

The Dynamics of Sociocultural Systems

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Introduction

In the last lecture I presented the universal structure of all societies and categorized the various parts of sociocultural systems. This categorization makes it possible to examine the relationships among the component parts and to see how the components affect each other.

Introduction

This universal structure of society (environment-infrastructure-structure-superstructure) is a useful analytic device not only for understanding the structure of human societies, but the dynamics of sociocultural systems as well.

Introduction

In this lecture we will look at the dynamics of sociocultural systems. Specifically, we will look at processes of stability, change, and social evolution.

Infrastructure-Intensification

A curious phenomenon has been observed over the millennia: both human population and production have grown exponentially. This growth is because there is a reciprocal relationship between the two. Increases in production cause population to grow, which then further stimulates increases in production.

Structure-Bureaucratization

Another curious phenomenon over time that was noted by Max Weber: as population and production grow, primary groups lose many of their functions and much of their importance in social life, secondary organizations (governed by bureaucracy) grow in number and in power, and there is a marked increase in the division of labor.

Superstructure-Rationalization

And there is a third curious phenomenon noted by Weber: over the course of social evolution more and more of human behavior is guided by goal oriented rational thinking (also called zweckrational). Consequently, values, emotions, and traditions take a decreasingly smaller role in guiding human behavior.

Major Principle

And this leads us to the major principle of the theory of cultural materialism, and the major theme of this course.

Infrastructural Determinism

Within every sociocultural system, the mode of production and reproduction (infrastructure) determines the primary and secondary group structure, which in turn determines the cultural and mental superstructure.

Infrastructural Determinism

This principle claims a lot. It is strongly stated, though materialists do recognize the concept of probability. We also recognize that we are dealing with a sociocultural system, and other factors—structural and superstructural—do have their role in explaining human behavior.

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. It is through the infrastructure that society survives. It is through infrastructural practices that we modify the amount and type of resources required for life.

Infrastructural Determinism

Since these infrastructural practices are essential for life itself, all widespread structural and superstructural patterns of behavior and thought must be compatible with these practices.

Infrastructural Determinism

A society's infrastructure is the primary cause of the type and character of social groups and organizations within its structure, and the structure, in turn, is the primary cause of the ideas and ideologies, beliefs, and values of its superstructure.

Infrastructural Determinism

That is, infrastructural conditions are the primary causes of a society's basic patterns of interpersonal behavior, and these behavioral patterns in turn call forth specific patterns of thought that justify and interpret behavioral realities.

Infrastructural Determinism

Ideas therefore find their origin in the concrete behavior patterns systematically engaged in by members of a society, and these patterns of behavior originate in conjunction with the infrastructural conditions whereby people solve the basic problems of human existence.

Infrastructural Determinism

Ideas, of course, interact with (promote, dampen, affect) material conditions--but ideas also seem to have a natural affinity for people in similar material conditions. That is, people sharing similar material conditions share ideologies, belief systems, and values.

Infrastructural Determinism

The materialist approach is a means of explaining both social stability and change. Changes in modes of thinking ordinarily depend upon prior changes in patterns of behavior, and these latter changes are themselves largely products of prior infrastructural changes.

Infrastructural Determinism

Cultural Materialism is a research strategy that guides us in what to look for in explaining human behavior. If a diligent researcher fails to reveal the causal impact of infrastructural factors, she then turns to the examination of structural conditions, failing that, she turns to superstructural causes.

Infrastructural Determinism

There is one way in which a materialist approach to social life can be shown to be preferable to any of the theoretical alternatives. And that is to submit the materialist strategy to empirical testing against a wide range of sociocultural differences and similarities. Such rigorous testing has been carried out, it works.

Infrastructural Determinism

A materialist approach is unable to explain all relevant sociocultural phenomena, but it has had far greater explanatory success than any of its competitors. Materialists hold that infrastructural variables take priority because they constitute the fundamental means whereby human beings solve the most basic problems of human existence.

Infrastructural Determinism

Before humans can formulate marriage rules, organize political systems, construct abstract religions, they must organize the means whereby they will survive.

Infrastructural Determinism

“Since the aim of science is the discovery of the maximum amount of order in its field of inquiry, priority for theory building logically settles upon those sectors under the greatest direct restraints from the givens of nature...”

Infrastructural Determinism

“To endow the mental superstructure [ideas and ideologies] with strategic priority, as the cultural idealists advocate, is a bad bet. Nature is indifferent to whether God is a loving father or a bloodthirsty cannibal...”

Infrastructural Determinism

“But nature is not indifferent to whether the fallow period in a swidden field is one year or ten. We know that powerful restraints exist on the infrastructural level; hence it is a good bet that these restraints are passed on to the structural and superstructural components” (Harris, 1979, p. 57).

Structure & Superstructure

But structure and superstructure matter as well: “The cultural materialist does not proclaim the independent action of material conditions. That would be absurd. These conditions must somehow be translated into ideas, and these ideas must be funneled into individuals so as to galvanize them into action...”

Structure & Superstructure

“The idealist likes to begin the causal analysis with the unquestioned motivating power of ideas. The materialist prefers to begin the analysis one step further back, going behind the ideas to see how they arose in the first place and came to enter people’s heads” (Carneiro, 2003, p. 216).

Infrastructural Determinism

Cultural materialism provides a logical set of research priorities for the study of sociocultural life. It directs the investigator to begin the search for causes of sociocultural phenomena with the examination of infrastructural conditions. It is likely that these conditions will provide the key to explaining the phenomenon in question.

The Dynamics of Sociocultural Systems

To summarize the dynamics of the system: the intensification of population and production of a human society depletes needed resources from the environment. This depletion causes society to intensify its production further, causing additional rise in population... and the cycle continues.

The Dynamics of Sociocultural Systems

This intensifying infrastructure causes primary groups (families, communities) lose many of their functions in society (education, defense, care of the sick). Because great numbers of people and complex production processes require strong coordination, secondary organizations (governments, schools, corporations) become more numerous and important in social life.

The Dynamics of Sociocultural Systems

These secondary organizations are usually governed by bureaucracy. Bureaucracies are based on a detailed division of labor and strive for efficiency above all other goals. These organizations strongly promote goal oriented behavior among members of the organization and the people they serve, and discourage other modes of thought—values, traditions, emotions—among the population.

The Dynamics of Sociocultural Systems

Thus, rationalization—the increasing emphasis on zweckrational and the consequent weakening of tradition, values and emotions as guides to social life—becomes the dominant mode of thought in society. Human behavior and thought are increasingly guided by its logic. Values, traditions, and emotions take on an ever smaller role in social life.

The Dynamics of Sociocultural Systems

This rationalization of the superstructure encourages the further growth of secondary organizations at the expense of primary groups. Goal oriented thinking leads people to solve problems of organization without regard for traditions, values, or emotions.

The Dynamics of Sociocultural Systems

Functions that have traditionally been invested in community or family— institutions steeped in human values, traditions, and emotions—are instead vested in government services (education, counseling) or given over to the market (child care, elderly care).

The Dynamics of Sociocultural Systems

Both bureaucratization and rationalization then promote the further intensification of the infrastructure.



The Dynamics of Sociocultural Systems

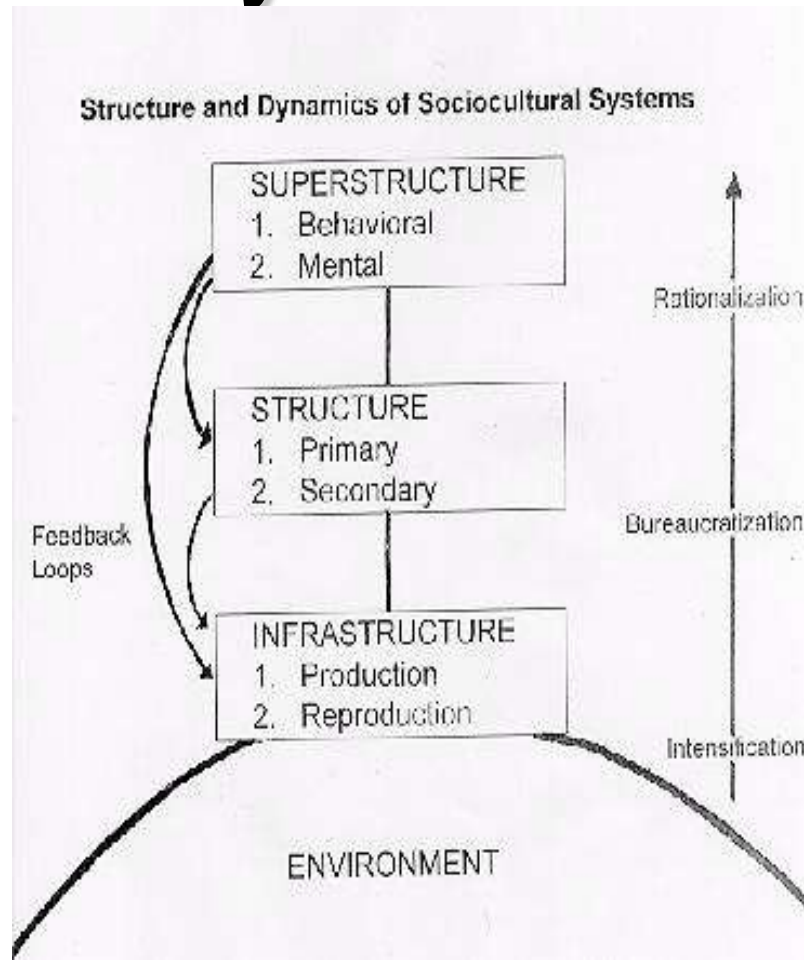
Goal oriented rational behavior is applied almost exclusively to our production processes and increasingly into our reproduction processes as well.

Corporate and government bureaucracy strongly promote economic growth.

The Dynamics of Sociocultural Systems

Society is a system and the various components of that system affect one another. The Universal Structure and Dynamics of Sociocultural Systems that I have defined in these lectures is illustrated on the following slide.

The Dynamics of Sociocultural Systems



Feedback Loops

The straight arrow in the diagram represents the principle of infrastructural determinism. The curved lines represent “feedback loops,” pointing to the importance of structure and superstructure in explaining social life. The structure and superstructure are in interaction with the infrastructure.

System Stability

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



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System Stability

System maintaining negative feedback is capable of deflecting, dampening, or extinguishing most system change. The result is either the extinction of the innovation or slight compensatory changes that preserve the fundamental character of the whole system.

System Stability

An example of this resistance to change is in the attempt by the government to change to the metric system of measurement.

Manufacturers relying on the existing system of measures resisted the change. People who were used to inches and miles ridiculed and fought the effort. Some groups took it as a matter of pride that America was different from the rest of the world. Consequently, the change was resisted and eventually defeated.

System Stability

Another example: women working outside the home. When women started to work in industry and government in some numbers, traditionalists, churches, and many males resisted en masse. Further, industry and government did not have policies in place to fully integrate women and treat them as equals. Consequently, there was significant “struggle” in the social movement.

System Stability

A third example is the struggle over the reform of the American health care “system.” Corporate interests, political money, political ideology, individual fear of change, have all combined to resist the change through demonstrations and misinformation.

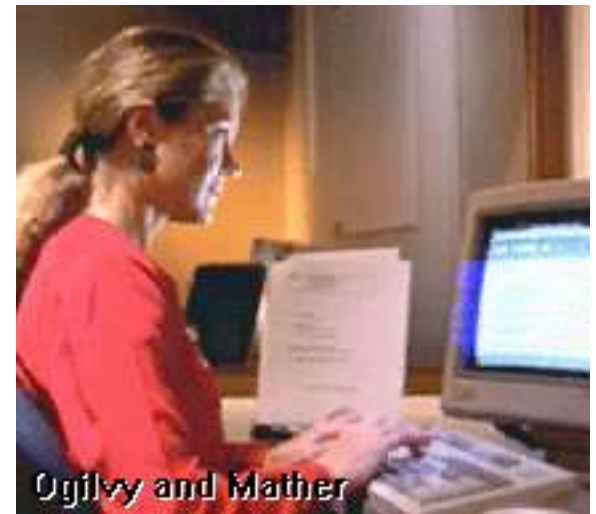
System Dynamics

But there are times when change is rapid and fundamental—revolutionary in character.



System Dynamics

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



System Dynamics

Infrastructural and environmental relationships are central in explaining sociocultural change. But materialists also recognize the importance of structures and superstructures in determining the speed, character, and direction of change.

System Dynamics

But it is not the simple calculation of the greatest good for the greatest number of people that accounts for sociocultural change. Many changes are more satisfying to some members of society than to others.



Elites

All societies have elites who dominate the various hierarchical structures of society. In American society we have corporate and government elites, as well as elites in education, military, and other institutions. Real social and political power, however, is vested in corporate and government elites.

System Dynamics

Infrastructural change that enhance the position of elites are likely to be amplified and propagated throughout the system.

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

System Dynamics

The elite are able to impose direct economic and political sanctions to get their way. They can also encourage ideas and ideologies favorable to their position through the ownership or influence over media, churches, and educational institutions.

System Dynamics

But it should also be noted that the amount of power and control exercised by elites varies across societies and through time.



System Dynamics

This means that elite are not all powerful and that their power goes through cycles—becoming stronger or weaker in response to historical circumstance. In the U.S., the power of the elite has waxed and waned.

System Dynamics

The elite were probably more powerful in the last half of the 19th century than they are today. Some claim, however, that the elite are in the process of reasserting their power today. Many would argue that they have taken on increasing power and wealth in American society since 1980.

System Dynamics

One of the first tasks of a sociocultural materialist analysis is to attempt to identify the elite, gauge the amount of power that they wield, and uncover their biases and assumptions when analyzing sociocultural systems.

Back to Social Problems

So what does this theory have to do with social problems? Remember, the name of the course is *Social Systems* and Problems. We have just defined the structure and dynamics of the system. Also recall that the first lecture made the following point: social change causes social problems, and these problems often induce further social change.

Back to Social Problems

World population and industrial infrastructures are growing at an exponential rate. In a system you can't do **one** thing. This tremendous growth (or intensification) has impact on other parts of the system. First, and perhaps foremost, it has tremendous impact on the natural environment in the form of depletion and pollution.

Back to Social Problems

Second, the intensification of the infrastructure causes the growth of secondary organizations at the expense of primary groups. And since intensification is occurring exponentially, it is having dramatic impact on our structures. Bureaucracies—particularly governments and corporations—are becoming increasingly powerful. Families and communities, are losing even more functions.

Back to Social Problems

And the decline of primary groups and the increasing power of bureaucracy, as you will see in units two and three of this course, cause many of the social problems we see around us.

Back to Social Problems

The intensification of the infrastructure and the bureaucratization of the structure, cause the superstructure to "rationalize." Recall that rationalization is the increasing dominance of goal oriented rational behavior at the expense of behavior guided by values, traditions and emotions

Back to Social Problems

And this rationalization will be connected to many of the individual problems we see in our society: the high rates of drug abuse, alienation, ennui, political and social apathy, and deviance.

Conclusion

Such is the structure and dynamics of sociocultural systems. We will be referring to this structure and dynamic throughout the course; without such a framework, social problems appear much more chaotic than they actually are. Indeed, it is a useful framework for understanding all of social life.

Bibliography

For a more complete discussion of the structure and dynamics of sociocultural systems, see my Internet paper:

[Cultural Materialism: A Sociological Revision](#)