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 Survey of Anthropology
 11/05/2007

The Human Socio-cultural System

1) The Issue:-

To describe culture, system and superstructure, structure, and infrastructure as components of the socio-cultural system. To discuss and define mode of production and reproduction as subcomponents of infrastructure.

2) The Claim (Thesis):-

It is my assertion that the socio-cultural system is a type of system and is divided in three components: superstructure, structure and infrastructure. The socio-cultural system is composed of two modes, the mode of production and the mode of reproduction.

3) The Evidence:-

- Culture
 - Definition:
 - Lecture: Culture is a way of life. It is an adaptation tool.
- System:
 - Definition. Lecture: Three features:
 - Must have more than one component
 - Socio-cultural system is an example
 - There must be interaction between components
 - If one component changes, the system must change
- Socio-cultural System as a type of system
 - **Superstructure.** Definition. Lecture: Mental Life → Values → Ideas → Beliefs
 - **Structure.** Definition. Lecture: How a culture organized itself in institutions, groups and organizations. Examples of economic structure include:
 - Political Economy:
 - Political Organization: Decision Making
 - Economic Organization: Ownership
 - Domestic Economy
 - Kinship: Definition
 - Lecture: System of rights and obligations.
 - Marriage: Definition
 - Lecture: A relationship recognized by law or people
 - Movie (Faces of Culture- "Sex and Marriage"): A social contract and its customs reflect the economic needs of the group.
 - Descent Rules: Definition
 - Lecture: Rules used to define membership in the kinship system.
 - **Infrastructure:** Socio-cultural system & environment
 - Mode of Production
 - Critical Resources
 - Effective Control: Ownership
 - Distribution : Access

- The Carrying Capacity. Lecture: The number of people than an area can support
- The Point of Diminishing Returns. Lecture: Giving vs. receiving
- The Population Pressure Model. Text: Queensland Aborigines. Population vs. Environment
- Types of Modes of Production
 - Foraging. Lecture: Absence of formal government
Example: !Kung
 - DOMESTICATION
 - Pastoralism. Documentary: Male Dominated Society. Example : Basseri
 - Extensive Agriculture. Documentary: Property. Example : Mayas
 - Intensive Agriculture. Documentary: Stratified society. Example : Afghanis
 - Industrialism. Lecture: Mechanization → 1850 Europe
 - Hyper-industrialism. Lecture: Service/Information
- Mode of Reproduction
 - Demographic Transition. Lecture: Describes population change over time.
 - Population Curves
 - S Curve: Developed country.
 - J Curve: Planet
 - Demographic Trap. Lecture: Increase of births.
 - Expansive Population Pyramid
 - Third World
 - Developed Countries

4) The Conclusion:-

The socio-cultural system and its components are an important part of the organization of culture and society, from the gathering of food to the control of the population size.

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The Human Socio-cultural System

Socio-cultural system is an example of a system of human culture. The human socio-cultural system is made up of three associated components: superstructure, structure and infrastructure. Infrastructure is composed of two modes, the mode of production and the mode of reproduction.

In order to discuss the human socio-cultural system and its components and subcomponents, it is important to understand what do the terms “culture” and “system” mean for the human being. As discussed in class, culture is a way of life based on social tradition. Culture is used as an adapted tool. One example to illustrate culture and its function as an adapted tool is how human beings select aliments. Through different generations, cultures have been screening food by identifying which ones have benefit and which ones are harmful for health. This knowledge was initially gained through trial and error, and later passed on to future generations. The second term to define is system. According to one of the lectures in class, a system is defined as possessing there determinate features. A system must have more that a component. For instance, the socio-cultural system is composed of three main components including superstructure, structure and infrastructure. Another required characteristic of a system is that the components must interact with each other. The final requirement of a system is that if one of the component changes the system must change.

As mentioned before, a socio-cultural system is divided in three levels: superstructure, structure and infrastructure. The superstructure level involves mental life. The next level is structure which is how cultures organize themselves. The infrastructure level is divided in two modes, the mode of production and mode of reproduction. The mode of production involves the use of technology and practices for expanding or limiting the food and energy supply, whereas in the mode of reproduction technology and practices are used for expanding or limiting the size of the population.

The first level, superstructure, consists of the values, ideas, beliefs, and ideologies of a system. One example mentioned in class was how in our society, young people move out from their parental homes when they turn 18 years old. In American society, becoming independent at the age of 18 is an important value that shapes the structure of society. In contrast, in other cultures such as in Spain, young people move away from home at much later ages due to different values and economic pressures. Family unity is a stronger value in Spain than independence.

The next level in the socio-cultural system is structure. Structure is all the institutions, groups and organizations that a culture possesses which form the organization of society. Economic structure is one subtype of structure, and is subdivided into two types of economies, political and domestic economy. The political economy is divided into two types of organizations, the political and the economy organization. The political organization deals with public decision making regarding safety, law and order. One example of this organization is the political structure of the United States, which is defined as a Republic that is composed of states. In every state

there is a figure called governor that makes decisions. The economical organization is based on ownership. One example of this economical organization can be seen in the Netsilik culture from the northwest Hudson Bay region. Their critical resources are the seals, which no one person controls. People do not own the seals, and the access is free to this important source of food and clothing. In contrast, in American culture for example, one of the most important resources, oil, is owned and controlled by corporation instead of allowing individuals free access.

The last level is the infrastructure, which works as a bridge between the socio-cultural system and its environment. In this level, cultures regulate the amount of energy expended in the environment for gaining resources. Infrastructure is divided in two different modes, the mode of production and mode of reproduction. Mode of production involves the use of technology and practices for expanding or limiting the aliments and energy.

One component of this mode is the critical resources. Critical resources are those that are necessary for the successful continuation of a society's way of life. Examples of critical resources are food, water, and in modern cultures, oil. Effective control and distribution are characteristics of the critical resources component of infrastructure. Ownership determines effective control. This ownership can be generalized or restricted. According to the documentary "Patterns of Subsistence: Food Foragers and Pastoralists," the economy of the Basseri in Iran is based on sheep and goat. The type of effective control of this culture is generalized. Land and water is not controlled by anyone. The distribution, or individual access to the resource, is free to every member of the

population. In contrast, effective control of land in Mayan Mexico is restricted. The land is controlled by families or by lineages (Patterns of Subsistence: The Food Producers).

Another component of the mode of production is the carrying capacity. The definition provided in class states that the carrying capacity is the number of people that an area can support. Pastoralism is an example of how carrying capacity is demonstrated. As mentioned before, the main way of survival for the Basseri is the goats and sheep. When the pastures for the animals have been consumed or are dried out, the Basseri must migrate to another land in order to be able to feed their herds and thus sustain themselves (Patterns of Subsistence: Food Foragers and Pastoralists). Due to barren conditions in the spring, the carrying capacity of the land decreases and the Basseri move into the mountains where fertile lands can support their population.

The next component in the mode of production is the point of diminishing return. According to the definition provided in class, the point of diminishing return is the point at which increasing returns are not received for increasing amounts of input or energy. One example discussed in class is demonstrated in the evolution from foraging societies to societies dependent on pastoralism. In populations that survive through foraging, hunting and gathering, the food collection becomes more difficult as the population

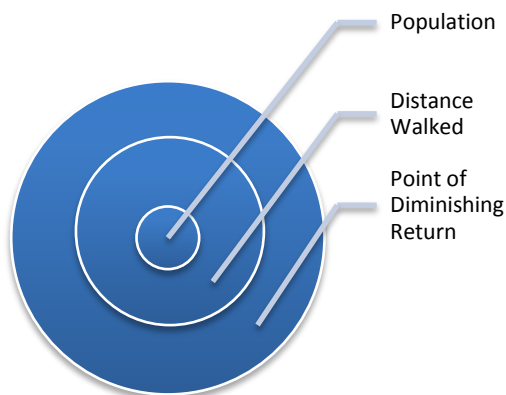


Figure 1. Example of Point of Diminishing Return

increases in size. As Figure 1 shows, a population has to walk a farther distance with increasing population size in order to be able to obtain food. There is a point at which it is not worth walking to collect food because you spend more energy in the

effort than the energy provided by the food in return.

The last component in the mode of production is the population pressure model. As discussed in class, the population pressure model consists of the pressure that a growing population puts on an environment. The result of this intensification of population and the resultant pressure onto the environment causes a depletion of the resources with the consequence that the system collapses. When the system collapses, cultures have taken two directions in order to be able to continue their survival. One of them is to go to war to find and take from other societies that which is missing in that particular society. One example of population pressure can be found in the Queensland Aborigines. According to Marvin Harris in his book "Our Kind," the Queensland Aborigines obtain their proteins and fats by eating their enemies' women and children when other meat sources are not available. This cannibalism is an alternative food source when animal meat is difficult to access. Cannibalism is another alternative to the lack of big game or other domesticated animals (Harris 303). The other option for a society when the current mode of production has collapsed is to switch into another mode of production. These types of modes of production have evolved over time since the beginning of human culture and span the range of possibilities from the early foraging, hunting, gathering society to our current mode of production: hyperindustrialism.

The mode of production starts with the appearance of the foraging, hunting, gathering societies followed by the domestication of animals and plants, industrialization and hyperindustrialization. Foraging, hunting and gathering are the most ancient ways of subsistence of all humans. This mode of production functions through collective work

and is characterized by an absence of formal government. The collective work is based on sexual division of labor. The !Kung in the Kalahari Desert in Africa is an example of a culture based on gathering and hunting. According to the documentary "Faces of Culture - "Patterns of Subsistence: Food Foragers and Pastoralists", the !Kung women gather nuts, fruits and roots providing the 85% of the population diet, while men provide meat.

The next mode of production is domestication. Animals and agriculture are domesticated when the increase of population leads to lack of control over natural environment. When this type of population pressure occurs, cultures must move into another pattern of subsistence after the previous system collapses in order to survive. Pastoralism is an alternative to the food collection of hunting and gathering. The herd is the major source of sustenance although people may also do some gardening, hunting and gathering. One example of pastoralism is found in the mountains of Iran where the Basseri are originally from. According to the documentary "Faces of Culture - "Patterns of Subsistence: Food Foragers and Pastoralists" this type of pastoralism is transhumance which consists of moving the herd from home to a new pasture area when the home area resources have been depleted and then back home again. Money and food is provided by sheep and goats. The herds are controlled by men making the Basseri a male dominated society.

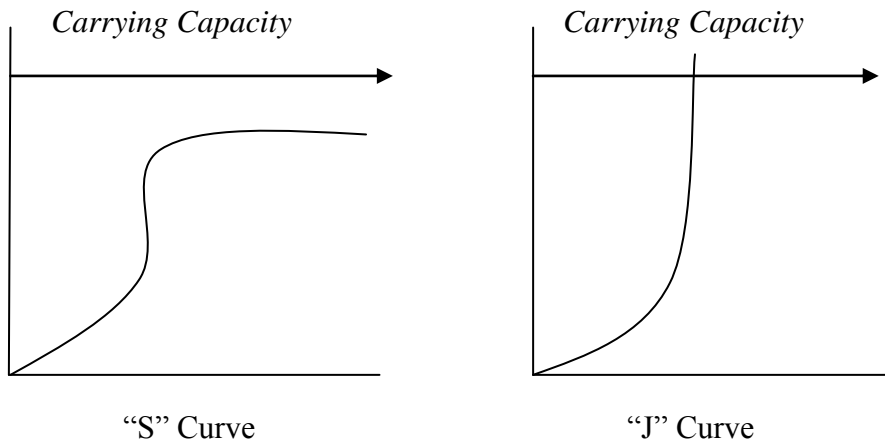
The other alternative method of food collection in addition to pastoralism is agriculture. In contrast to pastoralism, the societies that practice agriculture become sedentary populations. Cultures that practice agriculture can be divided in two groups,

those who use the extensive agriculture such as the Mayas in Mexico and those who practice the intensive agriculture like the Afghanis. Extensive agriculture consists of cultivating crops without the use of irrigation, draft animals or fertilization. The documentary “Faces of Culture - "Patterns of Subsistence: The Food Producers” shows how the Mayan culture uses the “slash and burn” horticulture technique as extensive agriculture. This technique consists of cutting down a surface and letting it dry during about eight months. After this time they burn the rest of the vegetation (Faces of Culture - "Patterns of Subsistence: The Food Producers). Burning the vegetation leaves nutrients in the ashes that the soil absorbs and makes available for the next crop that is planted after the rainy season. As mentioned before, agriculture encourages populations to settle and leads to an increase in the population, which changes the structure of society. The origin of the idea of property stems from the agricultural need for labor and for continued access to the crops.

On the other hand, intensive agriculture involves use of irrigation, fertilizers, draft animals and mechanization. “Faces of Culture - "Patterns of Subsistence: The Food Producers” shows the Afghanis as an example of a culture that practices intensive agriculture with the result of the creation of a structured society with the need for many new professions. Commerce and trade appeared as a consequence of needing items that were not produced at home, and led to new types of professions such as bankers, artisans and soldiers. Similar to the Afghanis, our society has become a structured urban society which has evolved to an industrialized and specialized society.

Industrialization and hyperindustrialization is considered an extension of intensive agriculture. In 1850 the Industrial Revolution started in Europe. The necessity to produce more in less time to satisfy a growing population in Europe led to the mechanization of several sectors such as the textile industry. The evolution from industrialization to hyperindustrialization is based on the introduction of new technologies and the increase in the number of people working in the service sector. Hyperindustrialization is the mode where our society currently lives. As discussed in class, the number of manufacturing jobs is not growing because new technologies have replaced the use of labor in the manufacturing process of products. On the other hand service occupations are what predominate more today. In other words, this current society is based on services and information industries rather than manufacturing.

Mode of reproduction is the last mode in an infrastructure. The mode of reproduction consists of behaviors designated to control rapid increases or decreases in population size. There are two different types of demographics in the mode of reproduction, the demographic transition and the demographic trap. The demographic transition is a model that describes population change over time and it follows two different patterns. These patterns can be observed through two different types of graphs, the “S” curve and the “J” curve graphs. The other effect that takes place in the mode of production is the demographic trap. The demographic trap occurs in countries where population grows rapidly due to the high number of births. It is characteristic of third world countries.



The model of population that the “S” curve graph represents take places in most developed countries. The population grows below of the carrying capacity. The graphic shows that at a certain time during the industrial revolution, the increase in birth rate stopped. According to Harris, after industrialization, parents did not have the same need children to work in the family business or in the fields as before the industrial revolution; instead fewer children were needed to make money in factories and offices (Harris 224).

On the other hand the “J” curve graph takes place at the planet-wide level. According to the discussion in class, the “J” curve can be observed in the population of flies. They have a high rate of birth which overpasses the carrying capacity. When the population surpasses the carrying capacity, the flies die off. However, the fewer remaining flies begin reproducing again, creating another “J” curve. The “J” curve can also be observed in countries of the third world. Harries states that parents in developing countries need a big number of children in order to be able to obtain more incomes for the household, which leads to a “J” curve model of population growth (Harris 217).

Finally, the last component of the mode of reproduction is the demographic trap.

A population that exceeds the carrying capacity due to a high number of births is caught

in a demographic trap. It is characteristic of third

world countries. Figure 2 demonstrates how

populations in developing countries are distributed. It

is called the expansive pyramid and is divided into

three segments. The pre productive segment refers to

the non working population such as children. This

sector is big because of the high birth rate. The

productive sector is the working people and as long

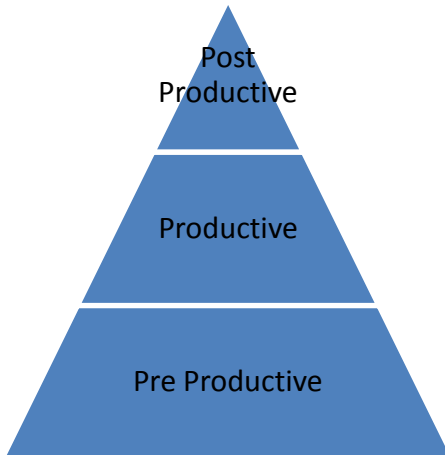


Figure 2. Expansive Pyramid

this segment is bigger than the pre and post productive sector, the system is stable.

However, in many developing countries the productive sector is smaller than the other two, leading to an unstable system.

The next type of pyramid is constrictive and occurs in places such as United

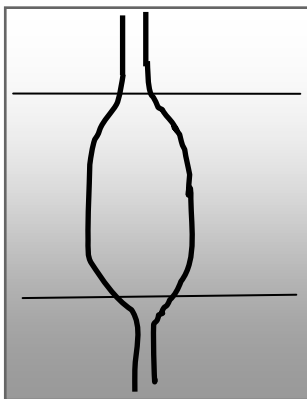


Figure 3. Constrictive Pyramid

States. The main characteristic is the lack of young people.

Because of the necessity of workers there is a demographic

collapse where countries need to both increase the age of

retirement and decrease the age at which children can work in

order to raise the population of the productive sector.

In conclusion, all cultures possess a socio-cultural system that is composed of three components: superstructure, structure and infrastructure. The superstructure

component is composed of the ideas, beliefs, and ideologies of a system. Structure is way that cultures organize themselves. The last component is infrastructure, in which cultures regulate the amount of energy expended in the environment for gaining resources.

Infrastructure is divided in two modes: the mode of production and the mode of reproduction. The mode of production involves the use of technology and practices for expanding or limiting the aliments and energy. In the mode of production an evolutionary pattern exists from the food collectors of the first humans to the hyperindustrialism of our time. In each of these modes of production exists a characteristic that makes each type of mode different from the last. For the foraging cultures the defining characteristic is the lack of formal government, as is demonstrated in the !Kung culture. For the domestication of animals and agriculture the unique characteristic is the concept of property as exemplified by the Mayan culture. In the mode of production of industrialism is characterized by the mechanization born in the Industrial Revolution. The last and current mode of production, hyperindustrialism, is defined as a society based on service industry. The mode of reproduction is designed the increases or decreases in population size. There are two different types of demographics in the mode of reproduction, the demographic transition and the demographic trap. The changes of the population over time are found in the demographic transition, while demographic trap exists when the population exceeds the carrying capacity. In summary, the socio-cultural system and its components are an important part of the organization of culture and society, from the gathering of food to the control of the population size.

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