

Final Essay:

The evolution of Gender, Capitalism, Class and Shame as social constructs:

A long and twisted compilation of thoughts

Throughout this essay, I plan to demonstrate the concepts I learned from the following readings belonging to Norbert Elias, Max Weber, and Candace West and Don Zimmerman. Not only will I demonstrate each concept in its entirety, but I will also share the idea of each topic being seen as a social construct and why that is specific per each essay.

Doing Gender

Summary

This piece shows a mix of opinions on the term “doing gender”. It calls not only on the perspectives of Candace West and Don Zimmerman, the authors of the essay, but also Erving Goffman, and Harold Garfinkle's “Study of Agnes” a story of a trans woman in the 1960s. Throughout the essay, West and Zimmerman share that the idea of gender is merely a social construct made up by society to define individuals. The concept argues that women will always look female and act feminine with the same applying to men, however, that is not entirely true as West and Zimmerman explain. Through the role of theory, West and Zimmerman touch on the idea that sexual orientation and gender identity play parts in daily lives, they explain this through the example of jobs. Jobs do not have a legitimate gender assigned to them; however, we tend to associate certain professions with a gender thus, making us feel compelled to identify an individual's gender when they do not match our unconscious stereotype. For instance, the term female doctor.

West and Zimmerman continue to talk about how identifying gender is not solely about how an individual looks but also how they act. In the study of Agnes, Agnes works to present herself as

unequivocally female so that there is no confusion from the outside world. The essay uses this to dive into the idea of gender display, here we can see that society shares gender through expressions such as a man helping a woman carry something heavy. West and Zimmerman share that our society thrives on the idea of gender, sharing that when we do not immediately know an individual's gender, we drive ourselves mad to figure it out.

As the essay shifts back to the study of Agnes, it shares what Agnes had to go through to hide the gender she was assigned at birth to live out who she was. Agnes shares that the penis she was given at birth was a mistake which opens the conversation to Kessler and McKenna's piece on people's obsessions with genitals. They describe that although we do not constantly see one another's genitals we rely on them to identify the gender of another individual. However, in actuality, there are many cases like that of Agnes's where a person's genitals do not describe their identity.

As the essay switches perspectives, it opens on Diane Margolis's piece on a salesperson's gender identity. Margolis was unable to tell the gender of this said person and shares that she obsessed over it throughout their entire interaction and beyond. Though this interaction did not seem to make Margolis uncomfortable it is clear through West and Zimmerman's description that it was distracting for her. This again fits with the concept that we rely on gender heavily when identifying an individual. The essay ends with the notion that all gender traits are learned and approved by members of society as well as the circumstance that we share.

Insights

I thoroughly enjoyed this essay, it was by far my favorite in the entire course and I wanted to wrap this entire paper around the concept of this essay, thus proving why my summary above is rather long compared to the following summaries. I think that when this essay was written it had a solid grasp on the way that gender is a social construct. It played into the fact that though we may not be able to see

everyone's genitals we tend to force this idea of gender on them no matter who they are. This correlates to our need to know and understand others. Forcing the idea of gender on those around us helps us feel in control of others. I completely agree with West and Zimmerman's approach on the topic of gender, I think that by studying it as a whole concept but not assigning a specific gender to everyone we can see the differences between how specific gender concepts are perceived without perceiving an actual person. I also enjoyed the study Agnes greatly. It added a level of depth that another example would not be able to bring to this piece. By sharing the exact elements that went into play in Agnes's life as a transgender woman in the 1960s the audience, as well as the researchers, can identify how gender affects not only individuals looks but their actions, as well as how they hide parts of themselves to be perceived as they wish.

I think that throughout the study I was able to relate to the situations that Agnes went through not from my perspective but because when I was in school one of my very close friends came out to me as transgender. I was able to watch his whole transition process and understand everything that he was going through. Thus, when I was reading her story, I was able to pinpoint emotions that correlated between both processes. Even though they were decades apart it still felt as taboo of a process in the present day as it did in the 1960s. It is interesting to see just how we evolve as a society and yet at the same time, our morals regarding certain things remain taboo. For instance, in the essay when Margolis shares her opinion on how she was unable to perceive the sales clerk, that is not a new concept. For centuries and even into today's modern society people have tried to force gender onto individuals because the idea of a lack of gender creates a nervous concept.

I found most of the article interesting, however, I think that the concept of people being obsessed with genitals may have been the point that I latched onto the most. Kessler and McKenna's points on how society tends to obsess over what is in an individual's pants to identify them was a powerful point

because they prove that there is no way for us to physically see what is in someone's pants. However, it is the action of perceiving what is in someone's pants that we feel the compelling need to obsess over. To then take this point and compare it to the study of Agnes proving that in some situations it is not exactly what is in one's pants but instead how we perceive ourselves was truly a powerful correlation.

As I said prior there is very little that I disagree with within this essay. Although, I think that it would have been interesting to potentially compare the efforts that a transgender woman in the modern century goes through to the study of Agnes. However, that may be more difficult than not. This essay allows for a good definition in the explanation of what exactly a social construct is. As I show with each of the other essays in this paper, I believe that each of these concepts is a social construct, however, this is the only essay out of the bunch that goes on to prove that its topic is truly a social construct. This allowed me to use its definition for the following essays to prove that each of the other topics also follows under the evolution of being a social construct.

Spirit of Capitalism

Summary

In this essay, Max Weber shares his opinion on how we see capitalism in society as well as how other types of communities view capitalism. Sharing that if people work constantly, they will intern make the maximum amount of money and thus will be content with their lives. Though he shares his distaste for this notion he does not argue it. He explains this through the words of Benjamin Franklin's piece on American culture. Weber continues to talk about what makes the spirit of capitalism. He shares that the spirit of capitalism is difficult to fully conceptualize because people must understand both parts of the sentence before they can understand the phrase. He shares that capitalism is just modern life, that as a society we have infused capitalism into our everyday way of thinking, and that the spirit of capitalism is seen as the ethics of capitalism.

Ethics is an important part of the idea of the spirit of capitalism because Weber explains that capitalism must have ethics attached to the idea of wealth. However, Weber mentions that these explanations are almost hypocritical because of just how complex the issue is. He shares that by acquiring more and more money we assume that it will bring positive enlightenment to individuals, however, this continuous work effort can instead take away life's enjoyment. Weber then works to explain the ideas of past and future capitalism calling them modern capitalism. This modern capitalism is made subject to helping society move forwards because, as it has already been described, capitalism is deeply embedded in society, and it is at times inescapable.

The final point that Weber draws out is the idea of the "Spirit of Christian Asceticism" (Weber, 57) also known throughout the essay as an ascetic. This is the absence of material things and the self-discipline it takes to control the urge to want material things. Here Weber can tie religion with the idea of capitalism just as Franklin had done prior, this time with the idea of Protestantism. At the end of the essay, Weber shares that the piece is merely a construct as to how protestant ascetic influence started and where it is deemed to go in the future. He shares that religion like capitalism is so rooted in our subconscious and that we are almost unable to think of life without either one.

Insights

I found this essay harder to follow than the other ones that I have chosen to discuss in this paper, however, I thought that Weber's discussion of capitalism and the ways that it is rooted in society so deeply was an important way to discuss further topics. I do agree with Weber that capitalism has overtaken our modern society, and how as we tend to advance so does capitalism. However, as a product of my environment and a viewer of modern-day culture, I have been able to see the extent of the harms that capitalism has brought to multiple communities. It tends to favor some groups over others which causes unequal resource distribution. Though I understand the idea of working hard to gain the most

amount of money possible, capitalism has become a game for billionaires to play on those who are poor enough to feel unable to refuse. A person should not feel the need to work themselves to death to barely survive, while others have used family money to “get-rich-quick” thus making them untouchable to the everyday man.

That is not to say that I do not agree that work is necessary for money however, I do not agree that one must work an exhausting number of hours to scrape the bottom of the livable wage barrel. I think that because society has advanced rapidly since the creation of this piece that it is unfair of me to completely judge this idea based on how modern capitalism functions today. This notion is based on my perception of Weber’s piece and the idea that when he wrote it the minimum wage of the everyday man was equal to the average living standards in a city. However, comparatively, that is not the case in modern capitalism. Because of the constant inflation of living prices and material items, while minimum wage and the average man’s salary continue to stay the same, this causes individuals to overwork themselves to afford basic things. Thus, I do not completely agree with Benjamin Franklin’s point or potentially Weber’s point on capitalism.

The idea that religion can play a part in capitalism and potentially the shift of modern capitalism is an interesting notion. It brings together two ideas that essentially define past and modern society. Religion, specifically Protestantism, has created a divide between groups of people in the past and the idea that it works to divide the idea of capitalism is exactly on target for that concept. By bringing together the notion of ascetic protestants it makes it difficult for extremely religious individuals to support the idea of capitalism, thus forcing a change in the definition of capitalism because it is so intertwined with the economy. Therefore, if society is not engaging with the economy, then the idea of capitalism as a concept would need to be altered to fit society's new needs. On the other hand, I think that one of the biggest discrepancies that I was unable to detect throughout the reading was what exactly

Weber's stance was on the thought of capitalism. I know that he talks about how embedded it is in society and he in no way leads the readers to believe that he views capitalism as intensely as Karl Marx, however, he tends to flip between the importance of capitalism as a concept and the issues it brings to society. I did, however, enjoy Weber's point that an overload of money takes away life's joys. I think that this resonated with me because I view money at times as a social construct. The idea that people work themselves to death to obtain more and more of it because they think that it will make them happy, when in actuality, it takes the joy out of spontaneous situations plays into the fact that everything related to wealth is just overall a social construct.

Class, Status and Party

Summary

In this essay, Weber shares his outlook on how society views and enforces order. He tells the difference between types of power starting with class. There is a legal order, social order and economic order, all of which serve different purposes. Legal order helps advance an individual's chance of holding power, what Weber means by this is that everyone's end goal is to have power and have the ability to enforce said power. There are several ways in which individuals can work to gain power such as knowing their way around the legal system. However, as Weber explains that in no way guarantees power to an individual. There is also economic order which shows how material things such as food and services are projected to a population and thus used by the said population. Finally, there is a social order which is how individuals are conditioned to perceive economic order.

After these explanations, Weber begins to talk about the ideas of class, status groups and political parties and how each category uses its tools to gain power from one another. He shares that class is not a specific community but rather it is when a group of people is affected by a larger force. He refers to the idea of power and how those with property have more overall power than those who don't

have any. However, this can be fixed if a landowner rents land to someone or hired a work hand to work on the land. Although, this creates the creditor-debtor relationship which in turn leads to its struggles between classes.

Weber begins his discussion on the different types of class struggles by showcasing that not all classes are the same and thus not all deal with the same issues. Here is where Weber brings in the idea of status groups. He shares that these groups are made up of people who can be identified not through financial qualities, but social ones. Thus, showing that the people in status groups show power through social movements, rather than classes economic movements. Finally, Weber transitions into the idea of the party. Here power comes from political movements. These parties represent how issues will be fixed and distributed amongst society. Weber shares that each party is a form of “social domination” (Weber, 83) sharing that all parties are in a constant struggle with one another. Weber ends this piece on the note of domination, sharing that that is all power is, a constant state of domination between the three sectors: class, status and party.

Insights

In this piece, Weber looks at the idea of power and how power presents itself in different forms in society. I enjoyed looking at the different ways class, status and party presented themselves in the movement of power. However, what I truly agreed with was the idea that all three of those concepts work to assess and accumulate power thus, dominating other individuals’ power. In my day-to-day life, I know that I have encountered the idea of power and how I would personally have to obtain power. For instance, when I was little, I used to have to go to the ballet with my grandma every year to learn how to be a young lady. This is a direct correlation to the idea that status will bring an individual power. Because I was forced to sit quietly for long amounts of time, as well as dress nicely and learn how to talk with people in upper-class society, I acted like someone in a status group above my own. This

caused me to view material things and high-class attitudes as a form of luxury and power. Thus, combining my idea of power in class and status. The same goes with election season. When there is a major political election, it becomes apparent who has power and who individuals want to be associated with, specifically candidate-wise.

I think that the idea of power coming in from different aspects of society is an interesting concept that I wholeheartedly agree with. Class, status and party all play different roles in people's lives, and I think that the idea of associating different forms of power per role helps people understand that to be successful amongst society we need to have amounts of power from each role. For instance, having economic power would be the concept of class as discussed in the essay. However, the idea that economic power stems from owning property and luxury items is completely subjective. What I consider to be a luxury is different than what someone else may consider being luxury thus proving that power is in its term subjective and potentially in the eye of the beholder a social construct just as I explained for capitalism and gender. The same can be said for social and political power. Each of these ideas is a made-up concept created to place people and power in identifying boxes.

I agreed with a majority of what Weber had to say throughout this essay. I thought that the idea of associating different forms of power was symbolic of the type of society we have created for ourselves. Along with that, as adamant as I was about society changing drastically in the form of capitalism, I think that these three concepts have stayed intact as it comes to how society has progressed. Though as I mentioned earlier, I disagree with some of Weber's views because I believe that these concepts are social constructs, that does not mean that they do not prevail deeply within our society.

I think what I found to be the most interesting in this essay was how Weber chose to differentiate the different forms of power. Instead of solely talking about overall power, he introduced the idea of power and then went on to go into the three specific forms of power, all of which have their movement.

By differentiating that there are different forms of power it makes it easier to see the flow from one individual to another. As well as seeing the domination of power which as the essay suggests, is the overall goal of power. I think that the in-depth analysis as far as land ownership and property goes in the concept of economic wealth was a little distracting in the essay, however. I understood the initial example, but it seemed to play out as the essay drew on. It would have been more interesting if Weber had delved into other concepts of economic power or expressed the exact importance of why the property was at the front of the concept.

Shame and Repugnance

Summary

Norbert Elias explains that shame and repugnance are visceral forms of anxiety and embarrassment. He explains that “Embarrassment is displeasure or anxiety which arises when another person threatens to, breach, or breaches, society’s prohibitions represented by one’s super-ego” (Elias, 415). Throughout this essay, Elias shares that as a society what scares us most about embarrassment is the idea of looking idiotic in front of others. It is not the act of saying or doing something itself that is embarrassing but it is rather the perception of others and loss of power in a situation. By having shame and embarrassment become contingent to that of other thoughts of us it eliminates the idea that individuals can be embarrassed when they are alone.

Elias describes how the idea of shame changes based on social class. If someone is embarrassed by a peer that is seen as a basic embarrassment, while on the other hand if the two individuals who are participating in the embarrassment are a part of different classes, then the outcome of the embarrassment differs per situation. If a person in a lower class embarrasses someone in a higher class, then the exchange is seen by society as disrespectful. While if an individual of a higher class embarrasses someone in a lower class, then it is seen as almost a rite of passage. Elias explains that this has to do

with the ego and superego of the individual. The class rank that someone holds has a direct connection to how an individual is treated in society specifically in a moment of embarrassment.

Finally, Elias ends his piece on shame and repugnance with a discussion on how society has changed. He refers to the difference between primitive and modern beings. He shares that repugnance can stem from fear and that we tend to fear what is unknown. As society changed from primitive to modern our notions of fear changed while also making us cautious towards past fears. Each of our anxieties deepens who we are and how we react to situations.

Insights

Throughout this essay, I would find myself agreeing with the idea that instead of thinking that we are embarrassed by what we have done, instead, we are embarrassed about how we are now going to be perceived by others. I had not throughout of shame or embarrassment in this way until this semester when I read this article, however, the more that I read it the more I understood the concept of embarrassment as that of a social construct. Because we are not embarrassed on our own it is instead solely the idea of how others perceive us, this makes the idea of embarrassment subjective to one's idea of perception. I think that along with the idea of perception, the idea that an individual's class identity plays a role in whether they can embarrass someone and/or be embarrassed by another was important to discuss. It has been clear to me throughout my life that people who are above me both in age and status are seen as morally untouchable and this idea that if someone of lower-class embarrasses someone of higher-class they are perceived as disrespectful is quite clear in today's modern society as well as the modern society the Elias refers to. Growing up I was hyper-aware of the role that I played around adults and how my actions would be perceived by said adults. I think that hyper-awareness played into the idea that I was afraid to be seen as embarrassing or disrespectful to the said adults. There was nothing that I

blatantly disagreed with within this piece however there were a few aspects that I did not fully understand.

One aspect of the essay that I did not find helpful was the idea of fear and how that has changed over time. I was unsure as to why it became the focus of this essay towards the end. I think that it is an important topic to talk about and that the idea of anxieties changing as societies evolve is true to the idea of evolution however, I do not see its exact relevance to the topic of this essay. I would have rather seen Elias talk about how shame and embarrassment have changed our perspectives on issues over the years. I think that unnecessarily focusing a portion of the essay on anxieties when they were not technically the focus of the essay took away from the concept of shame and repugnance.

On the other hand, one aspect that I found interesting throughout the piece was how Elias chose to define embarrassment. By linking it to breaches in society's beliefs upon the super-ego we can see the initial idea behind embarrassment as a perceived notion. This opens the idea that embarrassment is subjective which helps us correlate it to being a social construct as stated prior. However, this idea also works alongside the idea that it is our morality that plays a role in the embarrassment we feel.

Conclusion

The idea of social constructs is contingent on the idea that something is made up and can be perceived in multiple different lightings by numerous individuals. Each of these concepts Gender, Class, Status and Embarrassment all have its identifying factors, however, each of them can be interpreted differently according to each person. Thus, leading individuals to believe that they are social constructs in our daily lives.

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