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Opinion – Habitus and the 2024 US Presidential Elections

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PATRICIA SOHN, NOV 10 2024

It appears that the 2024 U.S. presidential election was won by the lumber yard and the feed store. Those two often appear in one joined space or storefront in rural, just-outside-of-town, and just-outside-of-city locations all around the U.S. Who frequents lumber yards and feed stores? Can we measure elections by political geography and *Habitus* to use Bourdieu's term? There is a political geography to lumber yards and feed stores, which I will not delve into except to say that this election seems to be won by the benefactors, beneficiaries, Mom's and Pop's, and capital conglomerates of those economic and social spaces. *Habitus* (see also Mahmood), expressed in the daily spaces and habits of a person, when tied to the economic and social spaces that we know as lumber yards and feed stores, reflects social habits, economic habits, and, possibly, ideological or ideational habits as well (on habitualized acts, see also).

Why turn to the political geography of economic spaces, the shared *habitus* of owners, frequenters, and clientele alike? The answer is simple. While it comes close, the rural-urban divide does not quite answer the entire question of why one party won and the other did not. Gender, likewise, answers some parts of the question, and not others. Age is a significant factor, but it does not explain the whole. Urban areas voted strongly for Harris. Suburban regions voted in favor of Harris. Rural voters used their franchise strongly for Trump. Women were split with a majority for Harris; young women preferred Harris. Nonetheless, there is too much overlap in these categories to offer a single parsimonious explanation. What might reasonably capture, or explain, Trump's wins in urban and suburban contexts, and by other oft-mentioned factors where he received votes from smaller parts of the electorate?

Why the lumber yard and the feed store? Frequenters may live in either rural or urban locations, thereby explaining some parts of the puzzle not captured in a strict rural-urban model. Frequenters and owners may fit highest, lowest, and everything in the middle in terms of tax brackets. They may be women or men. They may be part of any ethnicity or race, or they may be multi-racial. They may speak any language as their at-home or maternal language. They may be part of any religion, or be located anywhere on the religious-secular spectrum of the country's population. They may be any age. What habits and (micro-level) practices do they share in common?

Here, I am using the word practices also in keeping with its use in comparative politics [comparing institutional rules or claims vis à vis actual practices, and more often stemming conceptually from Foucault], somewhat differently, although still overlapping with Bourdieu's structural use of the term as a means of analysis, operationalizing, or the analytical deconstructing of power over practices.

The answer appears to be: that they are people who like soil; growing their own vegetables; growing their own flowers; and rural homesteading, neo-suburban or even urban homesteading. Or, they like to work with cows, horses, and the like. They may enjoy keeping their own chickens (in town) or ducks (near a pond or lake outside of town). They may frequent (expensive or inexpensive) stables, or they may have their own at-home large pony for kids and adults with (safe and sufficient) rudimentary shelter. They may have a hydro-farming porch garden in the middle of a big city, a medium-sized garden plot in their suburban backyard, a full-subsistence home garden in the country, or a large plot of dozens (or hundreds, or thousands) of acres for larger-scale farming. They might think that training on large ponies is better for the health than driving to an enclosed, air-conditioned gym; or they may think the

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same of at-home gardening. They might enjoy their xero-turn mower, and mowing their small acreage. Such folks might go to the lumber yard and feed store for at-home carpentry projects, large and small; for grain and feed for animals; for vetting; for insecticide options; and even for clothing, boots, and riding equipment. They may drive to the lumber yard and feed store from the city, or from the country. They may live in the city and spend significant time in the country. Or they may live in the country, or just outside-of-town (e.g., rural) areas, full time.

Why does the above framework, taken from Bourdieu's *habitus*, make a better explanation for who won the election and who did not; and how to capture, concisely, what the people who frequent these establishments share in common across ethnic, racial, economic, religious-secular, age, and rural-urban lines?

I have previously suggested that we might call such (Bourdieuian) habits and practices, shared across these otherwise lines of diversity, pre-modernism. It is also the case that we might call it neo-modern traditionalism. For, whether we reject or embrace modernization theory and high modernism, we are all part of the contemporary, modern world – like it or not. I posit, therefore, that Trump's victory comes from the rejectionists of the overarching (and sometimes domineering) framework of modernization theory at its most urban chic, missionizing, and high modernist points of expression.

Ideas matter, as do practices. Bourdieu's *Habitus*, as a theoretical concept, incorporates space, practices, and ideas or norms as factors. It provides a framework to analyze them and allows a parsimonious explanation for (or means to parse) many of our 2024 electoral outcomes. That is, people do not only vote with their money in election donations and the like; they vote with their money in social and economic spaces, in this case, lumber yards and feed stores. The social and economic space of lumber yards and feed stores correspond with social habits, practices, and ideological (or at least ideational) trends (where ideology is related to formal political ideologies or parties, and ideational pertains to individual normative views on a wide range of themes). From the election results, it does not appear that Harris won the American shopping mall. But it does appear that Trump won the lumber yard and the feed store, and that those social and economic spaces, in turn, can also be said to have won the election.

In other language, one might frame such a joined constituency – budding though it may be – In post-revolutionary terms (thinking in terms of the French Revolution, and perhaps the Glorious Revolution in England, or at least the tumult surrounding the Black Act). There, it might reflect a joining of the old nobility and *les peuples paysans* (using the French word, which has strongly positive connotations). *Les peuples paysans* may come from many walks of life, and they may reflect a wide variety of tax brackets. In fact, many among the old nobility – using this nomenclature – would fit among *les peuples paysans*.

Interestingly, in French, the word *paysan* comes from the word *pays* (pronounced, *pe-i*), which means, country (as in nation-state). Thus, the word *paysan* has the connotation of the country (today, as in the nation-state); the country (as in the countryside or rural areas); and the people of each of those: country, nation, and countryside. It can also have a connotation of patriots (from *patrie*, or homeland) of the country (*pays*). Despite its frequent repetition, “peasant” is not a good translation of *paysan* from the French. A more apt translation might be, “volk” or “folk” (with general associated connotations from both German and English).

It is the *paysans* who were not reached sufficiently by the argument or agenda of the losing side in this election. While the Democrats have strength in cleaving to the urban and suburban chic among social, economic, and ideational *habitus*, they were not able to convince the *paysans* that their habits and concerns were being sufficiently addressed. Not everyone wants a Maserati. Some people want a tractor; and, if not that, a Rolls, or an Appaloosa.

For those flummoxed and feeling foiled by an ostensibly hackneyed set of patriot-*paysans*, who simply will not accept that urban-chic modernism (or social programming high modernism) is the way of the world and the Answer, the hard answer is: they were out-numbered. Perhaps it is time to re-think the best laid plans for social programming, coercion, and domination of the majority by the few. Perhaps it is time to re-adjust the parameters of the high-modernist impulse to something more modest. Perhaps it is time to take a trip to the lumber yard (the real lumber yard) and the feed store to get a feel for the pulse of the body politic inhabiting its social and economic spaces. It is possible that a small experience in political-ethnography can be useful in healing and bridging the divide – perhaps

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overstated – between *pays* as *campagne* (countryside) and the urban-suburban metropole.

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