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Starhawk Re/Claims a View of the World

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From the turmoil and turbulence of society in the United States in the mid-20th century arose many movements and groups labeled “counter-cultural.” One such group, Reclaiming Collective, allegedly began as a feminist and alternative religious venture, but through the influence and leadership of its founder, Starhawk, it has taken on the additional role of attempting to alter the society from which it sprang. Culture change is complex and has far-ranging effects. I examine the possible reasons for the birth of Reclaiming through: the theories of cultural materialism and Weberian theories on religion; apply theories of intentional community and invented tradition; and look at the recent involvement of Reclaiming in general and Starhawk in particular in their endeavor to change society through their activities in the spheres of protest against globalization and in favor of the environment. Tracing their “withdrawal” from society and their subsequent return to influence change within that same society will allow for analysis of cultural and societal change, advising analyses of change mechanisms both here in the United States and cross-culturally.

Who Are the Reclaiming Collective?

Spirituality leaps where science cannot yet follow, because science must always test and measure, and much of reality and human experience is immeasurable. (Starhawk 1979)

It has been said that if you ask 10 Pagans a question, you get 13 different answers; taking academic definitions of NeoPaganism was a necessity. For the purposes of this paper, the definition of NeoPaganism is “... an occult religious movement composed of many loosely connected groups and individuals who look to nature-oriented, often polytheistic religions for inspiration.” (McCloud 2006: 237) Selena Fox, one of the founders of Circle Sanctuary in Wisconsin, gives her meaning of NeoPaganism in a “statement of faith” of sorts:

I am Pagan. I am a part of the whole of Nature. The Rocks, the Animals, the Plants, the Elements, and Stars are my relatives. Other humans are my sisters and brothers ... hear the cries of Mother Earth who is upset with the harm being done to the environment by humankind. I am dismayed by the pollution of the air, the soil, and the waters, and by the domination games being played by nations with the fire of nuclear missiles and other weapons of mass destruction. I also am concerned about spiritual pollution on the Planet -- selfishness, hatred, greed for money and power, addiction, violence, despair. (Fox 1994)

“Many scholars point to the influence of ... Gerald Gardner and later his student Raymond Buckland” in the founding of the Wicca movement (McCloud 2006:238), a sub-set of the NeoPagan subculture and one that calls itself witchcraft, a rather
provocative term. “Modern witchcraft emerged in 1951 with the repeal of the 1736 Witchcraft Act. This prompted Gerald Gardner to publish *Witchcraft Today* in 1954 in which he claimed to reveal some of the views of a group of English witches.” (Greenwood 2005:21) Zsuzsanna Budapest is recognized as the first female head of a Wiccan group, founding the Susan B. Anthony Wiccan coven in 1971 for female-only practitioners of what was to be called Dianic Wicca.

Reclaiming Collective follows the formation of Budapest's group, and is one whose focus is a combination of the nature-reverence that Selena Fox mentions with Wiccan structure and Starhawk's desire for political and social involvement. Starhawk is probably the most recognized woman in the Wiccan movement. Born Miriam Simos in 1951, Starhawk trained in Victor Anderson's Feri tradition of Wicca, a "traditional" form of Wicca with both a male and female "leader" (although they might cringe at the use of that word), before writing the text that sparked the formation of her own “tradition” of Wicca. Reclaiming, as they call themselves, organized in San Francisco in 1979, has as its focus progressive social, environmental and economic activism, hand-in-hand with the religious/magical practice that is Wicca. Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* (1979) outlines a belief practice for modern witchcraft/Wicca; *Dreaming the Dark* (1982) advances the case for political involvement of the newly formed religious sub-community. "As politicians they are concerned with strategies and necessities and firmly believe that it is not possible to change western culture without changing western religion ... not by rejecting it, by replacing it with another symbol system and structures that evoke other values." (Salomonsen 2002:134) Starhawk intends to change both.

**What Else Was Going On?**

To live with integrity in an unjust society we must work for justice. To walk with integrity through a landscape strewn with beer cans, we must stop and pick them up. (Starhawk 1982)

The 1960s and 1970s saw economic, social and political upheavals in American society. This country had their faith in the political process of change shattered in 1963 with the assassination of President John Kennedy. Our military became more entrenched in a war in Vietnam. Women who had gone to work during WWII now had daughters and granddaughters who expected the same right. In the early 70s, the right to non-discrimination in education was extended to women as well as men with the passage of Title IX. In 1966 women who were tired of waiting for their rights under law, afforded to other sub-sets of the population under the Civil Rights Act, formed the National Organization for Women and took up the cause of the Equal Rights Amendment. Vatican II changed the fundamental way the Roman Catholic Church worshiped and structured itself, giving greater access to its members.

None of this, however, can claim *prima facie* infrastructural causality for the rise of NeoPaganism. Top down changes of society did not occur in sufficient quantity or quality to address the changes in culture, the “bottom up” events. A large number of women were freed from reproduction issues in the 1960s by the introduction of the birth
control pill, and were tempted with increasing opportunities by higher education. What women sought out and formed was a means to action that was uniquely their own, one that spoke to the major reason for their exclusion from demographic, economic and technological access – they were female. Between the cultural permission to be whatever they wanted to be, and the societal lack of accessibility, many women chose to fight another way: through feminist and religious counter-culture.

Are We To “Blame”?

Perhaps the first true female influence on the NeoPagan movement, albeit unwittingly, was archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, who in the 1960s began to publicize her re-interpretations of European pre-history and advocated a theory that allowed a matriarchal Neolithic Europe brought to patriarchy by waves of advancing Indo-European kurgan cultures. Her theories of Great Goddess matriarchal societies living happily across Europe in the Neolithic were appealing and enticed many adherents already predisposed to alternative beliefs.

“Anthropology and the other ethnographic disciplines by their very nature contribute a vast quantity of previously foreign and esoteric cultural information to the ‘field of possibilities’ of the literate societies of the world.” (Jencson 1989: 2) It is this “contribution” that may well have kick-started the NeoPagan movement to begin with claims the author. The increase in higher education means that more individuals are exposed to the material: “Witches flock to lectures and classes on anthropology,” claims Jencson. (1989:4) “We influence our informants, and we influence those who read our books. These individuals then go on to influence their cultures (or subcultures), making use of the information we provide to them in ways often beyond our control, or knowledge.” (Jencson 1989: 4) As the educational level of the population grew, so did their exposure to materials such as anthropologists publish, which in turn fuels their conviction that these ways, appealing in part because they are so exotic, are right for them. In fact, much of Gerald Gardner's work to found Wicca initially was influenced by the ethnographic works of anthropologist Margaret Murray and the material on “Gypsy” lore by folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland.

In Enchanted Feminism Salomonsen points out that Starhawk has more than basic working knowledge of symbolic anthropology and the anthropological theories of religion (she states that Starhawk often cites Geertz), crediting her use of them with the structuring of Reclaiming. Jencson then may be correct in her assessment, not only for exposure to other cultures and practices but also for exposure to anthropological theories themselves.

Cultural Materialism

In a fascinating look at materialism and the contemporary American NeoPagan movement, George Lundskow theorizes that the two are not incompatible, and he uses Starhawk to make his case.
Reclaiming Collective arose from the anti-nuclear movements in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and “has devised a sophisticated spirituality to address vital issues of the modern age – inequality, poverty, pollution, and especially alienation.” (Lundskow 2005: 233) Starhawk challenges the “mechanistic worldview that each person and thing is a separate and isolated entity.” (Lundskow 2005: 233) It is in this societal reinforcement of isolation and separateness that Marvin Harris saw the ineffectiveness of the New Age movement, since individuals who care only about what changes they make in themselves cannot effectively change a society. (Harris 1974) On this, then, Starhawk is right on the mark. She maintains that our “current culture and economic system reinforce each other, and that our spiritual system, namely Christianity, supports patriarchy, domination, and power-over.” (Lundskow 2005: 236) In her public statements, Starhawk has only had to point to the distance between the poor and the rich in this nation, the ever-increasing lack of basic health care and employment opportunities, the increase in environmental damage caused by corporations, to make her case. Her alternative offers a reverence for nature, an increasing valuation of community and a decrease in individual alienation from each other and the products of their efforts, eschewing hierarchy (NeoPaganism has no central authority).

Lundskow concludes that Marxist materialism and American NeoPaganism (as opposed to British traditions, which are extremely hierarchical) are “inherently compatible and complementary ... because the Neopagan vision of social relations holds that obligation arises from mutually recognized responsibility.” (2005: 236) NeoPaganism “encourages critical reflection ... seek(s) integrative knowledge ... rely on the human capacities of reason ...” (Lundskow 2005: 237) Far from a denial of technology and reason, NeoPaganism embraces it in an attempt to change the world. Starhawk’s alternative offers a reverence for nature, an increasing valuation of community and a decrease in individual alienation from each other and the products of their efforts, eschewing hierarchy.

Weber’s Disenchantment and the Iron Cage

... it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, on principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. (Weber 1946:139)

Weber argues that the rationalization of other spheres of life has pushed religion more and more “into the realm of the irrational” (Walton 2000) He does, however, leave open the possibility that religion may continue to serve as the domain of meaning in an otherwise disenchanted world. A religion in this setting would not offer meaningful rationalization of the workings of the world, but instead offer the hope that such a meaningful rationalization is possible. “As religion has developed its own distinctive forms of rationalization, religion itself has become disenchanted without necessarily forfeiting a distinctive and vital function.” (Walton 2000)

Weber outlines a description of rationalization (of which bureaucratization is a part) as a shift from a value-oriented organization and action (traditional authority and charismatic
authority) to a goal-oriented organization and action (legal-rational authority). “The result, according to Weber, is a 'polar night of icy darkness', in which increasing rationalization of human life traps individuals in an “iron cage” of rule-based, rational control.” (Ritzer 2004: 55)

According to Weber, once you enter into a society, the iron cage is inescapable; the rules and regulations of rational society are yours, a part of the culture that influences an agent in their action. Once operating under these constraints you cannot go back. Weber’s cultural diagnosis of disenchantment and the solutions he offered “did not in themselves constitute a re-enchantment, but rather ways of living in disenchantment.” (Ruickbie 2006:117) In contrast, academics have attempted to prove re-enchantment as a viable causality for the rise of NeoPaganism.

Weber saw individual and personal expression of religion as simply a reaction to the disenchantment of modern life, a retreat into the irrationalities of apolitical emotionalism, “antithetical to political activity.” (Berger et al 2003:53) In a traditional sense this may be true; NeoPagans though, while they profess to be apolitical in traditional realms of politics, have redefined the term political to mean “decisions that affect our daily lives.” In these areas they are extremely involved the politics of social change and environmental awareness: Helen Berger states “as the slogan of the second wave of the women's movement declares: 'the personal is political'.” In light of the chaos around them NeoPagans sought perhaps to reconnect all the disjointed elements of society back into a whole, a nostalgic attempt to harken back to a time when religion was personal and advised the rest of their endeavors, including the political and economic.

*Intentional Communities as Culture Change*

Community, according to Susan Love Brown, can be defined as “a social group sharing common characteristics or interests and perceived or perceiving itself as distinct in some respect from the larger society in which it exists.” (Brown 2002:2) Intentional communities, then are those formed consciously with a specific purpose in mind (Brown 2002), and are usually found in one of two forms: ideological or formed around action-oriented endeavors. They “allow us to observe how human beings live in large, heterogeneous societies” using the community as a way of coping with the larger whole. (Brown 2002:6) In modern anthropological and sociological studies, intentional community refers most often to religious organizations and movements, and communal living arrangements, such as have been found in communes and among sects. Among other factors, intentional communities are formed in an attempt to reconcile the disparities of the world around them and garner some familiar meaning in the new surroundings. Liminality frequently is a marker of these communities, in that they live in a state of “outsiderhood.” (Brown 2002:9) This was the initial intent of the formation of Reclaiming, to absent themselves from mainstream religious practice, yet to remain involved in and concerned with their transformation altering mainstream society at some future time.

*Invented Traditions as Culture Change*
'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices ... which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past ... the peculiarity of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely fictitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition. (Hobsbawm 1983:1-2)

Jonathan Friedman states that the politics of identity, which includes the invention of traditions, is in crisis in the world of anthropology in a battle between modernism and postmodernism. (1992) If anthropologists in the past defined the cultures they viewed through the lens of Western civilization, which was not objective, then today the “past” that many objects of ethnographic study are trying to recreate in “newfound subjectivity” bears little resemblance to the past previously defined. (Friedman 1992:837-859) “The ‘invention of tradition’ is a double-edged sword that criticizes the assumptions of cultural continuity while implicitly reprimanding those who would identify with such cultural fantasies today.” (Friedman 1992:837-859) In an ethnographic study done within the theories of cultural relativity, the culture is studied as a snapshot in time, and the invented traditions are taken as part of the whole, and as a part of the reflexive definition of the culture by the members therein.

There is not a culture that has not, at some point in their history, invented or adopted traditions. “The question of ownership is a question of who has the right to define another person’s or population’s culture.” (Friedman 1992:837-859) This same article reminds that all constructions of the past are socially motivated — that history is written by the victor — and now, instead of anthropologists investigating and interpreting the “others,” the “others” are now defining and interpreting themselves. “Constructing the past is an act of self-identification and must be interpreted in its authenticity, that is, in terms of the existential relation between subjects and the constitution of a meaningful world.” (Friedman 1992:837-859) Social groups construct their images in terms of an agreed upon version of the past, which is kept alive not by individual memories, but by communicating them frequently and in toto within the group, and to the larger society around them. (Halbwachs and Coser. 1992)

The tradition of Reclaiming is a cobbled reconstruction of feminist and pagan histories, filled in with borrowed materials from contemporary animistic and pagan religious cultures. “What is made is always made from materials already given … in such a way … the present can only be made from the past, but the future can be made from the present. As culture is transmitted and transformed, it opens up new horizons.” (Balkin 1998:5) Reclaiming has written their past and now uses it to create an involved present, one that they are more than content to make known the larger society.

Twenty Years Later

Starhawk has, through patient manipulation of and access to the media, become a voice for multifaith work. She sits on the board of directors of Creation Spirituality, the brain child of excommunicated priest Matthew Fox: it was her teaching of courses at
Holy Names College where Fox was in charge that started his path to excommunication at the behest of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI). (Gross 1988:B2)

She has spoken to the United Nations, and sits as a consultant to numerous multifaith and interfaith groups. But it her work on behalf of environmentalism and against the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other forms of transnationalism and globalism that has garnered her the most public recognition:

> When we founded Reclaiming two decades ago, our intention was to bring together the spiritual and the political. Or more accurately, some of us for whom the spiritual and the political were inseparable wanted to create a practice and community that reflected this integration. (Starhawk 2003)

*Truth or Dare* (1987) is the literary child of the arrest and incarceration of 600 women as the result of a protest at the Livermore Weapons Lab in California. Objections to nuclear weapons construction flowed quite naturally from the spirituality of Starhawk and Reclaiming; besides education on the nature of power, this "how-to" manual of protest includes subsections on the uses of magic in resistance. Quotes from Foucault, Geertz and Sun Tzu balance chants to the Goddess, serving as a handbook for Reclaiming's escalating involvement in political and environmental affairs.

In November of 1999, the WTO attempted to hold their meeting in Seattle, Washington. Joined by over 50,000 union members (Bunn 2003:6/58), thousands of "street activists," led in part by Starhawk and her Reclaiming Collective, effectively shut down the meeting. When the police stopped one group, others would flow in to take their places. This loose, leaderless model of protest took as its model both the anarchists who fought in the Spanish Civil War and the small locally-based "organization" of Wiccan groups. "No centralized leader could have coordinated the scene in the midst of the chaos. Our model of organization and decision-making was so foreign to their picture of what constitutes leadership that they literally could not see what was going on in front of them." (Starhawk 1999)

In *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising*, Starhawk states that she prefers not to use the term “non-violent” in describing her grassroots movement, because using it still frames the discussion and debates in terms of violence; she prefers the term “empowered direct action.” (Starhawk 2002) Whatever you call it, it is extremely visible, and has garnered her wide-ranging support. It has also elicited criticism, like this column from Thomas Friedman in the New York Times: "These anti-W.T.O. protesters -- who are a Noah’s ark of flat-earth advocates, protectionist trade unions and yuppies looking for their 1960’s fix -- are protesting against the wrong target with the wrong tools." (Friedman, T 1999) Undaunted, however, by Friedman’s or anyone else’s remarks, Starhawk and Reclaiming have gone on to join or instigate collective protests in Genoa, Italy; Quebec, Canada (where First Nations peoples welcomed the overflow and those turned back to refuge on Akwesasne); and New York.

Organizers said that events in New York represented a turning point for a movement that has been so strongly associated with televised images of riot police and tear gas. 'I think we showed that we are peaceful, and that even when
the police try to intimidate us, we will still come out in large numbers,' said Starhawk. (Jacobs 2002:A15)

I cannot help but draw parallels between the stressors of the 60s and 70s with the events on the ground since the millennium. Starhawk and her organization once again network into the counter-culture, and now have a little over twenty years of practice and experience with their new culture and community.

Conclusion

Weber's theories of disenchantment and the iron cage can help to explain the attraction and growth of NeoPagan spiritualities while analyzing the infrastructural and structural inequalities of society in the 1960s and 1970s can help identify the trigger for the movements. Part of the problem in analyzing cultural changes such as the rise of NeoPaganism in general and Reclaiming in particular lies in their extremely short life span to date. R. Brian Ferguson quotes Marvin Harris in asserting that, in some instances, the period involved is inadequate to analyze the influences on the movement and from the movement, (1995:31), and indeed Harris' own analysis of the modern witchcraft movement suffers from just such a shortened time depth.

Analyses of the classic anthropological theories of culture change show that they are based in large part on an extant culture or subculture that undergoes contact with an agent of change and in response, they may revitalize or renovate their community in order to maintain cultural continuity. For Starhawk and the Reclaiming Collective, however, the applications of these theories are a stretch: there was no pre-existing community or culture to revitalize. Starhawk had to create her community first, then bring it into mainstream society to "work her magic." It is because of this difference that theories of invented tradition and intentional community are more applicable to a study of Reclaiming. The analysis of this unique situation lends itself to wider application, looking at the intentional communities of immigrant populations, other religious groups, and class delineations in this society and globally, among others.
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