

Explaining culture: Cultural materialism and culture as text

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- Today’s material should seem familiar after the previous readings and class
 - Marvin Harris’s “cultural materialism” is a classic example of what Middleton means by explaining culture as adaptation
 - Clifford Geertz’s analysis of Balinese cockfights (and other things) as “texts” is a classic 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 thus polluting to eat?
 - **pollution**: in this use, means the taint one gets from committing a wrong (a sin)
 - may cause people to despise or shun you
 - may affect your afterlife (or next life)
 - examples: becoming a teenage single mother, cheating on your spouse (Mark Sanford, Governor of South Carolina, with his Argentine mistress)
 - 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 largely determine the rest of culture
- Classic example of cultural materialism, suggested by Harris:
 - Why do Indian Hindus consider cows too sacred to eat?
 - Cattle are needed to
 - pull plows (male cattle: bulls, bullocks, oxen)
 - 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: cows)
- provide leather, horn, meat, etc. to non-Hindus
- Supporting Indian humped cattle is almost cost-free
- In times of drought or famine, 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 overcome 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 so *filthy* that they are polluting to eat
 - This belief is actually much older than Islam
 - apparently originating in the desert areas of the ancient Middle East: Iraq, Egypt, Syria, southern Anatolia (southern Turkey)
 - This Muslim belief seems to have the same effect as the Hindu one:
 - don't eat the animal
 - but with the exact opposite reason: pigs are too filthy, rather than too sacred, to eat
 - Harris argues that the Muslim belief is different because it leads to a different, but equally practical, set of behaviors
 - Why do Muslims consider pigs too filthy, rather than too sacred, to eat?
 - Pigs provide little besides meat
 - don't pull plows, provide milk, etc.
 - they do provide dung, but it is not needed by the nomadic desert pastoralists who developed this dietary restriction
 - they require lots of water, can't eat grass or brush
 - can't be herded any distance, won't cross rivers
 - so for the nomadic desert pastoralists who developed this belief
 - supporting pigs is costly and wastes resources
 - 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 against keeping pigs 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 the Hindu and the Muslim dietary restrictions 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
 - the fact that even the arbitrary values (sacred vs. unclean) behind the restrictions make sense in practical terms
 - suggests that this practical, materialist explanation may really be correct here
- 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
 - in speaking, Balinese use cockfights as 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 betting on certain cocks, or against others
 - 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
 - in speaking, Americans use football as 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
 - even though they scream, cry, get violent, get overjoyed...
 - football can be seen as representing life, war, politics, gender roles, etc.
 - it is a “story” about how life works
 - the vital role of teamwork
 - hard work and training pays off
 - life is competitive,
 - with winners and losers
 - determined by their skills, abilities, and attitude
 - but life’s competition is (or should be) fair,
 - with a “level playing field”
 - and clear “rules of the game”
 - resulting in clear winners and losers
 - and always with another chance to come back and do better next time
 - Americans “tell” this story 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...