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Deprivation

Sociological definitions of deprivation describe it as “inequality of access to social goods,” stressing that such inequalities are often reproduced across generations (*transmitted deprivation*) and experienced in several dimensions of social life by the individuals and groups affected (*multiple deprivation*) (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 1988: 65–66). Conceptually and experientially, deprivation thus overlaps with poverty and social exclusion. Classical studies have recognized poverty and deprivation as relative (rather than absolute) concepts dependent upon wider contexts, shared expectations, perceived entitlements and exclusion from them (e.g. Coates and Silburn 2007 [1968]: 50). The “social goods” in question, limited or blocked access to which defines deprivation, can include material wealth, physical comfort, cultural life, infrastructural provision, psychological well-being, and networks for social mobility and personal fulfilment. Multiple deprivations and the significance of context further demand an appreciation that power is simultaneously exercised, and experienced, along several “intersecting axes” of inequality, including gender, class, “race,” ethnicity, sexuality, and indeed religion (Brah 1996).

Focusing on the latter, what follows provides a conceptual map for thinking about the complex interfaces of religion with deprivation. These interfaces can be assumed to be as “old” as social stratification itself, with which religious ideas and practices—premised upon a (sub-)culturally postulated “transcendental” order (Bloch 1992)—inevitably stand in *some kind* of relationship. The conceptual map outlined to illuminate these relationships contains four dimensions: religion and social reproduction; religiously-underpinned political subversion; globalization and religiosity; religion and social capital.

“Opiate” and Consensus

In the history of social theory, there is a curious area of agreement between two competing paradigms that otherwise explain the social world through contrasting prisms of *conflict* and *order* respectively. Versions of Marxist and functionalist thought, for all their profound and irreconcilable differences, attribute remarkably similar effects to religion: it is thereby widely seen as a force and source of social reproduction. Where Marxism and functionalism differ fundamentally, of course, is in their respective evaluations of religion’s postulated structural effects.

The Marxist reading of religiosity as an inherently conservative phenomenon manifests most famously in the notion of religion as “the opiate of the people,” which is held to “dull” the oppressed and to thereby prevent revolts against systems of inequality—paradigmatically those structured around ownership of the means of production (see Lemert 2005: 17–19). This puts religion on par with other forms of assumed “false consciousness” preventing those suffering deprivation from recognizing structural injustices and acting against them. Religion is here subsumed under the broader conceptual umbrella of a dominant ideology, which includes ideas, language and “behavioral practices” that ensure the reproduction of existing relations of “power, control and dominance” (Augoustinos 1998: 159).

According to (structural) functionalism, religion also aids social reproduction. In contrast to the Marxist perspective, however, religion is here not regarded as a reactionary phenomenon to be overcome in a future classless society but as a necessary force of integration providing consensus and social order. The assumed link between the religious “grounding [of] society’s ultimate values” and social stratification emerges from Talcott Parsons’ understanding of religion as a “transcendental

balancing,” acting as a “compensatory mechanism” that motivates people faced with evil or unfulfilled expectations (Aldridge 2007: 106–107). This postulated functional role performed by religion in relation to social hierarchies emerged yet more clearly in a paradigmatic and widely criticized essay by Davis and Moore (1945: 242, 245): here, classlessness is defined as an impossibility, stratification as a “functional necessity,” and religion is credited with providing differently positioned social actors with shared “ultimate ends and values,” thereby “integrating” behavior and “enabl[ing] society to operate as a system.”

Their otherwise very different interpretative and evaluative orientations notwithstanding, Marxists and functionalists thus partly overlap in conceptualizing religion as contributing to the reproduction of the status quo. In stratified societies, this inevitably implies the reproduction of social hierarchies and therefore of (relative) privileges and deprivations. This raises the important question as to whether religions can also inspire opposition to inequality.

The “Disruptive Potential”

A more nuanced account acknowledging religions’ diverse political trajectories and uses emerges from Douglas Davies’s discussion, combining insights from anthropology, sociology and cognitive science, of religious responses to the “unsatisfactoriness of life”: religions function, in part, to “explain and contain...negative emotional experience[s] within social contexts when people [experience] loss of meaning and hope” (Davies 2011: 67). Crucially, this explanatory, meaning-providing function does not predetermine the political direction and effects religions take and achieve; for while “[s]ome see sickness and death as punishment by God for evil deeds...others speak of divine love as motivation for helping the needy... and *seeking to alter political and economic situations to improve living conditions*” (Davies 2011: 78, *italics added*). Put differently, religions do not

inevitably inform structurally conservative ideas and behavior but can also motivate political critique and social activism.

The critical, oppositional potential of certain religious beliefs was captured in Kenneth Burridge’s seminal study of millenarianism. These are religiously-motivated movements of critique levelled against a social order that is experienced as deeply unjust and dehumanizing; experiences of deprivation, or the “awareness of being disenfranchised,” are articulated through beliefs in a future earthly intervention by a supernatural power, leading to a “new condition of being” (Burridge 1969: 105; 112). Millenarianism shows that religious ideas, rather than being inevitably tied to structural reproduction, can be moulded into channels of opposition to hierarchies of privilege and deprivation. Similarly relevant here is I.M. Lewis’s study of shamanism, which distinguishes between “central,” “peripheral,” and “messianic” spirit possession: while the former involves holders of “political and legal authority” sustaining “public morality” and social control, peripheral possession cults are vehicles of symbolic protest by the oppressed and downtrodden in “rigidly stratified societies”; their protest, however, remains temporary and ultimately contained within established social hierarchies. “Messianic” possession cults, however, take protest one step further, as “religions of the oppressed” they have “separatist aspirations,” seeking detachment and escape from the established order that disadvantages them (Lewis 1989: 29, 27, 114–115). Therein we thus detect different political trajectories religious beliefs and practices can generate.

The interface of religiosity and social protest emerged with particular clarity from various forms of liberation theology in Latin America: starting in the 1960s, these were ideational syntheses of Christianity and Marxism, which rejected a present “order” of acute oppression and exploitation and considered “revolutionary change” a necessity (e.g. McLellan 1987: 148–156). Considering a wider range of historical examples, Christian Smith prefaces his edited collection of case

studies of *Disruptive Religion*—including the roles of the Black Church in the Civil Rights Movement, of radical Islam in the Iranian Revolution, of church organizations in the South African anti-apartheid movement, the “religious foundations” of Polish solidarity, or the interface of popular Christianity and political extremism in the US—by attributing the widely-neglected role of religion in social activism to the long theoretical dominance of the secularization thesis and structural functionalism. Consequently, the politically subversive potential of religious ideas and practices had remained unacknowledged and their arguably “primarily conservative thrust” taken for granted (Smith 1996: 6); “there is another face to the sacred-social phenomenon we call religion,” Smith summarizes: “the worldviews, moral systems, theodicies, and organizations of religion can serve not only to legitimate and preserve, but also to challenge and overturn social, political, and economic systems. Religion *can* help to keep everything in its place. But it can *also* turn the world upside-down” (1996: 1, *original italics*).

This acknowledgement of the religious potential to challenge existing social structures in general, and systems of inequality and deprivation in particular, is given additional conceptual direction by a distinction drawn by James Beckford: various manifestations of religious power include “power that controls” and “power that contests” respectively (1983). Translated into the terms of the present discussion, Beckford’s distinction captures the historical fact that religions can—depending on context—aid *both* structural reproduction *and* political subversion, variously serving the interests of the powerful *or* those suffering disadvantage and deprivation.

Religion and Globalization

Since questions about the interfaces of religion and structures of unequally-distributed privileges and deprivations can thus only be answered in specific empirical settings, a few words on the

contemporary context are called for. Put differently, how do (some) religious ideas, practices and organizations relate to deprivation in our era of globalization and “liquid modernity” (Bauman 2000)?

As often pointed out, the period since the 1980s has seen a widening gap between the very rich and the very poor, both globally and in particular national contexts (e.g. Storper 2001: 88–91; Lemert 2005: 105–106). In addition to the material effects of social exclusion, (relative and absolute) deprivation suffered by today’s excluded also has profound psychological effects on those living lives of “flawed consumers” and structural “redundancy” (Bauman 2004: 2005). Manuel Castells’s seminal work on *The Information Age* illuminates the connections between contemporary globalization, social exclusion, and particular identity politics: today’s economy is, Castells shows, driven by the “information technology revolution,” globally-integrated financial markets, and transnational economic actors and corporations operating in a global “network society” (2000a; 2000b). Far from offering a utopian order of universal participation, however, this new “space of flows” entails novel experiences of stifling exclusion, against which various “resistance identities”—some of them religiously underpinned—promise an antidote. In Castells’s own words: “[T]here is [a] reaction against social exclusion and economic irrelevance that... will play an essential role in the twenty-first century: the exclusion of the excluders by the excluded.... Fundamentalisms of different kinds and from different sources will represent the most daring... challenge to one-sided domination of informational, global capitalism” (2000b: 386).

While the argument that religious radicals react against exclusion and deprivation applies in some contexts, it does not help explain examples of religious violence perpetrated by the still comparatively affluent and well-protected. Mark Juergensmeyer’s findings concerning some infamous groups, such as the Aum Shinrikyo movement in Japan or certain Christian militias in the US, illustrate this. In these cases, religiously-motivated

violence was perpetrated by middle-class professionals “laid off in their companies’ downsizing” or Protestant members of a currently “privileged class [who] perceive[d] American society to be moving in a direction that would make [them] increasingly peripheral” respectively; in some contexts it is therefore not “extreme poverty, but . . . relative deprivation” or the mere fear of “impending marginality” that has spurred violent reactions, framed by the perpetrators in images of “cosmic war,” to the contemporary world (Juergensmeyer 2000: 192).

Religion and Social Capital

By way of conclusion, and to re-iterate the main argument made here that religions can intersect in different and *context-specific* ways with deprivation, brief mention should be made of current discussions of the roles religious organizations can play in localities particularly affected by (multiple) deprivation. Such debates frequently draw on Robert Putnam’s (2000) distinction between “bonding capital” and “bridging capital.” While the former refers to networks within (ethnic/religious) groups, the latter captures interactions and close relationships between them. Recent research in one particular urban locality defined by religious diversity and multiple deprivation shows that religious institutions and initiatives can provide *both* bonding *and* bridging capital (Karner and Parker 2008; 2011); religiosity’s multiple and at times contradictory local manifestations further include the close proximity of meaningful inter-communal relationships, social activism grounded in religious beliefs, and rigid, potentially antagonistic identity politics.

Understanding the interfaces of religions with systems of social inequality and deprivation thus demands, first and foremost, contextualization. Rather than yielding a clear and singular theoretical proposition (i.e. religion *either* reproduces *or* opposes deprivation), religions can and do have diverse structural effects, variously serving the

interests of the powerful, facilitating activism and ideological critique, or being employed for competing agendas in contexts of inequality, struggle, and profound disagreement. Put differently, questions about the political uses and effects of religious ideas, practices and institutions can only be answered in specific historical contexts, not by a priori conceptual postulates.

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