

Order and Dissent among Old Colony Mennonites

A Regime of Embedded Sovereignty

Lorenzo Cañas Bottos¹

This is a pre-print version for open repository storage of an already published work.

Please use the following definitive published version for quotation and citation:
Cañas Bottos, Lorenzo. 2009. "Order and dissent among Old Colony Mennonites: a regime of embedded sovereignty." In *Permutations of Order: Religion and Law as Contested Sovereignities*, edited by Bertram Turner and Thomas G Kirsch, 107-124. Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Introduction

Using the example of the Old Colony Mennonites, this paper presents an ethnographically grounded discussion on the interface between political and religious practices of ‘the exception’ and ‘sovereignty’. The Mennonites are a religious group with roots in sixteenth-century Friesland. After fleeing the religious persecution that followed the reformation in sixteenth-century Holy Roman Empire to Prussia, they later migrated to Ukraine (1780s), Canada (1870s), Mexico (1920s), Bolivia (1970s), and Argentina (1980s).² In all these instances, the Mennonites negotiated ‘states of exception’ as preconditions for their immigration into the territories where they settled, and left them in order to avoid the imposition of public schooling and military service.

This chapter proposes the concept of ‘embedded sovereignty’ to understand the complexities of the relationship between: a) states and Mennonite authorities; b) states

¹ The author acknowledges the CVCP, Fundación Antorchas and the University of Manchester for funding the research. Final drafting was done under Estonian Science Foundation grants SF0130033s07 and ETF7360.

² The dates mentioned refer to the immigration to the preceding polity.

and Mennonite believers as citizens; c) Mennonite authorities and Mennonite believers. In this context, 'embedded' refers to two aspects. On the one hand, it refers to the 'spatial' configuration of the various grounding bases of the different institutions claiming sovereignty, thus producing a nesting effect like Russian dolls, and inviting one to empirically examine how this nesting is negotiated and maintained, and to investigate the conflicts that it generates. On the other hand, it refers to how different spheres (in this case the political and the religious) interact with each other in the process of legitimation and the practice of sovereignty, bringing into question how political and religious agents misinterpret, mirror, and misrepresent themselves and each other in these processes.

Giorgio Agamben's resurrection of *homo sacer* and his revitalization of Carl Schmitt's notion of sovereignty (Agamben 1998; 2005; Schmitt 2005) has been the flashpoint of a recent explosion of analyses of contemporary political events. This production has focused chiefly on extreme cases of politics of exception and biopolitics, such as concentration camps (Feuchtwang 2006; Gregory 2006), prisons (Rhodes 2005), the treatment of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees (Prem Kumar and Grundy-Warr 2004; Turner 2005; Feldman 2007), and post 9/11 US policy (Chappell 2006). Having become the norm in governmentality, the exception has also become the privileged cipher (together with the other by-product of sovereignty, *homo sacer*) that enables the sovereign to be identified. But the analysis of sovereignty carries a risk similar to that of thinking the state; as Pierre Bourdieu puts it, "of taking over (or being taken over by) a thought of the state, of applying to the state categories of thought produced and guaranteed by the state" (1998: 33). Therefore, in order to not be taken over by the sovereign, we need to think the sovereign from the outside. Indeed, the question of 'the one' who decides on the exception as the crucial test of sovereignty (Schmitt 2005) can be seen as a direct expression of the thought of the state in its attempts at establishing itself as the holder of the "monopoly of the universal" (Bourdieu 1998: 59). Therefore, to stop the analysis at the point of identification of the sovereign runs the risk of contributing to the recognition (and consolidation of) the success of the state in attaining the monopolies it claims.

One of the strengths of anthropological analysis is its use of unfamiliar cases to help us rethink our naturalized world and categories. This means that from an

anthropological perspective, both state-based juridical, political, and philosophical concepts—such as *homo sacer*, sovereignty, citizenship, nationality and the exception—as well as the jurists, genealogists, and scribes that produce them are to be taken as expressions of a particular emic perspective—despite their (implicit and explicit) discursive claims to universality and normativity. Hence, the anthropological studies of statecraft have been insistent on the problematization of the relationship between sovereignty and citizenship, depicting the nuances and layers that characterize it (Buur 2005; Hansen 2005; Jensen 2005; Turner 2005; Hansen 2006; Kelly and Shah 2006; Rodgers 2006). In this direction of analysis, the Old Colony Mennonites provide three further characteristics that make them into an interesting example in the examination of practices of sovereignty.

First, if, as Carl Schmitt (2005) argued, all political concepts are secularized theological concepts, then the exploration of the political sphere within a religiously defined polity like the Old Colony Mennonites is a privileged locus of observation. The Mennonites can be seen to be an exception among narratives of secularization, within which Schmitt's argument is located: Narratives of modernity consider the disenchantment of the world to be the outcome of processes of structural and functional differentiation that lead to the privatization and decline of religion. In these narratives, the expansion of rationalization and science is accompanied by the expansion of 'the natural' over 'the supernatural' while the latter becomes a residual category. Religion, therefore, once captured by modernity as one amongst other domains in the process of differentiation, becomes re-defined through the reference to 'the supernatural' or contained within the domain of ethics (Latour 1993; Bruce 1996; Durkheim 2001).

In this context, religious formations that refuse to play the part assigned them by narratives of modernity are either perceived as an oasis of morality and ethics, havens from the exacerbated consumerism and individualism produced by modernity, or are portrayed as fundamentalists, irrational obscurantist fanatics pitched towards the elimination of modernity and the instauration of the rule of God on earth. In either case, they have become exceptions (for how the Amish have been portrayed by the media see Weaver-Zercher 2001; for a critique of representations of Mennonites see Cañas Bottos 2005: Chap. 4; Cañas Bottos 2006; Cañas Bottos 2008: 4—9).

Second, the Mennonites' historical relationship with nation-states has been characterised by a cyclical negotiation of privileges for obtaining 'states of exception', and emigration when those privileges were lost. This willingness on the part of the Mennonites for a state of exception provides a crucial contrast to cases where 'the exception' is seen solely in its negative effects on the subjects (for an analysis of the Venezuelan 1999 *Tragedia* where the state of exception was also willed by the subjects of the sovereign, see Fassin and Vasquez 2005).

Third, the coextension of social and religious domains in Old Colony Mennonite settlements has compelled their religiously defined authorities to act as secular ones. Therefore, while in practice the religious authorities adopted political functions, they concealed and rejected this fact discursively through their promotion of values such as pacifism and separation from the state. This chapter shows how the Mennonites constructed a regime of sovereignty embedded within their negotiated state of exception. This allows for questioning the quest for the ultimate 'One' that decides on the exception. Thus, through the concept of 'embedded sovereignty' we can bring to the fore the multiple layers and practices involved in sovereignty.

The application of secularized theological concepts (Schmitt 2005) to a case like that of the Mennonites, who seemingly have remained separate from the process of secularization (or at least who discursively claim to have done so) requires several acts of translation and transformation. The meaning of religion, the exception, and the political sphere differ in secularized and non-secularized contexts. Whereas the concept of sovereignty codifies all social processes under the category of 'the political'; within the Old Colony Mennonites, 'the religious' is the master trope that subsumes them all. Therefore, to translate *bios* and *zoē* (Agamben 1998) in culturally sensitive ways we have to ask what the crucial distinction is that they are marking and that the figure of *homo sacer* carries.

If we are to translate these passages into the Christian religious tradition, we have to focus on the decision on damnation/salvation. It is the decision on eternal life that marks the Christian sovereign. This decision however, lies in the cosmic future, to be applied by the deity. In the meantime the appropriate means of achieving this decision while on earth has been delegated by the deity to the leadership of the church on earth.

Within the religious sphere of the Old Colony Mennonites, the decision on the exception takes the form of a combination of baptism and excommunication, and not the miracle as Schmitt argues (2005). An excommunicant in a religious community is like a citizen without rights: bare life (Agamben 1998).

The first part of this chapter outlines the processes of the historical formation and maintenance of the Old Colony Mennonites' moral and social order in their attempts to build a church of believers separate from the world. This will depict their quest to become exceptions as well as the process by which the political was absorbed by the religious structure. I then focus on the contemporary organization of Old Colony Mennonites in late-twentieth-century Argentina and Bolivia. This chapter finishes with two cases of conflict that illustrate the strategies by which colony authorities attempted to suppress and exclude dissent and heresy, thus constituting examples of the practice of embedded sovereigns. I argue that in order to assure their own continuity as internal sovereigns, they resorted not only to the usage of an institutionalized exception like excommunication, but to the avoidance of due process.

Negotiating and Becoming 'the Exception'³

The Mennonites owe their name to Menno Simons (1496-1561), a Dutch reformer whose main theological tenets were the baptism of adults, separation from the world, the separation of church and state, universal priesthood, and pacifism. They are part of a wider Christian movement known as 'Anabaptism' (due to their practice of rebaptising adults who had been baptised during childhood in the Catholic Church). In sixteenth-century Europe, the Mennonites formed a dispersed movement, with followers coming from a wide variety of backgrounds. They were persecuted by mainstream Protestant groups and Catholics alike. In an imperial mandate issued as a consequence of the Diet of Speyer (1529), Charles V decreed that 'every Anabaptist and rebaptised man and woman

³ For the formative period during the reformation, George Huntston Williams' *The Radical Reformation* (1962) is the best point of departure. For the 'Russian' and 'Canadian' periods see Urry (1978; 1989; 2006). For Canada and Mexico see Redekop (1969) and Sawatzky (1971). For a more detailed historical reconstruction, as well as a critique of sources used, see Cañas Bottos (2005; 2008).

of the age of reason shall be condemned and brought from natural life into death by fire, sword, and the like, according to the person, without proceeding by the inquisition of the spiritual judges' (Bossert quoted by Williams 2000: 238).

As a consequence of their persecution by both Catholics and Protestants, the Mennonites fled the Holy Roman Empire for Prussia, where they were tolerated due to their economic contributions stemming from their expertise in agriculture in swampy areas and in the construction of dikes and canals (Williams 2000: 609; Urry 2006: 35 & ff.). However, the rise of the Hohenzollern aristocracy and their militaristic policies were not received well by the pacifist Mennonites. In 1789, although they managed to negotiate the exemption of military duties in exchange for additional payments, they also suffered restrictions in land acquisition and various other measures, which they considered as threats to their religion (Urry 2006: 52). This made them receptive to an offer made by Georg van Trappe, a colonizing agent under the orders of Grigori Potemkin who, in turn, was in charge of the territories in the Ukraine recently conquered by Catherine the Great. As part of a wider colonization plan designed to populate and consolidate suzerainty over these territories, the Mennonites were offered a series of privileges to lure them to the Ukraine (the actual document that contains them is usually referred to as the *Privilegium*). They were offered, among other things, religious freedom, tax exemptions, and land. In exchange, they were required to settle in unpopulated areas, and not to try to convert other Christians – although they were free to Christianize Moslems.

In accepting these offers, the Mennonites became agents of the Russian state for the incorporation of the territories. They transformed an indistinct nomadic space into one that the state could read, understand, measure, simplify, and tax (see also Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Scott 1998). For this, the Mennonites provided the Russian state with a grid as a settling pattern, the epitome of state readability.⁴ In brief, through the Mennonites, the Russian state effectively “captured” the territory (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 440). On a symbolic level, the Mennonites’ acceptance of the *Privilegium* can be

⁴ This layout is very similar to the one used in Hutu refugee camps in Tanzania (Malkki 1995) and in “high modernist” planning (Scott 1998).

interpreted as recognition of the legitimacy of the Czarina as the sovereign over the territories where they settled. Oblivious to these material and symbolic contributions to the consolidation of the sovereign, the Mennonites seized this opportunity to attempt to bring about a 'separation from the world' and the founding of the 'community of true believers'. The *Privilegium*'s imposition to settle in unpopulated areas made them form exclusive colonies that were almost isolated from the rest of the population and which transformed the meaning of 'separation from the world' from a *spiritual* to a *geographical* one. On the other hand, through the creation of a differentiated legal regime, the *Privilegium* created a space of exception which provided the conditions for the rooting of an embedded sovereign who would rule within this sphere. Under these conditions, the Mennonites grew through extended reproduction, and through the reception of new migratory waves. While they created several new colonies, they also suffered several internal schisms.

During the reign of Alexander I, in an attempt to normalize the political administration of local governments, the Mennonites were forced to accept a new politico-administrative structure in 1801 which can still be found in the colonies today: a *Schult* (major) for each linear village of a colony, and a *Fäaschta* for each colony, in charge of coordinating the *Schulte* and linking with the external state authorities. In addition, each colony also has a *Leardeenst*, a collective body formed by various *Prädjasch* (preachers, sing. *Prädja*), one *Dia'koon* (Deacon) and one *Eltesta* (literally 'the Eldest' but which today Mennonites translate into Spanish as *Obispo* – 'Bishop').

By 1871, as part of Alexander II's empire-wide reforms, the Mennonites' *Privilegium* was revoked and their status changed from 'foreign colonists' to 'settler proprietors'.⁵ The reforms involved the limitation of land division upon inheritance (leaving a great number of landless Mennonites), the introduction of Russian in schools, and were soon followed by compulsory military conscription.

In its attempts at Russifying the immigrants through schooling (and lifting the state of exception that granted them different privileges), the Russian state attempted to include them in the 'body of the nation', which had become one of the three pillars of

⁵ For a detailed discussion on the use of land in Russia, see Longhofer (1993: 399).

sovereignty as expressed in the imperial motto “Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and National Character” coined by Count Sergey Uvarov. By changing of the principles of legitimation, the absolutist state was transformed into a nation-state (Hobsbawm 1992: 80, 84) and set for itself the task of the construction of ‘the people’ that would provide its very legitimation (Morgan 1988). In this way, the *bios* of the subject was now threatened to be ‘captured’ through schooling in order to inculcate a particular type of *zoē* that would internalize its inculcator as sovereign.

Whereas some Mennonites agreed with these changes, others felt they could not accept them, and after failed negotiations with Russian state representatives, broke their communion with those who remained and migrated to Canada. In the early 1870’s they had negotiated a *Privilegium* with the Canadian government. They were offered land, and similar conditions to those lost in Russia. Territorial consolidation through agricultural settlement was also part of the agenda behind the invitation: Canada wished to attain effective occupation of the area close to the recently established border with the USA. The Mennonites therefore settled on two tracts of land in Manitoba, one of which was literally on the border with the USA. As in the Ukraine, the Mennonites obtained a state of exception in exchange for their contribution to the territorialization of the state.

The voluntary acceptance of the public schooling system and of the Canadian village administrative structure together with the modernization of singing among some Mennonite congregations led to a schism which gave rise to the Old Colony Mennonites. Later, within the context of the First World War, the School Attendance Act of 1916 was passed in the Manitoba legislature and English was made the sole language of education in the province. The Mennonites failed in negotiations to maintain their own schooling system. Again, some accepted the imposition while others considered international migration as a viable course of action.

In February 1921, a Mennonite delegation met with the president of Mexico, Álvaro Obregón, and obtained a *Privilegium* that granted them, among other things, schooling autonomy and exemption from military service. The Mennonites established a number of colonies in the states of Chihuahua and Durango. And as they grew in number they formed new colonies in the states of Zacatecas, Campeche, and Tamaulipas. Some years later, the fear of an imposed military service, economic changes, and an internal

schism due to the adoption of modern pick-up trucks and electricity, prompted further migratory movements to British Honduras (1958), Bolivia (1960s), Argentina (1986), and Paraguay (where there was already an important presence of Mennonites from Russia who had escaped the Stalinist regime in the 1930s).

After the disastrous Chaco War (1932—1935) against Paraguay, the Bolivian government implemented a population policy of the Oriente (mostly within the department of Santa Cruz de la Sierra). In addition to internal migration from the Andean region, it also incorporated Japanese colonists from Okinawa, and Russian Old Believers, who built four and three agricultural settlements respectively. In this context, the Mennonites again obtained a ‘state of exception’ through a presidential decree which exempted them from military service, taxes, the import duty for agricultural machinery, and public schooling. By 2000, when I conducted my fieldwork in Bolivia, there were forty Bolivian colonies with a total population of approximately 40,000 people.

In Argentina, on the other hand, Mennonites from Mexico and Bolivia established La Nueva Esperanza in 1986, in the Province of La Pampa. They did not manage to obtain a written *Privilegium* at the moment of their immigration, but government officials promised them that they would not be coerced into military service and that they could retain their schooling system. However, within fifteen years of their arrival, the provincial and national governments started to put pressure on them to adopt the state approved curricula. Although the state initially intended to incorporate all children of schooling age who were resident in the colony into the official schooling system, following negotiations it was agreed that, following the principle of *ius solis*, only those born in Argentina would be subject to the schooling policy (and this was reduced to the teaching of Spanish). The Mennonites, in turn, claimed jurisdiction over these children through the principle of *ius sanguinis*.

These conflicts reveal that the *bios* of individuals is at stake in the dispute between the state and the *Leardeenst*. It reflects a veritable battle over the capture of the *bios* for its transformation into a particular *zoē*, a transformation either via baptism with the aim of transforming the *bios* into a Christian *zoē*, or via the national schooling system into a national *zoē*. This transformation would also indicate the primary (or rather ultimate) loyalty to be demanded from the individual: either to be willing to die bearing witness to

Jesus as saviour, or for its national equivalent as best expressed in Horace's principle *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* ['it is sweet and appropriate to die for the fatherland']. Both cases involve a process of internalization and legitimation of a particular sovereign's powers over life and death.

This imposition by the Argentine state in the late 1990s resulted in a migratory movement back to Bolivia by those most unwilling to comply, although so far it has resulted neither in the breaking of communion with emigrants nor in a schism (but such an outcome is not unlikely in the near future). It is now time to examine how this internally embedded sovereign operates within its own semi-autonomous space.

The Internal Exception

The Mennonites say that life on earth should be led according to the Scriptures. Within the colonies, rules and regulations, prescriptions and prohibitions are all supposed to be based on the Bible, or to follow Biblical principles and values. In addition, a number of other sources are used as guidelines, including Menno Simons' writings (Simons 1983), a *Catechism and Confession of Faith*, a Hymnal, and the *Martyr's Mirror* (Braght 1982).

Besides this corpus of unchanging and widely available texts, the Old Colony Mennonites also use the *Ordninj*, a text maintained by members of the *Leardeenst* and read once a year during the worship service. The agreement between different colonies on a common *Ordninj* allows them to recognize each other as equals and binds them across localities and international borders, therefore forming a trans-statal community (Cañas Bottos 2008). In this way, membership in a particular colony, enables the individual to transfer to another one if he or she chooses to move.

The *Ordninj* contains a set of rules that regulate a broad range of aspects of everyday life, including details about attire and personal grooming, but also prohibitions on the ownership of televisions and cars, and the installation of electricity in homes. These prescriptions and prohibitions are, in everyday life, transformed into visible marks of group boundaries and membership. When Mennonites explained to me why certain things were forbidden, compulsory, or desirable, the verbal reference used in most cases was the Spanish expression '*la religión*' (the religion). This simple speech act, which

identifies “the religion” with its codification, evidences the success in establishing the legitimacy of the *Ordninj*.

In his analysis of the genesis of the state, Pierre Bourdieu (1998) shows, on the one hand, how the state contributes to the modern structural differentiation of domains, generating a different type of capital in each one of them. On the other hand, the state also strives to attain a monopoly over each and every type of capital as well as of the rates of exchange between them, claiming the “monopoly of the universal” (1998: 59) and hence, the subsumption of all spheres to the political. The *Leardeenst*, by contrast, claims the monopoly of the universal by hindering and externalizing the process of differentiation of domains. In the eyes of the Old Colony Mennonites ‘religion’ is a ‘total social fact’ in which the moral, legal, political, and economical threads have not been disentangled, but subsumed to the authority of the *Leardeenst*. Although they do have specialists (such as the *Schult*, *Fäaschta*, cheese factory administrators, ‘doctors’, an internal insurance system, singers) the *Eltesta* retains the last word on *every domain* (for an analysis of the dilemmas and contradictions in this situation see Cañas Bottos 2008: Chap. 4).

The *Leardeenst*’s main duty is to maintain the social and moral order in the colonies. This is achieved through regimes of socialization—for example, by overseeing and controlling the school curricula and weekly worship services—and social control—through, for instance, the threat and usage of excommunication.

Through baptism, a member is incorporated into ‘the body of Christ on earth’, and this sacrament thus becomes the basic prerequisite for being saved in the afterlife. However, changes in social context have meant that the social consequences of baptism have changed over time: In sixteenth-century Europe, baptism in the Roman Catholic Church was compulsory; therefore, the incorporation of a new member in a dissenting Anabaptist congregation (such as the Mennonites) would have required a new baptism which, in turn, would have been liable to persecution. Within the contemporary Old Colony, baptism is, in practice, compulsory. Nowadays, baptism is required for acquiring full adulthood rights within the colony, most importantly to be able to marry and to be able to own land, and the crucial question is thus not whether one should be baptized or

not, but instead the *timing* of such an event. In short, baptism has been routinized and transformed into a ritual that marks the member's coming of age.

Whereas in an unbaptised state he or she is answerable to his or her parents, after baptism, he or she is accountable to the wider community. Baptism accordingly transfers the *bios* from the sphere of the domestic to that of the *Leardeenst*. Now, in order to make a youngster a suitable candidate for baptism, he or she needs to have gone through the Mennonite schooling process, in which, using the Bible, they are taught how to read and write, and must memorize the questions and answers set forth in their catechism. Just as states use the schooling system to inculcate the basic presuppositions of the national self-image and to transform children into citizens appropriate for a particular polity, Mennonite schools inculcate a worldview designed to transform children into adults, while this entails the generation of Mennonites as future citizens of heaven, and not of earthly polities.

Losing control of schooling would mean that the Mennonites would lose the process by which individuals come to 'voluntarily' accept baptism and submit to the Old Colony as the sovereign (in a similar way that love for one's country and flag is instilled through schooling in most nation-states).

The 'opposite' of baptism, representing the *Leardeenst's* main tool for obtaining compliance is the *Kjoakjebaum* (excommunication, but also referred to as *Ausschluss* ('exclusion') or *ban*). Following Matthew 18: 15-19, a number of intermediary steps need to be taken before excommunication is carried out: On the discovering of a breach of conduct, a *Prädja* or two visit the culprit to indicate the offense and request an explanation, repentance, and, if applicable, the abandonment of the reproachable behavior or object. If this fails, the offender is summoned to the *Donnadach* (the bi-weekly meeting of the *Leardeenst*) where he would be admonished by the full *Leardeenst*. If this is not sufficient, the offender's case is raised again during a worship service, in front of the full congregation. Repentance and compliance is requested once again, and if the answer does not satisfy the *Leardeenst*, the *Kjoakjebaum* is decreed.

Again, we need to point out differences between contemporary Old Colony Mennonites and those in the days of Menno Simons. Whereas during sixteenth-century Europe converted members would be considered a persecuted religious minority, among

contemporary Old Colony Mennonites, the limits of the social unit, within which the greatest part of social interaction occurs, are coterminous with and subject to the limits set by the church authorities. This means that whereas in the days of Menno Simons, the religious authorities' power was confined to the spiritual sphere, in the contemporary Old Colony the exertion of power by colony authorities (especially through the use of excommunication) has very concrete and practical implications that can range from internal social ostracism and, sometimes, even the loss of the means of subsistence.

Excommunication, however, has its limits due to its anchoring in 'the exception': if used in a generalized fashion, the *Leardeenst* would create the conditions for yet another space of exception in which an embedded sovereign could root itself, as in practice, excommunication implies a prohibition on members in good standing of socializing with the apostate. Since the apostates are already excluded, no further action can be taken against them, and nothing prevents them from maintaining social relationships amongst themselves. The generalization of the exception can therefore leave the sovereign without its subjects. Faced with this scenario, an exception has to be made to the application of the exception. This is, in broad lines, what happened in the two cases of conflict analysed in the following pages, where excommunication—although it should have been implemented—was avoided by the *Leardeenst*.

Case 1: Benjamin

Benjamin was born in 1970 in Colonia Norte, and one year later moved with his parents to Capulín colony (both in Mexico). In 1986 they left Capulín in order to join La Nueva Esperanza, in Argentina, where Benjamin was baptised and later married. In conversation with me, Benjamin did not consider his baptism to have made much of a change in his life as he claimed that he continued to smoke, drink, and only thought in terms of making money. The 'great change', as Benjamin himself called it, came in 1998 and was a result of meeting Sergio, an Argentine religious seeker who at some point (unsuccessfully) tried to be incorporated in the colonies. Sergio and his wife did, however, succeed in building a network of Mennonite supporters, but in doing so, triggered several conflicts within the colonies.

According to Benjamin, the first time he had invited Sergio to their home, he emphasized the missionary message of the Bible, Menno Simons' active position in the spreading of the Gospel, and reflected on stories from the *Martyr's Mirror* (Braght 1982). Then, Sergio gave his testimony, a practice which is not performed among Mennonites.⁶ From that day onwards, Benjamin considered Sergio to be 'brother in Christ', and he started to read the Bible, Menno Simons' works, and the *Martyrs' Mirror*. Benjamin claimed that he discovered, during this process of reading and discussing with Sergio, that he had previously believed in things which were either wrong or of no importance: He had believed, for example, that the Mennonites were Israelites, and that the only way of being a Christian was to live in a colony.

These reflections are an expression of Benjamin's changing perceptions of the definition of 'Christianity' and 'community' – perceptions that differed increasingly from those held in the Old Colony: He proposed an individualised, internal, and affective relationship with Christ by being his witness to the world, and by living in a community tied by common faith and spiritual kinship as opposed to one that was based on common descent and custom, that was externalized and ritualized, and that strove to separate itself from the world. Through this alternative definition of the *Corpus Christianum*, he challenged the legitimacy of the *Leardeerst's* monopoly in the matter of salvation and damnation. Sergio sent some of his treatises to Benjamin, who recalled upon receiving them:

He showed, in these letter, the errors that the Mennonites were making, and there was not a single word in those letters that was not backed up by a verse in the New Testament, or by resorting to other books such as Menno Simons' works or the *Martyrs' Mirror*.

Benjamin translated *The Church of God*, one of Sergio's essays, and made photocopies of it for distribution within the colony 'in order to awaken faith in Christ'. When a copy reached the *Eltesta*, he summoned Benjamin and ordered him to retrieve all copies.

⁶ For an analysis of 'witnessing' and its efficacy, see Harding (1987).

Benjamin, in turn, refused to do so until it was proven to him that the essays were wrong. Benjamin and some of his supporters were expecting the *Eltesta* to produce a Bible-based refutation of *The Church of God*. However, the *Eltesta*'s reply was harsh and rather disappointing for them; he said: 'There is nothing wrong with it, but we do not need a *Weltmensch* [worldly man, the categorical opposite to being a Christian] to teach us on these topics. We already have those books in our houses, that is enough'. Benjamin attempted to defend his newly found spiritual brother, but the *Eltesta*'s answer remained in the same tone: 'we do not need to discuss this'. Benjamin had not been summoned for a discussion of either Sergio's religiosity or his biblical hermeneutics; he had been summoned to obey. During this conversation Benjamin was explicitly 'forbidden to open the Bible with non-Mennonites'. The *Eltesta* could therefore be seen to be using his office-based authority to close down avenues for the emergence of dissenting biblical interpretations that were threatening to undermine the current social order.

When moving between Mennonite colonies, it is necessary to obtain a letter of transference from the *Eltesta*, which serves as proof that the respective person is a member 'in good standing' and which recommends the person's acceptance in another colony. However, when Benjamin—in the year 1999, just after the conflict with the *Eltesta*, outlined above—left La Nueva Esperanza for Pinondi (in Bolivia), he did not have such a letter. Without proof of his good standing and without having been excommunicated, he was neither in or out, but betwixt and between, in a truly liminal position (Turner 1995). Upon arrival in Pinondi, he was nevertheless accepted temporarily and required to produce the letter of transference within a specified period of time. Thus, in refusing Benjamin his letter, the *Eltesta* of La Nueva Esperanza not only avoided the process of excommunication himself, but by providing his peers with a ready made reason for non-acceptance freed them from having to resort to this process should they need to discipline or get rid of Benjamin.

In Pinondi, Benjamin was appointed as a teacher, but this, as I later came to know, was *not* due to his degree of literacy or scriptural abilities, nor was it an indication that he was trusted: For a couple of months, Benjamin and I had been trying to organize a joint trip to visit Sergio. Eventually Benjamin told me that he was ready to go and mentioned that the following weekend was his last chance to visit Sergio because the school term

would start the following week. We arranged that I would take the train from Santa Cruz to Yacuiba, and he would join me at Charagua Station. However, when I met him at the station, he told me he could not come with me and said: “Mennonites can go wherever they want, but there is a small plot of land in Tarija that has been forbidden to me”.

This remark made me realise what was really going on: As a teacher, he received land, housing, and a salary. Thus, because he was living in a house that was property of the colony, he was not really free to receive visitors; this concerned especially those who would have required staying overnight. The teaching schedule, with classes both in the morning and in the afternoon, meant that there was little spare time to receive and make visits. And since he had to teach six days a week, he was virtually confined to the colony. In addition, having to teach from the Scriptures meant that other members of the colony could check for any deviations from the established interpretations by asking their children what they were being taught by Benjamin.

In short, his appointment as teacher was something akin to house arrest, and the control was both physical and ideological. In this way, internal ostracism and an intensification of social control was added to his precarious membership status. In the end, the *Leardeenst* succeeded through these measures of isolation and ideological asphyxiation. Not only in controlling the spread of Sergio’s ideas, but also in obtaining compliance from Benjamin, who eventually lost touch with Sergio, and the rest of the members of their network.

Case 2: Bernard

Let us now turn to Bernard, where the conflict resulted in the externalization of the dissenter, that is, without resort to excommunication or expulsion, he was progressively pushed to the edges of the Old Colony, resulting in him leaving “voluntarily”. Bernard and his family were living in Swift Current colony, in Bolivia’s department of Santa Cruz, in a house provided him with his job as an attendant of the colony-owned store. He was born in a colony in Mexico, and came to Bolivia at a late point. As he told me, while preparing for his baptism, he came across a “Confession of Faith” in the Centro Menno in

the Mexican town of Nuevo Casas Grandes.⁷ In the text, the “washing of the feet” and what he called “the search for the lost souls” attracted his attention. Upon consulting with his father, he received a chiding reply: “why are you looking for writings from the outside? We should read the New Testament, the *Gesangbuch* [hymnal], and that is enough”. However, Bernard continued to read any book that he came across, but keeping his doubts to himself in order to avoid any further reprimands.

In 1998, between Christmas and New Year’s Eve—that is, at a time when Mennonites refrain from working and have plenty of time to visit each other—Sergio appeared in the Swift Current colony and Bernard invited him to his house:

I realised that he was a person of faith, of a very strong faith in Jesus Christ; he was very religious. He told me about the *Martyrs’ Mirror*, of things I knew and of things I was about to know. I realised that he had a good understanding of these things so I liked it...

When Sergio went to live in his own settlement in the department of Tarija he spoke about Bernard to the former Amish who were his neighbours. They, in turn, decided to pay Bernard a visit on one of their trips to Santa Cruz, as did a group of Russian Christian (Old Believer) colonists who also befriended Sergio. Those visits were shortly followed by two *Prädjasch* telling Bernard to stop receiving people. Recalling the event, Bernard told me:

So I told them that “according to the Holy Scriptures I am obliged to accept any visits.” I don’t know how to say this to you exactly, but by accepting visitors, some have received angels in their homes, without knowing they were angels. But they did not want to hear. I told them

⁷ The “Centro Menno” is the name given to local centers run by the Mennonite Central Committee, which is formed by non-colony Mennonites in Canada and the U.S., primarily for missionary efforts.

“treat me with love, and convince me, through the Holy Scripture, that I am going on the wrong path and I will immediately stop doing it, but otherwise, I cannot tell my brothers not to come”. But where I cannot be convinced by the Holy Scriptures, and by love, I think I should follow God instead of men. Well, they refused to refer to the Bible. They did not even mention a single word. They just said “We have come to warn you not to do it anymore”. That was it, they were gone.

Things were getting out of hand: Bernard continued to incorporate people into his spiritual kinship family, while the *Leardeenst* tried to stop it before it spread. And it did so in the same fashion that it did in reacting to Benjamin’s case: no defense, discussion, or negotiation was allowed. Bernard’s protest and attempt to induce a discussion “Bible in hand” was dismissed. The party was sent to relay orders, not to discuss them.

Then, in December 1999, Bernard received notice that from the beginning of the new year his services would no longer be needed in the store and that he had one month to find another place to live as he would have to vacate the house by the end of January. In brief, the matter was settled as a simple laying-off of an employee. Unable to pay the inflated land prices in the Swift Current colony, Bernard had to move to a newly established colony in the south of Bolivia. There, Bernard was again kept under control, his visitors having to report to one of the *Prädjasch* to ask for permission before staying at his house. When I was there, the *Prädja* instructed me in no uncertain terms to let Bernard know that if he wanted to change the lifestyle of the colony, he should leave it for good. Sergio sent me a letter in May 2007 informing me Bernard had left the colony and joined him.

Taken together, control of the spread of ideas seems to have been the prime objective on the part of the different colony authorities regarding the handling of internal dissent. They therefore directly admonished against receiving visitors, attempted to restrict the circulation of certain printed materials, and prohibited members to engage in Bible-based discussions with outsiders. Then, having failed in the control of the

circulation of the materials that carried these ideas, the *Leardeenst* focused on the people who espoused them. In doing this, however, they circumvented the excommunication process but, instead, engaged in isolating and externalising dissenters. In the final instance, this meant to (slowly and steadily) push them towards the margins of the Old Colony, leaving it up to them to either comply or leave.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how the relationship between Old Colony Mennonites and different nation-states has been characterized by the use of ‘exceptional’ treatment, through the negotiation of privileges in exchange for their contribution to the territorial consolidation of sovereignty. In this configuration, the constitution of exclusive settlements transformed the Mennonite ideal of a ‘separation from the world’ from a spiritual metaphor into a socio-spatial order. As the recipients of privileges from states, they created a ‘space of exception’. In turn, this ‘space of exception’ allowed for the creation of a domain in which the colony authorities formed a regime of ‘embedded sovereignty’. In this way, Old Colony Mennonites contest (symbolically and in practice, but not in an overt and discursive way) claims to sovereignty by nation states by claiming an ‘exception’ within which they establish a domain of sovereignty and over which they reserve the right to decide on ‘the exception’. In this regime of embedded sovereignty the *Leardeenst* absorbs ‘the political’ under the guise of ‘the religious’, while at the same time claiming its exclusion. ‘Religion’ here becomes the cloak of acceptability of this embedded sovereign. To those outside the Old Colony, this self-definition in religious terms contributes to defuse possible threats to the host states by hiding the political sphere. To those inside the Old Colony, the *Leardeenst* needs to center itself within the religious sphere without appearing too ‘political’ in order to maintain legitimacy.

I have also shown how the relationship between these two sovereigns is far from unproblematic, especially when it comes to the control of the institutions through which bare life is transformed either into a citizen or a Christian and through which fundamental categories for understanding the world and one’s ultimate loyalty are instilled. The social construction of the structures upon which the exceptions can take effect thus precedes the

decision for an exception. Hence beginning by the decision on the exception naturalizes the process by which the exception itself becomes possible and legitimate.

The circumvention of excommunication shows, on the one hand, the implicit recognition by the *Leardeenst* of its limits as a tool for social control, and the dangers of the normalization of the exception. The procedure of excommunication would have contributed to the dissemination of the dissenters' ideas by providing them with a public forum in which they could be voiced. Indeed, both Bernard and Benjamin were eager to enter into a public discussion, Bible in hand, in order to defend their ideas and to carry out what they saw as their duty in paying witness to their faith. Had they succeed in spreading their message, it would have created a context for the mass excommunication of dissenters. This, in turn, would have created yet another space of exception within which another embedded sovereign could have taken root. Hence the avoidance of the process of excommunication was a means of protecting the *Leardeenst* as an embedded sovereign.

References:

- Agamben, G. (1998), *Homo sacer: sovereign power and bare life*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press).
- Agamben, G. (2005), *State of exception*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Bourdieu, P. (1998), *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press).
- Braght, T. J. V. (1982), *The Bloody Theater, or, Martyrs mirror of the defenseless Christians*, (Scottsdale: Herald Press).
- Bruce, S. (1996), *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Buur, L. (2005), 'The Sovereign Outsourced: Local Justice and Violence in Port Elizabeth', in Hansen and Stepputat (eds.).
- Cañas Bottos, L. (2005), *Christenvolk: Historia y etnografía de una colonia menonita*, (Buenos Aires: Antropofagia).
- Cañas Bottos, L. (2006) 'Old Colony Mennonites in South America: Refractions of the 'Other'', *Cambridge Anthropology* 26:1, 1-23.
- Cañas Bottos, L. (2008), *Old Colony Mennonites in Argentina and Bolivia: Nation making, Religious Conflict and Imagination of the Future*, (Leiden, Boston: Brill Academic Publishers).
- Cañas Bottos, L. (2008) 'Transformations of Old Colony Mennonites: the making of a trans-statal community', *Global Networks: A journal of transnational affairs* 8:2, 214-31.
- Chappell, B. (2006) 'Rehearsals of the sovereign: States of exception and threat governmentality', *Cultural Dynamics* 18:3, 313-34.

- Durkheim, E. (2001), *The elementary forms of religious life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Fassin, D. and P. Vasquez (2005) 'Humanitarian exception as the rule: The political theology of the 1999 *Tragedia* in Venezuela', *American Ethnologist* 32:3, 389-405.
- Feldman, I. (2007) 'Difficult distinctions: Refugee law, humanitarian practice, and political identification in Gaza', *Cultural Anthropology* 22:1, 129-69.
- Feuchtwang, S. (2006) 'Images of Sub-humanity and their Realization', *Critique of Anthropology* 26:3, 259-78.
- Gregory, D. (2006) 'The black flag: Guantánamo bay and the space of exception', *Geografiska Annaler Series B* 88:4, 405-27.
- Hansen, T. B. and F. Stepputat, (eds.) (2005), *Sovereign bodies: citizens, migrants, and states in the postcolonial world* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Hansen, T. B. (2005), 'Sovereigns beyond the State: On Legality and Authority', in Hansen and Stepputat (eds.).
- Hansen, T. B. (2006) 'Performers of Sovereignty: On the Privatization of Security in Urban South Africa', *Critique of Anthropology* 26:3, 279-95.
- Harding, S. F. (1987) 'Convicted by the Holy Spirit - the Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist Conversion', *American Ethnologist* 14:1, 167-81.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. (1992), *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Jensen, S. (2005), 'Above the Law: Practices of Sovereignty in Surrey Estate, Cape Town', in Hansen and Stepputat (eds.).

- Kelly, T. and A. Shah (2006) 'Introduction - A Double-edged Sword: Protection and State Violence', *Critique of Anthropology* 26:3, 251-7.
- Latour, B. (1993), *We have never been modern*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- Longhofer, J. (1993) 'Specifying the Commons: Mennonites, Intensive Agriculture, and Landlessness in Nineteenth-Century Russia', *Ethnohistory* 40:3, 384-409.
- Malkki, L. H. (1995), *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Morgan, E. S. (1988), *Inventing the people: the rise of popular sovereignty in England and America*, (New York: Norton).
- Prem Kumar, R. and C. Grundy-Warr (2004) 'The irregular migrant as homo sacer: Migration and detention in Australia, Malaysia, and Thailand', *International Migration* 42:1, 33-64.
- Redekop, C. W. (1969), *The Old Colony Mennonites. Dilemmas of ethnic minority life*, (Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press).
- Rhodes, L. A. (2005) 'Changing the subject: Conversation in supermax', *Cultural Anthropology* 20:3, 388-411.
- Rodgers, D. (2006) 'The State as a Gang: Conceptualizing the Governmentality of Violence in Contemporary Nicaragua', *Critique of Anthropology* 26:3, 315-30.
- Sawatzky, H. L. (1971), *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico*, (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Schmitt, C. (2005), *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

- Scott, J. C. (1998), *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- Simons, M. (1983), *The Complete Works*, (Aylmer: Pathway).
- Turner, S. (2005), 'Suspended Spaces--Contesting Sovereignties in a Refugee Camp', in Hansen and Stepputat (eds.).
- Turner, V. W. (1995), *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (New York: Aldine de Gruyter).
- Urry, J. (1978). *The Closed and the Open: Social and Religious Change Amongst the Mennonites in Russia (1789--1889)*. DPhil Thesis, Oxford, University of Oxford.
- Urry, J. (1989), *None but Saints: the transformation of Mennonite life in Russia, 1789-1889*, (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press).
- Urry, J. (2006), *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood: Europe - Russia - Canada 1525 to 1980*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press).
- Weaver-Zercher, D. (2001), *The Amish in the American imagination*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).
- Williams, G. H. (2000), *The Radical Reformation*, Third Edition, revised and expanded (Kirksville: Truman State University Press).