Chapter Ten: The Transformation of Amish Work

Overview

Chapter Ten traces the dramatic shift in the nature of Amish work in recent years by:

• Summarizing the Amish agricultural heritage;
• Identifying the forces that produced the transformation of Amish work;
• Reviewing the options for responding to the changes;
• Describing present day patterns of employment;
• Tracing the rapid growth of Amish business involvements;
• Reviewing the various types of Amish businesses;
• Identifying the sources of success with Amish businesses; and
• Assessing the impact of business involvements in Amish life and society.

Key Points

• The Amish have a rich and powerful agricultural heritage which continues to shape their cultural values today even though fewer families are farming.
• The shift from farming to business is the most consequential social change in Amish society in the last century. What evidence exists to support this statement?
• Identify the ways in which Amish owned businesses represent a cultural compromise between the agricultural tradition of the past and moving into a full-scale embrace of modern businesses.
• Explore the unique characteristics of Amish work and show how it differs from work in mainstream society. Consider the ways in which the nature of work shapes the other patterns of social life in a society.
Consider the role of social and cultural capital in the formation and success of the Amish shops. How does Amish culture provide both resources and restraints to the development of Amish businesses?

Identify some of the reasons that Amish businesses have been so successful when they are not using electricity or computers and their owners have not had the benefit of high school or college-level courses.

Estimate how the movement into business may encourage the development of a three-tier class structure in Amish society. How could this change Amish society in the long run?

Consider the long-term consequences of the rise of Amish-owned businesses. What changes will they likely bring related to family life, values, use of the dialect, child-rearing, technology, gender roles, and interaction with the outside world.

In many ways the Amish have been a pre-industrial society. Does their shift into small business represent a stage of industrialization or are they still a pre-industrial or post-industrial development?

**Questions**

1. An Amish bishop once described factory work as a “lunch pail threat” which could disrupt Amish society. What did he mean by this and why was he worried?

2. Identify and discuss the possible reasons why the Lancaster Amish did not migrate to more rural areas in the United States where they could continue their tradition of small family farming.

3. Describe the unique characteristics of Amish enterprises. How do they differ from non-Amish businesses?

4. Identify and discuss the possible reasons for the success of Amish businesses despite all the cultural restrictions related to electricity and motor vehicles.
5. Explain why working at home has a big impact on Amish social and family life.

6. One analyst has called small businesses the Trojan Horse of Amish life. What did he mean? Do you agree with his assessment? Why or why not?

7. Nearly one-fifth of the Amish-owned businesses are owned by women. Discuss how this development might change gender roles and power relations in Amish society.

8. Amish schools developed when the Amish were virtually all involved in farming. How will Amish schools need to change to be able to serve the needs of the children who will become business owners in the future? Or will the present-day schools to be adequate?

Statements

1. Support or Refute this statement: “The Amish movement into business represents the most important and significant change in Amish life in the last century.”

2. Support or Refute this statement: “The rise and success of Amish business enterprises is a worm that will eventually (over several generations) destroy Amish life and culture.”

3. Support or Refute this statement: “The Amish church should make wealthy Amish business owners give all of their profits to the church to prevent the development of an elite Amish social class.”

4. Support or Refute this statement: “Amish women are oppressed because they have to work so hard.”

Activities

1. Search the Internet for examples of Amish products. (See the list of Commercial Sites in Part III. Begin with Amish.net). Make a list of the most frequently appearing products.
2. Explore the attraction of Amish products. Why do the general public have such a strong interest in Amish products? Why are Amish products so appealing to Americans? Develop an essay around the theme “Why Amish products are popular.”