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Anna Sofia Hedberg

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# **The Dynamics of Boundaries: Obedience and Transgression among Bolivian Old Colony Mennonites**

Anna Sofia Hedberg<sup>1</sup>  
Faculty Office for Humanities and Social Sciences  
Uppsala University  
Uppsala, Sweden

## **Abstract**

Boundaries keep people apart just as they keep people together. Boundaries are social constructs made by man in order to maintain the natural order of things. The aim of this article is to elaborate on the social construct of boundaries and particularly acknowledge their dynamic character. Social and cultural boundaries are passable, changeable, and negotiable. Nonetheless, boundaries are fundamental to many peoples' existence and survival as ethnic and cultural communities and must therefore be acknowledged as essential human needs. By focusing on the members of a conservative Christian community—Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia—as they carry out practices in relation to the outside world, the article illustrates processes that help sustain the group's boundaries towards the outside as well as processes that simultaneously challenge and to some extent transform these same boundaries.

## **Keywords**

Boundaries; Obedience; Disobedience; Old Colony Mennonites; Bolivia; *Ordnung*

## Introduction

Boundaries: physical or mental; visual or imagined; social, political, or religious. At first sight, they tend to seem so rigid, so permanent. Boundaries keep people apart just as they keep people together. Not only people but also phenomena, things, and ideologies are enclosed by boundaries. The *raison d'être* of boundaries is to maintain categories, to hinder the mixing of, for instance, ideas, things, and people that should be kept separate.

Focusing on these separating and cohesive conceptual lines, the aim of this article is to elaborate on the social construct of boundaries and not least to acknowledge their dynamic character. By applying an anthropological perspective on daily practice among Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia, this article lays bare processes that help sustain a group's boundaries towards the outside.<sup>2</sup> Mennonites have spread around the world in numerous waves of migration. The conservative farming Old Colony Mennonites reside in separate colonies in rural areas in Central and South America. Thus, in market places in Central and South American towns and cities, as well as on buses in the Bolivian, Paraguayan, and Mexican countryside, one may encounter representatives of this uniformly clad people—apparently of European origin—that stand out from the rest. The men's bib-and-brace overalls and Panama hats and the long flowery dresses of the women reveal they are Old Colony Mennonites, and the fact that they avoid eye contact and speak a Low German dialect unfamiliar to most signals distance.

Similar to many other Christian groups, the Old Colonists regard themselves as a people chosen by God. As such, they believe they should not mix with the outside "world" during their life-long striving for salvation. Just like other minorities that display explicit conservative and isolative tendencies (e.g., the Haredi, the Amish, and the Hutterites), the Old Colony Mennonites make great effort to maintain their own way of life, distinct from that of the surrounding society and the modern world. Such endeavors require boundaries.

Representing an anthropological approach, this article departs from the assumption that boundaries are social constructs made by man—more or less consciously—in order to maintain and protect the "natural" order of things, as we envision it. Shortly stated, boundaries are social constructs in the sense that they are products of people's construction of a perceived social reality (Berger and Luckman 1967; Hacking 2005). As most other social constructs, however, boundaries are seldom static. The people separated by the boundaries change, the circumstances surrounding the boundaries change, as well as the reasons for upholding the boundaries may change, increase, or even disappear. As a result, the boundaries also change. Boundaries are possible to trespass, alter, or negotiate. Depending on who you are, your possibilities for passing boundaries vary. Depending on your position, your influence over the boundary construct also varies. Depending on your cultural and social aptitude, your ability to negotiate boundaries may decrease or increase.

If not being the first to do so, anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) has at least contributed a great deal to anthropologists' and other social scientists' notion of boundaries as social constructs. Making the universal human need for categorizing, orderliness, and distinction very clear to us, her theories are still of great value, and in our contemporary world, issues concerning social and cultural boundaries are as relevant as ever. Globalization is often held to have influenced human beings' needs for boundaries in emphasizing distinction and/or similarity (Inda and Rosaldo 2007). Some hold that globalization erases boundaries as global flows of people, cultural influences, capital, services, and items have diminished the relevance of borders for many people in the world (Bauman 1998, 77). Others claim that processes of globalization rather tend to increase peoples' need of making distinct boundaries between themselves and "others" (Billig 1995, 44; Yuval-Davis 2006, 202). Often enough, the smaller the difference between different groups, the greater is their urge to communicate distinctiveness (Barth 1969; Eriksen 2002). The main argument of this article is that it is crucial to recognize and study social and cultural boundaries as passable, changeable, transitory, and negotiable, yet simultaneously acknowledge the fact that boundaries are fundamental to many peoples' existence and survival as ethnic and cultural groups. This I will demonstrate by drawing on examples from a people whose mere existence is dependent on clearly communicated and manifest boundaries, but who are also challenging these boundaries from within, keeping them under constant strain.

### **Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia**

This article draws primarily on 13 months of fieldwork between 2004 and 2006 in the Mennonite Old Colony Durango, which is located in the Bolivian Gran Chaco region (Figure 1). The Gran Chaco region is a frontier zone that stretches into Argentina, Paraguay, and Bolivia. Throughout the colonial period up until 1950, the entire Gran Chaco remained relatively isolated. Since then, the Bolivian government has been actively developing the region as a center of agricultural production, a process that has brought with it some increase in infrastructure and mobility. The Colony Durango and its three neighboring Old Colonies are located between the town of Charagua in the west and the geographical zone referred to as Izozog in the east. Besides the Mennonites, various groups of Guaraní as well as white Creole landowners and cattle breeders inhabit the area.

The colony Durango covers about 12, 000 hectares and hosts approximately 3, 000 inhabitants. The residents arrived in 1995/96 from their former colony Colonia Nueva Durango, Curuguay district, Paraguay. Due to internal disagreements concerning modernization processes and adjustments to the surrounding society, the colony in Paraguay split and those members who resisted change set off for Bolivia where the new colony was set up.

There are more than 40,000 Low German speaking Mennonites in Bolivia living in approximately 40 different colonies, mainly concentrated around Santa Cruz de la Sierra. A few are also found near the towns of Charagua (like Durango) and Villa Montes farther south. The Mennonite colonies in Bolivia belong to separate denominations, differing in degree of

conservatism, integration of modern equipment, and interaction with the neighboring society. Well over 50% are of Old Colony background. As such, they are generally more conservative and more hesitant towards external influence, unlike more progressive Mennonite communities that use electricity, cars, and telephones and have less strict clothing regulations. The colonies also differ in terms of size, place of origin, time of arrival, etc. Moreover, there are also Mennonites who do not live in colonies. This category encompasses Bolivians who have converted, Mennonites who for some reason have left colony life behind, and Mennonite missionaries from the United States and Canada.

Most Mennonites in Bolivia make their living from agriculture. They are skilled farmers who dedicate themselves to a delicate means of subsistence, heavily dependent on weather. Many Mennonite families in the arid Gran Chaco region, where people traditionally have subsisted on cattle breeding, small scale agriculture, hunting, wage labor, and fishing, thus live with very limited economic margins, primarily due to the dry climate and scant harvests.

**Figure 1: Map of Bolivia, with the Colony Durango in the South**



Due to the Old Colonists' self-perception or status, of being a people chosen by God, the distinction between the Kingdom of God and this world is of crucial concern (see for instance Redekop 1969, 228). The "world" refers to the realm outside of the *Jemeent*<sup>3</sup>—the Old Colony congregation—and the spiritual quest of the Old Colony congregation is to reach salvation. The Anabaptist idea of salvation implies that the one who lives a God-fearing life, separate from the world, will someday reach what people in Durango refer to as *Himmelreich*, the "heavenly

kingdom,” where the notion of the Kingdom of God becomes completely implemented (Redekop 1969, 235f). To attain this, the members ought to keep separate from and uninfluenced by the world, which is not for the chosen people but must be kept at a distance (see e.g. Cañas Bottos 2008; Hedberg 2007). In literature on the subject, this virtue is referred to as the “principle of non-conformity” (Driedger and Kraybill 1994, 49f; Miller 1995, 10; Redekop 1969).<sup>4</sup> This principle, or attitude, is what motivates Old Colony Mennonites not only to live in separate colonies in the countryside, but to also uphold certain prohibitions against things perceived as bringing people closer to the world. Thus, from a western outsiders’ perspective, life in the colonies is characterized by absence of electricity, cars, TV, radio, and many other modern inventions. Moreover, in accordance with the Old Colony religious ideals and the principle of non-conformity, the inhabitants in Durango continue to farm, speak the Low German dialect (*Plautdietsch*) of their ancestors, refuse military service, refuse swearing oaths, demand tax relief (primarily related to import taxes on machinery and goods), and run their own schools. Also, central to this community is the *Ordnung*, an oral set of rules that encompasses the dos and don’ts as regards most aspects of life, including behavior, the naming of children, physical appearance, types of clothing, means of subsistence, the members’ relationships to goods and objects, and so forth (Plasil and Roessingh 2006, 48; Redekop 1969).

According to Old Colony faith, the most probable means to reach salvation is through the members’ joint efforts to maintain the Old Colony way of life. People in Durango apparently value carrying out their life in accordance with their image of the ideal society, the *Altkolonie*<sup>5</sup> (“old colony”) in eighteenth century Russia. It is striking that the inhabitants do not refer so much to where or when it used to be but rather to *how* it used to be. In line with the significance ascribed to the past, change or disruption of the Old Colony way of life is believed to threaten the community members’ unified reach for salvation. There is a crucial relationship between that which supposedly occurred in the past and the idea of eternal life in heaven, *Himmelreich*. This idea, or the collective striving for salvation in the heavenly kingdom, combined with all members’ mutual responsibility for this common concern, influences practice and thought, and contributes to social cohesion (Hedberg 2007). Moreover, and even more relevant here, this perception adds further to community boundaries, since it separates the chosen ones, the Old Colony Mennonites, from all others. In short, boundary maintenance among the Old Colonists in Durango is as much about securing a sense of belonging (by staying together) as it is crucial for demonstrating non-belonging and exclusion (by remaining separate).

During fieldwork in Durango, I was approaching the community and its members at and from the margins of Old Colony daily life.<sup>6</sup> Hence, I followed my informants as they moved between the colony and the outside world, interacting with their Bolivian neighbors and host society. The reasons for doing so were many. Highlighting that which is taking place at the society’s physical and cultural margins not only offers new perspectives on the hub of the community, it also provides a more nuanced picture of the society’s diversity. Moreover, following members in Durango as they act and interact outside of and at the margins of their

community, I could observe how members maintain and accentuate boundaries in processes of interaction with outsiders. Besides, in this sphere of life, manifestations of deviation are more easily observable and arguably more frequent than elsewhere in this relatively controlled society (Hedberg 2007, 33). As will be explained, safeguarding boundaries does not necessarily imply that boundaries are never being transgressed or negotiated. It rather means they are being controlled and carefully looked after throughout interaction. Even more vital for the aim of this particular article is that when boundaries are being transgressed and bent, their dynamic and flexible character becomes observable.

## **Boundaries as Social Constructs and Essential Human Need**

In what sense is it relevant to speak of boundaries in terms of social constructs? The answer is fairly simple; it is because people make them up and they do not exist without people envisioning them, communicating them, and ascribing them meaning (Berger and Luckman 1967; Hackin 2005). Secondly, *why* do people construct boundaries? Following Mary Douglas, this has to do with a universal human need of categorizing and structuring the world (Douglas 1966). We place everything within categories that are ascribed sets of certain rules, guiding our contact and interaction with them. On a very basic level, we do so also to ourselves, by creating the fundamental categories of “Us” and “Them.” The process of creating a “We” in contrast to everyone else is essential to people’s (individuals and groups) processes of identity formation, and the two categories are very much dependent on one another. Without a “Them” there can be no “Us” (see Barth 1969; Cohen 1985; Eriksson Baaz 2001; Eriksson, Eriksson Baaz, and Törn 2005).

Anthropologist Fredrick Barth advises us that as we study the identity of any ethnic group, we ought not to focus on the “cultural stuff,” but rather on the boundaries surrounding it (Barth 1969, 15). Anthony Cohen, drawing inspiration from Barth, argues that “the boundary encapsulates the identity of the community and [...] is called into being by the exigencies of social interaction” (Barth 1969, 15; Cohen 1985, 12). Following Barth’s idea, community boundaries are manifested by means of interaction between groups that wish to be separate (1969). This is closely related to what Stuart Hall (2005) refers to as “*positioning* rather than essence” (234). In this interaction, differences and particularities become emphasized in mutual processes.

Even though Douglas implicitly suggests that this human need of categorizing and classifying the world is a universal human characteristic, the categories and classifications in their turn vary with socio-cultural context. Thus, only native members fully master the classification system of a given culture. In order to maintain the system of classification, boundaries are essential. Similar to the categories, the boundaries are in themselves human constructs that are sensitive to change and variation. Just as the system of classification is dependent on recognition by all (or at least most) members of a particular community or group, the boundaries demand equal degree of acknowledgement and common agreement. Even though

Barth advised us to focus not on the “cultural stuff” but rather on the boundaries, it is important to note that the cultural stuff—in terms of, for instance, dress, type of settlement, language, food, language, and means of transportation—constitutes much of the means by which boundaries are communicated, maintained, as well as negotiated among Old Colony Mennonites and others. The emphasis on non-conformity and the accentuation of the Old Colony way of carrying out daily activities operate not only to create and communicate the boundary between members and non-members. Parallel to this process, by carrying out the Old Colony way of life in what Catherine Bell (2009) would label a *ritualized* or ritual-like way, the community members themselves are constantly reminded of their particular status, of the importance of their commitment, and of the significance of maintaining the boundaries (Hedberg 2007:107).

### **Means of Boundary Maintenance in Durango**

For the Old Colonists in Durango, several boundary maintenance processes could be analyzed. I will comment on (1) the principle of non-conformity, (2) migration, (3) social control and the ban, and (4) conservatism and uniformity.

#### **The Principle of Non-Conformity**

Concerning the principle of non-conformity, the Old Colony Mennonites’ urge to preserve a certain way of life implies distancing oneself from the world verbally as well as in practice (Redekop 1969, 33; Urry 1999, 5). Old Colonists regard modern technological innovations with skepticism; many manifestations of the modern world are perceived of as threatening, undermining fundamental Old Colony beliefs (Friesen 2004, 133; Plasil 2009, 122). The inhabitants in Durango doubtlessly realize the economic and material benefits of electricity, trucks, cars, and more advanced technology. Nonetheless, the ban on such things is a means to maintaining non-conformity to the world. Avoiding them is a way of making the world less accessible. Accordingly, the primary means of transportation among Old Colony Mennonites is horse and buggy, and diesel driven tractors with steel-wheels (without rubber tires) are used for working the fields. Due to the ban on electricity, the Old Colonists use gas for running kitchen stoves and fridges. Wind- or horse-power extracts water from the ground and diesel runs the motor of the washing machine that some families have. Many inventions facilitating daily work on the farm or in the household are used, although always adjusted to make them fit and harmonize with the elaborate system safeguarding non-conformity.

The principle of non-conformity also permeates peoples’ behavior, physical appearance, settlement patterns, decision-making, and so forth. You can thus tell by the appearance of an Old Colonist that he or she is different from non-Mennonites, which is precisely how it should be. In some sense, neighboring groups unintentionally further reinforce the non-conformity principle. The Bolivian neighbors, primarily the Guaraní communities,<sup>7</sup> provide the inhabitants in Durango with contrasting images facilitating the Old Colonists’ process of communicating who they are and—more typically—who they are not. Their Amerindian neighbors serve as warning examples

for Old Colonists. For instance, the Guaraní face poverty, alcoholism, broken families, and high unemployment rates. The Old Colony Mennonites in Durango, on the other hand, observe their Bolivian neighbors and analyze the causes of their worries. The most common conclusions are laziness, alcoholism, extramarital children and relations, vices, and poor education. From an Old Colony perspective, the Bolivians suffer from the downsides of a life that diverges radically from the Old Colony way of life. The daily worries of the Bolivians assumingly awaits also the people in Durango if they abandon their rightful way, thus fuelling the notion that the “world” must be avoided and the Old Colony way of life maintained.

In sum, non-conformity is basically about restricting interaction with and accentuating distance from the outside world. Henceforth, and as will be discussed in greater depth below, in order to protect the boundaries, great significance is ascribed to *how* interaction is carried out.

### **Migration**

Many have argued that migration has played a critical role in the maintenance of the Old Colony community and its boundaries (Quiring 2003, Redekop 1969, 22). Certainly, migration constitutes a central aspect of being Old Colony Mennonite. The people in Colony Durango, Bolivia, are descendants of the Russian Mennonites that headed for North America from Russia in the 1870s. A few living Durango members were born in Canada, although most were born in Mexico, from whence they moved to Paraguay in the late 1970s, and thereafter to Bolivia. The long tradition of migration is in no way unique to Durango but pertains to Old Colonies in general and the reasons for all these waves of migration differ.

Old Colony Mennonite migration is not an end in itself, but people talk of relocation as out of necessity (although voluntary and self-imposed). Initially, and on a collective level, Mennonites in the sixteenth century began migrating in order to escape persecution in Europe, successively moving eastwards. This resulted in a century long sojourn in Russia. From Russia, many Mennonites eventually moved on to the United States and Canada in the 1870s. This move was also a means to escape external calls for adjustments and inner disagreements. Due to their systematic way of responding to outside pressure (i.e. becoming even more conservative), the Old Colonists appeared as a distinct group in Canada during the late nineteenth century. Since then, innumerable Old Colonists have been searching for a refuge in more tolerant areas to avoid external interference. In addition, economy, shortage of land, family ties, and religious motives have made the inhabitants in Durango and countless other colonies break up and go elsewhere several times.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, the Old Colonists always set certain requirements before they even consider moving to a particular country. These preconditions concern the right to carry out the Old Colony way of life uninhibited by outsiders. On a collective level, religious preferences and motifs have thus always directed the decision regarding what country to move to.

Ultimately, migration is a way of protecting Old Colony community boundaries, both in moving away from places where change is demanded and in carefully selecting where to go. No

matter its reason(s), migration has become a prominent feature of the Old Colony Mennonite past and of being Old Colony Mennonite, as the accounts of people in Durango indicate (Hedberg 2007, 234f). Departing, relocating, and getting settled doubtlessly constitute recurrent aspects of these people's reality, and many aspects of daily life bear witness to the members' migration experiences. Migration stories constitute a vital aspect of people's identity and presentation of themselves on an individual and collective level. As such, it also marks a boundary between members and non-members. The latter might very well have their own migration experiences, but they do not share the collective migration story of the Old Colony Mennonites.

### **Social Control**

Throughout my work, I have searched for people's motivations to stay in the Old Colony community rather than factors hampering people from leaving. Investigating social cohesion and members' choice to stay takes one too many instances of social control church authorities and members exert, as with the ban (Friedman-Rudovsky 2013; Redekop 1969; c.f. Quiring 2004).

The Old Colony is indeed a controlled authoritarian community, and social control does inevitably contribute to the construction and maintenance of boundaries. Due to the collective aspect of the Old Colony's spiritual quest, salvation requires all members' loyalty and subordination to the *Ordnung*. The ultimate task of the congregation's authorities is to safeguard the community by teaching members from the Bible, enforcing the rules, and ensuring that people fulfill their community duties.<sup>9</sup> However, control is largely maintained by the common members themselves. Considering the size of the colony and the tightly knitted network of kinship within it, anonymity is non-existent. Members are aware of the control fellow members and authorities exert and of the fact that news and gossip travel fast. Neighbors keep a watchful eye on one another, and people report bad manners and illicit behavior. Closely knitted social relations combined with explicit moral rules and norms give rise to a powerful and efficient form of social control. Social control directs the extent to which people disobey rules; most members act and behave as if surveillance is constant. The power of social control works autonomously in a panoptical sense (Foucault 1993, 235).

All Old Colonists know that a person disobeying the rules constitutes a threat to the community, as is implied by each member's responsibility in striving for the spiritual quest. A member caught in disobedience might be excommunicated and even banned. For an Old Colonist, excommunication means exclusion from the chosen people, which in turn implies reduced or no chances of reaching salvation. In addition, being banned is to be shunned by the congregation. This means you are on your own, a scenario that frightens most of us, not least an Old Colony Mennonite.

### **Conservatism and Uniformity**

According to Old Colony faith, the most probable means to reaching salvation is through the members' joint efforts to carry out their life in accordance with their image of the ideal society (Quiring 2003; Redekop 1969). In the process of maintaining the Old Colony way of life, the Old Colony notion of "how things have always been" is essential for my Old Colony informants (Plasil 2009, 119ff; Warkentin 2013). This has made them develop a conservative approach in life.

In Durango, life thus follows a strikingly uniform pattern: people dedicate themselves to more or less the same means of subsistence, dress, behavior, housing structure, and furnishings. In addition, the *Ordnung* regulates almost every aspect of life, and fellow members control and safe-guard one another's adherence. The community has, in Mary Douglas' (1996) terminology, "strong grid." As a consequence, change in general is avoided. New things are looked at with suspicion—as well as fascination—and have to be considered very carefully. Moreover, the conservative and uniform way of life in the Old Colony makes daily practices a constant reminder of maintaining the Old Colony way towards eternal life in heaven. In this manner, the community is protected and boundaries strengthened. Community members, as well as outsiders, are kept on the right sides of the boundaries.

### **Negotiating Boundaries at the Margins of Durango**

Anthropologist Anthony Cohen (1985) refers to the symbolic aspect of boundaries in the meaning people give to them, adding that the symbolic aspect of community boundaries is also the most crucial one. Boundaries are essential for the Old Colony Mennonites, in their daily striving to maintain the Old Colony way of life; the symbolic aspect of Old Colony community boundaries is thus vast. Even so, their assigned value does not hinder people from negotiating them. Though they are indispensable for the community, they are by no means inflexible. By means of dress, behavior, language, means of transportation, and so forth, people in Durango—and Old Colonists elsewhere—safeguard their community boundaries. By the same means—dress, behavior, language, etc.—they also bend and challenge boundaries. There are several expressions of boundary transgression in the Old Colony community, and they are carried out on individual and collective levels. Here I will limit myself to three sets of boundary negotiation, namely: physical and figurative crossing of community borders, rule-breaking, and modifications of the Old Colony way of life.

#### **Physical and Figurative Crossing of Community Borders**

When it comes to physical and/or figurative crossing of community boundaries, people from Durango pass the borders of the colony land occasionally. The destination might for instance be a neighboring Mennonite colony, one of the neighboring Guaraní communities, one of the smaller towns in the area, or perhaps the City of Santa Cruz de la Sierra or the colonies in that area. Many men pass the border on a daily or at least weekly basis, primarily motivated by

errands directly related to work and trading. Most women, men, and entire families cross the border on at least a monthly basis, for instance to pay a visit at a health clinic, to pay family visits in another colony, or to buy groceries. Non-Mennonite outsiders who enter and leave the colony land are also crossing the borders of Durango. One major reason is that the main road that leads from the nearby town Charagua down into the Izozog area,<sup>10</sup> where there are at least 25 Guaraní communities inhabited by approximately 9, 000 people, runs through the colony. Moreover, Bolivians visit the colony in search of certain goods, such as cheese, gas, and seeds, as well as services from, for instance, the colony's doctors, dentists and mechanics. On a daily basis, outsiders also come to Durango to sell their products, such as groceries and supplies to the colony stores, or to offer their services, mainly in terms of labor.

In all activities mentioned above, Mennonites as well as outsiders cross the colony borders in a literal as well as in a figurative sense. Most crossing of the colony borders is routine, and people seldom speak of them in terms of illicit or inappropriate behavior. Still, these physical and social processes involve interactions with the world, which, by definition, collides with the principle of non-conformity and constitutes a potential violation of the community boundaries. However, it does not necessarily have to end there. Mostly, it is more correct to speak of bending, stretching, and negotiation rather than of violation, breaking, and undermining. As interactions take place, the most vital aspect in this context is *how* the Old Colonists interact with the world; not that they *do* interact. One important distinction, for instance, is that people speak of themselves and the Bolivians in terms of business partners or acquaintances, not in terms of friends.

To conclude, it is rather the attitude, the performance, and the manners by which the Old Colonists in Durango interact and deal with the outside that makes the difference. *Despite* the principle of non-conformity, people interact, and, *in accordance* with the principle, they remain non-conformed during this interaction. Non-conformity thus does not mean having nothing to do with the world; it rather means interacting with the world in appropriate ways. Carried out with the right attitude, members express non-conformity even during interaction with the outside. Old Colonists in Durango make great effort to articulate and accentuate precisely a relation to the world rather than denying it. Thus, in more or less visible ways, an explicit attitude of non-conformity in interactions produces and reproduces the boundaries that are essential to the community.

### **Rule-Breaking**

While some interaction with Bolivians is more or less unproblematic, it has to be acknowledged that, while the Bolivian neighbors provide the Mennonites in Durango with approved necessities such as business opportunities and medical attention, the Bolivian socio-cultural context also offer things that are far more troublesome, things banned in the colony, such as tobacco, opportunities to engage in extra-marital relations, alcohol, TV, and popular music. Since control is less strict at these margins of Old Colony life, Bolivian settlements in the area

constitute an easily accessible refuge for Mennonites who go there to get hold of articles banned in their own community. This inevitably brings us onto a topic that is more sensitive to examine, namely, rule-breaking.

On a general level, respecting and obeying the rules of the Old Colony is a way of respecting and safeguarding boundaries, whereas disobedience is a way of challenging or even violating the same. In all Old Colonies, the *Ordnung* constitutes an important factor for the maintenance of boundaries, and people in Durango would most likely agree that inappropriate behavior must be controlled and prevented. Otherwise, the Old Colonists will “become like the Bolivians,” like many community members put it. This means that the boundaries separating the fundamental categories of “Us” and “Them” will be blurred and that the Old Colonists will succumb to immoral and undisciplined behavior. People in Durango also refer to less conservative Mennonites in order to illustrate how modern inventions or other outside influences often bring about wickedness. Many share examples from Mennonite colonies in Bolivia and beyond, where the use of cars and the occurrence of immoral behavior simultaneously increased. Many are the stories of teenagers who go out by car in the evenings violating laws and causing trouble with the police, and many members in Durango have heard about the worrying number of Mennonites in Mexico who are engaged in drug trafficking. In the eyes of the Old Colonists in Durango, these Mennonites “have left religion behind” as they have accepted modern inventions. It is thus vital to emphasize that on a general level, members perceive of the rules as something that benefits the community and its members.

Nonetheless, wherever there are rules, rules are broken. Durango is no exception, and rules are continuously being broken, bent, and negotiated. Despite what the *Ordnung* and the ministers preach, people in Durango drink alcoholic beverages, smoke, watch TV, play and listen to music, keep a camera, dance, and have extramarital romantic affairs. There is nothing unique to the fact that inconsistent behavior occurs and that members break rules, even in this strictly-controlled community. The reason for looking at rule-breaking among Old Colonists in particular is rather that their community offers an unusually clearly defined framework for the dos and don'ts of the group, thereby providing possibilities for investigating the dynamics of boundaries. Primarily through the Durango Old Colonists' interactions with Bolivians, it becomes apparent that rules are being negotiated and boundaries are being meddled with. In all of these cases, rule breaking is by definition taking place.

Commencing fieldwork at the margins of the Old Colony community, it soon became noticeable that, some rule-breaking constitutes reason for fellow community members to immediately call for the church authorities' attention and for the ministers to confront the offender. If someone is caught with a camera or a CD-player, the church authorities will immediately confiscate it and often burn it. Worse felonies lead to more severe punishment. For instance, a man who could be called “Thiessen” was confronted by the church authorities for his disobedient behavior, which included filthy language, heavy drinking, and refusal to attend church. He had been warned several times but refused to change. One day, however, when

Thiessen had become furious for being denied to buy liquor at a store, he had picked up a gun. As soon as this got to the ministers' and the other church members' attention, Thiessen was banned. The felony was undeniable and there were no forgiving circumstances whatsoever.

In other instances, however, people choose to ignore the wrongdoing and no sanctions are meted out. Every Sunday afternoon, for instance, young men in the colony gather after church service for the family lunch that follows. This is their institutionalized opportunity to spend time with friends out of their parents' sights. The boys often take the opportunity to challenge the colony rules by wearing trousers and a belt, instead of the prescribed bib and brace overall, a very provoking undertaking. Those not so daring might limit themselves to attaching a *Coca Cola* or *Volvo* sticker onto their hat or cap, a subtle yet clear challenge to the clothing regulations. The adult members are aware of the fact that the boys gather like this and that alcohol, cigarettes, and coca probably occur, but since most men used to do the same thing in their youth, they choose to turn a blind eye to it. Still, the boys are expected to manage their free time within certain limits. No matter what you have been drinking during the hours spent with your friends, you must by no means turn up drunk at home. If you do, physical punishment and grounding await you. In addition, and even worse, if a girl would be caught accompanying the boys and sharing the beer can and cigarettes with them, they would all be severely punished. There are limits to less offensive misbehavior as well.

Even though people give voice to very concrete images of the consequences of disobedience, under certain circumstances rule breaking seems to be considered more or less harmless. Just like interaction with the world can be carried out in manners that comply with the principle of nonconformity, other actions that seemingly clash with fundamental values of the community can be overlooked, as long as it is carried out in appropriate ways. For instance, beer cans and cigarettes are hidden, and happy jolly singing is silenced as another buggy shows up on the road. Even though the passengers in the passing equipage might very well have an idea of what was going on before they showed up, the demonstrated self-control signals the necessary obedience expected from all Old Colony Mennonites. Thus, interference is not necessary.

Crucial to emphasize is that I never heard an informant who has committed a misdeed, saying he or she had sinned, or is sorry or feels guilty about it. As long as no one has caught them doing wrong, there seems to be no harm done. Contrary to what an outsider with preconceived ideas of a conservative Christian community might expect, people do not seem thoroughly concerned with whether they have gone against God's will or not. What fellow community members know and think, on the other hand, is of utmost importance. There may be several possible explanations as to why some rule breaking is not reported and seemingly not causing guilt. One reason is that people are greatly concerned with the expected order of how things should be and most people are cautious not to disturb this order. One man explained it like this:

When you drink more [than one can of beer], you start to speak badly, [the ministers] say.

It isn't the beer that is bad, it's the words. It's the words that they don't like. But I can drink three cans of beer and nothing happens to me. I just stay calm.

In that way, he was not misbehaving, despite a quite substantial intake of alcohol.

In line with this, when a fellow community member has broken a rule, people in Durango have referred to it in terms of disturbing the colony order or disobeying the ministers' instructions, not in terms of sin. In other words, what seems to genuinely worry people is that they are defying community stability, disobeying the community's maxims on discipleship and loyalty. Another example illustrating the emphasis on manners and behaviors concerns a 60-year-old man in Durango who was banned a few times, and who apparently suffers from some mental disorder. On several occasions, he has aimed to commit suicide without succeeding. Once he was brought to the medical clinic in the colony after he had deliberately cut off one of his testicles. The doctor and his son were able to save the man's life, despite the enormous loss of blood he had suffered, but the consequence was that he was banned from church. As I tried to make some sense out of this, I asked one of my informants to explain why he was being excommunicated and banned for cutting off his own testicle. The man was apparently ill. "It's because you can't do like that. People have to behave! If not, people here will become like the Bolivians [...] they will do just anything [...] People have to control themselves" (Hedberg 2007, 219).

Drawing on the emphasis of form and manner when it comes to rule-breaking, not just obedience but also disobedience follows a fairly uniform pattern in Durango. Members of the community usually break rules and norms in accordance with how rules should be broken and are thus not perceived of as challenging the *Ordnung*. Rules broken in the appropriate way indicate that rules and the *Ordnung* are somehow still respected, and the offender is not harming the collective struggle. The crux of the matter is to be careful not to openly challenge the instituted order of the community. As members break rules in ways that signals awareness of the inappropriateness of the offense, they are in a way simultaneously acknowledging them and paying them respect by transgressing them in the "correct" way (Hedberg 2007, 181, 213ff). To relate to anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner (1984), I would even say that breaking the rules is also an active engagement of the rules. This process of carefully challenging the boundaries without damaging and questioning their value is traceable also in the context of change in this change-shunning community.

### **Modifications of the Old Colony Way of Life**

The third set of boundary negotiation comprises modifications of the Old Colony way of life. Rules are assumed to be for the benefit of the community, and rules that might appear odd to an outsider—as for instance the ban on rubber tires on tractors—can be ascribed a remarkably simple explanation. Often enough, statements such as, "The Mennonites have always lived like this," and, "This is the way the Mennonites do it," appear to be good enough, whether the rule is longstanding or recent. Simply put, Mennonites in Durango claim that they do things the way the

Old Colony has always done them (Hedberg 2007, 82; Warkentin 2013). When self-imposed changes have taken place or when new elements have been introduced on the Old Colony Mennonites' own terms, rationales are presented so as not to disturb the course leading them towards salvation in heaven.

Mary Douglas notes that no system of categories will be perfect; some things will not readily fit into any category. These anomalies are “deviant,” as Douglas calls them. Boundaries are challenged not necessarily by violating them but by making them vague, imprecise, and incorrect (Douglas 1966). To understand how colony members of Durango accept and justify change that has taken place, we could assume that either foreign elements—*anomalies*—have been reformulated in order to fit within the Old Colony way of life, or, alternatively, that the framework itself has been modified (Douglas 1966; Kurkiala 2005, 211ff). Even though all cultures and societies are dynamic and changeable, when it comes to the Old Colony, the former is most probable: anomalies are being reformulated in to fit within an already existing system and new elements become perceived of as culturally appropriate integrated parts of how things have always been (Toren 1988, 669, 713). Tractors are stripped of their rubber tires and equipped with impressive steel wheels. The Nike logotype on the type of sports cap that male Old Colonists often wear as an alternative to the Panama hat is painted over with black ink, transforming the cap into an appropriate Old Colony attribute fitting the strict clothing regulations. The foreign but fair-skinned anthropologist is convinced to dress up like an Old Colony Mennonite woman and be called “sister” from time to time.

The examples above could be perceived of as illustrations of the flexibility and dynamics of the community boundaries. New elements are made legitimate by common agreement, although this does not happen *en passant*. The introduction is controlled in the sense that it requires common agreement. Many things are clearly rejected and would by no means be let in. Yet, it cannot be emphasized enough that even though boundaries are crossed, bent, broken, and negotiated, people in Durango value them highly. Or rather, their community's mere existence as Old Colony is dependent on the boundaries.

### **The Dynamics of Boundaries: Concluding Remarks**

We live in an era when globalization is inescapable. Encounters, fast societal change, and mobility are concrete aspects of many peoples' reality. These circumstances call for a need to thoroughly explore issues concerning group membership, belonging / non-belonging, boundaries, and community maintenance. By studying the Old Colony case, we attain increased knowledge about how socio-cultural boundaries are being produced and reproduced. The Old Colony Mennonite community also provides interesting, as well as important, examples that illustrate and cast light on the dynamics of boundaries. The Old Colonists' mere existence is dependent on the boundaries that are carefully looked after in relation to the world. The boundaries are indispensable in the strictest sense of the word. Meanwhile, the boundaries that serve to shelter the Old Colonists' way of life are greatly dependent on the “Other,” the non-Mennonites. As has

been shown, interactions with the world do take place. Throughout interaction, the Old Colonists in Durango generally make great effort to enunciate and express precisely a relation to the world. By articulating a relation to the world, rather than denying it, the community boundaries are being controlled and further strengthened. These processes have to be considered in order to understand the striving of the Old Colonists in Durango to stay outside the world, which implies distinguishing themselves from others, as well as to convince themselves of who they are.

By highlighting in particular that which takes place at the margins of society, we get a far more nuanced picture of the diversity that exists than if we limit the scope to include only the centre. At the physical and cultural margins of the Old Colony, negotiation and bending of colony rules becomes most perceptible. By means of actions carried out in this sphere of life, Old Colonists give us adequate reasons to challenge notions about boundaries as stiff, static, and immovable. We have also seen that carried out in the appropriate way, deviation even becomes an enactment and manifestation of the rules and thus the boundaries.

I would like to conclude by highlighting one last aspect. We have seen that even though obedience is key, the Old Colony can in fact meet the expense of deviation, and even though boundaries are essential, the Old Colony does allow some bending and negotiation. I would suggest that this strength and endurance ultimately stems from the fact that the members have something fundamental, some “cultural stuff,” in common—for instance, the Old Colonists’ striving for salvation. As I have argued elsewhere, community is about *wanting* unity despite deviation as well as about being motivated and sharing a willingness to continue (Hedberg 2007, 258). To conclude, even though social and cultural boundaries are passable, changeable, and negotiable, they are fundamental for the existence of many ethnic and cultural groups. An important point to make is the fact that maintenance of boundaries requires a desire and will to maintain them. Preserving boundaries is without doubt a much more demanding task than just leaving them adrift. Evidently, the Old Colony Mennonites in Durango, Bolivia, share the willingness it takes to face the challenge.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Anna Sofia Hedberg holds a PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Uppsala University. Her doctoral thesis *Outside the World: Cohesion and Deviation among Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia* (2007) was based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork among Old Colony Mennonites in the Bolivian Gran Chaco. Hedberg has been a professor in social anthropology at the University of Dalarna (2008-2013) and a professor in cultural anthropology, Uppsala University (2013-2015). Her research has mainly focused on processes of cultural maintenance, empowerment, and boundary negotiations in interactions between religious and ethnic minorities and the majority society. Contact information: [anna\\_sofia.hedberg@uadm.uu.se](mailto:anna_sofia.hedberg@uadm.uu.se)

<sup>2</sup> The article draws on the main arguments, material, and conclusions brought together during the work on my doctoral thesis, based on 13 months of anthropological fieldwork.

<sup>3</sup> *Jemeent*, also spelled *Gemeent*, is Low German for the High German word *Gemeinde*, which means parish, local church, community, or congregation (cf. for example Driedger 1973, 259).

<sup>4</sup> The Mennonite principle of non-conformity derives from Paul's words "do not be conformed to the world" in Romans 12:2. By referring to this particular passage, the early Anabaptists argued that the state should not have any jurisdiction over the church or religious affairs (Estep 1992, 194).

<sup>5</sup> The *Altkolonie* refers to the first Mennonite settlement, Chortitza, in Russia, which has come to be the ideal model for a Mennonite Old Colony. The first Mennonites came to the southern regions of the Russian Empire—today's Ukraine—in 1788 and 1789 from Prussia. In 1798, the Mennonite immigrants in Russia founded the first colony, Chortitza. Chortitza became known as "the Old Colony" (*die Altkolonie*) in contrast to the second settlement, Molotchnaia, founded in 1803 (Urry 1989:57).

<sup>6</sup> "Cultural margins," alludes to the margins of the community's morally and ideologically defined framework of dos and don'ts, whereas the physical margins refer to the actual colony boundaries.

<sup>7</sup> The Amerindian groups inhabiting this part of the Bolivian Gran Chaco are primarily Guaraní, either Ava-Guarani or Izoceño-Guaraní.

<sup>8</sup> Many inhabitants in Durango have also experienced temporary work migration, within or outside of Bolivia, travelling back and forth between their colony and elsewhere.

<sup>9</sup> The office of minister is a lifelong commitment, and a man who is elected for the post cannot decline since he is believed to have been chosen by God.

<sup>10</sup> Izozog is a 19,000 km<sup>2</sup> geographic area flanking the river Parapetí in the Bolivian Gran Chaco.

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