

Book Review

Kenny Wollmann, editor. *Navigating Tradition and Innovation: Essays Commemorating the Permanent Settlement of Hutterites in Manitoba*. MacGregor, MB: Hutterian Brethren Book Centre, 2024. 424 pp.

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This volume offers a welcome contribution to the Hutterites—past, present, and outlook into the future. Edited by Kenny Wollmann from Baker Hutterite Community and published by the Hutterian Brethren Book Centre, it assembles nine essays on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of Hutterite permanent settlement in Manitoba, celebrated in 2018, and connected to the Jacob D. Maendel Lectures, a series that commenced in 2019. It presents different disciplinary perspectives on a wide variety of themes by academics and independent scholars that promise to further develop research into the history and current trends of this ethnoreligious minority from the Anabaptist religious tradition.

Wollmann's thoughtful introduction places the volume's agenda into the context of scholarly research and recent Hutterite developments from their own perspective. He addresses the “tension” (iii) in balancing tradition and the dynamic evolution of Hutterites in the twentieth century. Albeit implicit, it becomes clear that the volume does not restrict innovation to technological evolution but applies a wide understanding of the term that includes social, economic, cultural dynamics, and institutional changes in the Hutterite polity (or rather: polities) through the lens of the *Gemeindeordnungen*. Wollmann rightly suggests that the dearth of scholarly expertise in Hutterite communities—compared to other Anabaptist communities or churches—has so far limited inquiry into vital questions such as settler colonialism and other legacies of Hutterite settlement in Manitoba. He addresses both the scholarly research interest in Hutterites and the specific spiritual needs of Hutterite communities in their history “for the sake of the Church” and “history as redemptive” (vi) and warns against a romanticization and oversimplification of historical accounts (vii). In conceptualizing Hutterites as a social entity, Wollmann rejects the term “colony” as an outside label and convincingly argues for using “community” as a concept that best aligns with self-descriptions such as *Gemein* or *Haushaben*.

The volume's seven essays can be divided into three chronological parts. In the first part, Astrid von Schlachta and James M. Stayer address the early modern origins of Hutterites in central Europe



and in the sixteenth century. Both are experts in this field. Historian von Schlachta focuses on “Jakob Huter—His Life and Thought” in the formation of early Hutterite communities through their emigration to Moravia. Stayer then addresses the early writings of Hutterites in Moravia and traces their tradition as historical sources of time.

The second part consists of two chapters, including one that fills almost one third of the entire volume and could easily be published as a monograph in a revised and expanded form. In “The Land Transaction of Hutterite Immigration to Manitoba,” independent researcher Bruce Wiebe offers a meticulously researched and original contribution to the land purchases involved in the Hutterite permanent settlement around the year 1918. Over 300 footnotes document the impressive archival work, and six appendices present detailed evidence on the complexities involved with a communitarian group acquiring property as part of their migration. In his chapter titled “Community and Ethics,” historian Leonard Gross covers the intermediate years between Hutterite settlement in Manitoba and the 1992 Schmiedeleut schism. He presents an abridged version and brief interpretation of Samuel Kleinsasser’s *Community and Ethics*, written in 1998, that Gross considers “perhaps the sole in-depth and in-house theological, historical and sociological interpretation of Schmiedeleut Hutterianism to have been written in the twentieth century” (158), similar in scope to Harold S. Bender’s “The Anabaptist Vision” from 1944.¹

The third part offers perspectives from contemporary history as well as scientific genetic research in six essays. Communications scholar Gerald J. Mast focuses on the “Internet Question” and the Hutterite struggles surrounding smartphone use. Ian Kleinsasser, an independent researcher from Crystal Springs Community, provides a detailed account of the 1992 Schmiedeleut schism into Group I and Group II, and its aftermath. Geographer Simon M. Evans and Peter Peller, director of the Spatial and Numeric Data Services group at the University of Calgary Library, systematically examine Hutterite responses to economic change as nonfarming activities have grown, at least in some communities in the past few decades. Cheryl Rockman-Greenberg, A. Micheil Innes, and J. Michael Charette, all working in the field of medicine, look at recent genetic research with the Hutterites, a field that has “witnessed a rapid increase in the identification of the genetic basis for many genetic disorders, some of which have only been reported in people of Hutterite descent” (307). Finally, Jesse D. Hofer, a high school teacher from Silverwinds Community, analyzes the shift from written *Gemeindeordnungen* to a more informal way of communal governance in the Schmiedeleut Group I after the 1992 schism. While Hofer’s essay primarily addresses the consequences for communal stability in the absence of annual *Gemeindeordnungen* for the polity, his insights hold much deeper implications for researchers interested in governance structures more broadly.

This reviewer offers three suggestions for further research. First, the themes “tradition” and “innovation” have been a cornerstone of historical research for decades, yet the terms remain a bit vague in the volume. Interestingly, related terms such as “modern” and “modernity” are rather absent. In addressing long-term changes and continuities, research on Hutterites might benefit

¹ Harold S. Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision,” *Church History* 13, no. 1 (March 1944): 3–24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3161001>.

from scholarly conceptualizations in other fields, notably on other Anabaptist faith traditions such as the Mennonites and the Amish.²

Second, there is now considerable historiographic literature on Hutterites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Hutterite settlement in Manitoba at the end of World War I, as well as research interest in Hutterite contemporary history with a focus on the 1992 schism of the Schmiedeleut. In contrast, the interim period, ranging from the 1920s to the 1980s, has received far less historiographic attention. It would be highly welcome to see more historical research into the dynamics of Hutterite communities in social, economic, political, and cultural perspectives to complement and perhaps give new direction to scholarly debates so far dominated by ethnographic and other social scientific fieldwork since the 1960s.³

Third, while the Hutterites are historically specific, and in this sense are “unique,” further research could and should offer more comparative perspectives. For example, the theoretical and methodological reflections of “community” as an analytical concept can open up new research for non-Anabaptist communities also. Moreover, the specific governance structure of Hutterites and its dynamics might hold valuable insights for institutional research on a community of goods in the line of economist Elinor Ostrom’s groundbreaking book *Governing the Commons*.⁴

The essays in this volume provide a valuable impetus for research in many directions. Of particular importance is also the bibliography on Hutterites in Manitoba that expands older bibliographies. At the same time, editor Wollmann in his introduction rightly points to the lack of “educational institutions” (iii) in Hutterite communities. From this reviewer’s perspective as a historian, the lack of a professional and accessible archive also for external researchers presents one major obstacle. Wollmann expresses his hope that this volume will encourage “trained researchers and historians from within the Hutterite tradition contributing to the broader academic conversation” (xi). This would be a most welcome outcome. *Navigating Tradition and Innovation* provides an important basis to advance scholarly research.

² Paul Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community* (Herald Press, 2010); Calvin W. Redekop, ed., *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (University Press of America, 1988); Marc A. Olshan, “Modernity, the Folk Society, and the Old Order Amish: An Alternative Interpretation,” *Rural Sociology* 46, no. 2 (1981): 297–309.

³ Marvin P. Riley, *South Dakota’s Hutterite Colonies: 1874–1969*, Bulletin 565 (South Dakota State University, Brookings, 1970); John W. Bennett, *Hutterian Brethren: The Agricultural Economy and Social Organization of a Communal People* (Stanford University Press, 1967).

⁴ Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).