

**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 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."