Weaponizing Amish Country Tourism: An Update on *Selling the Amish*

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Abstract: The 2012 book *Selling the Amish: The Tourism of Nostalgia* investigated what is it about Amish Country tourism that visitors find compelling when what they encounter in tourist towns seems, on the face of it, so contrary to the plain and simple life of the Amish. This article briefly summarizes the original findings of that study and then provides a research update, highlighting some surprising developments in the merchandising of Amish-themed tourism venues, not just in Ohio but also in Indiana and Pennsylvania. While American flags were certainly common in the three tourist towns described in *Selling the Amish*, merchandise now promoting guns and gun violence is new. The research update suggests further inquiry and theorizing on links between tourism and Christian nationalism is warranted.

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Introduction

In my book *Selling the Amish: The Tourism of Nostalgia* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), I attempted to answer the following question: What is it about Amish Country tourism in Holmes County, Ohio, that visitors find compelling, given that what they encounter in tourist towns seems so contrary to the plain and simple life of the Amish? Eleven years later, in 2023, I was invited to give a paper at the seventh annual APASA (Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies Association) conference in Wilmot, Ohio, that would provide an update to what I had argued in my book. I was delighted to be asked, interested in any changes that might have occurred in the visual and material rhetorics aimed at tourists in these towns. What I discovered surprised me yet also—paradoxically, perhaps—could be seen as just more of the same. In this article, I summarize my original findings, discuss what I discovered in my more recent visits, and conclude with a few comments about the changes and continuities in Amish Country tourism.[1]

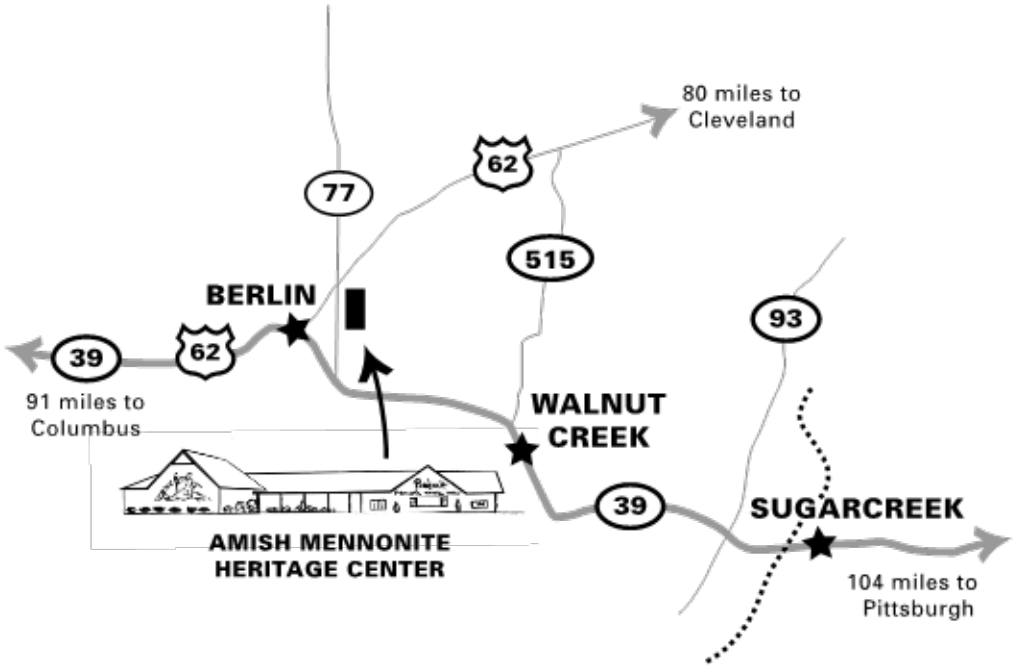
[1] For a fascinating companion piece to this article, but focusing on Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, see Feldman and Fader, "Illiberal Jewish-Christian Encounters," in which the authors examine the "triangle of ultra-Orthodox Jewish tourists, Amish/Mennonite farmers, and Christian tour guide mediators," 1. Thanks much to one of these authors for their very helpful feedback on this article, as well as to Steve Nolt of the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies, Elizabethtown College.

A Summary of *Selling the Amish*

I spent the summer of 1996 living in the tiny and charming town of Walnut Creek, Ohio. During that time, I began to think a lot about, to borrow from Donald Kraybill's phrase, the riddle of Amish Country tourism.[2]

Every year, millions of Americans travel to Ohio's Amish Country (only Cedar Point amusement park claims more visitors annually in the state), presumably to experience the "plain and simple life of the Amish." What I found baffling was the fact that what those millions of tourists were getting was anything but plain and simple. What, exactly, were they getting?

Fifteen plus years later, my book *Selling the Amish: The Tourism of Nostalgia* was published. In it, I focused on the visual and material rhetorics of three towns in the Greater Holmes County settlement, which is the second largest settlement in the world: Berlin, Walnut Creek, and Sugarcreek.[3]



Area map published in Selling the Amish (Image courtesy of Grounded Design Studio)

More specifically, I sought to answer these questions: What was being put in front of tourists at each town? What sort of architecture did these towns feature? Were the towns themed? If so, what

[2] I am, of course, drawing upon the title of Kraybill's book, *The Riddle of Amish Culture*, first published in 1989 and in a revised edition in 2001.

[3] The Greater Holmes County settlement, which includes portions of Holmes, Wayne, Tuscarawas, Stark, and Coshocton counties, is home to 40,435 Amish and 323 Amish church districts. According to Erik Wesner, "Holmes County proper is the 'most Amish' county in the nation, with over 40% of those living within county boundaries belonging to a horse-and-buggy Amish church." Erik Wesner, "The 10 Biggest Amish Communities (2024)," *Amish America*, updated September 19, 2024, https://amishamerica.com/10-biggest-amish-communities-2019/.

was the theme and why might it be compelling for visitors? What kind of merchandise was for sale? How did these towns construct the Amish, America, and tourists?

In short, I wanted to figure out why White middle-American tourists might find what these towns were offering so engaging. I should note that I identified visitors in Ohio's Amish Country as White and middle-American because those were the sort of people I observed most often in the course of my research. They were overwhelmingly White. I rarely saw people of color. And, judging from my tours through parking lots outside Amish-style restaurants and local hotels, they favored minivans and SUVs. They wore casual attire, typically shorts or blue jeans and T-shirts suggesting their enthusiasm for the American flag, a professional sports team, or Ohio State University.

I wanted to find answers to these questions about tourism because, again, on the face of it, it didn't seem as though Amish Country tourism had much to do with the Amish.

Sol's Palace in Berlin (Photo courtesy of the author)

Berlin

What was on offer in Berlin? In a word: clutter. Everything from giant Adirondack chairs to all manner of so-called arts and crafts (most of which were manufactured in China), to quilts (most also made in China), to "Levi's Choice" potato chips, to Route 66 wind chimes, to—of course—Amish Country souvenirs.

That said, there were exceptions to the clutter. Chief among them was the Amish and Mennonite Heritage Center (or Behalt) just north of Berlin on County Road 77. Tours given by knowledgeable locals of the impressive cyclorama, painted by Heinz Gaugel (1927–2000) and completed in 1992, helped visitors understand the Amish story from its origins in the Reformation

all the way to the late twentieth century.[4] There was also Boyd and Wurthmann, a favorite dining spot for the Amish, and Helping Hands Quilt Shop, where, instead of quilts imported from China, visitors could purchase quilts made locally, often by Amish. But, for the most part, there was a lot of clutter.

Carlisle House Gifts in Walnut Creek (Photo courtesy of the author)

Walnut Creek

Walnut Creek had an obvious Victorian theme. Small homes had been demolished and, in their place, a big Victorian-themed hotel and gift shop had been constructed. On sale in Carlisle Gifts was a lot of lace in the form of curtains, table runners, tablecloths, and the like. There were also elaborate tea sets, fancy hand lotion, gourmet coffee beans, and imported Christmas ornaments. The décor inside Carlisle Inn continued the theme, with a baby grand piano in the parlor just off the main lobby, white wicker tables and chairs in the second-floor breakfast room, and floral print upholstery and wallpaper. There were also buggy rides on offer at the hotel, Amish-style food at Der Dutchman restaurant, and apples along with Amish-style peanut butter just up the road at Hillcrest Orchard. Walnut Creek was something of a mix—much architecture and merchandise that seemed contrary to Amish life, but also some things that were more fitting.

[4] For a brief history and rhetorical analysis of the Amish and Mennonite Heritage Center that tries to tell the fascinating story of its controversial origins, see my article (published under the name Susan Biesecker-Mast): "Behalt: A Rhetoric of Remembrance and Transformation."

Alpine Hills Museum in Sugarcreek
(Photo courtesy of the author)

Mannequin sitting on a quilt in a shopping cart outside a gift shop in Sugarcreek
(Photo courtesy of the author)

Sugarcreek

Sugarcreek was in yet another category. Swiss music played all over town through outdoor speakers. Swiss and American flags stuck out of outdoor planters. A bank, a restaurant, and gift shops had been given new facades in the 1950s to evoke the architecture of Swiss chalets. A major draw for visitors was the giant cuckoo clock along with the yodelers at an annual Swiss festival, which featured (among other things) a Swiss cheese competition.

The display that really stood out was positioned just outside a gift shop that, like shops in Berlin, sold quilts manufactured in China. The display consisted of a shopping cart inside of which was a quilt upon which sat a mannequin dressed to resemble an Amishman—plain clothes, beard (although not an Amish beard, as it includes a mustache), hat (although not an Amish-style hat), and all.[5] As odd as that display was, it did have a way of distilling much of what Amish Country tourism was at the time.

[5] Marcus Yoder, executive director of the Amish and Mennonite Heritage Center, agreed that the mannequin was supposed to be an Amish man despite the mustache and non-Amish-style hat.

Thus, the enigma: What were middle Americans getting out of Amish Country tourism? Was it simply consumerism? Was visiting Amish Country merely an excuse for shopping and overeating? To answer questions like these, I spent fifteen years visiting the area. I went into every gift shop, restaurant, cheese factory, antique mall, and other establishments. I took thousands of photos and lots of field notes. I interviewed shop owners, observed and talked to tourists, and shopped. Briefly, here is what I said about these three towns.

Arguments in *Selling the Amish*

I argued that Berlin was all about the promise of regaining control over technology. In the post-World War II world, middle Americans, forced in elementary school to "duck and cover" in preparation for the possibility of the Soviets dropping an atomic bomb, knew well that humans had lost control over technology. And while advertisers worked overtime to convince Americans that they were in control (as Dinah Shore sang it—"see the USA in your new Chevrolet"), it wasn't always an easy sell. I argued that Berlin—with its antique malls full of old household items and farming implements and gift shops displaying mid-twentieth-century-style toasters, miniature television sets featuring images of Marilyn Monroe along with TV shows like "I Dream of Jeannie" and "The Andy Griffith Show," and retro-style radios featuring a likeness of Elvis Presley—was selling the idea that, like the Amish, tourists could regain control over technology. By making the right purchases, they could rule technology instead of it ruling them. Just like the White men who had "ruled" the frontier, Sol's Palace in Berlin was notable for the way it crystallized the frontier theme of the town. It was built to look like a nineteenth-century frontier fort but with a difference. It has porches stocked with yard décor for purchase and hickory rockers. The rockers seldom go unoccupied as they provide a place for husbands to relax while their wives shop, thus providing some gender clarity and making clear who runs the show.

Porch of antique mall in Berlin (Photo courtesy of the author)

Merchandise for sale at Catalpa Trading Company in Berlin (Photo courtesy of the author)

Two participants in the Swiss Festival in Sugarcreek (Photo courtesy of the author)

Sugarcreek, I argued, was about ethnicity and the promise that White middle Americans, who grew up in families that had been fully assimilated into the so-called melting pot generations earlier, could rediscover their ethnic roots and distinctive heritages. In Sugarcreek, visitors were invited to imagine, as they watched the Swiss Festival queen make her way down Main Street in a convertible or listened to musicians in full Swiss costume playing alpenhorns, that they were not, simply, vanilla. They, too, had an ethnic identity and history, even if they weren't too sure what it was.

I argued that Walnut Creek was about gender. Diners at the famous Der Dutchman restaurant, for instance, knew very well who the women were and who the men were. All of the servers were women, and many (if not most) were Amish. Those who were Amish had on dresses, black tights, aprons, and head coverings. Those who were not Amish wore dresses or skirts and, of course, aprons. If they were conservative Mennonites, they likely also wore a head covering of some kind. Men who worked at the restaurant were not especially visible since most worked in the kitchen. But there were always plenty of Amish men eating at the restaurant and sporting their broadfall pants, solid color shirts, and suspenders. In short, clear gender differences were readily visible in Walnut Creek. At the time I was researching and writing this chapter (in the 1990s and early 2000s), gender was becoming increasingly confusing for many White middle Americans. I argued that this sort of gender clarity was reassuring.[6] Here was a place where gender differences appeared to be intact, stable, timeless.

Walnut Creek was also about time. Der Dutchman specializes in "slow food"—turkey that was roasted, and chicken that was broasted. Both were typically served with dressing on the side and real potatoes that were peeled by hand, mashed, and topped with gravy. White and wheat loaves of bread were baked every day and served with apple butter and Amish peanut butter. And then there were the fruit or cream pies, also baked every day. This kind of food is called "slow food" because it can't be made in a hurry. Research on the topic of how, say, working parents who were also trying to make sure their children got to school on time—never mind soccer practice, vacation Bible school, music lessons, and all the rest—showed that Americans were stressed by the demands of their busy lives. To sit down to a tasty meal featuring slow food, I argued, was a welcome luxury.

These three tourist towns in Ohio's Amish Country, I argued, provided visitors with visual and material rhetorics[7] that offered ways of imagining antidotes to their challenging and pressing anxieties about technology, ethnicity, gender, and time. They also made for ample opportunities to sell tourists all manner of merchandise—from cookbooks to retro-styled kitchen appliances to toss pillows and throws to apple butter.

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[6] For a history and commentary on the rising fear regarding gender, not just in the United States but globally, see Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?*

[7] Visual and material rhetorics can come in the form of images, merchandise, interior spaces, architecture, and so forth. They shape the way we think about things, how we understand ourselves, how we engage the world, what we think is possible, and so forth. There is a rich body of literature on visual/material rhetorics. A great place to start reading in this field is the work of Stuart Hall. See Hall, "Encoding and Decoding."

An Update on *Selling the Amish*

As noted above, I was delighted in 2023 to be asked to provide an update on *Selling the Amish*. Toward that end, I revisited the three towns analyzed in that book, with an eye to discovering what changes might have occurred in their visual/material rhetorics.

I began my research by returning to Berlin, starting with Sol's Palace. Merchandise there is organized in bays—like an antique mall. When I walked in, expecting the Chinese-manufactured "crafts" I saw years ago, I was stunned.

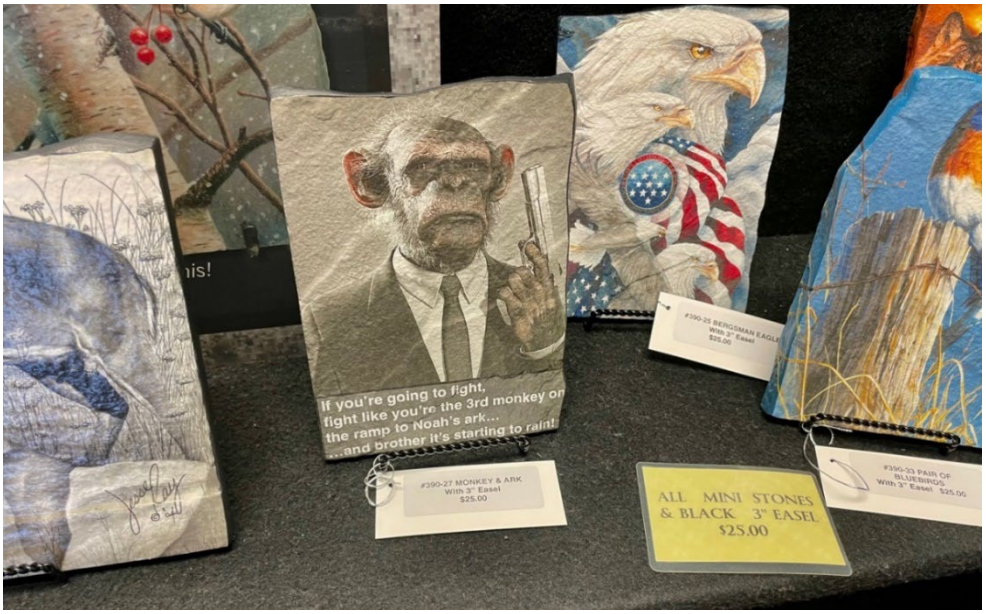
Merchandise for sale at Sol's Palace in Berlin (Photo courtesy of the author)

Just to the left of the main entrance is a bay that offers personal beverage containers. Instead of taking the shape one expects (cylindrical with, say, a top that sports a straw), these were in the shape of bullets. On those containers appear phrases such as "Liberty or death" and "Second Amendment 1789." There is also a Greek phrase: *Mu omicron lambda omega nu lambda alpha beta epsilon*. According to gun enthusiasts, this phrase was borrowed from the ancient Spartans. The English translation of the phrase is "come and take it." The "it" refers to one's gun. Of course, the appearance of this phrase on this bullet-shaped beverage container speaks in defiance of the supposed threat that the federal government is going to take guns away from gun owners. In this same display can be found a coffee mug with a list of various calibers of guns: 45s, 38s, 22s, 9mm. The message that accompanies the list: "All faster than dialing 911."

Sol's Palace is well known for its eclectic collection of merchandise. So, I thought such merchandise might be unique to Sol's. I was wrong. It's ubiquitous. You can find merchandise like it in many other shops in Berlin. You can also now find such merchandise in Walnut Creek and Sugarcreek.

Merchandise for sale in a gift shop in Walnut Creek (Photo courtesy of the author)

Images of the American flag appear on all manner of merchandise: toss pillows, throw blankets, candle holders, coffee mugs, wind socks, birdhouses, and T-shirts. They appear on wall hangings with accompanying phrases like "2nd Amendment Is My Gun Permit." They even appear on Christian crosses, superimposed with phrases like "God Bless America: My Home Sweet Home." There are displays featuring images of the Founding Fathers, the clear suggestion being that the Founders were all evangelical Christians (a common *topos* in evangelical rhetoric today), even though any US historian worth their salt will tell you that most were not. There are displays of documents, fashioned to look as if they are old, including the Pledge of Allegiance, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution.



Merchandise for sale at Sol's Palace in Berlin (Photo courtesy of the author)

An item that stood out among the rest was an image of a monkey on what looks like a piece of slate. The monkey is wearing a suit and pointing a gun in the air. The accompanying quote reads, "If you're going to fight, fight like you're the third monkey on the ramp to Noah's Ark…and brother it's starting to rain."

In addition to revisiting Berlin, Walnut Creek, and Sugarcreek, I also returned to Mount Hope, a town I wrote about in *The Amish and the Media*, a volume edited by Diane Zimmerman Umble and David Weaver-Zercher. In that chapter, I argued that Mount Hope was considerably less focused on tourism than Berlin, Walnut Creek, or Sugarcreek.[8]

Much remains the same in Mount Hope, such as Mt. Hope Auction, where many Amish (and other locals) gather, usually on Wednesdays, to buy and sell everything from horses and cows to pigs, eggs, and pies. Mrs. Yoder's Kitchen, a popular Amish-style restaurant, continues to do a brisk business serving hungry diners. Mount Hope Fabrics and Gift Shoppe carries lots of fabric (much of it for the purpose of making quilts), along with ready-made clothing and hats for Amish men and nightgowns, slips, dresses, and prayer coverings for Amish women. Mt. Hope Hardware serves the Amish community with its stock of items such as hand-crank ice cream makers, kerosene lamps, and gas-powered refrigerators.

Guns for sale at Premier Outdoors in Mount Hope (Photo courtesy of the author)

But things have also changed. For the first time, Mount Hope is home to a hotel, the Sleep Inn and Suites, which was built close to the Mt. Hope Auction. Another addition (built in 2015) is Premier Outdoors, which specializes in all things related to hunting, fishing, hiking, and camping.

[8] Biesecker, "Heritage versus History." (At the time of the book's publication, my name was Susan Biesecker.)

Their inventory includes camouflage, hiking boots, fishing poles, and guns. Although I am not an expert on guns, I was not surprised to see a lot of rifles—what one would expect deer hunters to use. What I didn't expect were all the varieties of handguns. I have it on good authority that handguns are sometimes used by the Amish to eliminate wild predators that may otherwise kill livestock. And the caliber of guns (such as 22s) that appear in Premier's glass cases appear to confirm that. Still, given the Amish commitment to nonresistance (pacifism), it gives one pause to see so many guns for sale in Mount Hope.

Merchandise for sale at a gift shop in Shipshewana (Photo courtesy of the author)

Lest we think that Ohio's Amish Country is unique, visitors to Shipshewana, Indiana, can expect to encounter very similar displays of merchandise. In Shipshewana, images of American flags are also ubiquitous. They appear on toss pillows, tea towels, decorative plates, candle holders, women's straw hats, mailboxes, and many more items. Phrases like "God Bless America," "America: God Shed His Grace on Thee," and "God Bless Our Flag" make their appearance on toss pillows, tea towels, and decorative plates as well. One can purchase a "Bullet LED Flashlight" and a "Double Barrel Shotgun Barbeque Lighter."

Merchandise for sale at a gift shop in Lancaster County catering to tourists
(Photo courtesy of Steve Nolt)

The same is true for the Amish settlement in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Visitors there encounter huge displays of merchandise with military themes. The displays include T-shirts, wall hangings, coasters, and ornaments featuring all four branches of the military. There are wooden signs with the image of an American flag and the phrase "Support Our Troops" on them. Other wall hangings feature a white cross on a blue background and the stripes of the American flag. As in the Holmes County settlement, Hold Fast merchandise is for sale, items that, according to the company's website, are for "freedom loving Americans who want to see Biblical values preserved and are taking a stand and letting their voices be heard." Hold Fast merchandise features flags and statements like "One Nation Under God," "Hold Fast to Faith, Family, and Freedom," and "I stand with Israel." Another display features photographs of police officers and a wall hanging of the first responder flag. Superimposed on the flag is Matthew 5:9, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Elsewhere, visitors can find a toss pillow with a silhouette of a soldier (in the colors of the flag) and the phrase, "Home of the Free because of the Brave."

Reflection and Possibilities for Further Research

In *Selling the Amish*, I tried to provide a reasonable explanation as to why middle Americans spend lots of time and money in tourist towns that are so contrary to the plain and simple life of the Amish. And I argued that, despite all the commodification of the Amish in Amish Country tourism, there were still opportunities for visitors to encounter Amish life in meaningful ways.

For example, in the course of my research for the book, I often saw middle Americans in their SUVs or minivans traveling the backroads of Holmes County get stuck behind buggies going about 10 miles an hour. It would not be surprising if many visitors in that situation got cranky because

they were forced to drive so slowly on their way to, say, an Amish-style restaurant. But in the book, I suggested that, if they were curious, visitors might think about a fact that the Amish make abundantly visible; namely, that the way those visitors were living their lives was not the only way to live. I argued that an important lesson the Amish teach visitors is that it is possible to live at a much slower pace. It is possible to live surrounded by one's extended family and lifelong friends. It is possible to live in a community that does not put efficiency and competition first. I wondered if at least some of those visitors, despite all the opportunities for overconsumption in Amish Country, thought about how Amish life posed questions about their own lives.

But the nature of Amish Country commodification seems to have changed. And, after seeing so many displays of merchandise that feature military and police themes, Second Amendment slogans, beverage containers in the shape of bullets, and various patriotic symbols like flags alongside items that borrow from Christian symbols like crosses in various forms (often with flags superimposed upon them), or items that make use of biblical phrases or items like devotional books and journals, I have to wonder what the Amish now signify in the context of Amish Country tourism.

In their 2024 article "Illiberal Jewish-Christian Encounters: Political Temporalities in Amish Country Tourism," Feldman and Fader examine aspects of Amish Country tourism in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, related to race, religion, and political ideology.[9] Although many of the specifics of their study are unique to Ultra-Orthodox Jewish visitors to Amish-themed tourist venues, the themes they discuss overlap with my observations and suggest lines of inquiry for future research. Feldman and Fader cite Campanella and Dassù's work on the rise of "nostalgic nationalism" and find it expressed not only in politics but also in leisure spaces.[10] Believing that "tourism is, of course, inherently political," Feldman and Fader find nostalgic nationalism casting an interpretation of the Amish as "exemplary symbols" of "a broad right-wing critique of liberal democracy in America that includes anxieties around" race, personal liberty, and "rejection of government control over individual autonomy." As they joined various tour groups during fieldwork in 2022, they were surprised to hear few comments from visitors about simplicity of lifestyle, limited digital technology, and the like, but many approving comments about perceived Amish resistance to government regulation.[11]

To return to the question I posed in my original research in 2012: Is it possible for visitors, amid all the marketing emphasis on a militaristic Christian nationalism, to see the Amish as people who are committed to following the Prince of Peace and who are determined to shape their daily lives in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount? That is to say, is it possible—or how is it possible—for tourists to see the Amish in the America of 2025?

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[9] Feldman and Fader, "Illiberal Jewish-Christian Encounters.

[10] Campanella and Dassù, *Anglo Nostalgia.*

[11] Feldman and Fader, "Illiberal Jewish-Christian Encounters, 4-6, 14-16. Feldman and Fader are, among other things, investigating the different sorts of nostalgic nationalisms at play among Ultra-Orthodox Jewish tourists and evangelical Christian tour guides. The populations and factors at play in Holmes County, Ohio, might not be identical, but possible parallels are worth investigating.

Maybe the pop culture image of the Amish will dissolve into just another illiberal option of American identity. Or maybe their countercultural lives will make the Amish witness more powerful than ever. In any case, the task of considering and reconsidering the tourism of nostalgia is as important as ever.

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