Transformations of Old Colony Mennonites:

The making of a trans-statal community

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Abstract

Through an analysis that combines the historical development of the Old Colony Mennonites, covering their migrations from sixteenth century Europe to late twentieth century Latin America, with ethnographic fieldwork in Bolivia and Argentina, this article examines the genesis and maintenance of a religiously based trans-statal community. It argues first that it is by conceptually maintaining a clear distinction between transnational and trans-statal processes that Old Colony Mennonites cross border practices can be understood. Second it shows that Old Colony Mennonite's trans-statal practices are a strategic means for outmanoeuvring states in their imposition of national identities within a context of nation states as the dominant political formation.

Keywords:

Trans-statal, Old Colony Mennonites, religion, globalization, state

Introduction

This article focuses on the Old Colony Mennonites to take up Peggy Levitt's challenge of shifting the perspective from nations to faith communities (2003) for approaching the constitution of transnational, and trans-statal spaces. Social scientists have been qualifying as 'transnational' a wide range of practices (Hannerz 1996, Hannerz 1998, Ho 1999, Dahinden 2005, Waters 2005) merely on the grounds that they crossed over different state jurisdictions but which have had little empirical or conceptual effect on the constitution of the nation. As several authors have recently noted (Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 1999, Bauböck 2003, Olwig 2003, Pries 2005) this usage threatens to empty the concept of analytical power and of its potential for dismantling "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, 2003). This failure to distinguish between transnational and trans-statal, has allowed methodological nationalism to come through the back door, through the '-national' aspect of the 'transnational' because it has often been allowed to continue to signify the unity of territory, state, and nation (Kearney 1995). The subversion of borders and the promise of the dismantling of methodological nationalism implied in the 'trans', have been undermined by the implicit assumption of unity of what those borders contain, the naturalization mode of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Schiller 2003: 579). That 'transnationalism' has rarely been used to refer to relations between different nations within a same state (being approached rather through issues such as interethnic relationships, aboriginality, multiculturalism, etc.) further consolidates this interpretation of the state being referred through the nation (see Olwig 2003: 789). Hence, in this article I recover the concept of 'trans-statal' to refer to practices that cross-over the territories of nation-states, while reserving 'transnational' for qualifying practices that bring to question the formation and definition of nations

(Bauböck 2003). Within anthropology the concept of 'trans-statal' was first proposed in the sense used here by Catherine Verdery (1994: 4). However, it is a concept that has been scarcely taken up as Ulf Hannerz (1998) and Michael Kearney (1995) noted. The term has been used also to refer to agencies on the supra-statal level, like the EU, NATO, EEC, etc (Amit 2001, Zubrzycki 2001, Ong 2004). Verdery was probably ahead of her time; with transnationalism on the ascendancy, shedding new fascinating insights in a world of nation states was not a conducive moment to point to the potential roadblocks the concept posed, especially the conflation it carried between nation and state; Hannerz recognized this issue but opted for simply putting it to the side (1996: 6). This article is therefore another attempt to bring 'trans-statal' to the foreground in order to transcend the limitations of transnationalism. This is necessary because transnationalism would confuse what the case at hand requires to be clarified: the movement and the establishment of relationships between and across nations on the one hand, from the movement and the establishment of relationships between and across the territorial borders of different states on the other.

In this article I show that Mennonites do not move in and out nations but between the territories over which different states claim sovereignty. They form a trans-statal rather than transnational community because while their community spans across the territories of different states, and although they tend to accept becoming citizens of states, they reject to partake from their nations. Their common imagination of themselves as a people apart does not include those with whom they share a passport or territory, but those who belong to fellow settlements irrespective to their citizenship. Furthermore, their trans-statal practices allow them to outmanoeuvre states in their attempts at imposing national identifications on them. Therefore, one of the arguments of this article is that the Old Colony Mennonites form a trans-statal

community, which produces transnational configurations only as a secondary effect. These transnational effects take place on the epistemic and political levels. The former, the product of social analysis of the case –the present article being one example– the latter exemplified in states' attempts to conceal (through forced incorporation via public schooling and military service or exclusion through expulsion) the full significance of their relationship with Mennonites in order to secure their own narratives of constitution (see Cañás Bottos 2006).

Fieldwork took place in Argentina and Bolivia (between 1996-2001) within colonies that belong to the *Altkolonier Reinlaender Mennoniten Gemeinde* (Old Colony Mennonite Community of Reinland, normally referred to by both themselves and others as 'Old Colony' in English and 'Altkolonie' in Plautdietsch, their everyday spoken language). This article proceeds by first outlining the relationships that the Mennonites have established with the different polities on whose territories they settled in their quest to build *the Church of Christ* since their origins in 16th century Europe, until their arrival in late 20th century South America (a critique of sources and more detailed account can be found in Cañás Bottos 2005, 2008). This section shows that migration has been for the Mennonites one of the preferred means to avoid the imposition of national identities. These migrations led to a dispersion of their settlements on different polities. The article them moves to an ethnographically based analysis of the organization and community maintenance of this system of colonies existing across different nation-states while focusing on Argentina and Bolivia. The article concludes that trans-statal strategies allowed the Mennonites to maintain themselves separate from nations, and that this very process would have been obscured by using the term transnational.

Persecutions, schisms, and migrations

During the Reformation the European feudal system was under a process of reorganization and centralization known as Absolutism which became the predecessor of the modern capitalist nation-state (Anderson 1974, Elias 1982). The bourgeoisie was undergoing a process of consolidation and independent cities abounded along the Holy Roman Empire. At the same time peasants were seeing their condition deteriorate considerably triggering the Peasants' War (1524-1526). Keeping the peasant masses in their traditional place became one of the Absolutist State's main concerns (Anderson 1974).

On the one hand, Luther's attack on the Catholic Church's claims to the interpretive monopoly of the Bible opened up the floodgates to a proliferation of biblical interpretations and reformers (O'Leary 1994). Those who followed the Anabaptist message (mainly rejection of paedobaptism, separation of church and state, and pacifism) and formed its constituency came "from all classes and estates" (Stayer quoted in Waite 1992: 459). Although it seems that the most active ones were the urban artisans (Waite 1987) together with disaffected clerics, university graduates, restive members of landed gentries and other skilled workers (Mullet 1980: 17, 65). The Reformation also had effects on a wider political level, as Mullet (1980) argues, it also started a process through which the overarching European Christianity was fragmented into local, national churches (see also Anderson 1974: 65, Zagorin 2003: 47). The subordination of these national churches to the needs of these emerging states made churchmen national subjects, starting the process of strengthening of proto-nationalisms (Mullet 1980: xii), which eventually led to the legitimation of states in secular terms by the invention of "the people" (Morgan 1988) and its political activation into nationalisms (Habermas 1996: 284).

There is a wide variety of self-defined Mennonite groups today, which recognize Menno Simons (1496-1561) as their founder (Toews 1989: 227, Kniss 1997) despite not being the initiator of Anabaptism, but joined the movement that sprung some years before he decided to renounce his position in the Catholic church (Williams 1962: 387, Cameron 1991: 326). Menno Simons was born in 1496 in Witmarsum, East Frisia and was ordained in 1524 (Williams 1962: 388). Simons focused on the Scriptural study of the issue of baptism on hearing about the beheading of Sicke Snyder at Leeuwarden for being rebaptised, and he "could find nothing in them concerning infant baptism […] and found that it made baptism take the place of the blood of Christ" (Williams 1962: 357, 387, cf. Stayer 1978: 57-58, Simons 1983: 3-4). Simons' conclusion was that baptism, as a conscious manifestation of faith, is instead an individual commitment of renouncing of sin and worldly life, which therefore can only be done during adulthood. In addition Simons preached obedience to the word of God, non-resistance and leading a life of poverty and suffering. He explicitly recognized drawing from Martin Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, which is the basis of the doctrine of the separation of church and state (Cameron 1991: 152, Urry 2006: 17).

The death penalty to any Anabaptist without the need for the intervention of trial by the Inquisition, as well as the acceptance of the mainstream protestant groups –also the very coining of the term Protestant– were established in the Diet of Speyer of 1528 (Williams 1962: 238, Zagorin 2003: 82). Simons' head was priced, as was that of any Anabaptist. Being unable to establish a fixed residence, he led an errant life, preaching, baptizing, and building churches (Williams 1962: 393). Between 1536 and 1543 his field of action was focused between East and West Frisia. In 1543 Simons

went to northwest Germany, and spent his last fifteen years of life in Holstein and the Baltic Coast, dying of natural causes in Westphalia in 1561.

Persecution made most of the Mennonites flee to areas such as the Rhine Valley, the delta of the Vistula, East Frisia, and the estuary of the Elbe. They joined pre existing populations, taking advantage of the wider liberties they had in cities such as Emden, Hamburg, Lubeck, Friedrichstadt, Crefeld, Cologne, Danzig, etc. (Williams 1962, Hoerder 2002: 296-297). One of the effects of the constant movement due to their persecution was that many congregations from different origins excommunicated each other on seeing their differences. During Menno Simons life, the Emden and Franeker congregations were split into rigorists and laxists (waterlanders) excommunicating each other. Simons was succeeded upon his death by Dirk Philips (brother of Obbe), under whom Frisian and Flemish groups mutually excommunicated each other (Williams 1962: 499, Urry 1978: 25 and ff., Cameron 1991: 327). The internal schismatic tendencies became more common as external persecution receded; George Williams (1962: 485) proposes the pun 'Anabanism' to characterise the period of the second generation of Anabaptists due to their increased use of the ban (excommunication).

In West Prussia the Mennonites enjoyed a degree of religious freedom and the absence of overt and bloody persecution. Changes in religious ideas and practices as well as their meanings, occurred during this period, especially a shift towards a change in the definition of borders by a sense of traditionalism. On the one hand, group boundary markers such as dress, language, architecture, and the refusal to wear wigs were being constructed in order to differentiate themselves from the rest of the population with whom they were living. By the end of the 18th century, German took over Dutch as their written and liturgical language due to the wider availability of

books, while Plautdietsch became their everyday language (Francis 1948: 103, Urry 1978: 44 & ff., Urry 2006: Chaps 1 & 2).

In 1772 Poland suffered the first of several partitions and the reforms implemented affected the Mennonites directly, impeding their agricultural expansion. In 1774, an Edikt forbade the offspring of mixed religious marriages to be brought up as Mennonites (Krahn 1959b: 382, Urry 1978: 59). Finally, it was changes in the conscription service in the late decades of the 18th century (Kirchner 1974, Urry 1978, Longhofer 1993: 388) which made the Mennonites accept an offer made by Catherine II and migrate to the Ukraine.

In 1786 a colonizing agent under the orders of Potemkin, who was in turn put in charge of New Russia by Catherine II, offered the Mennonites a series of concessions that would be later confirmed and referred to as the *Privilegium*, which included, among other points: religious freedom, land, and exemption from taxes and military service (translations of the Privilegium can be found in Krahn 1959b: 381, Urry 1978: 765-767).

This Privilegium was the product of a wider policy put in practice by Catherine II, towards the territorial consolidation of the state through the settlement of would be loyal subjects in marginal unpopulated areas or with uncertain or contested sovereignty such as the Ukraine (see Hoerder 2002: 312). The settlement of agricultural colonies provided economic, political and military resources to the empire. From taxation to their usage to station and provide supplies to armies on the borders (as the Mennonites did during the Crimean War, see Longhofer 1993: 404 note 19), as well as constituting a buffer zone for foreigner's incursions (Anderson 1974: 201). Last, but not least, was the recognition by the colonists of the legitimacy and sovereignty of the inviting state over the territories where they settled.

Although migration started in 1788 the first settlement, Chortitza, was founded in July 1789 by families coming from Danzig. This settlement would later be referred to as the 'Old Colony' (Krahn 1959a, Krahn 1959b: 381, Urry 1978: 78). Chortitza was soon followed by the foundation of Molochna with new waves of migrants. The Mennonites expanded, formed new colonies and prospered economically.

The Mennonites therefore became an agent of the Russian State for the incorporation of the territories by providing the means for the sedentarization of the nomadic space (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 353). That is, the transformation of an indistinct territory into one that the state can properly simplify, read, understand, measure, and tax (see also Deleuze and Guattari 1987, Scott 1998). Mennonites provided the state with settling pattern that is the epitome of readability: a grid, the result of the aggregation of linear villages which form a colony. Through them the state effectively captured the territory (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 440 and ff.). Oblivious to this contribution, the Mennonites seized this opportunity to attempt making a reality of the 'separation of the world' and the founding of the 'community of believers', which they attempted to replicate along their history.

In 1871 the Mennonites' Privilegium was cancelled and their status changed from foreign colonists to settler proprietors (for a detailed discussion on land use amongst Mennonites in Russia see Longhofer 1993: 399). This was part of a series of reforms which continued the nationalist policies developed by Count Uvarov (to whom the motto 'Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and National Character' is attributed) (Anderson 1974: 347, Urry 1978: 378, Anderson 1990: 83,87). The reforms also involved the introduction of Russian in the schools, and compulsory military service. These measures stripped the inhabitants of the territory from their privileges, in order to promote their assimilation and cultural homogenization (Hoerder 2002: 325,

Anderson, 1990 #2: 83). The Absolutist state was finally transformed into a nation-state through the changing of the principles of legitimation (see Morgan 1988, Hobsbawm 1992: 80 and 84).

In 1873, the Canadian government offered the Mennonites similar privileges to those they had received before if they were to migrate and settle in the prairies (Klaassen 1955, Redekop 1969: 5 and ff.). As with their arrival in Ukraine, territorial consolidation was behind the invitation (Sawatzky 1971: 8). The recently signed border treaty with the USA (whose territorial pretensions at the time extended to Alaska) impelled the Canadian government to urgently make effective occupation of the territories. A Mennonite delegation was sent to inspect the land and conditions, selecting two tracts of land; one at the west and the other at the east of the Red River, south of Winnipeg, in Manitoba. Significantly, one of the tracts was almost on the border itself. Around seven thousand Mennonites migrated to Canada between 1873 and 1880 (Warkentin 1959: 342, see also Sawatzky 1971: 10, Urry 1978: table 10a, 1990: 18 and ff.)

The first colonists arrived in 1874, coming from Bergthal (4202 people), together with a few families from Chortitza and settled in the East Reserve. A new group of 3240 people settled in the West Reserve in 1875; two thirds were from Chortitza, and the rest from Furstenland. By 1880, some three hundred families left the East Reserve (because its land was low and flooded easily) for the West Reserve (Gerbrandt 1955, Krahn 1957a, Krahn 1957b: 927, Warkentin 1959: 346-347). The move made evident that each one of the groups had their own peculiarities. These differences included the melodies sung in church, as well as the wider acceptance of public schooling and of the Canadian administrative system in the East Reserve. These were the main reasons that in the 1880s prompted the schism that created the Altkolonier Reinlaender

Mennoniten Gemeinde, constituted by those in the West Reserve (Krahn 1957a: 462, Krahn 1957b, Warkentin 1959: 365, Redekop 1969: 8-10, Sawatzky 1971: 10-17). In 1916 English was made the sole language of education and school attendance was made compulsory at public schools or state approved private ones. Increasing nationalism was also a source of concern to the Old Colonists. The attempts of the state to incorporate its population into the body of the nation was clearly expressed by Roblin, then premier of Manitoba, in the legislature:

> "While we welcome all, our duty to British subjects is to see that the children are taught the principles of the British constitution. . . What we need is to get the youth filled with traditions of the British flag and then, when they are men... they will be able to defend it" (Redekop 1969: 13). Similar quotations from government officials can be found in Janzen (1990: 93, 103-105).

The Mennonites failed in their subsequent negotiations to maintain their own schooling system. Within the context of the First World War, a Germanic speaking group requesting a linguistic state of exception was unlikely to succeed. The Mennonites formed new settlements in Alberta, as well as sending emissaries to the USA, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Mexico to evaluate the possibilities of migration (Krahn 1957a: 463, Krahn 1959a: 40, Sawatzky 1971: 27, 32). In February 1921 the then President of Mexico, Alvaro Obregón granted them their requested privilegium (Redekop 1969: 251, Sawatzky 1971: 40). As with the previous migrations, a new division occurred, between those who decided to stay, accepting the new rules and regulations imposed by the state, while others emigrated. Of the 4526 members of the Old Colony that were in Manitoba in 1922, 3340 had gone to Mexico by 1926 (Krahn 1959a: 41).

The Mexico that received the Mennonites had just come out a revolution. A land reform had been implemented and, the Mennonites acquired the land of former *latifundistas* (large landowners) who, through this transaction, found a way of avoiding expropriation (Will 1997). President Obregón, who had a farming background, expected the Mennonites to become a positive development influence, and an example for the rest of the population. Indeed, the Mennonite work ethic is highlighted in the 'Letter of Special Concessions to the Old Colony Church' which was the basis of their Privilegium.

Initially a number of colonies were established in the states of Chihuahua and Durango. But soon they grew in number and had to expand their land base, forming new colonies in the states of Zacatecas, Campeche and Tamaulipas. According to some of my informants, it was during this 'Mexican period' that several processes of economic modernization took place. Cheese factories were built, and tractors introduced in the colonies. Their conspicuous usage as means of transportation to the cities prompted the replacement of their rubber tyres with steel ones in order to restrict their usage to agricultural labour. In this way, the Mennonites attempted to maintain the separateness from the world while at the same time keeping and consolidating their positioning in the wider economy.

The unavailability (in terms of price/quality) of land in Mexico prompted further migratory movements to British Honduras (1958), and Paraguay (Sawatzky 1971: 189-190). My informants in Bolivia and Argentina, who had indeed made the decision to leave Mexico towards Bolivia (in the late sixties) and Argentina (from 1986 onwards) mentioned fear of military and educational impositions by the state, in addition to local issues: Lack of land and the sudden change in the price relationship between agricultural prices and oil which made irrigation uneconomical in the

colonies in Chihuahua; whereas those coming from La Honda colony (in Zacatecas) found in migration the means to separate from the ones who had accommodated and modernized themselves and become worldly. This process has continued and in December 1999 I was told that there were no longer any Old Colonies in Mexico; their acceptance of pick-up trucks, cars, electricity and other aspects of modern life was considered in breach of the practice of separation from the world. Since some of their fellow colonists had become part of the world, the *Christenvolk* (people of Christ) had to leave in order to remain separate. Greener pastures were sought in Bolivia, a country that was at the time seeking to develop the Chaco after a series of unsuccessful military encounters with its neighbours. Landlocked as a consequence of the War of the Pacific (1879-1883), Bolivia searched for a new oceanic access to the Atlantic through the Chaco, which until then had been a 'forgotten region':

> In the Chaco, while the civilized population diminished instead of increasing, the indigenous population defied for three centuries the authority of the conquistadors and continually flouted the Republic. (Father Julio Murillo quoted in Secretary General to the Council 1934: 153)

The Chaco provided an access to the Atlantic through the Paraguay River, but it become a precious prize when oil was discovered, triggering the Chaco War (1932-1935) between Bolivia and Paraguay. Until then, the department of Santa Cruz (the main political division that encompasses the Bolivian Chaco) had been an isolated and secessionist prone region (Lanning 1971: 18). After the Chaco War, roads were built and railroad tracks laid (see also Fifer 1967, Fifer 1982). Both internal migration from the Andes, as well as international immigration were directed to the area and Santa Cruz became the second largest city in the country by 1976 (Urquiola 1999).

Legislation promoting the agrarian reform, universal suffrage and the nationalization of the tin mines was passed during Paz Estenssoro's first presidency (1952-1956). In 1954 the Bolivian and Japanese governments organized the formation of agricultural colonies in the department of Santa Cruz with settlers from Okinawa, leading to the founding of Okinawa 1, Okinawa 2, and Okinawa 3, and San Juan de Yapacani (Consejo Nacional de Población - Fondo de Naciones Unidas para Actividades en Población 1986, Suzuki 2006). In the 1970s Russian Old Believers (coming originally from Siberia but who had settled in Brazil) founded three colonies: Toborichi Rio Grande, Cachuela Esperanza and Nueva Ichoa (Fifer 1982: 430, Consejo Nacional de Población - Fondo de Naciones Unidas para Actividades en Población 1986). In this context of colonization, nationalization, and agrarian restructuring, Mennonites from Mexico were granted their sought for privileges in the Decreto Supremo 06030 of the 16th of March 1962 (signed by Paz Estenssoro during his second presidency) (Consejo Nacional de Población - Fondo de Naciones Unidas para Actividades en Población 1986).

The Mennonites seemed to provide several benefits from the perspective of the state. First, they would recognize the legitimacy of the Bolivian State. Second, their sedentary character was more compatible with the way states 'act, think, and see' than the transhumant indigenous hunter gatherers, and it was expected that the former would have an influence on the latter to settle. Third, the state valued the Mennonites' contribution towards the economic development of the area through the putting into production of previously 'unused' land.

Mennonites of different church affiliations took advantage of the privileges; they settled in Bolivia and grew, developing into several daughter colonies (by the year

2000 there were forty-one Mennonite colonies, with an estimated population of 40.000).

In Argentina, Old Colony Mennonites formed La Nueva Esperanza in 1986, located in the south-east corner of the Province of La Pampa. Its inhabitants come mainly from the Nuevo Casas Grandes and La Honda colonies in Mexico, together with a few families from different colonies in Bolivia.

Argentina is usually self-defined as a country of immigrants, as Arnd Schneider puts it summarizing the standard Argentine historiography, "Argentina (…) was constructed as a modern country through immigration. That is to say, immigration was seen as a crucial agent of modernization by the Argentine elite and linked to notions of economic and political progress" (Schneider 1996: 174). Although the Mennonites' fitted the 19th century profile of desirable populations to be attracted (agriculturalists of north-European stock with a strong work ethic) their arrival in the late twentieth century was anachronic to the national narrative. The Mennonites were nevertheless allowed to immigrate collectively but did not obtain a written Privilegium, government officials promised them that they would not be coerced into military service and that they could retain their schooling system.

Within ten years of their arrival, the provincial Ministry of Education started to pressure the Mennonite colony to make them accept public schooling. First, offering to build provincial public schools, then to send teachers to complement the teaching of the Mennonite schools with partial implementation of the syllabus. An agreement was reached whereby children who were born in Argentina (and therefore claimed by the Argentine State as Argentine through *jus solis*) were to be taught Spanish by their parents, using material provided by the State. Several families migrated back to Bolivia to avoid this imposition. This movement brings to the foreground the

importance of different colonies to simultaneously coexist in different territories, allowing the building of a community and of deploying strategies to subvert state borders and impositions.

The maintenance of a trans-statal community

In this section I focus on the ways in which the Mennonites construct and maintain a community across national borders. I show how the internal organization of colonies is related to the inter-colony constitution of the Christenvolk, and how this allows the deployment of trans-statal strategies between different colonies in different countries. During my field research, there were a total of forty-one Mennonite colonies in Bolivia, of which fifteen belonged to the Old Colony. In Argentina, there were two colonies belonging to the Old Colony. Other settlements belonging to the Old Colony could be found in Paraguay and Belize.

Each colony has its own religious structure, the *Leardeenst* (lit. 'the educators'), formed by various *Prädjasch* (preachers, sing. Prädja), one *Diaʼkoon* (Deacon) and one *Eltesta* (lit. the 'Eldest one', pl 'Eltestasch'). The Eltesta is supposed to have the last word on any issue raised. He also administers baptism and the Lord's Supper and ordains Prädjasch and other colonies' Eltestasch. The Leardeenst's main duty is to care for the spiritual welfare of the colony. On the one hand they administer the sacraments (their political aspects will become apparent later) and oversee schoolwork and what is taught to the children (who attend one-room schools located within the colony, and do not comply with national curricula). At school children are taught German, which is used both as a written and liturgical language, whereas Plautdietsch remains strictly within the secular and oral spheres. After finishing school, children can attend mass, since they are now supposedly able to understand the written and liturgical language. On the other hand a continuous process takes

place at the weekly masses, where the sermons continuously remind the attendees of how life should be led following the teachings and examples of Christ, the Apostles and the martyrs. Lastly, the Leardeenst possess a powerful tool for obtaining repentance and compliance: the *Kjoakjebaum* (excommunication, lit. church-ban). The apostate is banned from attending church, and excluded from social activities. All social contact with him is forbidden, unless it is directed towards his repentance.

Formally, membership in the community (meaning full adult rights) is attained through baptism. When submitting to baptism, individuals commit to abide by the rules and regulations of the colony, publicly manifesting their compliance to the creed, and becoming fully responsible towards the colony as a whole (until then it is their parents' authority to which they must respond). In this way, they become members of the church and obtain all adulthood rights and duties (most importantly the possibility of getting married and owning land). Some of my informants were conscious of that situation, regretting the current lack of spirituality of the event and claiming that nowadays *young people only baptize just to get married*. Although the seeming compulsoriness of baptism was not recognized, the fact that almost the totality of youngsters get baptized is interpreted rather as an achievement, a sign of the fulfillment of one of their obligations towards God: the passing on of the faith to their descendants. As one colonist explained:

> *We want our children to learn the religion, and then, when they grow up, they will see with their hearts that it is the right religion. They are not obliged; baptism is of their own choosing. But once they are baptized, they are obliged to follow this law, this religion. Because it is not only for us, it is for the one above… We do not baptize children; we only do it when they are able to understand the word of God, the real truth.*

Note the similarities between the transcendental objectives of the teaching of the faith for the Mennonites, with the place of education for nation building purposes as expressed by Roblin above. The only change is in the object towards which affection is oriented, but in both cases it is towards a transcendental entity (God, the British flag) that acts as a guiding beacon in the reproduction of society.

If through baptism a person becomes a full member of the community, through the Lord's Supper he or she periodically confirms his or her belonging to the Church of Christ. As one Mennonite explained:

> *We all get together in the church, and the Eltesta asks us if we are all in peace with each other. If there is anybody who has a problem with another member of the community, he has to stand up and say what the problems are. Things cannot continue until they get sorted. When we are all in peace, then we have communion, and share the Holy Supper.*

Among the Mennonites, the Lords' Supper acts as a confirmation of the continuity of community by reasserting its exclusiveness and separateness, evidenced by their strict observance in allowing only members of the church. It should be recalled that one becomes a member by virtue of baptism, to which only the offspring of members (with extremely few adopted exceptions) are eligible. Members of different colonies that are considered by their peers to belong to the Old Colony, are allowed to partake of the Lord's Supper if they find themselves in a colony different from the one where they reside. This last point evidences that in practice membership in one colony implies membership in the whole group of colonies. Indeed the definition of the Old Colony, despite the visual separateness of the geographical location of individual colonies, is not a territorially bound one, but defined by the sharing of a common Ordninj between different colonies located in different countries. The Ordninj is a

document written by a collective formed by the Eltestasch of the different settlements that belong to the Old Colony, which states, in concrete terms a set of rules and regulations to be observed by all members. It incorporates the prohibition of ownership of cars and musical instruments, the prescription replacing rubber tyres with steel spikes on tractors, as well as limiting the range of acceptable attire and personal care of its members. This document is not widely available, but read in church once a year. It is this agreement on a common set of rules and norms that allows members of one colony to be recognized as equals by members in other colonies. This mutual recognition is therefore the framework upon which a translocal and trans-statal community is built. In practice, members wishing to move residence to a different colony (regardless of its country of location) need only a letter of reference from their local Eltesta, and to be subject to a year on probation on their new colony.

In addition to the organized collective movements outlined in the first section, it is not uncommon for Mennonites to move between colonies, giving reasons that range from no more than the wish to try out a different place; economic situation; or to liberate oneself from a social environment in which they are not happy. Franz was born in Mexico, spent his youth and got married in Riva Palacios (one of the oldest and biggest colonies in Bolivia), where his four children were born. He then moved to Argentina with his wife and children. After a few years, he moved back to Riva Palacios, only to return to Argentina two years later. The last time I saw him in Argentina, he told me he was strongly considering returning to Bolivia because of his unhappiness with the new colony authorities (although according to the last news I received, he was taking part in constructing a new colony in Argentina). One day, Franz, was telling me how he used his different documents according to the borders

he had to cross. Having residence documents for both Bolivia and Argentina (in addition to his Mexican citizenship due to his birth), Franz would leave Bolivian immigration with his Bolivian documents, swap them while crossing the bridge, and enter Argentina as a resident. That a member of a group who aspires to remain separate from the world through different strategies of selective technological appropriation, displayed strategies similar to Hong Kong executives who jet-set around the Pacific rim was indeed surprising at the very least (Ong 1999). His possession of multiple documents evidenced his relationship to different states, the historical base of which he highlighted: *my grandchildren are Argentine, my children are Bolivian, I am Mexican, my parents were Canadian, and my great grandparents Russian.* He then continued paraphrasing the Bible (Phil. 3:20): *Our fatherland is not of this world, our fatherland is heaven.* On a first look, it might appear contradictory that the possession of multiple citizenships, the adoption of a genealogy of linkages to different states while claiming belonging to a heavenly fatherland. This apparent contradiction is due to the methodological nationalism that strives to link the structures of affection linked to identification, citizenship, and states. We have to read the succession of citizenships in light of the Mennonite history, the succession of citizenship evidencing the nationalities that had been avoided through their schisms and migration on their path towards their fatherland, while document carrying, just an imposed necessity which is kept as long as it does not interfere with their transcendental fatherland. However, when multiple documentation can be secured, it provides further strategies in the Old Colony avoidance of the nation.

Abraham was also born in the same colony as Franz and also moved to the colony in La Pampa, where I met him during my 1996-1998 fieldwork, at the time he also owned land in several colonies in Bolivia, which he bought for his children. In the

year 2000 I found him in Pinondi colony, 300 km south of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, in

Bolivia. Although he still owned land in Argentina and in other settlements, he was

temporarily living in a borrowed house while looking for land in the Charagua area in

order to build a new colony where he and other *émigrés* from La Pampa could settle.

Abraham was not alone; along with his wife and children were his mother and father,

brothers and sisters (all with their respective spouses and children) (for an analysis of

the relationship between migration and marriage strategies see Cañás Bottos 1999).

Although colonies are to a large extent similar to one another, the fact that *other*

colonies exist (or can be created) without necessarily requiring a break with the

community is an indispensable factor for these strategies to exist. The frame of Old

Colony social relations is not individual colonies but the system of colonies spread on

different polities. As Gassan Hage argues on the Lebanese diaspora, the system of

Mennonite colonies is a "discontinuous site" rather than "multi-sited" (Hage 2005),

and it is precisely this discontinuity that becomes a resource for outmanoeuvring

states. The *simultaneous existence* of different colonies between which relationships

are established and a discontinuous site constructed, is what allows for the practice of

translocal and trans-statal strategies. This is why treating single colonies as basic and

total units (or several colonies as simple replicas of one) not only misses the frame of

reference of the Mennonites themselves, imposing limits where there are none, but

impedes the perception and analysis of trans-statal practices which are central for

understanding both the Old Colony's historical process as well as the translocal, and

trans-statal strategizing of its members.

Other translocal and trans-statal practices include mutual visiting, be it just for

pleasure, to do business, or to attend to ritual occasions (funerals, weddings, baptisms,

etc.), private epistolary exchange and the writing of open letters to the *Die*

Mennonitische Post (a fortnightly newspaper of wide circulation in the colonies).
Finally, by the end of every year, each Eltesta sends a demographic report to all other colonies summarizing their parish records, and the changes occurred during the year. These are then read aloud in church to inform its inhabitants of the situation of the other colonies. This practice contributes to the building of an imagined community with those statistically present although physically absent, and even personally unknown.

These practices manifest the interchangeability of members between colonies. In the eyes of individuals, this interchangeability gives flesh and blood to the abstract construction of *Christenvolk.* Since every so often, when members move between colonies or share their experiences in written form, it provides an opportunity for proving their shared membership and fellowship. It also teaches them that their life strategies need not be bounded to the colony where they live, but extended to the network of fellow Old Colonies. More importantly, it evidences that the ties that keep them together override nation-states.

Conclusion: The Old Colony Mennonites' place in the world

This history tells about the ironical place of the Mennonites in the world (ironical, since one of their tenets is the separation from the world and therefore claim not to belong to this world) and has implications beyond the Mennonite case.

After an initial contribution to the secularization (and subversion) of the political order in sixteenth-century Europe (and its concomitant persecution and expulsion) we can identify a historical pattern that seems to have characterized the relationships the Mennonites have had with the different empires and nation states. This pattern consists of a succession of two distinct phases: The first one characterized by the

acceptance of the Mennonite colonists, considered a positive factor for territorialization, economic development and the consolidation of sovereignty through the settlement and population of marginal areas, and therefore granted Privilegia. Through these Privilegia the Mennonites were transformed into exceptions, benefiting from the differential treatment they received by not being subject to the general conditions that applied to the rest of the population. Although they might have interpreted these negotiations as a way of securing their separation from the world and the state, they actually contributed to the state's territorialization and consolidation (materially and symbolically) as sovereign.

A second stage is entered once the state's initial objectives of territorialization have been attained. In this change, the divine right of the King, gave way to 'the people' as the ultimate source of legitimation (cf. Kantorowicz 1957, Morgan 1988). This is a stage where the state sets itself the task of building its own principles of legitimacy: the imposition of 'official nationality'. A process that Anderson argues should be understood as a means of retaining dynastic power through the stretching of the "short, tight skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire" (Anderson 1990: 82). Or, in a less phallic way, to invent the people (Morgan 1988) and then inculcate the "fundamental presuppositions of the national self-image" (Bourdieu 1998: 46) on the inhabitants of the territory over which the state claimed sovereignty. This was achieved mainly through public schooling and military service. The Mennonites were therefore witnessing, through the change of attitude towards them by the state from recipients of privileges –and therefore being recognized as different– to being subjects to the imposition of 'official nationalisms' –an attempt to homogenize them with the rest of the population, the transformation of empires (and kingdoms) into nations. Having initially worked for the state, the Mennonites attempted to remain separate

from the nation through migration, searching for a new state that would privilege territorial consolidation over nation-building.

That the Mennonites should remain separate from the nation was explained to me by Franz when, paraphrasing Jesus in Mt. 6:24 and Lk. 16:13 said: *one heart cannot have two masters.* In this way both Jesus and the nation (through the recourse to the naturalization of nationality and its conflation with citizenship) are perceived as competing for the ultimate loyalty.

Being a Mennonite and being a 'national' are seen by the Mennonites as exclusive of each other. Jesus as God's son and Saviour ought to be witnessed and upheld even in the face of torture and death. Concomitantly, from the perspective of nationalism: *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.* Or, put more prosaically by a modern anthropologist: "In war, the modern state demands from its citizens not only that they kill and maim others but also that they themselves suffer cruel pain and death" (Asad 2003: 117). Whereas the Mennonites look at martyrs' lives for suitable exemplars in the keeping of the faith to be followed in times of difficulty and persecution –and van Thieleman van Braght's (1982) voluminous martyrology can be found in numerous Mennonite houses– nation-states provide their own version in their heroes and monuments to the anonymous unknown soldiers. This is part of what was at stake when different states attempted to impose on them the respective national curricula.

In addition to the individual internal dynamics of state and nation building processes, a context of the globalization of the nation-state form which meant the lack of new frontiers to colonize, and states to consolidate territorially presented the Old Colony with new challenges. The Old Colony's answer to retaining separation from the globalization of the national order of things that they themselves contributed to construct has been to form a trans-statal community. That is, a community not bound

to any one particular place, but whose land base is spread across state borders forming a discontinuous site. Bound by a common agreement, and imagined and maintained through various practices such as publishing, travelling, intercolony migration, visiting, and census practices. Behind a façade of sendentarism and rootedness suggested by the clear cut geographical limits of the colonies, together with their agricultural practices and their investment on improving the land (building houses, roads, wells, etc.) which made them a desirable factor for state consolidation, were lurking strategies that spun not only across individual colonies, but also across countries. In addition, and similarly to the agricultural benefits stemming from their settlement in different ecological areas, their simultaneous existence in different polities allowed them a reduction of the risk of sudden change of political conditions in any one of them (as also does their multiple-passport holding strategies).

We can now have a better understanding of Franz's words. He was not speaking about a genealogical succession of nationalities (loyalties and emotional ties), but of citizenships. When later Franz added: *our fatherland is not of this world, our fatherland is heaven* it became clear which identification he was reclaiming as his own, as well as stating and where his loyalty was. In recognizing such distinction, Franz had successfully gone beyond "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) and decoded the "double code of nationality" (Habermas 1996) that attempts to make an indissoluble unity out of citizenship and nationality. This is why the case of the Old Colony, requires the analyst to mark a distinction between 'trans-statal' and 'transnational' to refer to practices that spawn the territories under the aegis of states. It is between the territories of states that Mennonites move, and not between nations. In fact, it has been the creation of this trans-statal space that has

allowed them, in a world ruled by the national order of things, to remain separate from the nations that were promoted by the states where they settled.

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