A CULTURAL-ECOLOGICAL THEORY

By Dr. Frank Elwell

Sociocultural Materialism

- This course will examine society through the prism of sociocultural materialism.

- Sociocultural materialism is a theory of sociocultural systems.   It is a variant of Marvin Harris's cultural Materialism.

Sociocultural Materialism

- Marvin Harris, a cultural anthropologist, is responsible for the most systematic statement of C.M. principles.

- A theory is simply a world view-- a framework for understanding your world and organizing observations. Points at what to look for.

Sociocultural Materialism

- It is a theory that attempts to account for sociocultural:
  - origins
  - maintenance
  - change

Dept. of Ethnology, Royal Ontari

Assumptions:

- The various parts of society are interrelated. When one part of society changes, other parts must also change. An institution, such as the family cannot be looked at in isolation from the economic, political, or religious institutions of a society.

- When one part changes it has an effect on other parts of the system.

Assumptions:

Environmental base to human societies

David Curl, Oxford Scientific Film

Assumptions:

Viewing society as a system of interrelated parts is at the core of most social theory. Difference is in terms of organizing principles. The way a society is organized to meet the needs of its population determines the rest of the system.

Human Needs

- Mankind is relatively free from biological instincts, drives and predispositions.

- Rather than relying on instincts, most human behavior is learned. To say it is learned does not mean that it is not deep. Eating slugs for example.

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BIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS

- Eat

- Energy conservation

- Love

- Sex

- Meaning

Need to Eat

- People need to eat and will generally opt for diets that offer more rather than fewer calories and proteins and other nutrients.

- American's have carried this to a high art. Now we diet--but it is a discipline.

Ken Graham, ALLSTOCK, INC.

Energy Conservation

- People cannot be totally inactive, but when confronted with a given task, they prefer to carry it out by expending less rather than more human energy.

- American's have carried this to a high art. How many took elevator? Exercise is a discipline.

Need for Sex

- People are highly sexed and generally find reinforcing pleasure from sexual intercourse.

- We learn proper (or improper) object of sex. Pygmy chimpanzees and lions.

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/Venic

Need for Love

- People need love and affection in order to feel secure and happy, and other things being equal, they will act to increase the love and affection other give them.

- Without love, human infants fail to thrive. Can die. With minimal love we warp.

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Need for Meaning

- People need meaning in their lives. This need arises out of our capacity for self awareness.

- Implied in Harris. Sometimes this need is fulfilled through religion, sometimes philosophy, sometimes entire culture try to give meaning to lives.

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Bio-psychological Needs

- The entire socio-cultural system rests on the way society exploits its environment to meet the bio-psychological needs of its population.

Dr. A.C. Twomey, Photo Researc

Bio-psychological Needs

While the needs are universal, the ways in which societies meet these needs as well as the extent to which these needs are met are highly variable.

Bio-psychological Needs

- Some societies approve of eating worms, homosexuality, wife sharing, gods, etc.

- There are other needs, but parsimony takes precedence. All needs are shared with other primates (save meaning).

Environment

- The physical, biological, and chemical constraints to which human action is subject.

- Like all living organisms, Humans must draw energy from their environment.

Steffen Hauser, Oxford Scientific

Environment

The environment is limited in terms of the amount of energy and matter it contains, and the amount of pollution it can tolerate.

Environment

- Therefore, each society must ultimately exist within the constraints imposed by its environment.

- The need to draw energy out of the environment in order to satisfy the bio-psychological needs of its people is the first and central task of any society.

Environmental Constraints

- Chief among these constraints is the availability of natural resources.

- A further constraining factor is the amount of pollution created by society. While man can modify these constraints, they cannot be escaped.

Kim Westerskov, Oxford Scientif

Infrastructure

- The principal interface between a socio-cultural system and its environment.

- It is through the infrastructure that society manipulates its environment by modifying the amount and type of resources needed.

Dr. A.C. Twomey, Photo Researc

Infrastructure

- Consists of two parts, the mode of production and reproduction.

- The modes of production and reproduction are attempts to strike a balance between population and the consumption of energy from a finite environment.

Mode of Production

- Consists of behaviors aimed at satisfying requirements for subsistence.
  - Technology of subsistence
  - Technological-environmental relationships

Dorling Kindersley

Modes of Production through History

- The mode of production is the way most anthropologists and sociologists classify society.

- This is because it is generally recognized as one of the most powerful determinants of the rest of the sociocultural system

Modes of Production through History

- Hunting and Gathering
- Horticulture
- Pastoral
- Agrarian
- Industrial

Mode of Reproduction

Consisting of behaviors aimed at controlling destructive increases or decreases in population size. Suppose we are a hunting and gathering society and we are running out of food. What can we do? It is upon this environmental infrastructural foundation that the remaining parts of the social system are based.
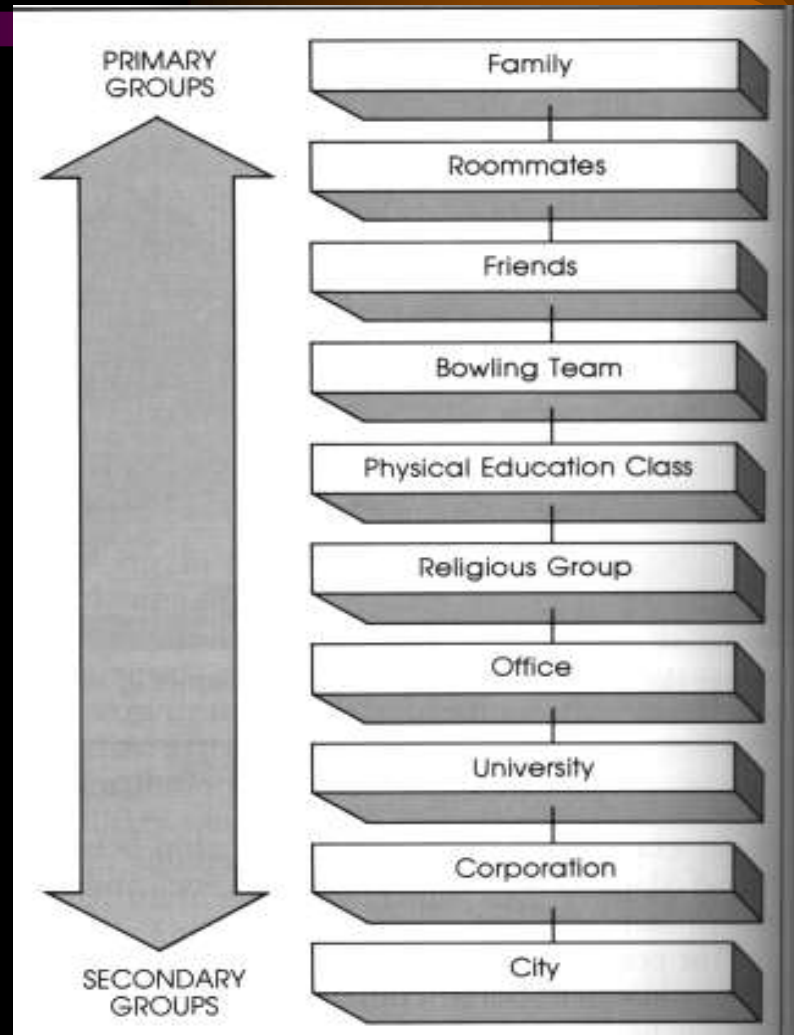
Mode of Reproduction

- Demography

- Mating patterns

- Fertility, natality, mortality

- Nurturance of infants

- Medicine

- Contraception, abortion, infanticide

Social Structure

- Social structure refers to human groups and organizations.

- Two types:
  - primary
  - secondary

Social Structure

Primary Groups

Primary groups consist of small groups like the family that regulate reproduction, exchange and consumption within domestic settings. Normally small, intimate, multiple roles.

Nevada Hist. Society

Primary Groups

- family
- community
- some voluntary groups
- friendship networks
- some religious groups

SECONDARY ORGANIZATIONS

Impersonal organizations such as government and industry which regulate productions, exchange and consumption within and between groups and socio-cultural systems.

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SECONDARY ORGANIZATIONS

- Governments, military, police

- Corporations

- Education

- Media

- Service and professional organizations

- Welfare organizations

Bureaucratization

- Curious phenomenon: over the course of social evolution, primary groups lose their function, secondary groups grow in number.

- Increasing division of labor. The primary and secondary groups dichotomy encompasses all human organizations responsible for the allocation and distribution of all bio-psychological need satisfaction.

Hierarchies based on class, sex, race, caste, age, ethnic, and other statuses exist throughout the structure of society.

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- All societies have elites, but the power of elites varies across societies and through time.

- The bio-psychological satisfaction of those on top of the hierarchies weighs more heavily than those below.

Superstructure

- Consists of two parts:
  - cultural superstructure
  - mental superstructure

Cultural Superstructure

- Includes recreations activities, art, sports, empirical knowledge, folklore, and other aesthetic products.
  - Art, music, dance, literature
  - Rituals
  - sports, games, hobbies
  - knowledge base

Mental Superstructure

- Values

- Emotions

- Traditions

- Zweckrational

Mental Superstructure

- This is from Max Weber. He said there were four basic motivators for human behavior.

- Ideal types. Actual behavior motivated by combinations.

Value oriented behavior

- Rational action in relation to a value.

- Examples: Attending college because you value the life of the mind. Doing the right thing out of religious or philosophical ideas of right or wrong.

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Affective behavior

- Affective or emotional action.

- Examples: Anger or joy. Serves no rational purpose, expresses feelings. Attending college for a good time, or because your significant other attends.

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Traditional behavior

- Action dictated by custom or habit.

- Examples: Sign of the cross. Facing front in an elevator, not talking at movies. Attending college because your mother attended.

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Zweckrational guided behavior

- Rational action in relation to a goal.
- Examples: Building a raft to cross a river. Studying to get a good grade. Attending college to get a good job.

Mental Superstructure

Weber noticed a curious phenomenon:
Zweckrational increasingly dominates.

Infrastructural Determinism

- The major principle of sociocultural materialism:

  - The mode of production and reproduction determine primary and secondary group structure, which in turn determine the cultural and mental superstructure.

Infrastructural Determinism

The rationale behind giving the infrastructure such priority rests upon the fact that it is through infrastructural practices that society adapts to its environment.

NASA/Science Source/Photo Res

Infrastructural Determinism

It is through the infrastructure that society survives. It modifies the amount and type of resources required for life. Since these infrastructural practices are essential for life itself, all widespread structural and superstructural patterns must be compatible with them.

Intensification

- World population and industrial infrastructures are growing at an exponential rate.

- You can't do one thing. This growth (or intensification) has impact on other parts of the system.

Bureaucratization

The intensification of the infrastructure causes the growth of secondary organizations at the expense of primary groups.

Rationalization

The intensification of the infrastructure and the bureaucratization of the structure, cause the superstructure to "rationalize."

Rationalization

Definition: the increasing dominance of goal oriented rational behavior at the expense of behavior guided by values, traditions and emotions

Feedback Loops:

While the infrastructure is considered to be of primary importance, the structure and superstructure are not mere reflections of infrastructural processes, but are in interaction with these processes.

Ogilvy and Mather

Feedback Loops:

- Societies are very stable systems. The most likely outcome of any change in the system is resistance in other sectors of society.

- This "system maintaining negative feedback" is capable of deflecting, dampening, or extinguishing most system change.

Feedback Loops:

- The result is either the extinctions of the innovation or slight compensatory changes that preserve the fundamental character of the whole system.

- Examples: income tax, women's liberation, commune movement.

Feedback Loops:

In general, socio-cultural change that releases more energy from the environment is likely to be swiftly adapted.

Bettye Lane, Photo Researchers

Feedback Loops:

- Infrastructural and environmental relationships are central in explaining socio-cultural change.

- But we also recognize the importance of structures and superstructures in determining the speed, and character of change.

The role of elites

But it is not the simple calculation of the greatest good for the greatest number of people to account for socio-cultural change. Many changes are more satisfying to some members of society than to others.

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The role of elites

Infrastructural change that enhance the position of these elites are likely to be amplified and propagated throughout the system. The elites are able to impose direct economic and political sanctions to get their way. Also encourage ideas and ideologies favorable to their position.

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The role of elites

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- Sociocultural materialism is in fundamental agreement with Marx when he states: "The ideas of the ruling class in each epoch are the ruling ideas."

- The amount of power and control exercised by elites varies across societies and through time.

The role of elites in the U.S.

- In the U.S. the power of elites has waxed and waned.

- They are probably more powerful in the last half of the 19th century than they are today.

- Some claim they are in the process of reasserting their power.

There exists within every society a dominant class (or classes) that possess a disproportionate amount of social power.

The role of elites

A sociocultural materialist analysis attempts to identify this class, gauge the amount of power it wields, and uncover their biases and assumptions when analyzing social systems.