Today’s material should seem familiar after the previous readings and class

Marvin Harris’s “cultural materialism” is a prototypical example of what Middleton means by explaining culture as adaptation

Clifford Geertz’s analysis of Balinese cockfights (and other things) as “texts” is a prototypical example of what Middleton means by explaining culture in terms of a system of meanings

each is extreme and explicit in promoting their approach
– in doing so, they make these theoretical approaches very clear

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”
  – the basic practices that provide for survival and continuation of the society
  – especially subsistence (food production practices) and technology
  – but also other basics such as how people survive the weather (housing, clothing, heating, moving seasonally, etc.)
  – how they move around (walking, horseback, cars, etc.)
  – trade: how they exchange these necessary goods
  – and so on
– **Structure**: how social relations are arranged
  – social organization, kinship, distribution of wealth and status (such as social classes), organization of power (politics)
– **Superstructure**: systems of meanings
  – religion, symbols, philosophy, ideology, worldview, aesthetics (art, design, music, dance)

– **Cultural materialism**: the view that infrastructure shapes or determines structure, which in turn shapes or determines superstructure

– aspects of culture can be ultimately explained in terms of survival and reproduction
– these explanations usually involve subsistence, ecology, and/or economics
– that is, the material realities of life determine the rest of culture

Classic example of cultural materialism, suggested by Harris:
– Why do Indian Hindus consider cows sacred, and polluting to eat?
  – **pollution**: in this use, means the taint one gets from committing a wrong (a sin)
  – may affect your afterlife (or next life)
  – may cause people to shun or despise you
  – weak examples: becoming a teenage single mother, cheating on your spouse (Mark Sanford, Governor of South Carolina, with his Argentine mistress)

– Cattle are needed to
  – pull plows (male cattle: bull, bullock)
− provide fertilizer (dung)
  − both of the above are essential to producing enough food by farming to feed the population
− provide fuel (dung)
− provide milk (female cattle: cow)
− provide leather, horn, meat, etc. to non-Hindus
− Supporting Indian humped cattle 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
  − necessary to overcomes desperate individuals’ short-term needs for the long-term survival benefit of the group
  − 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 rule about an animal that cannot be eaten
− Muslims also have a prohibition on eating a specific animal: pigs
  − but instead of considering them too sacred to eat,
  − they consider them too dirty and polluting to eat
− Why do Muslims consider pigs dirty and polluting, as opposed to sacred?
  − Pigs provide little besides meat
  − Supporting them is costly and wastes resources in a desert environment, where Arabs developed this rule
  − they eat food that people would otherwise eat
− Well-off families could afford to keep them
  − but this would harm everyone else by reducing the food supply
− So a very strong prohibition on even having them around at all is needed to prevent hunger for the poorer members of the group
− so Muslims see pigs as unclean and bad
  − thus they don’t eat or keep them
  − preventing the waste of resources
  − benefiting the survival of the entire group
  − by preventing the wealthy from making a self-serving choice to raise pigs
− while Hindus see cows as sacred and good
  − so they don’t eat them
  − but they do keep them
  − preserving their source of dung, milk, and labor to pull plows
  − benefiting the survival of the entire group
− by preventing farmers from killing the essential cows for short-term gain during famine caused by drought
− both ideas about what is edible are arbitrary social constructs
− but to a cultural materialist like Harris, these arbitrary constructs make sense in terms of promoting survival in the long run
− even down to the specific details of the beliefs
  − in which one group believes a potential food animal is too sacred to eat
  − and the other believes a potential food animal is too polluting to eat
− Harris’ cultural materialist explanations are essentially the same as what Middleton called explanations of culture in terms of adaptation
  − that was just his way of expressing the same set of ideas

− 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
        − same double-entendre or pun as in English
      − cockfights are a metaphor for disputes, political competition, trials, wars, etc.
    − people bet on their kin’s or fellow villagers’ cocks
      − you must bet on your allies’ cocks often enough and with enough money to show your support
      − and against your rivals often enough and with enough money to show that you are serious
      − this exercises and makes concrete the complex web of social relations
    − the higher-status the cock owners, the more important their rivalry, the more interesting and important is the cockfight
      − the more they and others bet
      − the sweeter the victory, the more agonizing the defeat
    − yet no one expects to significantly profit in the long run
      − and no one actually gains or loses much status, either
    − cockfights can be seen as representing men’s social world, alliances, status relations
      − it is a “story” about how life works
      − that Balinese “tell” to each other when they participate in a cockfight
        − by using the symbols and setting up the situation so that the story plays out as expected, with a winner and a loser
      − and Balinese “read” the “text” when they see and participate in a cockfight
  − “Reading” American football: very much the same
    − an activity that almost all Americans are passionate about
      − linguistic (and visual) 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 a football game and root for a team
– do Americans really think this way?
– George Carlin on the language of 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."
– Alan Dundess, an anthropologist at UC Berkeley, wrote a famous paper “reading” aspects of American football as referring to homosexuality
  – which was then popularized in the media
  – he actually got death threats!
  – apparently some people do “read” gender messages in American football, and feel pretty strongly about them
– Why is “Lingerie Football” apparently funny or interesting?
  – Photo of game between Dallas Desire and Los Angeles Temptations
  – it is funny precisely because it upends the gender imagery we expect
  – humor is often about pointing out or violating assumptions or unstated rules
    – laughter releases the tension caused by being faced with contradictions
    – comedians (like George Carlin) often do something very close to anthropology, in seeking out contradictions and the assumptions they reveal
  – if seeing the picture of lingerie football in class seems inappropriate or makes you even a little uncomfortable,
    – that is a hint that it really is touching something real about how we think about football and gender…
  – and that the idea of “reading” football as a “text” about gender in American society might be at least partially right…