Chapter Nine: Harnessing the Power of Progress

Overview

Chapter Nine continues the discussion of the use of technology by focusing on motor vehicles and farm equipment. The narrative explores the Amish

• Response to the advent of the automobile;
• Distinction between ownership and use of motor vehicles;
• Worries about how ownership of automobile would disrupt the community;
• Growing use of motor vehicles for business and trips to other settlements;
• Reasons for rejecting the use of tractors in the field;
• Distinctions between using tractors at the barn and in the field;
• Use of modern farm machinery pulled by horses;
• Division in 1966 over farm machinery; and
• Patterns of accepting, rejecting, and modifying technology.

Key Points

• The rejection of the car was a critical decision in Amish life because it shaped later responses to technology and developed their identity as a horse-and-buggy society.
• Explore the reasons why the taboo on car ownership has had a profound impact on the social organization and cultural patterns of Amish life. The decision to continue using horse-and-buggy transportation reinforced the local base and social fabric of their community and supports face-to-face interaction.
• Identify the specific ways in which adoption of the car would have threatened social capital resources in the Amish community. What would have been lost if the Amish had permitted private ownership of motor vehicles?
The current compromise between the taboo on ownership and the hiring vehicles for business and long-distance travel reflects the delicate tension between traditional constraints and convenience and mobility.

Identify the perceived threats of tractor farming to traditional Amish farming. Why did the Amish waver more on the tractor decision than they did on the car taboo?

Using tractors at barns but not in fields, shows how the power of past practice (using threshing machines at the barn) is negotiated with the need for major power at the barn.

An important developments in agricultural productivity was the willingness of the church to permit the installation of gasoline engines on new machinery that was pulled through the field by horses. An ingenious compromise, this development enabled Amish farmers to increase productivity and expand the size of their dairy herds without using tractors.

The important role of technology in the life of the church is underscored by the fact that the internal division in 1966 was primarily driven by disputes about the use of farm technology. Compare and contrast this experience with other religious groups. How many have divided over the use of technology?

The Amish are not Luddites that reject all forms of new technology. They readily accept some new technology, but are cautious about its social impact. They assess and screen technology to determine how it might impact their social life and community values.

Use the information on Table 9.2 (page 236), to review the history of technological change in Amish society. What pressures and forces led to some of these changes? How might gender issues be related to the acceptance and modification of technology in Amish society?
Questions

1. Explain why the Amish might permit members to travel on buses and trains but not own and use their own automobiles.

2. Describe the ways that ownership and use of automobiles would threaten social capital and change the patterns of social life in Amish society.

3. Discuss the ways in which the current Amish policies for motor vehicle use are a “negotiated compromise.” What are the benefits and liabilities of this compromise?

4. How might Amish life and culture be different if the Church had permitted members to own and operate cars?

5. An Amish bishop once said about new farm machinery, “if you can pull it with a horse, you can have it.” What did he mean? How did his statement shape Amish farming practices?

6. Discuss why the Amish church takes technology so seriously. Why doesn’t the church just let its members make their own decisions about the use of technology?

7. What are some lessons that we can learn about the use of technology from the Amish?

Statements

1. Support or Refute this statement: “The distinction between owning and hiring vehicles is a silly difference that shows how petty the Amish are.”

2. Support or Refute this statement: “The Amish should stop trying to control the lives of members and let individuals make their own decisions about technology.”

3. Support or Refute this statement: “The Amish are so outdated and mired in tradition that they have little to teach the rest of the world about technology.”
4. Support or Refute this statement: “The Amish could permit members to own cars without destroying their identity or breaking up their community.”

5. Support or Refute this statement: “The Amish will eventually be forced to own computers in order to compete in business.”

Activities

1. Imagine a world without cars! Identify how the car has changed American society. Develop an essay on “How the car has transformed American life.”

2. Discuss the ways in which Americans limit and restrict technology. Under what circumstances do Americans limit technology? Can you cite specific examples?

3. Craft an essay and develop an argument around the theme “What Americans can learn from the Amish about technology.”