Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 8

Thinking about culture: Cultural materialism, configurations, and text

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- Quiz
- Cultural materialism (Marvin Harris)
  - Why do Indian Hindus consider cows sacred, and polluting to eat?
  - Harris: because this belief serves a practical, material purpose
- Concepts:
  - Infrastructure: systems of production and reproduction
    - farming, economic system, technology, etc.
  - Superstructure: systems of meaning, such as religion, symbols, philosophy, ideology
- Cultural materialism is based on the idea that infrastructure shapes or determines superstructure
  - explaining culture in terms of survival and reproduction
  - usually involving ecology and/or economics
- Classic example of cultural materialism, suggested by Harris:
  - Why do Indian Hindus consider cows sacred, and polluting to eat?
  - Cattle are needed to
    - pull plows (male cattle: bull, bullock)
    - provide fuel (dung)
    - provide fertilizer (dung)
    - provide milk (female cattle: cow)
    - provide leather, horn, meat, etc. to non-Hindus
  - Supporting them is almost cost-free
  - In times of drought, people would be tempted to eat them
    - but this would be disastrous in the longer run
    - since next season, there would not be enough cattle to plow, fertilize, provide milk, etc.
  - a simple rule against eating cows would not be enough to stop hungry people from doing so
  - so a really strong, religious prohibition does the job
  - it may not have been invented for this practical purpose
    - but groups that held this belief did better than those that did not
  - so over time, it became widespread
- Harris strengthens his case by giving a materialist explanation for a related, but different practice
- Why do Muslims consider pigs dirty (as opposed to sacred), and polluting to eat?
  - Pigs provide little besides meat
  - Supporting them is costly and wastes resources
    - they eat food that people would otherwise eat
  - A very strong prohibition on even having them around at all is needed to prevent hunger
  - so Muslims see pigs as unclean
    - thus they and don’t eat or keep them
– while Hindus see cows as sacred
  – so they and don’t eat them
  – but do keep them
– both ideas about what is edible are arbitrary social constructs
  – but they are understandable in practical terms of cultural materialism
– you might notice that this is very much like what Middleton called "culture as adaptation"
  – that was just his way of expressing about the same set of ideas
– Patterns in culture, or cultural configurations (Ruth Benedict)
  – Zuni pueblo culture: ceremonious, sober, inoffensive, orderly, moderate, traditional, collective
    – She termed this theme (pattern, configuration) “Apollonian”
  – Plains Indian culture: value transcending the ordinary, intoxication, ecstasy, emotional extremes, visions, imagination, individuality
    – She termed this theme “Dionysian”
– other cultures would have other themes, and other names
– Benedict’s concept of cultural configurations
  – Each culture emphasizes certain interests, values, concepts, etc.
    – and not others
  – These shape and permeate most aspects of the culture
– Cultures are consistent configurations of customs
  – that is, the same one or two themes/patterns/concepts/values structure many or all aspects of the culture
    – the ideas and practices share the overarching configuration or pattern that is the hallmark of that culture
  – for example, in this view, a culture (say, ours) that emphasizes individualism and independence in dress and musical taste might also
    – have a political system in which individuals can vote
    – have restaurants with long menus
    – expect children to leave their parents’ home and establish their own
    – expect individuals to take care of their own retirement and medical care
    – etc.
  – As a culture is influenced by its environment or contact with other cultures,
    – changes and new features are selected and adjusted to fit the culture’s configuration
    – only those things that fit with the existing configuration are adopted
– Culture as text (Clifford Geertz)
  – “Reading” the Balinese cockfight
    – an activity that almost all Balinese are passionate about
      – linguistic clues indicate symbolism
      – cocks “mean” men, masculinity
    – cockfights are a metaphor for disputes, political competition, trials, wars, etc.
    – people bet on their kin’s or village mate’s cocks
    – yet no one expects to significantly profit in the long run
– and no one actually gains or loses much status
– cockfights can be seen as representing men’s struggle for status
  – it is a “story” about how life works
  – that Balinese “tell” to each other when they participate in a cockfight
  – and “read” when they see and interpret a cockfight
– “Reading” American football
  – an activity that almost all Americans are passionate about
  – linguistic clues indicate symbolism
  – football players “mean” men, masculinity
  – cheerleaders “mean” women, femininity
  – football is a metaphor for war, politics, business, romance
  – people root for their home teams
  – yet no one expects to significantly profit in the long run
  – and no one actually gains or loses much status
– football can be seen as representing life, war, politics, gender roles, etc.
  – it is a “story” about how life works
  – that Americans “tell” to each other
  – and “read” when they see and interpret a football game
– do Americans really think this way?
  – George Carlin on baseball and football
  – General David Petraeus, Sept. 7, 2007, letter to personnel of the multinational force in Iraq:
    – "We are, in short, a long way from the goal line, but we do have the ball and we are driving down the field."