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Book Review: The Hutterites in North America

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Gertrude Enders Huntington and John A. Hostetler. *The Hutterites in North America* (Mason, Ohio: Cengage Learning, 2002). ISBN-13:978-0155029156. Hardcover. \$48.50.

As promised in the book's title, Gertrude Enders Huntington and John A. Hostetler offer a study of the Hutterites, choosing communities on the Great Plains, a rich agricultural region that stretches north into Canada and south into the United States. The soil yields abundant crops of a variety of useful plants: wheat and other small grains, soybeans, corn, and sugar beets among others. As a rule, the farther west one moves through the Great Plains the more difficult becomes agriculture because of a dearth of rainfall. The western Great Plains was after all the site of the disastrous Dust Bowl during the Great Depression.

This review will examine the authors' purpose and goals by way of summary. The study *The Hutterites in North America* details the daily lives of these people in hopes of evoking empathy for them. One may easily agree. Empathy is necessary if one wishes more than a superficial understanding of the Hutterites. Such treatment is badly needed in an America that tends to lump what it perceives to be religious oddities into the category of "Amish." Although important similarities exist, the authors are right to treat the Hutterites on their own terms. Perhaps the key insight is the authors' emphasis on the importance of minimizing aggression and confrontation. Such an insight is a valuable corrective to an American media obsession with violence, police brutality, and disorder.

In fact, the suppression of tension and aggression is exactly what one expects of an ideal agrarian community. Violence must have been necessary earlier in prehistory when humans, as hunter-gatherers, had to kill other animals with dispassion to claim their next meal. Agriculture, however, demands a new dynamic. By making available more calories per person than hunting and gathering, agriculture has caused human populations to increase, with a steep rise following the successes of the Green Revolution. Aggression is no longer helpful in the large communities that agriculture has made possible, though humans remain capable of terrible brutality. The Hutterites, the authors make clear, have adapted marvelously to the demands of population density.

Much of this success, the authors note, must stem from the Hutterite commitment to Christianity. In the main, many Hutterite religious values overlap with those of mainstream America. The Hutterites live each day mindful that their actions will shape the quality of their afterlife. This belief is at least as old as dynastic Egypt. In the canonical gospels, Jesus articulates the importance of right conduct in achieving union with the Father in Heaven. In this regard, the Hutterites are conservative rather than innovative. The retention of conservative values must underlay Hutterite success. These conservative values include the subordination of women and children to adult men at a time when many Americans seem to have moved, if not rapidly, toward social egalitarianism. Many conservative Americans, however, are not far from Hutterite values when the discussion turns to authority, women, family, and children. The authors correctly note that the Hutterites challenge several mainstream values: the adulation of the individual, money and private property, and the preservation of competition. The emphasis on competition is a central tenet of capitalism. Social Darwinism, and the movement is not dead, preached the creed of cutthroat competition and is strongly at odds with the Hutterite vision.

By providing a lucid account of the Hutterite experience, the authors aim to reach a broad audience. This book is thus far from an attempt to engage a narrow slice of academic readers. The authors envision *The Hutterites in North America* as a contribution to cultural anthropology suitable for students in an introductory or mid-tier university social science course. From the outset, then, the text is a pedagogical instrument. Cultural anthropology needs many more studies like *The Hutterites in North America*.

~ Christopher Cumo