Overview

Chapter Thirteen is a concluding chapter that steps back from the details of Amish life and reflects on the larger questions of the Amish in contemporary society by:

• Exploring questions that the Amish raise about progress and modernity;
• Asking are the Amish pre-modern or post-modern in their world view and practices;
• Using the Amish experience to raise critical questions about contemporary culture;
• Considering why we (outsiders) are attracted to a people that eschew values (exclusivity, parochialism, sexism, uniformity, etc.) that we often deplore;
• Comparing the assets and liabilities of both the Amish and American social systems;
• Asking how well Amish culture and society address basic human needs for meaning, belonging, identity, and happiness; and
• Reflecting on what we can learn from the Amish experience in shaping our society.

Key Points

• On the one hand, the Amish appear primitive — driving horse-and-buggy and reading by gas light — but they have made many deliberate choices about education, technology, etc. If choice is a key feature of modernity, then perhaps the Amish are quite modern.
• Ironically, the Amish appear to be in control of many aspects of their life and society. How is it that Americans who engage in excessive planning often appear to be out of control?
• Consider the subtle aspects of modern conformity. Are Americans who applaud individualism actually as free as they appear to be? What are some of the elements of conformity in modern, mass society?
• Explore the positive and negative aspects of both Amish and contemporary society in terms of social problems like drug abuse, homelessness, domestic violence, imprisonment, unemployment, etc.

• From a strictly financial standpoint, consider the value of the Amish in modern society. Are they economic parasites, contributors, or is their economic contribution a wash?

• Explore the question of human freedom. In what ways do the restrictions in Amish life provide freedom from many pressures of modernity?

• Identify the ways that Amish culture and social organization meet basic human needs for meaning, identity and belonging? What are the features of Amish life that contribute to fulfilling these needs?

• What lessons emerge from the Amish story? Do they have anything to teach those of us living in contemporary society? What can we learn from them as we seek to strike a balance between unbridled individualism and excessive conformity?

Questions

1. Are the Amish models for the future or irrelevant social antiques? Develop an argument that addresses this questions.

2. What is the difference between a traditional and modern society? Where do the Amish fit?

3. Why are moderns attracted to the Amish who espouse values (exclusivity, parochialism, uniformity, conformity and low levels of education) that moderns applaud?

4. Identity and discuss some of the benefits of being a part of a group like the Amish with strong cultural traditions.

5. List and discuss what you consider the most important disadvantages to Amish life.
 Statements

1. Support or Refute this statement: “The Amish have created a humane society that protects the needs of disadvantaged members better than most modern societies.”

2. Support or Refute this statement: “The world would be a dismal, dark place if everyone lived like the Amish.”

3. Support or Refute this statement: “The Amish are financial parasites on the larger American economy.”

4. Support or Refute this statement: “Americans are not conformists like the Amish.”

5. Support or Refute this statement: “The Amish have only survived by living off the good graces of a tolerant national government.”

6. Support or Refute this statement: “As conscientious objectors, the Amish do not deserve the protection of the American military forces.”

7. Support or Refute this statement: “All things considered, the Amish are happier than most Americans.”

 Activities

1. Create a list of the benefits and of being both Amish and non-Amish. This will result in four listings. Develop an essay that supports or refutes the following statement: “All things considered, the benefits of Amish society outweigh the liabilities.”

2. Why are non-Amish people attracted to the Amish? Why are we (non-Amish) attracted to a people who reject many values (diversity, inclusivity, higher education, science) that we cherish? Develop an essay that addresses these question.

3. In some ways, the Amish both enchant us and torment us. List the ways the Amish enchant us. List the ways they torment us.