and since it appeared to be based on ascetic self-denial, a “good.” All these accounts confirm John W. Friesen’s point that as an ideal folk society, their unique cultural covering distracts attention from their belief system and the actual nature of the community.²⁷ Some newspapers got some way towards explaining the complexities. The *San Diego Union-Tribune* glossed over much of the ideology of the community, but did recognise that the Amish do use electricity and running water – but what they do not want is to be connected to an external system, nor do they want the ease and convenience such systems bring.²⁸ The press, however, tended to explain these

they have been poster people for all that America cherishes: strong family values, accountability, responsibility, a deep faith in God.³²

On this basis, the drugs arrests were jolting because as the

watch on their teenagers than the drugs case showed was the practice with the Old Order Amish.³⁶ By reporting such comments without rebutting them, the press tended to keep the focus where it had always been fixed, on the “quaint” cultural practices of the Amish.

The big “discovery” for the wider population of North America – if it can be said to be represented by the surprise voiced by reporters – was the Amish practice of *rumschpringes* – usually translated in academic studies as “running around time,” but more often referred to in the press as “time out,” and occasionally also as a “sowing of wild oats.”³⁷ Accounts of this rite-of-passage period described it as designed to give Amish youth a taste of the temptations of the world. Their parents are said to turn a blind eye to the drinking and to the driving of cars.³⁸ The major studies of the Amish, by Donald Kraybill and John Hostetler do discuss this phenomenon, and concede that the large “gangs” the young Amish form to promote socialisation and find a marriage partner, often also involve wild parties, called “hoedowns.”³⁹ Most of the informational books and leaflets available to tourists do not mention this at all. The film *Jacob’s Choice*, one of the highlights of the tourist experience in Lancaster County, though it was not, of course, made by the Amish, focuses on the choice of a young Amish man, who drives a car, whether to join the church by taking baptism, or to follow a “modern” path and leave – but it gives no indication that Amish youth, at this period in their lives, are virtually required to join a gang; even at this time, their experience is to be communal, not individual. It certainly does not mention indulgence in alcohol.⁴⁰ Kraybill and Hostetler have little to say on the subject, principally pointing out that an Amish concern for non-coercion inhibits parents from exercising discipline over their teenage children, as technically they are not members of the church (since they do practice discipline on younger children and on dissident members of their group, this explanation is somewhat disingenuous).⁴¹ No-one had given any hint that there was a real problem. Yet the case threw up plenty of evidence from law enforcement officials

and locals that members of the wilder gangs, such as the Crickets and the Antiques, were often causing trouble with their rowdy youthful high spirits. Until the FBI swooped, the Amish cocoon operated to hide most of this from the outside world, though locals were well aware of it. The Amish themselves dealt with such matters internally, and very successfully hid the fact that in addition to alcohol, there had been problems with marijuana for years, and in the last decade with cocaine as well. Thus it came as a shock when the two Stoltzfuses were arrested, and it was revealed not only that they were users (one was said to be a recovering addict), but that they had been dealing to Amish young people since 1993.⁴²

While it would have been possible to argue that the Amish brought it on themselves by failing to engage with the issue of teenage behaviour, the overwhelming tone was not one of censure. It was one of regret at lost innocence – which of course was built on the very strong and unshakeable assumption of Amish innocence. It is rare nowadays for the press (or the law) to excuse an ethnic community in which drug trafficking is revealed with the argument that wider society is to blame. It is a measure of the strength of the position of the Amish as an ideal folk society – and of the felt need for such an ideal – that it now happened for them. Commentators were quick to point out that the seminal *Witness* had been framed around the dangers to the Amish of the corrupt and violent outside world. The clear villain of this piece – more even than the Pagans – was mainstream America. It was the encroachments of modern society that were seen to be the root cause. All Americans were therefore implicated, and the Amish were the injured party. It was the urban sprawl and development in Lancaster County (and, it was pointed out, elsewhere where the Amish lived) that had forced so many of them (over fifty per cent in Lancaster County) to work in non-farming occupations. It was as a consequence of these reconfigurations in Amish life that they came into corrupting contact with “temptation.”⁴³ The Stoltzfuses met the Pagans when working as roofers. The community was depicted as endangered by these outside forces, not by any

internal problems. Newspapers endorsed the view of Federal prosecutors themselves that the Stotzfuses were deluded innocents, while at the same time reporting that they had been dealing drugs to Amish youth gangs for five years.⁴⁴ There was generally a deep tone of regret in the press coverage right around the country. *USA Today* stated that the news “stunned the most jaded Americans.”⁴⁵ The feeling was that outside society had let itself down, that it had contaminated these innocents, repositories of so many national values lost elsewhere. America had, it seemed, tarnished its “national treasure.” The idealisation remained intact, impervious to awkward facts, such as the comment by more than one Amishman that such problems had existed in their community for twenty-five years. A number of Amish pointed out to reporters that they never claimed to be perfect, and that they had problems like anyone else.⁴⁶ This is not an attitude which has been widely disseminated by those who have been the gatekeepers of the Amish standing in American culture. What the press coverage of the drugs case demonstrated was that when faced with evidence that all was not right within this idealised community, the newspapers swung into line with those gatekeepers. While they had, by their investigations, and impelled by such a newsworthy story, brought into general public view some some previously untold aspects of the Amish, the conclusions they drew strengthened the position of the Amish as a “national treasure” by emphasising for all to see the dangers they faced from mainstream America as they sought to maintain their idyllic, harmonious world. The courts concurred. Even the prosecution voiced regret, and the judge gave the Stotzfuses a sentence of just a year in gaol, when they might normally have expected at least four. A plea bargain was arranged, undoubtedly influenced by the Amishmen’s statement of repentance and their intention to join the Amish church, as well as their cooperation with authorities.⁴⁷

In spite, therefore, of the shock of the drugs case, the image of the Amish remains resilient, aided in no small part by the angle taken by the American press, with the exception

only of a few satirists.⁴⁸ The problems in paradise are now, however, better known – and it may be that the door has been opened to a more realistic appraisal of Amish society. Signs of this can be seen in reporting of teenage drinking and “sowing of wild oats” and recognition of the existence of occasional violent crime in the community. A women’s fashion magazine, *Glamour*, felt able in August 1999 to print a story on the repression of women in the Amish community – a missing part of the narrative to this point.⁴⁹ On the other hand, during 1999, envious eyes were cast on them as being free of Y2K worries, and newspapers reported a run on purchases of Amish-produced or Amish-style products in anticipation of technological meltdown. For many people, Y2K highlighted American over-dependence on technology, and the fascination with the apparent Amish rejection of technology was not only increased, but changed its tone. Previously there was curiosity as to how *any* people could do without automobiles, phones, TVs and zippers. Now those who *had* adulated such “simplicity” as leading to a more whole life have been joined by those whose consciousness of over-dependence on technology was raised by fears of the millennium bug. Thus the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* described – in an article entitled “Is techno-life driving you buggy?” – what it called the “neo-Amish,” who regain control of their lives by selectively rejecting certain technologies – though of course it was for a better quality of life, not the community cohesion that is behind Amish decisions.⁵⁰

A visit to the large Amish areas of Lancaster and Holmes Counties and a scan of popular literature introducing the Amish reveals that the cocoon – the guardian of the treasure – is still resilient, and the interests of tourism are such that one doubts whether the idealised image will change, even if there are signs the community itself is in a period of transition and even crisis.

Notes

1. Dachang Cong, "The Roots of Amish Popularity in the Contemporary USA", *Journal of American Culture*, 17, 1994, 60; George M. Kreps, Joseph F. Donnermeyer, Charles Hurst, Robert Blair and Marty W. Kreps, "The Impact of Tourism on the Amish Subculture: A Case Study", *Community Development Journal*, 32, 1997, 362-5; David Luthy, "The Origin and Growth of Amish Tourism", in Donald B. Kraybill and Marc A. Olshan, eds, *The Amish Struggle With Modernity* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), 113-29; Donald B. Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1989), 227-34; Roy C. Buck, "Bloodless Theatre: Images of the Old Order Amish in Tourism Literature", *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage*, 2, 1979, 3-11. For *Witness*, see John P. McGowan, "Looking at the (Alter)natives: Peter Weir's *Witness*", *Chicago Review*, 35, 1986, 36-47; John A. Hostetler and Donald B. Kraybill, "Hollywood Markets the Amish", in John Katz and Jay Ruby, eds, *Image Ethics: The Moral Rights of Subjects in Photography, Film and Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 220-235; William Fetterman, "Images of the Amish on Stage and Film", *Pennsylvania Folklife*, 43, 1994, 133-5.
2. *Los Angeles Times* 25 June 1998, A1.
3. Robert L. Kidder, "The Role of Outsiders" in Donald B. Kraybill, ed., *The Amish and the State* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1993), pp 221-23; Robert L. Kidder and John Hostetler, "Managing Ideologies: Harmony as Ideology in Amish and Japanese Societies", *Law and Society Review*, 24, 1990, 913.
4. Lee Zook, "The Amish in America: Conflicts Between Cultures", *Journal of American Culture*, 12, 1989, 30, 32; Cong, "Roots of Amish Popularity", 65 note 7; Marc A. Olshan, "The Old Order Amish Steering Committee: A Case Study in Organization Evolution", *Social Forces*, 69, 1990, 601; for the Amish as a counter-culture, McGowan, "Looking at the (Alter)natives", 42-5; Kraybill and Olshan, *Amish Struggle with Modernity*, 233; Calvin Redekop and John A. Hostetler, "The Plain People: An Interpretation", *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 51, 1977, 273-4; Daniel J. O'Neill, "Explaining The Amish", *International Journal of Social Economics*, 24, 1997, 1136-40. Kreps, Donnermeyer and Kreps see them as a sub-culture, George M. Kreps, Joseph F. Donnermeyer and Marty W. Kreps, "The Changing Occupational Structure of Amish Males", *Rural Sociology*, 59, 1994, 709-10.
5. See for example, *Columbus Dispatch* 6 July 1998, 1B; Daniel W. Lehman, "Graven Images and the (Re)presentation of Amish Trauma," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*

- Influence* (New York: Hart, 1972), 123, which states, “the Amish know of no unhappy marriages or broken homes (and, by the way, there are no serious crimes in their communities).”
11. Hannah Lapp, “Plain Independent: What the Amish Can Teach Other Americans About Reducing Reliance on Government,” *American Enterprise* 8, November/December 1997, 28-32; Carleen Harris, “A Second Parting of the Red Sea,” *Forbes* 161, 9 March 1998, 138-43; Jerry Useem, “The Virtue of Necessity,” *Inc*, 18, December 1996, 80-6; “In Amish Country, A Store Is Swept Up In Year 2000 Panic,” *Wall Street Journal* 18 December 1998, B1; “From Gravy to Jus, Now Amish is Trendy,” *New York Times*, 17 March 1999, F1.
 12. Cong, “Roots of Amish Popularity,” 63; Douglas Kachel, “The Amish As An Exemplary Model: Truth or Distortion?” *American Atheist*, June 1992, 25
 13. *New Yorker* 20 July 1998, 31; Buck, “Bloodless Tourism,” 9. Marc A. Olshan, “What Good Are the

42. *Washington Post*, 27 June 1998, A1, reported how elders had started a new “gang”, that had become known as the “Quakers”, to divert teenagers from the wilder gangs, and also observed how the state and local authorities had had a strong interest (the tourist trade) in hiding the youthful activity journalists now discovered along Route 30. Another cocoon member with such an interest was Jack Meyer, the owner of a buggy-ride business interviewed by the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, who had also known what was going on, *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 28 June, A8. *USA Today* printed estimates of drug use among the young Lancaster County Amish, and a number of papers published the text of the letter bishops had circulated the previous autumn asking that parents be alert for the signs of drug-taking; *USA Today*, 26 June 1998, 4A; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 25 June 1998, A12, 5 October 1998; Bruce K. and John W. Friesen, *Perceptions of the Amish Way*