

Question 2(a)

My classification scheme involved two groups: those theorists for whom symbols, language, institutions, and codes help us *understand* various aspects of society, and those theorists for whom symbols, language, institutions, and codes are used to *dominate* subordinate groups by the elites. The first group includes Saussure, Durkheim, and Alexander; the second includes Bordieu and Foucault.

Saussure describes language (la langue, the entire system of language) as something that “the masses” have no ability to influence (pp. 71). He believes language is inherently linked to society, and that “its social nature is one of its inherent characteristics” (pp. 77). Further, Saussure’s linguistic theory notes that words are not generated due to any kind of intrinsic relationship between the sound and the item or idea being described; that the relationship between the “signifier” (i.e. the sound) and the “signified” (the object) is arbitrary. His theory helps the reader better understand language.

Durkheim’s system of the “sacred” and the “profane” (described below) helps the reader better understand the way in which things that may seem “religious” to individuals are actually that way because of the influence of society on the person. Finally, Alexander (also described below) explains the ways in which a system of binary codes can help the reader make sense of the notion of a democratic civil society. All three of these theorists help us gain a new understanding of a complex social phenomena (or society itself, in Durkheim’s case).

Bordieu (again, described below) illustrates how classifying taste and culture into symbolic systems can perpetuate inequality, while Foucault focuses on how certain institutions perpetuate inequality by determining what is or is not within the acceptable realm of “discourse” for that institution. In both of these cases, the authors show that the ways in which discourse, symbols, and signs are organized can work to exclude certain people and work to the inherent advantage of others.

Question 2(b)

This essay will examine why Jeffrey Alexander, Emile Durkheim, and Pierre Bourdieu believe people experience the world in the way that we do, and how these characterizations are similar and different across the three theorists.

Jeffrey Alexander

Alexander, in trying to explain the existence of democratic norms, believes that societies build narratives, stories, and ideas about political life based on a universal binary cultural code. These codes create the basis for “civil society,” which he identifies as a “sphere or subsystem of society that is analytically and, to various degrees, empirically separated from the spheres of political, economic, family, and religious life” (pp. 53). The binary code consists of three broad sets of concepts (civil motives v. uncivil motives, civil relations v. uncivil relations, and civil institutions v. uncivil institutions) (pp. 56-59). Alexander believes that these codes “are generally accepted by all actors” (pp. 64); but what is particularistic is how the codes are applied. His framework provides a clear way of examining how certain people and groups in a society are deemed “deserving” or “undeserving” of being a part of society, and how this can be interpreted in different ways by different people and groups using the same set of basic codes.

In terms of how we characterize the world and why we are compelled to feel this way, Alexander believes that the broad culture dictates universal codes, and that people and groups within the culture use the codes to organize their world, determine who should be a part of the society, and what is considered “sacred” or “evil.” We use this discourse to evaluate public figures, historical events, and groups of people, among other things, to determine whether they are a part of democratic/civil society, or outside of it. The interesting twist is how different people interpret the same thing in such different ways: for example, Alexander discusses George Orwell’s seminal novel *1984*: he notes that “if most of the members of democratic society accepted the validity and reality of 1984, they disagreed fundamentally over its relevant social application. Radicals and liberals were inclined to see the book as describing the already repressive or at least imminently anti-democratic

tendencies of their own capitalist societies; conservatives understood the work as referring to communism alone” (pp. 64).

Unfortunately, individuals can use these codes to engage in discriminatory behavior based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, etc. by determining that all individuals who share a certain characteristic (such as homosexuals, Muslims, immigrants) are “impure” or “polluted.” This can also be done with geographic space; i.e. members of this nation v. other nations and people who live in the city v. those who live in the country. Additionally, we can use non-civil spheres to create inequalities, such as determining that people who have succeeded in the economic sphere, i.e. those who are wealthy, are also morally good, while those who live in poverty are morally impure (pp. 204). He notes that people who lack economic resources do have the ability to let their grievances be known through the civil sphere (through social movements, civil associations, etc.), even if he admits that these efforts often fail (pp. 208).

Alexander provides a clear picture of how members of societies characterize the world the way that we do, and why we are compelled to think this way. His theory and his coding scheme make a lot of sense, especially when looking at groups that are negatively stereotyped in our society and the reasons for their exclusion, as most of the reasons fit into this scheme. It is also very interesting to look at how the same phenomena can be characterized as “polluted” or “non-polluted” depending on how people classify them into the various codes.¹ However, it is unclear to me how he proposes to deal with the inequalities in society, which inevitably are made worse by the stereotyping and “coding” that we utilize to come up with a sense of “us” v. “them.” I argue that it is not enough to merely allow marginalized individuals and groups the right to participate in the civil sphere, because most do not have the resources to instigate large scale social change.² Or does Alexander support the idea of some kind of a social welfare system included in the other institutions, such as the state? Is

¹ For example, George W. Bush would probably be described by liberals using most of the terms under “uncivil relations,” while many conservatives would describe him using the exact opposite codes.

² Or, as Marx would note, many may not even realize they are being oppressed.

there any way in which the dialogue of the civil sphere can be utilized to improve the plight of marginalized groups, or does it “other” them by its very nature?

It seems that the best way to be “released” from these codes is to realize they exist and to think critically about what society is classifying as “sacred” and “evil.” This is especially important when the codes are used to stereotype entire groups of people. The notions of the codes can also be used to raise awareness about issues to others, especially in things like political campaigns or advertisements when these various codes are likely to be “played up” in order to sway the audience.

Emile Durkheim

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim analyzes the most stripped-down, bare bones version of society he can imagine: the Australian clans whose religion centered on the totem. He does this because he believes that by looking at people in very primitive societies, we can learn about why individuals in modern societies act the way that we do. He determines that the reason why individuals in these clans worshipped the totem (as well as things that bore the emblem of the totem, such as animals and even humans in the clan) was because, upon experiencing “collective effervescence,”³ they believed they were experiencing something sacred⁴, something religious, and the totem was the one thing that surrounded them and to which they could attribute it. Thus, they began to worship anything that bore the emblem of this totem. It was not that they believed the specific animals or plants represented in the totem were sacred; these were merely representations of what they believed created the “sacred” feeling: the totem itself (pp. 142). Durkheim argues that it was obviously not the totem that *really* created this feeling: instead, it was the “collective effervescence” created by the society and just attributed to the totem (pp. 164).

Thus, Durkheim believes that in society, the things (symbols, images, signs, rituals) that are considered “sacred” are those that result from feelings of collective effervescence; for example, the

³ Durkheim notes that in Australia, the tribal societies often spend many months scattered in small groups. Once the tribe gets back together, they have a ceremony. Specifically, at this ceremony, “because the primitive’s emotional and passionate faculties are not fully under the mastery of his reason and will, he easily loses self-control. An event of any immediate importance takes him outside of himself. The very fact of assembling is a very powerful stimulant” (pp. 162).

⁴ The notion of “sacredness” is diametrically opposed to the notion of “profanity” – anything that is not sacred is profane (pp. 56)

example of the soldier who would die for the flag. It is not the actual piece of cloth he or she is dying for; the flag is sacred because of its intrinsic value to the larger social group of which he or she is a part. Durkheim believed that we characterize the world in the way that we do because of the symbols that are deemed sacred by society and the social groups of which we are a part. An understanding of these symbols helps us determine sacred from profane and right from wrong, and guides our behavior. Durkheim firmly rejected the notion that society is an aggregate of individuals, instead he believed that our actions are influenced by our larger social group (on pp. 115, he notes that, “society has provided the canvas on which logical thought has operated”). One way to be released from this grip seems to be not participating in society or social groups (which Durkheim would call “anomie” and disapprove of) so that the various symbols would not mean as much to you.

I have not read any of Durkheim’s work outside of this book, and I am unclear where the economy and the state fit into his concept of society. He clearly rejects the liberal/utilitarian idea that the economy drives peoples’ behaviors, but how does the economy fit in to the picture under this vision of cohesive societies and social groups? Does the economy do anything to break up that cohesion? Further, what would Durkheim say about people who fall outside of the realm of society by factors they did not choose (i.e. people who are marginalized because of poverty, illness, mental health problems, etc.) His portrayal of a seemingly cohesive society seems rather optimistic.

Durkheim and Alexander both discuss how cultural codes are used to determine what is considered “sacred” and “profane” in society. One key difference is that Durkheim’s schema is intended to apply to the entire society, while Alexander’s is specific to the “civil sphere.” Alexander acknowledges that there are other spheres in society, including economic and political, that do not necessarily adhere to his binary codes. This type of distinction did not seem to be present in Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

Pierre Bourdieu

The gist of Pierre Bourdieu’s argument about social class and culture can be found on pp. 13: “hidden behind the statistical relationships between educational capital or social origin and this or

that type of knowledge or way of applying it, there are relationships between groups maintaining different, and even antagonistic, relations to culture, depending on the conditions in which they acquired their cultural capital and the markets in which they can derive the most profit from it” (pp. 12). Bourdieu argues that culture (including music, art, food, clothing, etc.) is used to perpetuate social inequalities and power differences between classes. A person born into an upper class family (i.e. born into a family with economic capital, or money/property) will automatically have a knowledge and understanding of certain kinds of “high status” culture (i.e. cultural capital) that a person born into a middle or low-income household will not likely have. People who are not born into money can obtain educational credentials and attempt to increase their cultural capital, but their attempts will ultimately fall short of those who have both cultural and economic capital. Thus, the way that a person experiences the world, according to Bourdieu, differs significantly based on the social class into which he or she was born; people born into a household with high economic capital will be more likely to have high cultural capital, and will be more likely to understand and be able to participate the “highbrow” culture.

Bourdieu introduces the notion of habitus, which “enables an intelligible and necessary relation to be established between practices and a situation, the meaning of which is produced by the habitus through categories of perception and appreciation that are themselves produced by an observable social condition” (pp. 101). This means that people instinctually know, through perception and appreciation, how to act in a certain situation. Those with high cultural capital will know how to act at the opera or a five star restaurant without giving it much thought; while those who do not have high cultural capital will likely not be able to experience their first opera or meal at a five star restaurant without questioning what they do with the opera glasses and which fork to use for the salad. This can further perpetuate inequalities because it makes a person without a habitus for high culture even more different from those who have this habitus, as it is not just money but a different culture that makes these individual unequal. Bourdieu notes that it is impossible for people to escape from culture; that said, an understanding of the ways in which it advantages some

individuals and disadvantages others is very useful for individuals who are interested in how inequality is perpetuated.

One concern I have with Bourdieu's analysis is that it could potentially be used to perpetuate the notion of a "poverty culture" by its demonstration that there is a dominant or preferred culture to which people in poverty must adhere.⁵ Specifically, I am thinking about the "life skills" classes that exist at many state and non-profit social welfare programs, especially in the post-PRWORA era. In Michigan, some counties require every individual who comes to its Work First program to participate in such classes, which teach everything from current events to how to act at a job interview (not what to say at an interview, but how to act: how to dress, how to speak, etc.). I have seen little research that demonstrates whether these classes actually have an impact (either positive or negative) on people in poverty, but it seems problematic that these programs are trying to force people to adhere to certain cultural ideals instead of helping them address the barriers (such as education, health problems, transportation, child care, etc.) that prevent them from getting ahead. Further research into this issue, both as it relates to Bourdieu and in terms of its impact on people in poverty, is needed.

As noted above, Bourdieu differs from Alexander and Durkheim in his explicit thesis that the cultural systems described in his book help reproduce inequality. The other two theorists are not nearly as explicit on this issue; instead, their analyses tend to help readers gain a greater understanding of certain phenomena in society. While these analyses are important, I believe analyses like Bourdieu's are critical, as they reveal the ways in which systems of inequality can be perpetuated in even seemingly innocent systems like the opera and fine art. The more that individuals who are concerned about issues of inequality understand all of the ways in which inequalities are perpetuated, the better equipped they will be to try and combat the problem and work toward greater social justice.

⁵ Although I am sure this is not his intention, as he is trying to show how these cultural systems perpetuate power and inequality.

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