

Review: *Horse-and-Buggy Genius*

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Royden Loewen. *Horse-and-Buggy Genius: Listening to Mennonites Contest the Modern World*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2016. 256 pp. ISBN: 978-0-88755-798-9

It can be all too easy for “moderns” to assume that they have their “anti-modern” neighbours figured out. Employing an ethnographic approach that rooted him and his seven research partners in Old Order Mennonite communities in Canada and Old Colony Mennonite communities in Latin America, Royden Loewen’s *Horse-and-Buggy Genius* demands that modernized readers strive to listen, understand, and learn something new about Loewen’s subjects and themselves.

In particular, *Horse-and-Buggy Genius* strives to “convey the historically conditioned culture, the genius, of these quiet and communitarian [Old Order Mennonites and Old Colony Mennonites] to the wider world” (vii-viii). By “relay[ing] the stories of people...who have resisted the logic of the modern world and survived,” it also seeks to get to the heart of this “genius” (3-4). In slowly allowing stories of this preserved faithfulness to unfold in each chapter, Loewen carefully teases key themes out of that “genius.”

Loewen’s research included interviews with 250 “horse-and-buggy” Mennonites. Though Loewen admits that full absorption into other communities, especially anti-modern communities, is impossible, it is clear that he learned to know his subjects well. He frequently admits, for example, that simply sitting down to ask a horse-and-buggy Mennonite about him/herself can sometimes feel futile. So, Loewen establishes the credibility of his ethnography by describing the activities he participated in with his subjects. In one particularly telling example, he tells of receiving only one-sentence answers to a series of interview questions. When he accepted an invitation to help plant potatoes, however, his interviewee filled the time with a detailed description of attempting to confront a corrupt local minister who was exploiting a widow (217).

Loewen also demonstrates an insider’s knowledge when contrasting what is most evident to those on the outside of horse-and-buggy communities with what is most important to those within them. For example, Loewen notes that outside perceptions of his subjects often fixate on their “overt artifacts” (159). Based on the observations that grow out of his interviews and field notes, however, it becomes clear that buggies and clothing choices simply grow out of what his subjects truly find important: fidelity to God, community, family, and the past.

Loewen also allows his interviewees' stories and reflections to do much of the "telling." Thus, chapters follow a familiar pattern. Loewen begins with a story that tells of his own immersion into the community, bringing his reader into the community with him. From there, Loewen focuses on the words and actions of his subjects, introducing key topics and then providing detailed descriptions of what was shared about them by interviewees. While Loewen's description of his own experiences helps to demonstrate how his work was sufficiently ethnographic, self-conscious of its constructivism, and often open-ended, his seven research partners tend to be invisible. This leaves the lingering question: how were their techniques similar or different from his? Was their interview data given equal weight by Loewen, or was it mostly used to verify his own experiences? The presence of eight ethnographers in the research process, but only one in the book, leaves lingering questions about methodology and construction.

For the most part, Loewen leaves his more academic analysis for the end of his chapters, and even there, he focuses on highlighting how his subjects think about themselves, not pressing their responses through social scientific frameworks. In his first chapter, for example, Loewen tells the stories of Ontario Old Order Mennonites struggling to preserve "changelessness." To do so, he highlights the musings of people like farmer David Reist, who describes the constant tension he feels and sees in his community between making money in the consumer market and sharing one's money with others. While capitalist philosophies tend to assert that those who make the most can share the most, Reist observes something different in his community. "Some of the smaller farm operations," he observes, "seem to be more generous because they aren't upgrading buildings and equipment and have more money to loan out" (22). Reist explains that the marketplace is enticing for farmers in his community and that one can easily be enslaved by it. Reist's reflection is straight-forward, and Loewen first allows it to speak for itself. Capturing a nuance that the reader may have missed, however, Loewen points out that "changelessness" is not simply choosing not to change; it is actively living in constant tension with pressures to modernize.

In general, Loewen's greatest strength appears to be capturing nuance like these that an outside observer or even a researcher more focused on social theories might miss. Loewen's third chapter, for example, uses Old Colonists' stories about migration to highlight that unlike the Old Order Mennonites, Old Colony Mennonites are less willing to stay rooted; they are more likely to simply "walk" (from one country to the next, prioritizing the preservation of the specific religious practices that "have built a particular kind of community" (72, 100). Still, Loewen's fourth chapter avoids presenting such fidelity as a simple binary between change or preservation. The local community, not just rote or static repetition, guides decision-making. Thus, Old Colony Mennonites reflect on their

migrations and communities in ways that demonstrate that “careful innovations,” in their own complex way, have “enabled old and even ancient patterns of organization to continue” (129).

Of course, using modern tools to hear and present “anti-modern” voices is not without its complications, some of which have not always been overcome in this text. Loewen admits some of this by pointing out that all qualitative research is inevitably constructive, shaped from the very start by the questions chosen by interviewers. He also admits that he and his interviewees isolated individuals from a society that is fiercely communal and that his modern framework sees history as somewhat teleological, whereas his subjects focus on minimizing change over time. Nevertheless, Loewen’s openness to his subjects and his heavy reliance on their words and stories allows his interviewees’ voices to be heard. Given this emphasis, the book may sometimes appear journalistic to those looking for the application of sophisticated social scientific theories to a case study. If one is looking for a sensitive and sympathetic guide to hearing another people in their own words, Loewen’s work will strike a deep chord.