



FRAGMENTATION OF U.S. SOCIETY

SO 105: Social Problems &
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THE FRAGMENTATION OF SOCIAL LIFE (EITZEN, 2000)

- Despite its economic growth, the U.S. is also wrought with some of the highest rates of inequality and injustice;
- The U.S. is characteristic of the “fragmentation of social life” or “reduced societal cohesion”;
- Four indicators of “reduced societal cohesion”:
 - 1) Excessive individualism: promotes inequality and keeps individuals from being obligated to serve others; paradoxical since “our fate depends upon others.”
 - 2) Personal isolation: individual and family lives have become more isolated and less communal; “social malnutrition” as a result of growing technology;
 - 3) Widened gap between wealth & poverty: gap between wealthy and poor has increased significantly leading to a “two-tiered society”; and
 - 4) Deepening racial/ethnic/religious/sexuality divide: religious, legislative, and institutional policies and actions are perpetuating inequality, discrimination, and oppression within a highly pluralist society.

CAPITALISM, CLASS, & THE MATRIX OF DOMINATION (JOHNSON, 2001)

- Capitalism plays a major role in developing and perpetuating white privilege;
- Capitalism is fueled by individualism and is void of moral/ethical values and principles (or clearly functions without them);
- Capitalism exploits worker hours and promotes “worker productivity” (and lower costs):
 - 1) Introduction of technology to replace human beings;
 - 2) Threatening closure/relocation if workers don’t cooperate; and
 - 3) Move production to countries where “cheaper” labor is exploited.
- Capitalism fosters class, race, and gender-based inequalities and connected with various dimensions/social categories/identities of privilege;
- These inequalities and their solutions should be understood through the analysis and deconstruction of problems of privilege.

CONSUMER CULTURE: AN INTERVIEW WITH JULIET SCHOR (HOLT, 2005)

■ Schor defines:

- Consumerism: an attitude/ideology, a particular way of relating to consumer goods;
- Consumer society: a situation when the vast majority of people have a consumerist attitude or are living consumerist lifestyles;
- Four problems associated with consumer society:
 - 1) Output bias of capitalism: “cannibalization” of time/other non-market-related aspects of social life;
 - 2) Impact of consumer activity on the environment;
 - 3) Orientation of private consumption; and
 - 4) Destruction of community
- Worker adaptation vs. preferences: workers do not have preferences, but they are still acclimatized to habits of spending and refuse to change them after the fact;
- 1980s onward marked a significant shift from consumption based on social interaction to media/technology-driven marketing;
- Vertical emulation/consumer aspiration is based more on visible status cues of the lower and lower-middle classes emulating the upper-middle class and above . . .

COMPARING EITZEN, JOHNSON, & SCHOR . . .

- What do you agree with in the three readings? What do you disagree with? Why?
- What similarities did you find in all three, particularly addressing:
 - Capitalism
 - Inequality
 - Isolation/Individuality
 - Identity
 - Social Interactions
- Can you identify any points of contention or differences within the three selections?
- What was missing from their overall arguments?