THE SOCIAL FACT

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MATRILINY AND ISLAM: RELIGION AND SOCIETY IN THE LACCADIVES

Sivarajavel IAS Academy 's

THE SOCIAL FACT

is a monthly bulletin for sociology current affairs which tries to give aspirants a new dimensions in their sociology preparations. The Magazine has been designed in such away that the reading experience is enriching and insightful for the readers.

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THE SOCIAL FACT

INSIDE THIS SOCIOLOCIAL BULLETIN

Connecting the dots :
Sociology is a process in making. Everyday newspapers and weekly have many important news, which have sociological angle in subtle form. This chapter helps you to connect those dots and give a clear picture of the reality.

Sociology Explained :
World is one for sociology. Many authors explains social problems and social changes in length and breath through their research. This chapter collects and compiles those articles which are related to our syllabus.

Perspectives :
Beauty of Sociology, as a social science, is its capacity to offer different perspectives of a same topic. This chapter analyses a current topic with an unique social perspectives.

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CONNECTING THE DOTS

- *An ethnic clash erupted in India's north-eastern state of Manipur between the Meitei people, a majority that lives in the Imphal Valley, and the tribal community from the surrounding hills, including the Kuki and Zo peoples. The underlying anger, simmering for a long time, has other reasons. These are linked not just to the government's clampdown on reserved and protected forests in the State's hill areas but also to the Kukis' feeling of being persecuted :* **Countries in which people of various ethnic background share no nationalist spirit experience efforts by separate factions to impose their own views of nationhood on the land; the resulting clash is often violent.**

- *India's top wrestlers protesting against Wrestling Federation of India president and BJP MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh over sexual harassment allegations said they will throw their medals in the river Ganga in Haridwar but the protesting ace wrestlers have temporarily shelved their plans to consign their medals in Ganga at Haridwar after intervention from farmer leader Naresh Tikait. They have given a five-day deadline for action against the wrestling federation chief :* **This is a functional aspect of pressure groups in the Indian socio-political structure.**

- *Difference of opinions have surfaced over the film – " The Kerala Story". Some argues that it is marketed as a true story, the film is premised on the Hindutva conspiracy theory of "love jihad", and falsely claims that thousands of Hindu women from Kerala have been converted to Islam and recruited in ISIS, while others claims this film as a true reality. Similar arguments were made around "The Kashmir Files" film :* **The sociology won't give the judgement of right and wrong but the above incidents show the increasing importance of ideological state apparatus (a term coined by Louis Althusser) in the modern society.**

- *Over 6,000 villagers who lived devoid of essential government welfare schemes and developmental benefits for decades deep inside forests in Odisha's Ganjam district are set to embrace a new life with the recognition of their villages as revenue villages under the Forest Right Act :* **Earlier, Ghurye formulated the tribal question. There are three views on the tribal situation: no change and revivalism; isolation and preservation; and finally assimilation. Later the government has adopted a policy of tribal integration into the mainstream, with the goal of developing a creative adjustment between tribes and non-tribes that leads to a responsible partnership.**

- *According to the findings of the Delhi-based Institute of Policy Studies and Advocacy (IPSA) and the Indian Muslim Intellectuals Forum (IMIF), Muslims are lagging behind their contemporaries on most socio-economic parameters in Delhi. The community suffers from one of the highest unemployment and maternal mortality rates and limited political representation:* **Zoya Hasan believes that educational backwardness can explain Muslims underrepresentation at the higher levels of employment and the above finding is the extension of the theory.**

- *From March 22 to April 26, 2023, as many as eight people have died while cleaning sewers in various parts of Gujarat, raising concerns about the continuing deaths of manual scavengers despite the fact that the practice has been declared illegal across the country :* **Manual scavenging is not a career chosen voluntarily by workers, but is instead a deeply unhealthy, unsavoury and undignified job forced upon these people because of the stigma attached to their caste. The nature of the work itself then reinforces that stigma.**

- *The Supreme Court on Monday held that its extraordinary discretion under Article 142 of the Constitution can be used to do "complete justice" for couples trapped in bitter marriages by granting them divorce by mutual consent, sparing them the "misery" of waiting for six to 18 months for a local court to declare the annulment final. :* **The statement said by the judge ("If a marriage is wrecked beyond hope of salvage, public interest lies in recognising this real fact,") shows the desacralisation of marriages in India.**

A PICTURE TO PONDER

"Capitalism is evil and you cannot regulate evil"
~Marxism

SOCIOLOGY EXPLAINED

KEEPING ORDER AT HOME

Paper 1 : Scope of the subject

Paper 2: Research methodology - Functionalism

There is no place like home. But what makes a home? Some of you might say a home is a place that gives you a feeling of comfort, safety, and familiarity; it is a place where your heart belongs, and the self can thrive. It is a welcoming sanctuary where you find a treasure chest of living. But above all, home is where everything should be in order. When we enter different homes with a sociological perspective, we can immediately experience a unique statement about the inhabitants' tastes, lifestyle, and identity. At the same time, we can see how everything is put and kept in its place. Have you ever noticed how ordering things in the home might bring you a sense of wellbeing and comfort, but looking around a messy home can be overwhelming? The domestic space is, thus, a good place where we can study our relationship to objects and its connection with social order. For the anthropologist Mary Douglas, the home is a "localizable idea" that "starts by bringing some space under control." In this sense, a place like home acquires its meaning through home-making practices; and as such, it becomes part of processes of the creation of domestic order. Put differently, order is sustained and things go smoothly so long as they are being kept in the proper place within the home.

Most likely, we may store our stuff in the spaces where we most commonly use the objects. So, the rationale for keeping things at the places to which we think they belong might probably be more pragmatic than symbolic. However, putting things in places where they "just belong" are, according to Douglas, well arranged spatial manifestations of underlying rules and values. A disruption of order at home relates, for example, to what Douglas views as "dirt;" where a thing in the wrong place, or too much stuff, violates norms, values and interests. Douglas brings up some examples by drawing our attention to "[…] bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; out-door things in-doors". Or imagine finding cutlery in your bedside table. While those things are not dirty in themselves, they may become "dirty" by placing them where they are out of context.

In this sense, each object belongs to a particular place, and the concept of "dirt" defies this place. So, by assigning things to their suitable areas, we also create a non-place; a location where things do not belong and become "dirty" or "a matter out of place." Whether our things are put in or out of place, there are cultural rules which tell us which objects can be combined and placed with others and the anxiety, repulsion or disgust that arises if these rules are transgressed. Most often, however, people may not reflect consciously on their stuff unless the objects are put out of context; unless we classify them as "dirty." Just think of how quickly everything in your home can, at the turn of events, suddenly end up deliberately hidden behind closed doors. How quickly do you put away clutter that has been stashed in your living room when unexpected visitors arrive? How deliberately do you hide intimate objects from plain sight? A disruption usually prompts action, followed by an ad hoc spatial re-organization.

But where does the idea of a proper place for our stuff come from? Do we organize our home from an innate aesthetic sense or is our concept of order and "dirt" shaped by cultural values, symbolic meanings and social trends?Pierre Bourdieu's work could explain us how people maintain a sense of domestic order through the display of taste and distinction. When we select places for our stuff to rest, Bourdieu might say that we will place it according to our likes and dislikes. In doing so, we not only represent parts of our lifestyle. We simultaneously symbolize boundaries between purity and pollution, private and public, inside and outside at home.

Just as we put our material things within this complex system of classification and segregation, we may also see how domestic divisions play a role in the organization of our home. Structural factors, such as age, income, occupational stability, neighborhood and living conditions, as well as social change can make people feel more or less concerned with keeping things in order (more on housing insecurity). A sense of order at home is therefore reflected and recreated by a socially constructed, yet meaningful vision of the home as a place of belonging, safety, as well as of private and public expression.

Now, with that in mind, is the way we organize our stuff a matter of choice, obligation or structure? Take a look around you and see for yourself. Wherever you keep your things in (dis)order, you can witness individually meaningful, yet socially constructed phenomena at place. What gives you the feeling of home might therefore extend well beyond a sense of homeliness, and may well be a reification of social concepts, values, and norms. These inherent social rules do not stop at our doorstep. At home, we also try to re-create order by putting everything in place.

ENTRENCHING BRAHMINICAL CONSERVATION

Paper 1 : Features of caste system
Paper 2 : Visions of Social Change in India (Law and social change)

An Analysis of the Wild Life (Protection) Amendment Act Amendments to the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 were made by the union government in December 2022. These amendments resulted in an increase in the animal species protected by the WPA, while also increasing the penalty manifold. Against this background, it is argued that the criminal–legal framework of wildlife conservation established by the WPA is rooted in Brahminical environmentalism. The WPA will further strengthen the web of criminalisation around forest-dependent livelihoods, predominantly affecting forest-dwelling communities.

During the winter session of Parliament, the Wild Life (Protection) Amendment Bill, 2021 ("the bill") was passed in the Rajya Sabha on 8 December 2022. The bill, which is on the cusp of being notified, was introduced in the Lok Sabha on 17 December 2021 with the very explicit aim of implementing the provisions of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES). Since India is a signatory of CITES, various provisions were introduced by the union government to increase and strengthen protection for animals protected under the Wild Life (Protection) Act (WPA), 1972.

Despite these intentions and in light of all the debates in both houses, it would suffice to say that this bill has its fair share of problems. The majority of concerns surrounding the bill, which have been raised by civil society activists as well as members of Parliament (MPs), mainly focus on what is the "elephant conundrum" concerning Section 43 of the bill and the issue of "vermin" animals,

Despite the concerns, most of the remaining changes have been received positively by many, especially the bill's proposal to increase the penalty amount for general violation from `25,000 to `1,00,000 and the increase in the penalty for violation of provisions related to protected animals from `10,000 to `25,000. This increase in the penalty amount is viewed as a solid deterrent to ensure better wildlife protection, but this increase will have disastrous consequences for many.

In order to fully grasp the ramifications of this proposal, it is necessary to analyse the current wildlife-policing framework (the fortress conservation model) which governs our forests. Here, we argue that the conception of conservation in India was inherently colonial and that the current framework is just an extension. Further, the influence of the caste system on this already exclusionary framework has given rise to an entirely new phenomenon known as "Brahminical conservation," which has had dire ramifications for many people who reside near or in these forests situated in the districts of Mandla and Balaghat in Madhya Pradesh (MP).

Fortress Conservation: An Exclusionary Model

Conservation efforts through law in India were undertaken by the British in order to create a monopoly over forestlands to ensure efficient exploitation of the forest resources and maximise revenue generation Further, with the passing of the Indian Forest Act of 1865 and the subsequent amendments, the colonial government fully embraced the fortress conservation model. This was done with the ulterior motive of maintaining control over these forests and not necessarily to tackle its dilapidated conditions and the wildlife in India, most of which was a direct consequence of the rampant deforestation that ensued in order to satiate the demands of development (including, but not limited to, constructions of railway tracks, ports, and ships) under the colonial NCDNSNT 2008).

Fortress conservation works on the idea that the best way to maintain bio-diversity is to establish protected regions where ecosystems can operate independently of human interference. It is also known as protective conservation, which presupposes that the local communities exploit natural resources destructively and irrationally, leading to biodiversity loss and environmental degradation. Three principles are used to describe protected areas that follow the fortress model—locals who depend on the natural resource base are excluded; park rangers patrol the boundaries and enforce rules using a "fines and fences" strategy to ensure compliance; and only tourism, safari hunting, and scientific research are deemed appropriate uses inside protected areas. The legislation introduced by the colonial government emphasised the creation of inviolate zones within the forests, classified into subcategories such as "reserved," "protected," and "village forests," which were under the control of the state Further, they viewed the customary rights of the forest-dwelling communities merely as undue privileges, which should not be recognised, as this recognition might hamper the efficient exploitation of the forest resources (NCDNSNT 2008). This view resulted in traditional forest-dwelling communities losing access to the forest and its resources. This also led to the loss of forest-dependent livelihoods. As a result, they had to relocate and find other means to survive.

Even after independence, the colonial remnants of forest governance still prevail in existing wildlife legislations. The passing of the WPA in 1972 was done with the explicit intention of moving away from the aforementioned "production-oriented forestry" to "social forestry" programmes (Sarin et al 2003). No efforts were made to adopt any other framework of forest governance. Thus began the regime of WPA, wherein the Indian government fully embraced the fortress conservation model.

The act, following the fortress conservation model, created inviolate zones called "protected areas" where human activity is prohibited, except activities necessary for wildlife conservation. Creating these protected areas resulted in the further displacement of many forest-dwelling communities, especially those belonging to the Scheduled Tribes (STs). This forced displacement of the forest-dwelling communities increases their vulnerability to exploitation and often pushes communities towards poverty and ill-health. Apart from the problem of rampant displacement, one of the major criticisms of the fortress conservation model is that the local indigenous populace is typically hostile to such programmes. This hostility is because it antagonises them by labelling them as criminals, poachers, and squatters in areas they have occupied for decades or centuries. Further, the framework works on this erroneous assumption that tribal/local existence in the forest threatens flora and fauna. Whatever has remained of India's forests and wildlife has been primarily credited to the symbiotic relationship established by the tribal populations with them. It is abundantly clear that one cannot think of forests without the people who live there, and vice versa, given the dependence of the forest authorities on the local communities for the prevention of forest fires, management of wildlife, and the gathering of minor forest products by those communities.

Since the 1990s, the government has taken some steps in the direction of the idea of community-based cooperation vis-à-vis conservation when it started the joint forest management initiative. In 2006, the government passed the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (FRA), establishing the process through which forest-dwelling communities can claim the forests' resources. However, the states have continued to sidestep their obligations by either failing to implement the regulations or partially implementing this historic legislation.

Thus, despite growing concerns around the exclusionary fortress conservation model, it remains relevant.

Brahminical Conservation

Post-independence India has seen the rise of Brahminical conservation. It is a mode of environmentalism wherein caste Hindus determine conservation and environmental protection ideas without considering the indigenous centrality of forests. Further, to understand how this mode of environmentalism goes hand-in-hand with the aforementioned fortress conservation model, we must consider what political ecology says about conservation. It describes the environment as a setting where various social actors with asymmetrical political power compete to access and control natural resources. The declaration and implementation of a conservation policy, which involves defining and constructing jurisdiction and frontiers establishing exclusionary rights, concretise this control over the environment. For more than 150 years, the industrial lobby and the forest department viewed forests as nothing more than a money-spinning proposition and had their way at every stage of policy- and law-making and implementation. Since independence, powerful conservationist groups have been able to lobby for enough influence over India's conservation policies, which as a result, leads to the forest-dwelling communities that depend totally on forests for their existence, identity preservation and cultural survival being left behind

The anti-caste and environmental movements in India have always been at odds with each other. This is because of a lack of environmental insight into caste issues and the exclusion of marginalised voices in the mainstream discourse. Further, much of the anti-caste criticism directed towards Indian mainstream environmentalism is because of how it has created a very exclusionary and partial political atmosphere within the discourse, which is often Brahminical,

Hindu, and conservative (Sinha et al 1997) in its inception. Despite the urgent need for a more holistic approach to environmentalism, the caste-blind nature of the discourse persists, and some discourses even defend the entrenchment of the caste system by calling it an ancient system of sustainable development (Sharma 2021). The symbiotic relationship that oppressed caste and forest-dwelling communities have shared with the environment over the years makes it necessary to consider the anti-caste perspectives, to not only recognise the various stakeholders involved but to formulate a more inclusive environmental framework. Brahminical conservation, at its core, is an Indian extension of the exclusionary fortress conservation model. According to the late scholar and activist, Abhay Xaxa, under Brahminical conservation, forests are seen as "pure" and pristine and are to be protected from the "polluted" (Anand 2019).

This reinforces the same caste-based hierarchy prevalent in Indian societies. The oppressor castes, who form the majority of the voices in environment-related discourse in varying capacities view the forest-dwelling communities, often belonging to oppressed castes, as encroachers who must be penalised for destroying the sanctity of the forests and deterring conservation efforts. In contrast, the same amount of hostility is not demonstrated towards mining and infrastructure projects which continue to ravage Indian forests at an alarming rate. Furthermore, since its inception, the requirement for a criminal legislation to advance the cause of animal conservation has remained unopposed in India. The control of the state and the forest department over forests—and the cas-teist foundations of conservation—has been cemented through criminal laws regulating hunting, its prohibition on trespassing, and the establishment of protected areas where conservation can be carried out without the interference of local forest-dwelling communities . We demonstrate this through a research study on the WPA in MP, titled "Wildlife Policing: The Reign of Criminalisation in the Forests of MP."

Empirical Findings

MP is notable in two ways: first, it has the highest proportion of STs in India, and second, it has one of the largest protected areas. Due to this overlap, criminal law and forest governance rules have long been handled in a way that is not known to the general public. To understand this better, the Criminal Justice and Police Accountability Project (CPA Project) examined 1,414 records of offences reported by the forest department across 24 circles between 2016 and 2020 and eight charge sheets filed by the forest department in MP. Furthermore, 780 arrest records in 38 districts between 2011 and 2020 and 129 first information reports (FIRs) recorded between 2016 and 2020 were also analysed.

Section 50 of the WPA empowers forest officers with extensive authority to search, seize, arrest, and record evidence. Therefore, in many cases, wildlife officials often engage in brazen displays of power. Further, in the FIRs registered, descriptions of how specific actions by the parties involved constituted an offence were ambiguous. In 86% of the FIRs, the police utilised information from informants (whose identities are kept secret) to investigate a crime. Without making any particular accusations, the police often used ambiguous words while registering the offence to implicate people. About 41.44% of incidents in the forest department's statistics do not specify how a protected animal was hunted. Moreover, in 51.27% of the cases, no recoveries were reported, and in a few of those where the hunting technique was recognised, the cases were established without the seizure of a weapon, which is not very procedurally reassuring. We also found that wild pigs (17.47%), parrots (12.0%), peacocks (9.26%), and fish (8.26%) were some of the most hunted animals, and in most of the cases related to wild boars, wildlife officials have charged people for simply employing self-defence measures (like putting fences around their field) to protect their crops from the onslaught of wild boars (CPAP 2023).

There is also a reversal of the burden of proof under the WPA, which means a presumption of guilt based on the mere invocation of these provisions can be attracted, and all the prosecution has to prove is simple possession and recovery. After this, the burden falls on the accused to prove that they were not in conscious possession of the article and were unaware of its existence, which is comparatively harder (Khanna et al 2022). During the study, we also found that under the WPA, people were disproportionately targeted. Within the offences recorded by the forest department, close to 78% of the accused persons (totalling 2,790 across 1,414 offences) belonged to an oppressed caste community (Scheduled Castes, STs, Denotified and Nomadic Tribes, and Other Backward Classes). Furthermore, not only do the oppressed caste forest-dwelling communities make up the majority of those accused of crimes involving wildlife, but the majority of such prosecutions of these folks residing in or around protected areas involve gathering wood, honey, mushrooms, and often fishing. This is even though under the FRA, fishing rights and rights over other products from local waterbodies are recognised as a community right. Also, it must be noted that 57 such cases related to fishing have been registered in the data set. These statistics are a clear-cut example of how the WPA is being used to curtail the rights of forest-dwelling communities.

Impact of the Bill

The WPA has a comprehensive scheme for penalties under Section 51 for any violation of any provision, punishing the offender with a sentence of up to three years in prison and/or a fine of up to `25,000. When the offence involves an animal listed in Schedules I or II of the WPA, hunting (Section 9 of WPA) or altering boundaries in a sanctuary or national park (Section 27 of WPA), the offender is sentenced to three to seven years in prison and a fine of up to

`10,000. Therefore, in light of the recent bill, which has increased the penalty amount by four times, it becomes necessary to analyse how this increase can potentially cause more devastation and complicate the already existing web of criminalisation of oppressed castes and forest-dwelling communities.

The study reveals that the financial burden the accused bears in these cases can be pretty high for many people implicated under the WPA, as their socioeconomic position is quite dire. When an accused person is apprehended, the cost of bail ranges from `12,000 to `15,000 (CPA Project 2023). Moreover, each subsequent court appearance adds to this cost; this includes lawyer's fees, bribes to court personnel, and travel to the court from their village for each appearance in court. Furthermore, because of the high costs, many have to take out loans with very high interest rates. The study also finds that the average trial duration was around four–five years, and in one case, a trial has been going on for more than 16 years.

Furthermore, over 95% of the cases by the forest department between 2016 and 2020 remained unresolved. Of these, 727 cases (51%) were still pending in court, 627 cases (44.3%) were undergoing departmental proceedings, and 35 cases (2.4%) were closed without further action (CPAP 2023), probably as a result of an offence being registered against an unidentified accused person. These facts show that there is also an acute case of chronic pendency, and from the data, it is abundantly clear that the proposal in the bill to increase the penalty amount will not just be a mere deterrent but will increase the financial burden on many, especially those booked on erroneous charges.

In Conclusion

In light of these findings, the bill needs serious reconsideration vis-à-vis the proposed increase in penalty amounts under the WPA.

Furthermore, the discourse of conservation in this country is saturated with Brahminical perspectives, which often reinforce the caste system and create an environment where anti-caste perspectives are either ignored or treated with hostility for raising concerns about the problems of caste. Furthermore, the invisibility of caste in the discourse of environmental conservation often seems deliberate, resulting in policy decisions being passed without considering the major stakeholders in the conversation around forests, that is, the oppressed caste forest-dwelling communities, in them. Thus, the need of the hour is the inclusion of more anti-caste perspectives on conservation that deviate from the trend of exclusivity, which the fortress conservation and Brahminical conservation models are rife with, and often wreak havoc in the lives of some of the most marginalised communities in the country by pushing them into a complex web of criminalisation and often financial ruin. The significance of such an anti-caste perspective is that it enables us to consider the impact of conservation policies to take into account the lived realities of the oppressed caste forest-dwelling communities. This will lead to more holistic conservation policies that consider the symbiotic relationship the forest-dwelling communities have shared with forests in this country and will also provide the discourse with much-needed critical reflections that centre around the marginalised and their needs.

COMPARATIVE HISTORICAL RESEARCH: THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN SOCIOLOGY AND HISTORY

Paper 1: Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences.

Sociologists sometimes venture into the historical study of social phenomena and events in order to identify shifts over time and what social forces may be the cause of change. This is called comparative historical research Sociologists who conduct comparative historical research often use methods that overlap with historians' research, such as using census data and other archived records, historical news clippings, oral histories, written correspondence and other sources of data. When sociologists use historical data, we are often trying to explain macro-level changes in society and have the benefit of time to analyze the causes and consequences.

By contrast, historians are often more interested in looking at the particular details of a given time period to better understand what happened in the past. (For a good description of the differences and similarities, see philosopher Dan Little's explanation.) Social history, a subfield within history, can be hard to distinguish from comparative historical sociology. Social history is more focused on people's historical experiences rather than government or political shifts, and like sociology considers the role that broader social forces played in people's lived experiences. In "The Practical Effects of Comparative-Historical Sociology," sociologist Ho-fung Hung explains: While historians occasionally unearth some forgotten events and peoples, it is often comparative-historical sociologists who rediscover the systemic significance of these recovered events and agencies. The recovery of these silenced voices can shed new light on many contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter.

Hung goes on to explain how sociologists who use this method can create a better understanding of social change that can be "guideposts" for social movements. (See also James Mahoney's article in Annual Review of Sociology.) Probably the most famous example of comparative historical research in sociology is The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, by Max Weber, which explores the relationship between religion and the expansion of capitalism in a number of countries over time. Economic sociologists are especially able to glean insights from looking at broad-scale changes over time.

While many comparative historical studies focus on major political or economic changes, this type of research can be smaller in scope. I have conducted two comparative historical studies in recent years that culminated in my books, Celebrity Culture and the American Dream: Stardom and Social Mobility and Pop Culture Panics: How Moral Crusaders Construct Meanings of Deviance and Delinquency.

Celebrity Culture and the American Dream explores how meanings of the American dream mutated over the course of a century, and how these shifts were expressed through narratives created in celebrity fan magazines. My primary data source were fan magazines dating back to 1911 (yes, my research involved reading magazines—lots of magazines!). This source was supplemented by government-gathered data such as census data, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and other official statistics that helped provide some context to understand economic and social changes taking place.

In Pop Culture Panics, I wanted to study the background and historical context of various panics about popular culture during the twentieth century in order to better understand the concerns that often recur about young people and new forms of technology.

For this study, in addition to the official statistics from government sources (again, mostly census data but also some FBI data on crime) I relied on historical newspaper stories and magazine articles as data sources.

Delving into the political, cultural, and economic circumstances surrounding panics about things like pinball machines, comic books, and early rock music, we not only can see how social changes led to those panics, but also more contemporary scares about video games and texting.

Thanks to academic databases, it is very easy to search for news stories from last century. Census data and other official statistics are also easily accessible online, so it has never been easier to do comparative historical research. Before all of this content was online, researchers would have to comb through microfiche reels (basically a film with pictures of old newspapers and documents) at the library or travel to special locations where archives are maintained.

When reading the old fan magazines, I did have to read some on microfiche archived at a library operated by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Fortunately, this is housed about 15 miles from my home so it wasn't too difficult to get there. My university also has a vast collection of these magazines, so my research assistants and I could read them at the library. Of course nothing is as convenient as reading something online.

Comparative historical research crosses academic boundaries, linking sociology with history and often disciplines like economics, religious studies, cultural studies, ethnic studies, and many others. What kinds of research questions do you think comparative historical research might address in the future?

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PERSPECTIVES

ALIENATION, CONSUMPTION, AND WASTE

Paper 1 : Alienation - Marx

Paper 1 : Work and economic life

Students of social theory are familiar with Marx's theory of alienation, which posits that workers feel disconnected from the products of their labor within industrial capitalism. As consumers, one might argue we are also disconnected from the process of production: both the creation of items we consume and discarding of these items. Through this article Karen Sternheimer explained the concept of Alienation with consumption and waste.

Many of us are aware that products we consume regularly, like food and clothing, are produced by child labor and sometimes even forced labor, and sometimes are created in "sweatshops" with unsafe working conditions. These practices are not limited to low-income countries, but take place here in the United States as well. It's hard to avoid products created under these conditions—especially because chocolate is one of the most problematically produced and most beloved food produces. I feel bad just thinking about this, because I wear clothes, eat chocolate, and eat fruits and vegetables too (agricultural work is the most dangerous industry for children in the U.S.) It makes me feel so bad that I'd rather not think about it at all. See, that's alienation!

What we buy isn't the only thing that we are disconnected from. What we throw away is too. (And what we hesitate to throw away. My university's e-waste fair to commemorate Earth Day this year helped me think about the realities of electronic waste: mostly how much of it I have been harboring at home. I knew about the old phones and laptops—I have been concerned about privacy and cyber security—but I was struck by how many cords and cables I found. Boxes of them.

I have been storing the cords over the years in case I might need them, but it was time to reckon with the fact that devices are increasingly wireless and the old ethernet cables, RCA cables, and other USB cables for devices I no longer have are not going to be useful. Things that were once essential now just take up space; the pace at which things become obsolete goes by quickly.

I   'm not really sure what happens to these items once they are officially donated as e-waste, but the company the university works with has assured us that hard drives will be "wiped" and "sanitized" before being destroyed. In 2009 PBS's Frontline World investigated where electronic waste ends up and found that at the time it mostly went to developing countries like Ghana, where toxins within devices created environmental and health hazards for workers and people living near these sites.

I like to think that separating my trash regularly by putting recyclable items in the appropriate bin is beneficial. But an episode of Last Week Tonight about plastics and a PBS Frontline investigation into plastic recycling have made me somewhat skeptical of where things really go after we think we are properly disposing of them. Maybe it's the optimist in me, but I am hopeful that recycling will be beneficial. I've likely engaged in wishcycling, or adding something to the recycling bin that won't be recycled, but I try and follow the local rules about what belongs in the recycling bin.

This year, my city has started a composting program, requiring all food waste to be placed in bins with yard clippings. The compost is supposed to be mulched and donated to farms in the region. That makes me feel good, and so does eliminating the odor of old food scraps from the trash can, taking out the trash less often and spending less money on trash bags. But I am disconnected from what happens to all of this stuff after I take out the trash cans and bring them back empty to be filled again.

My disconnection from the production and disposal processes have not made me more cynical, but also more mindful. While I can't necessarily change these processes, I can try and learn more and support movements and organizations that seek to reduce human and environmental harms caused by consumption.

As I wrote about a few years ago, I have been striving to be more minimalist in my consumption habits and to be more proactive about waste. Some practices I embrace:

• Avoid single use plastic bottles and bags when possible;

• Try to avoid buying new things unless they are needed or to replace older items that are no longer useful;

• When an item is needed, making sure we don't already have it somewhere in a drawer or box;

• Use an item as long as possible and resist the lure of the newest version of a product that I already have unless the item no longer works or its operating system cannot be updated;

- Find another purpose for an "obsolete" item (my old iPad is now my husband's new e-reader, an old iPhone 4 is now a camera, music, and podcast player for my young nephew);

- Seek e-books or audiobook versions rather than buying or borrowing paper books (this saves money, physical space, and the carbon footprint to produce and deliver the item);

- Buy perishable food I plan on eating within the next week by having a shopping list and plans for what to prepare;

- Avoid food waste by planning meals around perishable food items to prevent spoilage;

I am definitely not perfect when it comes to consumption and waste; I notice the excitement I feel when I buy something new, even if it isn't something I truly need. Like many people, I can be tempted by the new bells and whistles of new electronic devices and will spend time looking at specs of new devices compared with mine to flirt with the idea of upgrading more often than I would like to admit.

Part of Marx's theory of alienation is that being disconnected from the product of one's labor makes us feel less fulfilled and more distant from other workers, even potentially less connected to a sense of being human. When we are alienated from the production and disposal processes, we are less connected with our impact on the environment, and the people involved in these often-hidden processes.

THE SOCIOLOGY EVERYONE KNOWS: MERITOCRACY AND GENTRIFICATION

Paper 1 : Stratification and Mobility.

Paper 2 : Urbanisation and urban settlements

Perhaps you've heard that sociology just explains the things we already know about in the everyday world just in less accessible ways. But what if I told you that the everyday world already had a couple of very sociological ideas already in circulation? We already discussed a term that is used in everyday language that is sociological in origin: the self-fulfilling prophecy. For this post I want to write about two more everyday terms we don't think of as sociological in origin: meritocracy and gentrification. Jonathan Wynn gives his persepective about this topic.

You have likely heard and even used the term meritocracy, believing that it is part of the foundation of the American education system. The term has certainly been in the news lately due to the college admissions scandal.

And yet, what you might not know is that the term was coined by sociologists over 60 years ago. (There's some debate on who aptly coined the term. John Fox used it two years prior than Michael Young did, but Young ran with it a bit more, writing a fictional account of a sociologist in 2034 to tell the story of how society came to embrace the term. No matter.) I doubt that these men are taught in many introductory classes, but the term lives on.

Meritocracy is the idea that society's wealth, power, and privileges are meted out according to individual achievement and not based upon one's inherited social status. This notion is firmly engrained in our American DNA: That raw grit and talent are the things that define success, not what family we were born into. We can hold up examples of the meritocracy in action, from Bill Gates to Barack Obama.

Both Young and Fox, however, used the term in a satirical way, as a warning. Both believed that the advancement away from the ascription model (i.e., one remains in the social status they were born into) and toward an achievement model (i.e., based on merit) only blinds us from the inequalities that will be perpetuated through its more refined ordering system. Oodles of sociological research demonstrates this. (Also, as a side note: Psychological research shows that the more you believe in meritocracy, the more likely you are to be, scientifically speaking, kinda a jerk.)

Let's turn now to another term that is often used in discussions of contemporary cities, gentrification, and mostly for good reason. Actually, of the three terms I have written about recently, you can see here on Google Trends that gentrification has been the most used term since 2004. It shows up in The New York Times, the Washington Post, and PBS.

British sociologist Ruth Glass coined the term to describe new residential patterns in London in the 1960s. The term is meant to point to the process of rich folks (i.e., the gentry) move into urban areas. As my co-author and I try to point out in this essay, rich folks moving into cities is not always a problem. Sometimes cities (particularly in the American South) have city centers that were once the place for long-gone manufacturing, which could use new residents. The real problem is not just gentrification, but what often comes after it: the displacement of marginalized and under-represented minorities.

Some excellent recent research on gentrification has been tackling this topic (for example, a recent book called Taking Back the Boulevard on the arts, activism, and gentrification by Jan Lin). But it is also important to note that there are lots of kinds of gentrification: there's rural gentrification, "new build" gentrification, tourist gentrification, and retail gentrification.

I think it is safe to say that wider usage of sociological concepts is certainly a great thing! It is a relief that people use our terms, and it gives me hope. The idea of meritocracy, for example, was initially ignored by scholars but was embraced overnight by the public and eventually scholars returned to the idea.

As I noted in my previous post, when these sociological terms are adopted broadly they lose some of their meaning. Gentrification too. That term is used too broadly, to the point of not having meaning (and ignoring a more serious concern--displacement--which is not the flip side of that coin). And poor meritocracy. Meritocracy is now taken as a goal, quite the opposite from its intended purposes as a satirical critique of changes in our highly stratified education systems.

I suspect that there might be other sociological concepts that could be discussed. Are there any terms that you think could be infused into the wider linguistic mainstream that you can think of?

A PICTURE TO PONDER

"First life, then spaces, then buildings.
The other way around never works."

LEELA DUBE

- Fondly known as Leeladee, Leela Dube was an anthropologist, sociologist, feminist, teacher. Along with Irawati Karve, Vina Majumdar, and Lotika Sarkar, she worked in anthropology when the field did not even recognize women as a subject in male-dominated academia

- Dube explains in her article "The Construction of Gender: Hindu Girls in Patrilineal India", the social construct that passively forces women to create their image in their minds that are inferior to men.

- Dube played a role in enrichment in the arenas of social anthropology by delving into the subject and provided for a plethora of sources of knowledge: symbolic representations and the ideological significance they inherit.