

Religion; Social Class

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Mantsios, Gregory. "Media magic: making class invisible."

Zinn, Maxine Baca, and D. Stanley Eitzen. "Economic restructuring and systems of inequality at century's end."

VanderStaay, Steven. "The Armstrongs: an oral history."

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RELIGION

I. Anthropological views

A. Religion is seen as part of culture, a component of a particular cultural system

1. Example: in the U.S. Southwest, the Navajo people practice the Navajo religion
 - a. Illustrates conventional view: a close association with a group of people who identify themselves as a distinct culture with a distinct language
 - b. It's difficult to imagine what Navajo religion could be if someone who doesn't speak Navajo believed in it and practiced it

B. But most often religions are linked to culture (in the sense of "a culture"), nation, and ethnicity in more complicated fashion

1. World religions (Christianity, Buddhism, Islam)
2. Such major religions have a core set of meanings, symbols, and practices that adapt fairly easily to different cultural contexts

- a. Islam in Nigeria very different from Islam in Indonesia; both are very different from African American Sunni Islam
 - b. Faint echoes of the original culture will remain
 - c. Because all world religions began in a single culture
 - d. There will be premises, assumptions, and sometimes language from the original culture
 - e. Example: traces in Christianity and early Judaism
 - 1) The list of approved-of practices and beliefs in the Bible that are no longer acceptable is extensive
 - a) Polygyny, stoning to death, slaves, witches
3. Another influence: concepts and practices from cultural systems that existed in between the original cultural context and the present
- a. Many Orthodox Jewish practices originated in Central European communities over the last few centuries
 - b. Clothing; shaving the bride's head at marriage and donning a wig
4. If it's in the same locale there will be stronger connections between the culture that existed at the beginning of the religion and the present-day culture
- a. But this varies as well
 - b. Islam in the Middle East
 - c. Judaism in Israel
5. Or if there's a fundamentalist movement that stresses return to roots of the religion
- a. Los Angeles African American women saying their prayers in Arabic¹
- C. Local variants of world religions can resemble the one-culture-one-religion model a bit more

¹ Argentinean Jewish Sephardi women "converting" to Ashkenazi-inflected haredism more complicated; social class components; "Modernity" and rejection of "Third Worldism" components

1. Greek and Russian Orthodox
 2. “Irish Catholic,” “Irish wake”
 3. Tibet is perhaps the best example
 - a. Tibetan religion is a local variant of a world religion (Buddhism)
 - 1) But a very strong conflation of religion, culture, politics has developed there
 - 2) Is a theocracy (the Dalai Lama is seen to be both the religious and political leader—of course, not by the Chinese government)
- D. Some world religions are seen to “belong” to certain populations
1. Even though they are practiced in many countries
 2. Judaism
 - a. Even though the aggregate of people who self-identify as Jews shows enormous physical variation
 - b. Sammy Davis, an African-American entertainer
 - c. Converted to Judaism
 - d. It was seen as odd
 - e. Ethiopian Jews who migrated to Israel—Falashi—are seen as “odd” as well
 - f. There is an association made between religion, culture, and “looking Jewish”²
 - g. Notions of Jewishness as raced can be quite pronounced among some categories of Jews
 - h. So there will be rulings, for instance, about organ transplants
 - i. Whereas “he doesn’t look Catholic”—what would that mean?
 3. A very different example: young Americans who followed South Asian gurus in the 1970s

² See Sander Gilman, 1991. *The Jew’s Body*. New York: Routledge.

- a. Hare Krishna, followers of the guru Rajneesh
- b. Evoked laughter because their bodies didn't seem to belong in the saffron-colored robes, their shaved heads looked odd
- c. Hinduism, although practiced in many countries
 - 1) Is quite linked to India: not really a world religion
- 4. Many religions alter the body by inscribing religious symbols onto it
 - a. Circumcision of Jewish and Muslim males
 - b. Female genital cutting in areas of northern and central Africa
 - c. Such inscriptions constantly remind the person they are members of a moral community—can't do what they like with their bodies
 - d. And are identity markers that make the person easier to identify as a member of X culture; practitioner of X religion

II. The relationship between religion and ethnic and national identity

- A. A cookie-cutter model of culture that sees cultures as little islands, unchanging, internally homogeneous
 - 1. Doesn't work in general, certainly not for religions
 - 2. Even though some religions *appear* to be fairly straightforwardly linked to a nationality and a locality
 - a. Example of Tibetan religion
 - 1) If it is studied over time we have to understand the spread of Buddhism, etc.
 - 2) Look at the fame of the current Dalai Lama; what he represents, who his followers are
 - 3) Many practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism in Europe, the U.S.

III. How a given religion is born and how it evolves depends on its relationship with other religions and cultures it is in contact with

- A. Example: the Chinese government designates Chinese Muslims
 - 1. As ten “nationalities”: non-Han
 - a. Whereas Chinese Catholics, it’s strictly a religion
 - B. Transnational movement affects religious observance
 - 1. Buddhist Koreans converted to Christianity in substantial numbers when immigrated to U.S. and Canada
 - 2. African American Muslims
- IV. “New religions”
- A. All “new religions” draw on already existing religious components—symbolism, ritual, etc.
 - B. New religions may spring up in response to changes, pressures, oppression
 - 1. Christianity: ancient Israel was a colony of Imperial Rome
 - 2. **DISCUSS:** other examples?
 - a. Nation of Islam in the US
 - C. Another kind of “new” religion: syncretistic
 - 1. Are a blend of two or more “old” religions
 - a. Come about through forces of creolization, amalgamation, assimilation
 - b. *Santería* in this country
 - 1) Combination of West African Yoruba and Spanish Catholicism
 - 2) *Santería* is an ethnic signifier for certain Hispanic groups—in Florida, for example
 - D. Another type are religions that claim to be reviving old, extinct religions
 - 1. Wicca (witchcraft) in the U.S. and England

a. No major association with a current ethnic group, but do link themselves to a persecuted group in the past: Druids

2. Can be a very significant identity marker for adherents

V. Forces behind religious change

A. Are quite often powerfully linked to nation, ethnicity and related topics

1. Change appears as response to crisis, or felt needs not being met

2. The massive changes are threatening and the old religion cannot account for them

3. Example: conflict with state:

a. In France: schoolgirls wanting to wear the headscarf

b. A religious identity signifier is seen to be incompatible with French citizenship

B. As a religion grows and becomes established, it will become associated with the society that mainstreams it

1. May not be an entire nation-state, however

2. The source of a great deal of conflict

STRATIFICATION

I. Types

A. Egalitarian societies

1. No great differences in wealth, power or prestige

2. Note: people are born with differences, and these play a big role in egalitarian societies

B. Ranked societies—symbolic ranking, prestige

C. Stratified societies

1. Permanent hierarchy: some members by birth have greater access to resources: wealth, power, prestige

2. Caste is one kind
 - a. Hierarchy stratified and closed, no movement
3. Class the other
 - a. Open, can move up or down (groups and individuals)

II. Social class

A. **DISCUSS:** components of?

1. Job, nature of
 - a. White collar, blue collar
 - b. Manual labor
 - 1) **DISCUSS:** how many have had manual jobs?
2. Economic status: income, assets, etc.
3. Education
 - a. Formal
 - b. Informal (“educated”)
 - 1) Good manners—which fork to use
 - 2) **DISCUSS:** ways in which performing social class is gendered?
4. Family standing
 - a. Orwell: class position is not determined by just the amount of money one has
 - 1) Before WWI in Britain you were either a gentleman or not a gentleman: “shadowy caste system”
5. Speech
 - a. DVD “American Tongues”

- b. Orwell in French restaurant: pronouns of power and solidarity illustrated—everyone called him “tu” (intimate version of “you”)
- 6. Consumption patterns
 - a. Liquor, beer, dress, cigarettes
- 7. Leisure activities
 - a. Bowling, NASCAR, opera, MFA, classical music
- 8. Religion
 - a. **DISCUSS:** how is religion classed?

III. Maintenance of social class: ideology, culture, and structure

- A. The early post-revolutionary war US: battle over what kind of republic would this be—Republicans vs. Federalists?
 - 1. Would there be aristocrats or not?
 - 2. **DISCUSS:** Americans’ notions about social class?
 - 3. Conflict with Mantsios’s point that we are the most stratified (economically) society in the world
- B. Class is raced, race is classed, both are gendered, both are sexed, etc.
 - 1. Orwell’s “poor white trash” examples
- C. The relationship between race, ethnicity, and social class
 - 1. Complex and varied; folk models of race and ethnicity often unconsciously include assumptions about socio-economic status
 - 2. *Correlations* can be found between race/ethnicity and low socio-economic status; but they are not due to race and ethnicity themselves
 - 3. History as cause
 - a. For example, lack of English language skills prevents many immigrants engaging in some kinds of occupations
- D. What is cause, what is effect?

1. Mantsios points out all the ways US society doesn't see the poor, "blames the victim," etc.
 2. Newman says it's the working poor who are invisible
- E. "Structural oppression": all of the ways in which political and economic structures in a society oppress groups of people within it
1. Examples: the economy moves from a manufacturing economy
 - a. To one where the good jobs require much more education
 - b. And the bad jobs are more numerous
 - 1) Minimum wage
 - 2) Little chance for advancement
 - 3) No job security
 - a) For example, growth of temp companies
 - 4) No benefits
 2. Real wages—what a paycheck could actually buy—decrease
 3. When such conditions characterize an entire community, it can look like a third-world country
 - a. If a factory that supplied a lot of jobs pulls out of town—Elizabethtown, N.J.
 - b. Some communities have such a low tax base they can't afford to pay police or firemen
 4. Or a whole region deteriorates: "the Rust Belt"
- F. Interplay between "structure" and "agency": what role does culture play?³
1. The notion of "the culture of poverty"⁴

³ Some of this discussion is taken from Philippe Bourgois, 1995: *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴ A well-known anthropologist, Oscar Lewis, coined this term to describe the people in Spanish Harlem in the 1960s. He published a book titled *La Vida*: compellingly written, became a best seller. Consists of life-history accounts: thousands of pages of notes on one extended family. Most of the women were involved in prostitution. Lewis "explained" their situation by focusing almost exclusively on the intergenerational transmission of destructive values and behaviors among individuals within families. His notion of culture was one of micro-culture—*within* an

2. The idea that somehow people “learn” to be poor
3. Or the idea that their culture doesn’t provide them with the right knowledge and skills to get out of poverty
4. A government report was published in 1965: *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, US Dept. of Labor
 - a. Concluded that the black family—its structure, its culture—explained the problems Blacks were facing
 - b. In particular female-headed families robbed men of their self-esteem because such families were “matriarchal”
 - c. Report was enormously influential
 - d. Allowed people to assign blame to Blacks themselves
5. The legacy continues to this day in positions that argue:
 - a. Restore family values—it’s their culture at fault
6. On the surface this explanation may seem reasonable: we know that children learn the values, etc. from their parents
 - a. We certainly can see people choosing to behave in ways that are clearly self-destructive, criminal, unreasonable, etc.
 - b. So we explain poverty, family structure, welfare, unemployment, and out-of-wedlock births using this model
7. We can come up with a long list for inner city problems:
 - a. Gangs; drug dealing
 - b. Drive-by shootings; high levels of many kinds of violence
 - c. Drugs—HIV infection (VanderStaay article—parents are worried about their children’s safety)
 - 1) Crack-addicted newborns

extended family. Saw poverty as more a function of thought processes than of opportunities, physical environment. Lots of politicians and scholars found the theory extremely useful. The most famous was Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who wrote the 1965 Report.

- d. Very early sexual activity (often coerced by older males)
 - 1) Unwed teenagers giving birth to unwanted babies
- e. Prostitution and promiscuity leading to
 - 1) More HIV
- f. An indifference that makes the neighborhood more dangerous
 - 1) For example, people not reporting criminal behavior they observe to the police
- 8. Clearly *we* don't do these things, and so
 - a. It must be a different "culture": the values, etc., taught by the older generation to the younger

G. This kind of explanation is appealing

- 1. We want clear explanations, we want to assess blame, and we want quick fixes
- 2. Mantsios and Baca Zinn & Eitzen articles
- 3. And if at all possible, we don't want to have to blame ourselves

IV. But it's both: structural oppression and culture interact in complicated ways

A. Something like inner city poverty is produced by a multitude of factors

B. Racism's structural consequences

- 1. People of color will pay more in inner cities
 - a. For insurance and mortgages
 - b. Prices are often higher in grocery stores in the inner city; low-quality produce, etc.
 - 1) No competition because there's no transportation
 - 2) So the price is determined by what the market will bear

- 3) Store owners will justify higher prices by pointing to danger of being shot, higher insurance premiums, etc.
 - c. And higher rates of unemployment; bad public transportation; need to work two jobs; day care nonexistent except informally
- C. Culture: some of the values immigrants bring with them from rural Puerto Rico are singularly maladapted for life in Spanish Harlem
- D. Structural economic dislocations working class people have faced in the last thirty years
 - 1. Shifts in the economy to information and service sectors (Baca Zinn and Eitzen)—postindustrial society
 - a. Will have a greater impact on non-whites than whites
 - 2. The restructuring of the US economy around service jobs has resulted in
 - a. Unemployment
 - b. Income reduction
 - c. Weaker unions
 - d. Dramatic erosions in worker's benefits at the entry level
- E. Especially hard for inner city young men to get traditional unskilled work because
 - 1. Many middle-class and stable working-class families have moved out
 - 2. Factory jobs difficult to get to—lousy public transportation
 - 3. Many institutions that used to help have left
 - a. Only the church remains, and these store-front churches are desperately poor
 - 4. So the way most of this sector traditionally got jobs—through informal methods, connections and networks—is lost
- F. Cultural dislocations of this new economy
 - 1. Office-work service jobs have multiplied

- a. Dramatic expansion of the finance, insurance, and real estate sector of NYC (FIRE)
2. Work in professional offices is the best route for inner-city youths to find entry-level jobs if they want to be upwardly mobile
 - a. But these jobs—mail-room clerks, photocopiers, messengers in the corridors
 - b. Require a wrenching cultural confrontation with the upper-middle-class white world
 - c. Require obedience to the norms of high-rise, office-corridor culture
 - d. In direct contradiction to street culture's definitions of personal dignity, especially for males who are socialized not to accept public subordination
3. Can these young men succeed? Yes. But it's extremely hard
 - a. Simply learning what is proper clothing for the office isn't automatic from looking at subway ads and watching TV
 - b. You don't wave a magic wand and get rid of your culture, exchanging it for middle-class taste, values, knowledge, feelings
4. When they fail, our reaction is it's their fault:
 - a. They're lazy, they're flashy, they've got attitude, they've got Puerto Rican machismo and so won't work under a woman boss
 - b. They can't speak properly, they're functionally illiterate
 - c. It's their culture

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