

The Amish, “Obnoxious Machinery” & Community

an exchange

Various Authors

2006

In response to “Secular Antinomian Anabaptist Neo-Luddism,” FE #372, Spring, 2006]

Dear Fifth Estate,

When I saw the cover of FE which promised an article on the Amish and Anarchists, it piqued my interest. I live in Amish country, Pennsylvania. An Old Order Amish family are my next door neighbors.

I appreciate many of the overall points made in Peter Lamborn Wilson’s article, but I wonder if he actually knows any real Amish. I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but the Amish aren’t the quaint luddites that the Lancaster tourist industry would have you believe. So, I’d like to share my experiences.

The Amish family next to me so far have seven kids, and I’m sure they’re not done yet. She’s looking pale and thin. The Amish don’t get many converts, so women become baby factories. The Amish are known for how badly they treat “their” women and “their” animals.

I was recently at my Amish neighbor’s and watched as she kicked the dog out of her way. My friend rescued an abused and neglected horse from her Amish neighbor and has spent lots of time and money restoring the horse’s health.

Wilson rightly discusses the key to Amish autonomy as economic self-sufficiency, but let’s look at how they make their money. Lancaster County is known as the puppy mill center of the east, due to the Amish. This is the factory farming of dogs just like factory farming hogs, poultry, etc.—with all the problems of factory farming: neglect, abuse, and the exploitation of dogs, including killing unwanted, unsold, “unusable” dogs and dishonesty in selling puppies to naive consumers and pet stores. Even economic self-sufficiency can be the worst form of capitalism.

These Old Order Amish do have telephones in their barns and outbuildings. They may not have computers, but they’ll pay others to do their computer work—for example, to sell their puppy mill dogs over the internet. No, they don’t have cars, but there’s a whole industry here for “Amish hauling”—people who make their living from driving the Amish around in vans when horse and buggy transportation won’t do. I have a friend who took an Amish family on vacation to Niagara Falls a few years back.

No, they don’t have their own electricity, but they don’t mind using someone else’s. Our neighbors requested that we let them keep their freezer at our place; we’re off the grid, so it wasn’t feasible. Besides, we’re vegetarians, and they would fill it with the carcasses of the deer they killed (whom I considered friends).

They use compressed air to pump water—the system runs on a diesel engine. The huge contraption is so noisy it wakes me up in the morning, and the toxic exhaust fills the valley in which I live.

Their horses pull gasoline-powered implements for baling hay and for spraying pesticides. Yes, they do use pesticides and herbicides. Their farming practices are not organic. Some have been growing genetically-modified tobacco. They also use plastic “mulch.” At the end of the season, my neighbor pulls up acres and acres of this agricultural plastic, piles it up, and burns it, creating huge amounts of dioxin in the air (no smokestacks, no scrubbers,

or pollution controls), which settles in the soil and water as well as my lungs. I've given him information on recycling this plastic, and his response is that this would cost him money—not much different than any corporation's response.

Speaking of corporations, we are fighting a Walmart moving into this farming community. An Amish bishop sold his farm for quite a hefty profit to Walmart, creating a rift in his own community, as well as with us “English.”

And Bush campaigned hard here since Pennsylvania was a swing state in 2004. He specifically campaigned among the Amish who are very socially conservative, some of whom, the newspaper reported, uncharacteristically went to the polls to specifically vote on the abortion issue—guess which side?!

Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not anti-Amish as some here are. But, as a radical feminist, I certainly don't want to be an Amish woman, stuck in patriarchal gender roles and with 10 to 15 kids! As a radical environmentalist, I am appalled by the disregard I see for the earth and animals. As an anti-capitalist, I see that money issues rule “even” the Amish. And their strict adherence to rules and hierarchy isn't quite anarchistic. I am in awe of how they have preserved their culture and community, both under oppression and within a world which systematically destroys cultures and forces assimilation. But at what cost to women and individual autonomy?

They really are not luddites or anti-technology. It's just that their church forbids ownership of certain technologies (yes, to preserve community), but they still make use of these technologies as long as someone else owns them. My solar electricity is a lot quieter than his diesel water pumping system, and it doesn't belch toxic fumes. At least my neighbors' kids won't be running ATVs all over the place. But they aren't luddites.

My Amish neighbors' retreat from the world is no more complete than my own as an anti-consumerist, hippie, ecofeminist homesteader—just different and with different motivations. Their community of like-minded folk is more solid as long as they follow the rules. My more nebulous “community” is more tolerant, and diversity is not harshly punished.

I agree that technology often destroys community. I have sadly watched the transformation and demise of an activist community due to their dependence on the internet for communication. And my conscious choice not to communicate through the internet often leaves me “out of the loop.”

We may find some commonality with the Amish in the “retreat from the world,” but for anarchists, it's not based on compliance with an external hierarchy—but escape from this compliance. And although we may retreat, we are still working for a more just world.

Thank you, Peter, for a thought-provoking article, but I don't see the Amish as an appropriate model for anarchists.

Woods Walker,
Pennsylvania

P.S. I forgot to mention, a few years back, some Amish teens got into big trouble for dealing drugs for the Pagan Biker gang. Economic self-sufficiency, I guess!

Dear Peter Lamborn Wilson,

Thanks for your beautiful and necessary call for a secular, neo-luddite anabaptism. I'm glad to see you take the ultra-primitivist faction to task for not practicing tactical reversion, and your source material, as always, is interesting, inspiring, and intoxicating.

However, reading your piece, a reader might think that Dreamtime Village and Pumpkin Hollow, IDA and Short Mountain, Dancing Rabbit and Wildroots, and at least a dozen more anarchist-informed communes, collectives, and land projects never existed in North America.

Rather than recognize the practical and tactical retreat of your friends, you promote the facile myth that widespread anarchocommunitarianism faded with the 1960s in failure and defeat. You further claim that anarchists don't have cooperatives, farms, or CSAs. Although these points may serve your argument, they're simply not true.

Today and most days during the warmer months, I will eat food grown on my land or my neighbor's land and consume milk and cheese from a cow we cooperatively own in a neighborhood meat and dairy CSA. Many of my friends are experimenting with making their own biodiesel, living off the grid, and bicycling the back roads. True, many of us indulge ourselves with telephone and computer use, but that in no way dampens the neo-luddite spirit of the life we're striving for.

Perhaps you could modify your premise. At one time, you promoted a multifold “both/and” approach. As a writer who has done so much to inspire Permanent Autonomous Zones based on convivial pleasure rather than ascetic sacrifice, why not give credit to where your visions have taken root all over the remote rural regions of the continent? Consequently, your call for “anarchist utopianism” would have more credibility.

With love and respect,

Anu Bonobo

bolo bonobo collective of Pumpkin Hollow Community

Peter Wilson replies:

Of course, I not only know about the communes Anu B. mentions, I’ve visited some of them. Of course, I know about their “luddite spirit” (however severely derailed by Internet obsessions), but so far as I’ve noticed (please correct me, I’d love to be wrong on this) not one has given up cars or electricity or even computers. “Spirit” is not quite the same here as “practice.” Perhaps, I should’ve said there are no anarchist CSAs in my region—and only one co-op in the whole county.

I’m very glad to hear that Anu B. belongs to a CSA, but he doesn’t say it’s an anarchist CSA. Is it? Look, I don’t mean to insult or denigrate anyone’s life. I’m not a real ludd myself—maybe at best a “suburban luddite” (no car, TV or CD, radio or computer). I’m asking WHY we can’t do better. We claim to hate Obnoxious Machinery (as the original Ludd Letters put it). Why can’t we live without it?

Or at least without all of it?

To Woodwalker: Thanks for the excellent (handwritten!) letter, which answered some of my own questions about the Amish. No, I do not know any Amish and do not live in their part of the world. I said in the article that they’re paternalistic and authoritarian in some respects. I think it’s tragic that their conservatism makes it impossible for them to see that coalitions of tech-refusing communities might transcend “life style” and “class” differences through cooperation and mutual aid. But I also think it’s tragic that our vision, too, is sometimes dimmed by issues of style as opposed to content.

To every reader: I’m trying to compile a meta-catalog of catalogues, ‘zines, pamphlets, and books useful to people attempting to renounce hi-tech and revert to less obnoxious forms. In order not to have to cover ALL alt-tech, I will not consider any electric or internal combustion based forms. Going off the grid with solar is fine, but other people are covering such areas of research. I’d like to compile an “access to sources for tools” for those whose ambition (or dream, at least) is to do better than the Old Order Anabaptists and practice a refusal of tech that is ecologically conscious and deliberately reversionist—truly Anti-Civilization. Please help—send sample copies, addresses, suggestions, etc. to

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