Overview

Chapter One offers an orientation to the Amish story and the rest of the book by providing:

- An introduction to Amish and Anabaptist history;
- An overview of the Lancaster Amish settlement;
- A profile of the growth of this particular Amish community;
- An introduction to key concepts: social capital, cultural capital, resistance, negotiation, cultural bargaining, structural bargaining, and defensive structuring;
- A statement of the book’s argument; and
- A brief history of the divisions (1877, 1910, and 1966) in the Lancaster settlement.

Key Points

- The key question — the riddle — that undergirds the book is this: How does a tradition-oriented group thrive in the midst of a high-tech, modern society?
- The primary argument of the book is that the unique Amish practices which baffle outsiders, can be viewed as negotiated cultural compromises that blend traditional Amish practices with external social forces. Many of these compromises emerged as the Amish tried to preserve social capital and to prevent the assimilation of their culture and the fragmentation of their community.
- Consider stereotypes readers have of the Amish. Which five words first come to mind when people hear the word “Amish”. What are the sources of these images/stereotypes? Where and how have we learned about the Amish?
Explore the forces in contemporary society that threaten Amish culture. Why are these a threat? How might they place Amish society at risk?

The text (pages 21-23) argues that the Amish engage in “defensive structuring” to protect their culture and identity. Use examples from sports, war, and business competition to show how groups and organizations routinely mobilize to defend and protect their interests.

The Amish outlook has been deeply shaped by their persecution in Europe as recorded in the *Martyrs Mirror*. What traits, values, or world views might the Amish share with other minority groups that have experienced extensive persecution — Jews (Holocaust), African Americans (slavery), Native Americans (genocide) etc.? Asian Americans (Internment during World War II).

Compare the Amish in greater depth with one other religious minority in American society — how are the Amish similar or different?

Questions

1. Why are Americans so fascinated with the Amish? What attracts people to them?
2. What is the riddle of Amish society? Why is this an important question?
3. Define social capital and cultural capital. Provide examples of each concept from contemporary society.
4. Kraybill argues that the Amish both *resist* modern culture and *negotiate* with it. What does he mean by this? What would be the long-term consequences for Amish society if the Amish engaged in only *one* of these activities?
5. How does their religious persecution in Europe continue to shape Amish views today?
6. Why do the Amish emphasize separation from the world? How might their cultural practices change without this belief?

7. Kraybill argues that social fragmentation is a key trait of modern society. Provide some examples that illustrate this point.

8. What does it mean to “negotiate with modernity?” How do the Amish do this? Why is it important to their survival?

Statements

1. Support or Refute this statement: “The Amish are a cultural relic from the past and have no relevance for modern society.”

2. Support or Refute this statement: “Because they are so old-fashioned there is little we can learn from the Amish.”

3. Support or Refute this statement: “The public media portrays the Amish as people without faults, blemishes, or problems.”

4. Support or Refute this statement: “With their close-knit, humane society the Amish offer a model community for the future.”

Activities

1. Interview three friends who are not enrolled in the course. Ask them two questions: (a) what five words first come to mind when they hear the word “Amish”, and (b) Ask them on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = low, 10 = high) to rate the Amish on: (1) Friendly, (2) Trustworthy, (3) Industrious, (4) Inclusive, (5) Racist. Summarize your findings in an essay that focuses on “popular perceptions of the Amish.”
2. Explore several Websites related to the Amish (note the Websites listed in the Resources in Part III of this *Guide*). What do these Websites tell you about how the Amish are defined and perceived by other Americans?