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 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 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…