

The Acquisition of Personal Property Among Hutterites and Its Social Dimensions

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article veut analyser un cas de changement social provoqué par des pressions culturelles provenant de l'environnement social. Les Hutterites, en effet, sont en train de modifier leurs façons d'agir dans la manière d'acquérir des biens personnels sous l'influence de la culture nord-américaine.

The Hutterites, a religious sect within the Anabaptist tradition that first arrived in North America in the 1870's, are still a significant social laboratory, more especially since in recent years the colonies, which form the exclusive residential units of members of the community, are coming under significant pressure from the surrounding North American society and culture. In this paper we shall discuss changes in respect to the acquisition of personal property which we believe have crucial importance for understanding the process of social change among members of this sect.

The Hutterites presently comprise some 24,000 members, living in 250 colonies scattered across the western parts of the U.S. and Canada. These colonies, which often present an austere appearance in keeping with the religious teaching of the sect, are essentially agricultural collectives. It should be observed, however, that the Hutterites conform to no single ethnographic description. There are three major divisions within the sect – the Dariusleut, the Schmiedeleut and the Lehrerleut – but within each of these endogamous

divisions there is demonstrated a range of cultural behaviour which makes it difficult to make meaningful generalizations. As other anthropologists have discovered, selected observations of a part of a society cannot form the basis of widesweeping generalizations without much imprecision in the final statement: this is certainly the case among the Hutterites who display a continuum of practices from the most severe and 'traditional' on the one hand, to relatively 'liberal' and emancipated on the other. Furthermore it is often difficult to capture the correct descriptive adjective, since the social reality consists of a moving boundary of principle, so that a characterization at one point in time may rapidly date. Yet to ignore this inherent dynamic is to neglect one of the most important elements in many contemporary Hutterite communities: their pragmatic adaptability to the changing social world in which they are located.

We might in parenthesis ask why Hutterite research in particular has often consisted of the presentation of a uniform model in the place of the actual diversity which is to be empirically observed. Perhaps the visible but deceptive uniformity in dress, in standards of housing, and even to some extent in the more superficial aspects of behaviour to outsiders, might lead an observer to assume that there is such a thing as a single Hutterite ideal type. Certainly the Hutterites themselves might welcome such a false assumption, since it could serve as a protective device in their relations with the outside world, as well perhaps as concealing temporarily, even from themselves, the degree to which in practice different Hutterite colonies have moved away from the severe code that characterized the foundation and early history of their sect. Moreover the presentation of this ideal type and its reinforcement is an effective way of eliciting the desired response from the outside world. It is, however, necessary to look beyond such an idealization to the dynamics that contemporary Hutterite life documents.

In this paper we shall discuss changes recently observed in Dariusleut colonies. Although the communities observed show many departures from the archetypal model in such matters as the restriction of community size, the adoption of an aggressive and highly sophisticated technology and marketing, and their utilization of a highly specialized economic base (Peter and Whitaker 1982), additional observations show that the phenomena we analyse here are much more widespread in Hutterite society; indeed the process of

acquisition of personal property by individual Hutterites is to be found in some degree in almost all colonies. Rather it is here suggested that in the most modernized colonies the process has evolved further.

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The classical Hutterite community was based on the concept of communal living and the sharing of goods. This feature goes back to the very foundation of the sect, when in the spring of 1528 Jakob Wiedemann and his followers inaugurated the *Guetergemeinschaft* [community of goods] (Zieglschmid 1947: 18). From that time onwards this sharing has characterized the sect, and become the foundation stone of their religious doctrine and practice. Indeed it has undergone a process of reification, in the sense that the participation of the individual in the 'community of goods' bestows on him the security of salvation. All subsequent statements of Hutterite doctrine take this feature as axiomatic for the members. Thus when Peter Rideman, one of the earliest leaders, after Jakob Hutter,¹ compiled his *Rechenschaft unserer Religion, Lehr und Glaubens* [Account of our religion, doctrine and faith] about 1540 while he was imprisoned in Hesse, he wrote of this doctrinal feature as follows (we quote the somewhat lengthy passage in full so as to include the theological rationalizations):

Concerning community of goods

Now, since all the saints have fellowship in holy things, that is in God, who also hath given to them all things in his Son Jesus Christ – which gift none should have for himself, but each for the other; as Christ also hath naught for himself, but hath everything for us, even so all the members of his body have naught for themselves, but for the whole body, for all the members. For his gifts are not sanctified and given to one member alone, or for one member's sake, but for the whole body with its members.

Now, since all God's gifts – not only spiritual, but also material things – are given to man, not that he should have them for himself or alone but with all his fellows, therefore the communion of saints itself must show itself not only in spiritual but also in temporal things; that as Paul saith, one might not have abundance and another suffer want, but that there may be equality. This he showeth from the law touching manna, in that he who gathered much had

¹ Rideman's life and work has been summarized in Friedmann 1970.

nothing over, whereas he who gathered little had no less, since each was given what he needed according to the measure.

Furthermore, one seeth in all things created, which testify to us still to-day, that God from the beginning ordained naught private for man, but all things to be common. But through wrong taking, since man took what he should not and forsook what he should take, he drew such things to himself and made them his property, and so grew and became hardened therein. Through such wrong taking and collecting of created things he hath been led so far from God that he hath even forgotten the Creator, and hath even raised up and honoured as God the created things which had been put under and made subject to him. And such is still the case if one steppeth out of God's order and forsaketh the same.

(Rideman 1950: 88)

The community of goods, it should be noted, did not provide for equal sharing of all the material possessions; rather it became a finely tuned rationale which secured an individual member's access to communal resources according to needs. Many of the earliest Hutterite *Ordnungen* [ordinances] acknowledged differences in such important matters as diet, by granting persons in occupations which involved much expenditure of physical energy a higher scale of rations (Peter and Peter 1980: 12ff). Other differences, such as those of age and sex, were also recognized in this way. In fact it might be asserted that the community of goods offered members of the sect unequal access to resources according to *demonstrated* needs, and these needs might be physical, emotional, or spiritual. In this respect the early Hutterite practice resembled some of the provisions of the social programmes of the 20th century.

Given Rideman's elaboration (as well as many others in Hutterite religious writing), how is it possible that the possession of private property seems to be increasing? We believe that this is facilitated by the more frequent occurrence of what might be termed 'grey areas' [our terminology] in Hutterite conduct: that is to say an expansion in the number of situations where individual deviation on a minor scale is not formally subject to sanction, even though flagrant persistence in such deviance might ultimately elicit formal disapproval. In making this distinction it should perhaps be pointed out that Hutterite doctrine provides for the individual to come forward voluntarily, recognizing his wayward departure from the traditional code, and expressing repentance and requesting the elders for punishment and forgiveness. The onus to seek atonement must come from the offender, except in the most culpable offences when

an intransigent person may be confronted with his misdeeds. Although originally such requests for punishment were seen to originate in the conscience of the individual, today forces of social control most likely push the individual towards making such a request. This resort to social control, which is no longer directly tied to the conscience as used to be the case, results in a more relaxed mode of conduct, and the display of a degree of tolerance. It follows, therefore, that minor deviations may occur, and even be remarked casually by other members of the community, but the offending individual must take the first step towards repentance and change. Although, therefore, gossip may be expressed against the offender, a more decisive process of retribution will not necessarily follow until the offence has been acknowledged by the deviant member.

Since many of the minor deviations in respect of the acquisition of personal property may be essentially private, and perhaps known only to the offender and his family, such behaviour may continue without eliciting any formal expression of disapproval. We believe that a significant factor in this connection is the growing tendency for the dwelling to be a private sphere. In earlier times there was essentially no private domain, as Peter Rideman indicated when he wrote:

Therefore do we watch over one another, telling each his faults, warning and rebuking with all diligence.

(Rideman 1950: 132)

Now, however, there is a degree of privacy, and this is associated firstly with the dwelling, and secondly with the kingroup, who will be trusted to overlook minor deviance without attracting the attention of the whole community. This process, which may be labelled 'privatization', is one of the keys to the developing trend to acquire personal items. Another, and compounding, feature of such deviance is to be found in the shifting nature of the boundary between the permissible and the illegitimate. It is our belief that in earlier times the division between 'right' and 'wrong' in Hutterite society was perhaps more clearcut, and in any case the same standards were in force for many decades, so that the present confusion among younger Hutterites, as among other people in western society, was not present. Today the boundary is continually changing, as deviant practice becomes sufficiently widespread for new norms to prevail.

It might be argued that there is a basic Hutterite principle that precludes personal possessions, although this is no longer universal.

Indeed in respect of property in the form of land, housing and the means of production, this remains the rule. A colony is a corporation whose property belongs to all the members. There are no private pieces of land, and the houses themselves are owned by the colony as a whole. They are built collectively, still on a somewhat spartan model – although increasingly in some of the most modern colonies major concessions are made to urban planning and design. The houses are allotted to families by the leadership of the community, and hence an individual's living quarters are subject to reallocation as the needs of the community dictate, and as the family's requirements grow and diminish through marriage and death.

In the more traditional colony, when a newly married pair are granted living quarters, a present is also made of furniture, often sparse, and conforming to a community pattern. Whether this furniture becomes the exclusive and personal property of the married pair is, perhaps, not clear; expectations might vary from colony to colony, and also over time. In general in the newest colonies such furniture is seen as the exclusive property of the couple, and, as we shall see, under certain circumstances they might dispose of some of it (although not flagrantly). Meals are still largely taken in the communal eating-halls, where in fact women are seated apart from men, so that the need for a kitchen in the family's dwelling is confined to preparing light refreshment, especially following the arrival of visitors.

Significant to our discussion is the distinction between goods allocated for ready consumption, in contrast to goods over which the individual has the power of disposition, a disposition which does not necessarily include their immediate consumption. This distinction relates to cash, and also to some non-cash goods, such as the less fundamental elements in diet. Thus adult Hutterites would be given an allocation of wine, and families would receive fruit, honey, as well as materials for clothing, wool, etc., in a regular ration. This would be allotted to households or to individuals, and the items would be removed to the privacy of the individual dwelling in which, it was expected, they would be consumed, or in the case of materials, made into clothes by the womenfolk of the household.

Although the regular allocation of these foodstuffs and materials offered Hutterites within the same social category (such as those based on gender, health and age) equality of access, it did not ensure

that the use of these items was similarly equal. Indeed it was inevitably the pattern, recognized in practice in many communities, that different people would use these equally distributed items differentially, so that the idea that a person might dispose of the surplus of a given product that he or she did not wish to consume, was soon apparent. This practice became a 'grey area', not formally forbidden, but not openly legitimated. The goods were clearly distributed on the assumption that they would be used, but consumption could not be regulated, only expected.

Thus there was also a range of permissible behaviour in disposing of items that had formed part of such a communal allocation. A woman might give some material for a blouse that she had received from her colony to her married daughter who would always be living elsewhere, since as a norm colonies formed exogamous units. This would not formally be allowed. However the donation of material to a daughter would also have other social consequences. Since Hutterite colonies would buy their clothing materials in bulk, there was a uniformity of dress among the women (or the men) of a colony, which was socially desirable since it conformed to the religious ideal of the avoidance of personal vanity. Material obtained by a woman from her mother would probably be of a different quality and appearance from that worn by her fellow womenfolk, and hence the gift would carry with it the chance of relief from uniformity, and thus also a minor assertion of individuality. The demonstration of personal attachments, other than that between husband and wife, was disapproved in Hutterite thinking, but we observe the increasing acceptance of stronger emotional bonds between parents and children, especially in the younger generation of parents. Few colonies among the Dariusleut would now disapprove of the giving of a gift of material by a woman to her daughter, even if the other social consequences of such a gift might still be condemned. We see, therefore, that since the Hutterite family does not have an economic base, the individuals are only able to bestow minor economic benefits through such gift-giving, which in turn leads to a strengthening of the ties between members of the extended family.

There are also certain specific allotments in kind made to individual Hutterites; these include the household items a young Hutterite woman receives towards her dowry, which are kept in a

personal chest given to her by the community when she reaches the age of 18. These will mostly be soft goods such as domestic linen, which she will have been employed in making for her household, and some of which she will be allowed to keep for her future personal use. When a woman becomes pregnant she is given bedding for the coming child, including feathers. If a mother has already had children she may not need the new supplies, and so they become surplus goods which she can eventually sell or barter, and she may retain the proceeds. We might also mention at this point the burgeoning home industry, including quilt-making, down jackets, and other needlecraft which is occurring in Hutterite colonies, and provides items for private sale, often through the conversion of raw materials, or poor quality materials, into saleable goods. Wine, honey, and dried fruit, if available, are also items that an individual may legitimately acquire, but which he or she may not need, and can consequently later trade. Furniture that a family has received from the colony in the past, but which also proves surplus to their requirements, may also be sold to outsiders for cash (usually by the women). Thus it will be seen that there are a number of ways in which a female Hutterite can engage in personal marketing, although usually it is by the conversion of goods into cash.

Perhaps the most striking deviation from the traditional way of life is manifested in the allocation of sums of personal money, which the individual may keep, and be permitted to accumulate. This may be obtained by methods both 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' (although these are not categories used by our informants). However as we have already stressed, this boundary is a shifting one. Foremost among legitimate money is a small personal allotment made to all adult members of the colony. One Hutterite community, which we shall call Colony X, recently raised this allowance to \$10 per person per month; in others it may be as low as \$2 - \$4. These personal funds are given without precise specification as to how they are to be used and no distinctions in respect of gender, relative age among adults, or health, are made. Further, it has long been Hutterite practice that when individual members travel on the business of the colony they are given a daily allowance, which with some care may result in a surplus which an individual retains. This may then, for example, be converted into candies, which on return to the colony, will be given to selected children for somewhat surreptitious consumption.

For male members of the colony there is a trend to acquire cash directly. This may be achieved by undertaking minor economic services for their neighbours. Of course this will by no means be on a full-time basis, but Hutterites, with hitherto a good supply of male labour, would often be called upon by neighbouring farmers in an emergency. The service that they performed might be paid for in ready cash, which the persons completing the task would partially or wholly retain. Small items of furniture that a man might make in his spare time could also be sold. Machinery belonging to the collectivity might be loaned, usually with labour to operate it, and the method of paying for this would be somewhat imprecise. These 'grey areas' are a frequent source of money for the male Hutterite. One cannot altogether preclude the occasional sale of goods, such as vegetables, correctly belonging to the whole community, but which might also fall in this 'grey area' and become the source of individual gain.

There is a further source of personal property, however, that is increasingly being manifested in some of the more 'progressive' colonies. This is particularly associated with *rites de passage*, especially marriage. Today many Hutterite couples are given gifts at the time of marriage by relatives from other colonies in particular, and these gifts are always seen as personal property. They will have been purchased by the donors out of personal rather than community funds, generated in ways outlined above. Although the individual items might be relatively inexpensive, the large number of contributing relatives may result in a great number of gifts, so that whole rooms might be furnished, often with consumer items that indirectly conflict with Hutterite principles, such as toasters, dishes, and other cooking equipment which incidentally also appear to contradict the Hutterite practice of communal eating. The birth of a child, traditionally treated with a degree of religious indifference due to the rejection of infant baptism, also now becomes the occasion for the sending of further gifts, although these are not usually on such a lavish scale.

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In this essay we have sought to document the growing practice among Hutterites of setting apart specific articles or products as private property, belonging to the individual or to the immediate family unit, rather than to the community as a whole. The

consequences of this practice are perhaps of greater social than economic significance. We believe that they constitute the tangible modification of the earlier Hutterite ideal of communal ownership. The bestowal of personal gifts necessarily involves redefining the 'community of goods'. Redefinitions of the community of goods are seen by us as a continuing process in Hutterite life stretching back to the sect's earliest years² and are the means by which major discontinuities are averted, offering an opportunity for change without the direct challenging of tradition. Such changes have, however, to occur within the context of a three-generational traditional memory for them to be acceptable.

These processes do not occur in isolation from other social trends, however. Thus we have identified increasing privatization, although this process may apply to a whole family as well as to an individual. We have also noted the stronger emphasis on kinsmen, who may be the source of private property through gift-giving.

Of fundamental importance to our analysis is the recognition that the process is marked by imprecision and uncertainty. Flagrant violation of the norms is accompanied by scandal, which leads to the reassertion of the traditional practice, so that the process of change is temporarily halted or even reversed. This is the anthropological reality, which would be concealed if we simply chose to present a single model of Hutterite society, analysed in terms of a uniform progression. However what is most apparent from our study is the enhanced differentiation to be found within a single Hutterite colony, a differentiation manifested not merely in a growing trend away from a total uniformity in such external matters as dress, but also in visible inequality in the extent to which houses may be equipped with consumer items, in variable practice in minor ways such as the enjoyment of supplements to the food still largely eaten communally, and in differing behaviour towards children, as well as in a variety of views concerning what constitutes appropriate behaviour between parents and children. The diversification that we describe is to be found not only within a single colony, however, but also between different colonies within the same endogamous division (i.e. the *Leut*). Although ostensibly concerned with the acquisition of private

² This has recently been discussed in Peter 1982.

property by Hutterites, our study may also have illuminated the role of informal social control in the process of cultural change.

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