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Speaking of “Peter Money” and Poor Abraham:

Reaction to wealth, poverty and consumption among Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia

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In a sense, accumulation of wealth, valuing material goods for anything but their use value as well as ridiculing poor people could be perceived of as deviations from what we generally think of as Anabaptist and Mennonite ideals.¹ Still, life in contemporary Mennonite colonies gives at hand that they all occur. This fact hardly surprises anyone, yet from an anthropological perspective, it does constitute an incentive to consider how such examples of deviation harmonise and/or disharmonise with fundamental community goals. The overall aim of this article is thus to illustrate how issues such as wealth and poverty as well as consumption and material goods – and particularly members’ ways of dealing with these matters – relate to community maintenance in the Mennonite Old Colony Durango, in Eastern Bolivia.

Drawing on three periods of extensive fieldwork², this article builds on how people in Durango, talk of poverty and wealth and how they account for their own and others’ economic situation and choices regarding material goods. As will be shown, these accounts illustrate how and why poor as well as wealthy members’ economic situation becomes a crucial concern for all community members. They also indicate in what sense some material

goods actually matter and that it is particularly crucial what people in Durango spend money on. The main argument of this article is that the community members' culturally constructed image of the past and idea of that which shall come, which I refer to as the *forthcoming*³, influence my informants' reactions to individual consumption and material goods as well as to wealth and poverty.

Initially, two men from the Bolivian Old Colony Durango will be introduced, i.e. Abraham and Peter.⁴ Even though both of them have been born into and remained committed to the Old Colony way of life, their lives have turned out very different. Moreover, the ways in which fellow community members look at and speak about each of them differ greatly. The presentation of these two men will take off in the dichotomy that prevails between them – one of them being very poor and the other one being very wealthy. Together, these two cases will serve as starting point for subsequent discussions on how Old Colony Mennonites' outlook on wealthy and poor community members respectively relates to questions of conformity, deviation and community maintenance. Thereafter, the article will land in an attempt to illuminate how fundamental community goals govern how material goods are being valued beyond their pure use value.

“Peter Money” and Poor Abraham

In May 2004 when I came back to Durango after having been away to the Bolivian capital La Paz for almost two weeks, I asked people in the colony to update me on the latest news. Not much seemed to have happened while I had been away. Yet, one thing that people recurrently narrated was the death of a man nicknamed “Peter Money”⁵. Peter was a man in his 60s who had passed away after some time's serious illness.

In this case, it was not so much the cause of the death that was thoroughly analysed and discussed (which was usually the expected reaction); this time it was rather the fact that a very rich person had passed away. Peter was not from a well-off family, however, but used to be rather poor until he all of a sudden became a wealthy man. People in Durango often referred to Peter as “the richest man in the colony”, and some even claimed that he had more money than the entire colony. He had married twice and when he died he left his spouse with fourteen children – seven of them being his own. I often heard community members speculating about the legacy, and people mentioning amounts exceeding 100 000 dollars for each inheritor.

What puzzled me the most when peoples presented this narrative to me was that no one seemed to know how Peter got rich. Most colonists said “he had probably had a lot of good luck” and rumours held that he had found gold on his land. Others, like Jakob, one of my informants, dismissed the latter explanation. He told me he had gone to see Peter only a short time before he passed away. Jakob claimed to have asked the sick man straight out about the alleged gold finding but he had denied it. At that time Peter knew he did not have much time left – “and why would he then lie about how he got hold of all the money?”, Jakob asked rhetorically. He argued that the fact that the Peter persisted denying any such findings even at his deathbed was proof enough for overturning the gold theory. Yet, Jakob could not offer me any alternative explanation.

As people in the colony speculated on the issue, the gold theory and the assumption that he had simply been very lucky were the most common explanations regarding Peter’s accumulated wealth. One explanation that I had actually expected to get, but never heard anyone giving voice to, was that Peter would have earned his wealth through hard work. In fact, no one I spoke to ever talked of him in terms of a hard working person. However, Peter was referred to as a generous and helpful person, often ready to lend a helping hand to

someone in need. For instance, when the colony's inhabitants had recently arrived to Bolivia, a failed cotton harvest prompted the colony to take a bank loan. Due to high interests, the debt had soon grown considerably and people had problems paying their instalment. In order to facilitate life for his fellow community members, Peter decided to settle the debt and let people pay him back to very low interest instead. When Peter passed away in 2004, most borrowers still owed him money. Thus, many families in the colony now worried that Peter's inheritors would demand having the debts paid off, even though each heir would probably be allotted far more money than enough for making a living.

As Peter had passed away, three questions seemed to cause considerable concern in Durango. Would his survivors demand having unsettled debts paid off immediately? How did Peter actually earn his wealth? And, finally, was it really true that Peter had buried three jars of money on his land? Rumours in the colony held that his wife had found two of them, but that there was one left. People in Durango were unmistakably fascinated by this, and made me promise not to tell my Bolivian friends about it since they did not want outsiders to come and look for it. Many of my informants attended Peter's funeral, and peoples' explanations for doing so were more or less identical: "Peter used to be a very good friend of mine" or "Peter once helped me out," and "that man was very good," etc. In sum Peter was remembered as a good, liable and, not the least, rich person.

At the other end of the economic scale, we find a man named Abraham. He is in his mid 30s and married to Susanna, with whom he has got four sons. I got to know Abraham in the early stage of my first fieldwork in Durango in 2004 as he showed up at my hostess's house, wearing a ragged Panama hat and worn-out clothes. He immediately made an impression on me. Due to his curiosity, his fairly odd physical appearance, his unusual interest in books, the lisping and not the least his constant talk of money, or rather lack thereof, he soon became a noteworthy character for me. Abraham's and Susanna's family is one of the

poorest families in Durango. When Abraham invited me to their small house for the first time, he was apparently embarrassed by the fact that he had only cleared the area closest to their house. Thus he said that: “I’m almost ashamed for having so much forest [on my land]. People say I’m lazy for not clearing my land. But when there is no money, you have to go out to work outside your home to have something to eat. And there is no time or money for clearing the land...” So, instead of working his own land, Abraham has to earn an income by working for others. The couple owns 15 hectares of land, but only a minor part of the area is opened up. Felling the trees is hard work and to pay someone to come and work for them would cost around 25 Bs. (3.12 USD) daily. Since the family lacks money to pay for such work, the forest remains. As Abraham discussed their economic situation with me and also commented upon the fact that people call him lazy, he said that he is poor and therefore he has to work for others to earn some money for the day. He also mentioned that Bolivians sometimes “receive money from the government” and in that way they receive at least something to live on, whereas the Mennonites do not ever claim or receive anything. “And there are people who think that the Mennonites get money from their parents, but it’s not like that. My father has never given me anything.”

During the time I spent in Durango, I often bumped into Abraham in the least expected of situations; wandering by foot along the road heading off for some work in another village, in the city of Santa Cruz selling cheese, cookies and honey in the streets, or in a backyard in the nearby town Charagua as he was mending a business woman’s sewing machine. A grown-up Mennonite man walking along the road makes up a very unusual sight in Durango, but Abraham had to do it when he could not afford to repair his buggy. Mending sewing machines for Bolivians is not a “normal” occupation for men in Durango, but in order to make a living, Abraham did it. People in Durango often makes fun of Abraham and laugh at his failure to live the Old Colony way of life, calling him “lazy” and “incapable” or “silly”

etc. Even Abraham's own parents-in-law often comment on the incapability of their daughter's husband. From an outsiders' perspective, Abraham is very intelligent, extremely hard working, and constantly trying to figure out some way to increase his income. Yet, his way of trying to make a living apparently does not quite fit within the framework of expected Old Colony practice, thus making him an anomaly who is being ridiculed.

Community ideals and responses to wealth and poverty

The Old Colony Mennonites in the colony Durango, Bolivia, apparently value carrying out their life in accordance with their image of the ideal society, the *Altkolonie*. It is striking that they do not refer so much to where or when it used to be; but rather to *how* it used to be. By continuing the Old Colony way of life, the Mennonites in Durango maintain community, increasing their chances of achieving their ultimate spiritual quest, i.e. to reach salvation in heaven through common effort. In other words, there is a crucial relation between the community members' culturally constructed image of the past and the idea of what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the *forthcoming*.

The *forthcoming*, coined by Bourdieu as *l'à-venir*, briefly alludes to that which is to come, something in the coming that we look forward to and aspires to, although it is never achieved and it never happens, since it would then lose significance in its capacity of *forthcoming*.⁶ Moreover, as I read Bourdieu, we could understand the *forthcoming* as the likely ending of activities that are done in the proper way, whereas future, *l'avenir* on the other hand, is not within the reach of mundane actions or stages controlled by man.⁷ In the Old Colony case, the idea of the *forthcoming* becomes manifest in terms of the notion of eternal life in the heavenly kingdom, *Himmelreich*. I have argued elsewhere that the idea of the *forthcoming*, combined with all members' mutual responsibility for this common concern,

influence practice and thought (on several levels) in Durango.⁸ Moreover, this perception adds further to the community boundaries, since it separates the chosen ones, i.e. the Old Colony Mennonites,⁹ from all others. In this community, people are expected to obey the *Ordnung*, the oral set of rules that regulates most aspects of life, including economic practice, means of subsistence as well as the members' relationships to material goods and money.

During the initial stage of my fieldwork, I was struck by what I sensed as almost an obsession about money. Possessing money, lack of money, borrowing money, earning money, spending money, etc. constituted recurrent topics among my informants. Most likely, one significant reason for this is that Durango is a relatively poor colony. Compared to other Mennonite colonies in Bolivia, the inhabitants in Durango are financially weak. Many inhabitants argue that this is partly due to the low prices at which most families had to sell their houses as they left Paraguay by the mid-90s. Still, in comparison with their Bolivian neighbours in the nearby Guaraní community of Isiporenda¹⁰ for instance, they are seemingly well-off economically and materially. Nonetheless, people in Durango often express worries and complain about how they have to fight against the dry Gran Chaco climate, the drought and failed crops; factors that each and every one affects their economy negatively. For obvious reasons, my informants often talk about and account for their economic state of affairs, which they invariably present as a problem. Like most Old Colonists the inhabitants in Durango demonstrate an outstanding work ethic. I often heard informants expressing that “we can't just sit in the shade like the people in Isiporenda. That doesn't give me and my family any food at the table. We have to work.” In sum, according to my informants, the solution to their troublesome economic situation is in God's hands whereas all they can do is continue working.

When it comes to wealth and poverty, the official ideals fundamental to the Old Colony community imply e.g. that accumulation of wealth for personal purposes should be

desisted and that the poor should be cared for and assisted. Each household in Durango constitutes an independent economic unit. Thus, some families in Durango are very poor, most families are coping fairly well, and a few ones are very well-off. During the time I have spent with members of Durango, I have never heard people expressing disregarding opinions as regards wealth or asserting that wealth is perceived of as causing pride or materialistic values. In the light of my informants' actions and accounts, wealth rather carries with it status. It does not constitute e.g. a motif for ascribing someone an official position such as chairman of the colony or village chief. Still, due to the inhabitants' immodest way of examining and commenting on the economy of others, I have often sensed that wealthy people (like myself, in their eyes) evoke fascination and curiosity among the members of the community. People have often asked me how much I earn, what my clothes have cost me, how much I have to work in order to buy a return ticket between Sweden and Bolivia, and what my living expenses in Sweden are. This is understandable, since I am incredibly rich in their eyes, yet the unconcealed fascination was fairly unexpected to me.

This attraction is perceivable on other levels as well. Many community members visited the auction, held about three weeks after Peter's death. One informant, Johan, for instance went there to bid on one of the tractors that were for sale, but returned home empty handed because, as he explained it, everything had been too expensive. The tractors were sold for about 15.000 USD, which was very expensive compared to regular prices in Durango, i.e. 8–10.000 USD. The family's house was bought by Peter's widow for 30.000 USD, which was also a considerable amount of money in the context. Johan shook his head thoughtfully and said that when a rich person dies, people tend to pay more than at the auction after a poor person. "When a poor person dies, everything is sold very cheap, as if people seem to think that the items are not worth very much. But if it's a wealthy person who has died, people are prepared to pay more" he explained to me. "As if the items would be more valuable just

because the owner was rich.” Drawing on Naomi Klein’s theories on brands and social belonging, this could very well be understood in terms of buying entrance into, or at least achieving some sensation of getting access to, a higher social class by consuming certain goods; goods that is perhaps even too expensive to you.¹¹

Even though some practice in Durango indicates that being wealthy is desirable and that rich peoples’ belongings are valued higher than poor persons’, wealth or economic success among people within the community can however provoke critical reactions. Members who have in fact been exposed to wary opinions due to relative wealth often explain the reactions of fellow community members in terms of envy. One informant, Isak, for instance, is young man, who has made himself a minor fortune thanks to a harvesting machine he invested in. He often complains about people slandering him “because they are being envious” of his thriving deals and economic successes. Also my impression is that disregarding comments about rich or well-to-do members is a symptom of envy rather than reactions to accumulation of wealth as sinful behaviour. Just like in many other farming societies, envy in Durango might very well arise due to some notion of limited good¹². On the other hand, however, and as we also learnt from the case of Abraham, people look askance at poor members. The poor members of the congregation can receive some help from the *Armenkasse*, which the other members’ have offered. In that sense they are given some mercy, although in attitudes and opinion, few members appear to show much compassion with the poor families. On the contrary, since laziness is commonly perceived of as the cause of poverty, and poor people thus personify an anti-ideal, they are rather being looked down at.

Changing status from being rich to becoming poor may also evoke certain condescending reactions among fellow community members, indicating that a poor Old Colonist is to some extent a failed Old Colony Mennonite and only to blame himself. One of my informants, Cornelius, used to be a successful entrepreneur – as it seemed. He made

business with Mennonites and Bolivians, and when I got to know him, he was making grand plans for the future. Every now and then other informants asked me what Cornelius and his wife had invited me to eat, often assuming that we had had something very tasty and special, insinuating that “This Cornelius has a lot of money, doesn’t he?” When I was back in my home in Sweden, Cornelius sometimes called me from a public phone in the nearby town Charagua. I was not surprised when he one day told me he and his wife had bought a new and bigger house in the colony. He said I had to come and visit him and his family there next time I came to Bolivia, which I promised him to do. However, when I got back to Bolivia about three months later, he had lost all his assets and he and his family had had to leave the house and move in with Cornelius’ parents. Many people in Durango discussed this, and whereas Cornelius’ claimed he had been cheated and used, many community members argued it was because he had not used his head in business, that he had been too daring, and that he had consumed too much beer. Regardless the reason for his bankruptcy, no one ever expressed that they felt sorry for him, and no one seemed to pity him. On the contrary, people (including his sisters and brothers) shook their head and seemed to think he had only himself to blame.

As I learnt, in Durango wealth evokes fascination and curiosity, whereas poverty is generally blamed on laziness and incapability, regardless of whether it appears among Mennonites, Bolivians or in any other group. Apparently, the poor person him- or herself (primarily the husband of the family) is perceived of as the one to blame. In accordance with the *Ordnung*, an Old Colony Mennonite should behave, act and look in specific manners, and people are expected to conform to this normative ideal. Seemingly, neither Abraham, who is very poor, nor “Peter Money” conforms completely to the Old Colony way of life. Abraham is too poor and does not behave appropriately, whereas Peter was in fact too rich and was not even believed to have worked hard for his wealth. Yet, whereas Abraham is being mocked with, Peter was excused and even highly esteemed.

Conformity in poverty and wealth

During fieldwork I was particularly looking at what is going on at the margins of the community, and the study was greatly affected by my “anthropology from and at the margin.” This alludes to a methodological perspective that approaches the community and its members at and from the margins of Old Colony daily life.¹³ Consequently, during my fieldwork, I followed my informants as they moved between the colony and the outside world¹⁴ and interacted with their Bolivian neighbours and host society. The reasons for doing so were many, and among other things this sphere of life is interesting to focus on since here manifestations of deviation are more easily observable and arguably more frequent than elsewhere in this relatively controlled society. Moreover, following my informants as they act and interact outside of and at the margins of their community, I could observe how Old Colonists from Durango interact with outsiders and how community boundaries are being maintain and accentuate in that process.

This related to the question about how attitudes as regards wealth seem to reflect ideas about the significance of conformity, rather than any particularly normative dislike or aversion concerning accumulation of wealth. Arriving to Durango with the preconceived idea that accumulation of wealth is more or less equal to sin, among Old Colony Mennonites, I initially found it surprising that Peter Money was so high in status. When I realised that people did not believe he had earned his wealth through hard work, but rather by means of good luck, I became perhaps even more intrigued. My impression is that Peter “saved” his face by being generous and helpful – to individuals as well as to the Old Colony community as a whole. Calvin Redekop recognizes that “rank in the Old Colony is based ultimately on the behaviour of individuals as they help the Old Colony to achieve its objectives”.¹⁵ Peter did

that in two ways; firstly, he maintained living the way he should, i.e. the Old Colony way of life, by continuing farming, maintaining his horses and buggy in good shape, attending church, etc. and, secondly, he helped his fellow community members in different ways, which is an early Anabaptist virtue.¹⁶ Abraham, on the other hand does not fit in. Although he is also a frequent churchgoer, he displays too many flaws: he basically works for others only, his buggy is often out of order, he spends much time reading books, he did not get married until he was 30, he often wears second-hand trousers with braces due to lack of money for buying or making a new bib-and-brace overall, etc. In other words, his behaviour and manners deviate from that expected of an Old Colony Mennonite, thus breaking the order. He becomes the anomaly, a matter out of place, and as such fellow community members watch him with ambiguity and treat him with disregard.¹⁷

Since all members have to contribute to the common quest for salvation, the Old Colony community is dependent on generalised reciprocity among its members.¹⁸ Members like Abraham, who does not contribute or who does not make the expected input, is simultaneously breaking the order *and* causing imbalance in the community's web of reciprocal relationships. In other words, Abraham is not being looked down at or being socially stigmatized only due to breach of the *Ordnung* of the Old Colony. In Abraham's case, the issue at stake is rather his inability to participate in the expected reciprocal investments in maintaining the right way of life, and thereby contribute to the common concern.

In order to contribute to the order of the community it is apparently important that people in Durango demonstrate certain expected manners when other colonists are observing them. For instance, beer cans and cigarettes are hidden, and happy jolly singing is silenced as another buggy shows up on the road. This signals conformity and obedience, whereas undisciplined behaviour signals low morals and insubordination to the right way. Disobedience is reacted upon as hazardous since it might influence others to act in similar

ways and might result in further consequences. Most of my informants in Durango would probably agree that inappropriate behaviour must be controlled. Otherwise the colonists will “become like the Bolivians,” like many informants put it, and which means that they will succumb to immoral and undisciplined behaviour. Nonetheless, my observations in Durango have shown that there is actually some scope for breaking rules without being confronted or exposed to sanctions. Primarily through the Durango Old Colonists’ interactions with Bolivians, it becomes apparent that community members in Durango do actually negotiate and bend rules.

For instance, since I helped my hostess in neighbouring Isiporenda in her little store on an almost daily basis, I often witnessed that when costumers from Durango buy articles that are not allowed in the colony (e.g. beer, liquor, tobacco or coca), they often ask for a black plastic bag that will hide what they have bought to bring to their home. There is nothing unique to the fact that inconsistent behaviour occurs and that members break rules, even in this relatively strictly controlled community. The interesting point, however, is that the crux of the matter is rather to be careful not to openly challenge the instituted order of the community. By this I mean that disobedience follows a fairly uniform pattern in Durango and members of the community usually break rules and norms in accordance with how rules “should be broken.” Most members are aware that rule breaking takes place, but often enough no one chooses to interfere and sanctions are rarely being meted out as long as the violation is carried out with discretion. This reveals that *the way* in which disobedient behaviour is carried out determines whether it is considered as challenging the *Ordnung* or not. Rules broken in the “appropriate way,” indicate that rules are somehow still respected, or even, when rules are being disobeyed in the correct way, they are in a sense also being confirmed. To relate to anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner, I would thus say that breaking the rules is also an active engagement of the rules.¹⁹ Moreover, the way that disobedience and rule breaking are carried

out could be perceived of as representing a willingness to conform to the community and to adhere to the norms.²⁰ In a similar way, Peter Money was rich, but he chose to make use of his wealth in a way that still communicated his commitment to the community and its spiritual quest. He did “wrong”, but in the “right” way.

Conformity in consuming and valuing material goods

People in Durango frequently reveal great curiosity and also desire for material goods and wealth. Through daily conversations, I have often heard my informants giving voice to dreams and wishes for goods and things not allowed to them; i.e. harvesting machines of a type not allowed in the Old Colony, cars, telephones, cigarettes, beer, etc. At times, a desire for money – a lot of money – also rises to the surface, in serious as well as in more playful terms. Countless times, people have jokingly told me they think I should bring them along to Sweden so they could go there to work and earn enormous amounts of money, that I should bring them a Volvo straight from the factory in my country, or that I should teach them how to use my Visa-card, so that they can take what they need to buy a new tractor. Just as often, although in less joking forms, people have also asked me to lend or give them money.

According to anthropologists Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, “[g]oods assembled together in ownership make physical, visible statements about the hierarchy of values to which their chooser subscribes”.²¹ In a similar manner, Daniel Miller emphasizes how the study of objects not only contributes to an understanding of artefacts but is also an effective means for studying social values and contradictions.²² This leads us onto what Arjun Appadurai pointed out quite long ago, namely that things and goods carry cultural meaning and social implications, and that their meaning varies with culture.²³ In short, objects have no inherent immanent meaning – people ascribe them meaning. Drawing on this idea, we should

treat some material goods as culturally and socially meaningful, or, to paraphrase Miller, as if they actually matter.²⁴ Drawing on these ideas, taking into account what material goods money should be spent on and is being spent on in Durango could teach us something about the values held by community members. This is vital also since what you consume communicates to others who you are, and to what extent you conform to or diverge from the Old Colony way of life.

Regardless of what material goods people actually desire, there are some things people in Durango *should not* have whereas there are other things that are acceptable, and suitable. In addition, there is also a third category, i.e. things that members of an Old Colony *should* have and are expected to possess, for instance a buggy. Even though you could probably do without one; perhaps by riding the horse instead, you are expected to have a buggy. The homemade bib-and-brace overalls that men in Durango wear constitute another, perhaps even more, illustrative example. The original model for this overall used to have a small label with the brand attached to one of the breast pockets. Sometimes, there are similar labels – most commonly of the made-up brand *El Cisne* – for sale in the grocery store, and the women buy them to attach them to their homemade product. If there are no labels available, or if there is no money for buying one, a white piece of cloth in the same size but with no text, often sewn onto the pocket instead. This piece of cloth has no use value whatsoever, yet it is obviously considered important.

Significant to emphasise, is that the system of classification deciding what material goods should be consumed and not, is dynamic and thus changeable. In any cultural context, new objects and phenomena might initially be looked upon with suspicion. Yet, with time they can very well become considered familiar and “appropriate”. The process of converting a foreign element into an “authentic” component of a system or culture, i.e. in this case making a certain piece of material goods considered “Old Colony”, could be referred to as

domestication.²⁵ This resembles with the process of “redefining” an anomaly, described by Mary Douglas, in order to make it fit within an already existing category.²⁶

It is also worthwhile paying attention to how people explain why some goods should not be purchased, used or possessed by an Old Colonist. As often explained by informants in Durango, worldly goods are not necessarily evil in themselves, but they might bring evil consequences, that would threaten the overall cohesion in the community. There are numerous stories circulating in Durango about Mexican Old Colonies that – in my informants’ eyes – have collapsed morally due to introduction of cars, radios, mobile phones, etc. The lesson to learn from these stories is that it is safest to keep the world at a distance. Moreover, even though things not allowed are secretly desired, e.g., radios, TVs and cameras, many refer to them as unnecessary and making people lazy. On a general level, money should not be wasted on superfluous articles but should be spent on food, clothing and other fundamental needs. Thus, people in the colony look askance at those fellow colony members who drink quantities of beer, not necessarily because they do something that is explicitly prohibited, but because they waste money – and time – on it. In other words, this type of explanations reflects Old Colony Mennonite images of what is necessary and not and how people should prioritise. The inhabitants in Durango doubtlessly see the economic and material benefits that trucks, cars and more advanced technology would imply. Still, the ban on such things is a means to maintain continuity and non-conformity to the world. Technological innovations are regarded with scepticism and “modernity” is perceived of as threatening, undermining many of the Old Colony basic beliefs.²⁷

As already mentioned, due to their ascribed meaning, objects communicate aspects of their owner’s values and belonging. Drawing on statements of my informants in Durango, the Old Colony notion implies that by avoiding and desisting from certain things, the Old Colonists will stand apart on the final day; by *not* possessing some things whereas *possessing*

others, they demonstrate their belonging and accentuate the boundary between who is in and who is out. To a perceivable extent, “religion” as point of reference is common in Durango and part of the general discourse. For instance, as people tell of relatives in Canada and Mexico who dress in “worldly” clothes and who use cars, telephones and watch television, they generally refer to them as having changed religion, as having left the religion behind. My informant, Johan once told me that his wife's sister from Mexico had recently visited them travelling in a pickup and dressed in other types of clothes than Old Colony Mennonites wear. “Now they have already changed everything; they have got everything. Now they have a different religion,” he said and shook his head as if he found it almost amusing yet at the same time regrettable. Whereas other Mennonites are referred to as having “another religion, a common way of referring to other Old Colonies, is to say that “there they have the same religion as us.” In sum, the Old Colonists provide us with an example of how material goods communicate to others who you are, and thus also who you are not.

Concluding remarks and reflections

People in Durango (as many do elsewhere) reveal some ambiguous way of thinking about money. On the one hand, my informants have been raised and educated into a socio-cultural context that asserts that personal accumulation of wealth should be avoided and consumption should be constrained. Yet at the same time, fascination over Peter's money jar as well as the inflated prices at auctions after a rich person's death suggest that people are not completely disapproving as regards a possibility to get rich or to come across something that provides a sensation of being “almost wealthy”. When we consider how Old Colonists in Durango deal with material goods, poverty and wealth, we must not forget to take into account the economic circumstances under which they live. Poverty has certainly shaped the

strategies by which people in Durango deal with these issues. Nonetheless, a parallel factor that most probably has also shaped the community members' responses is the idea of the *forthcoming*. To conclude, I wish to dwell on the influence this conception appears to have on Old Colony Mennonites' notions of and reactions to wealth and poverty as well as to consumption and material goods.

To a considerable extent, the attitude by which members in Durango talk and act as regards most aspects of daily life reveal that they are very anxious to conform to the Old Colony way of life, which is perceived of as the most probable means to reach the fundamental goal of salvation in the heavenly kingdom. This goal, their *forthcoming*, requires non-conformity to the world. My informants' interaction with the world indicates that the principle of non-conformity among Old Colonists in Durango becomes manifest as a desire to accentuate boundaries by articulating a relation, rather than by having no contact at all. Done in the appropriate way and with the right attitude, non-conformity is expressed even during interaction with the world. Likewise, practices such as consumption and accumulation of wealth could undoubtedly challenge fundamental values of the community. Yet, carried out with the right attitude and in the right manner they can even become means of showing conformity instead. For instance, since material goods communicate aspects of its owner's attitudes and commitments, abstaining from some goods whereas consuming others constitute a way of communicating one's commitment. Likewise, redistributing some of your accumulated wealth for the good of the community constitutes an additional means of conforming to vital principles of the community even though personal accumulation of wealth as such is considered conflicting with the Old Colony way of life way.

The material goods that rich as well as less affluent members consume and the manner in which they deal with money are important means of accentuating the boundaries towards others, and thus of contributing to the preservation of the Old Colony way of life. No matter if

you are rich or poor, your ability to carry out the Old Colony way of life determines to what extent fellow community members consider you to be participating in the generalised reciprocity, thus contributing to maintenance of community and thus to the Old Colonists' common concern. The one who meets the requirement is thus counted in as part of something greater. The one who fails, on the other hand, is considered a weak link threatening the maintenance of community and its common concern. Hence, a poor member like Abraham is distrusted and sometimes even ridiculed due to his lack of means, though not lack of will, to contribute.

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Notes

¹ cf. Urry 2009:13

² Fieldwork was carried out during 13 months between 2004-2006.

³ Bourdieu 2000

⁴ In order to protect the identity of my informants', all names in this article are fictive.

⁵ The nickname *Plata* (Spanish slang for 'Money'), refers of course to Peter's economic status, and was initially ascribed to him by Bolivians, thus primarily used by Bolivians. Yet, also Mennonites communicating with Bolivians and other outsiders like myself, make use of this epithet. Thus, he was always referred to as *Pedro Plata*, or 'Peter Money', when people in Durango spoke to me about him.

⁶ Bourdieu 2000: 207ff

⁷ cf. Öian 2004:190

⁸ Hedberg 2007

⁹ Similar to many other Christian groups, the Old Colony Mennonites express an idea of themselves as being a people chosen by God, and as such they are ascribed certain responsibilities and expectations.

¹⁰ Isiporenda is an Izoceño-Guaraní community that limits to the colony. The interactions taking place between the inhabitants in Durango and their neighbours in Isiporenda have constituted an important aspect of my study and during all periods of fieldwork I stayed – for several reasons – accommodate with a family in Isiporenda, even though my project primarily focused on the people in Durango.

¹¹ Klein 2004:99ff

¹² cf. Foster 1965

¹³ It has to be emphasised, however, that the aspects of life captured through this perspective are by no means marginal to my informants. Moreover, I have also included the centre into my scope of study.

¹⁴ For the Old Colonists the "world" refers, in short, to the realm outside of their *Jemeent* i.e., the Old Colony congregation.

¹⁵ Redekop 1969:96

¹⁶ Urry 2009:13

¹⁷ Douglas 1966:342, Højdestrand 2009:2f

¹⁸ Sahlins 1972:193f, see also Kurkiala 2005:227ff,

¹⁹ Ortner 1984

²⁰ cf. Stark and Bainbridge 1995

²¹ Douglas and Isherwood 1996:ix

²² Miller 1998

²³ Appadurai 1986

²⁴ Miller 1998

²⁵ cf. Caldwell 2008, Alcalde 2009

²⁶ Douglas 1976:39f, Kurkiala 2005:211ff

²⁷ Friesen 2004:133