

Three Ways to Understand Government Classification of Jonestown Documents

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In 2001 my husband, Fielding McGehee III, and I filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) lawsuit against the Department of Justice. *McGehee and Moore v. U.S. Department of Justice* seeks to compel the Justice Department to provide an index—as required by law—to three compact disks of materials the FBI had pulled together from documents collected in Jonestown, Guyana in 1978 and from files generated in the agency's subsequent investigation into the assassination of U.S. Congressman Leo J. Ryan.

Our interest in Jonestown is both personal and professional, and in that respect I am writing as a participant observer regarding the events of 18 November 1978. I am a participant to the extent that my two sisters and nephew died in Jonestown in the mass murders-suicides which occurred under the direction of Jim Jones and I wish to know how and why. My status as a relative makes me an insider of sorts, with access to survivors of the tragedy, and with stature with government agencies as an interested party. But I am an observer as well, given my training in religious studies and my desire to interpret the events to my academic peers within a scholarly framework. I also wish to write the history of Peoples Temple, the group begun by Jones in Indianapolis which migrated to California and then to Guyana, as accurately and completely as possible. This is a daunting task, given the public perception of Peoples Temple as either a group of fanatical cultists, or as victims of a vast, dark conspiracy.

In short, I have a personal interest in getting the story straight, and in seeing history told as factually as possible. This type of investment is an advantage, which has seen my family through two and a half decades of research: from three FOIA lawsuits, including the current one; to a private investigation, trips to Guyana, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere; and to interviews with a variety of people involved with Peoples Temple. By being a participant I have been able to observe a great deal.

In 1992 the FBI released nearly 39,000 documents to settle a FOIA lawsuit from the Church of Scientology. The release followed the agency's review of earlier classification decisions relating to the papers. Many of these papers were generated by the FBI in its investigation of Leo Ryan's death. When we filed a FOIA request in 1998 for a copy of all lists of people who died in Jonestown, the FBI said it had identified 48,738 pages in response, and would make those available upon receipt of \$4863.80. After some negotiation with the agency—including the intervention of Congressman Henry Waxman (D-Ca.), then the ranking member of the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee, which has jurisdiction over implementation of the FOIA—the FBI agreed to make all of its documents relating to Jonestown, Peoples Temple, and Leo Ryan available on three CDs.

The good news is that anyone making a FOA request for information about Peoples Temple

and Jonestown receives three CDS, that is, absolutely everything the FBI has released on the subject, for \$30. The bad news is that there is no index to the files, which are stored graphically. One must search all three CDs, more than 48,000 pages, to find what one is looking for. In other words, the FBI is not truly responsive to requests for information about these subjects, and this is the reason we filed suit to compel such an index, as mandated by law.

There are several additional problems with the current release and presentation of information about Peoples Temple. First, and most basic, is that many of the items the FBI scanned (which do not include any of the hundreds of photographs in the agency's collection) are illegible, and hence unusable. Second, material that the FBI claims is exempt from release—primarily for reasons of national security, privacy, and law enforcement—must be appealed on a case-by-case basis. The possibility of reversing the classification decision is remote, as we have learned by having specific appeals denied. Substantial amounts of reclassification would necessitate recreating the CDs, an even less likely event. A third problem is that the FBI has shifted responsibility for releasing some items to the departments which originally generated the materials. For example, a teletype from the State Department sent to the Justice Department in the weeks following 18 November 1978, must now be reviewed by State before it can be released. This requires an administrative referral which, our experience has shown, is often ignored unless ordered by a court (which is the only way we were able to compel such a referral and to receive hundreds of pages of State Department documents via the FBI). It also raises the possibility, noted by the courts, of various agencies moving documents from one agency to another to avoid release. A final problem, and most significant, is that in recent years the FBI has claimed additional exemptions for some documents, and thus withheld information once available. We know this to be true because we have copies of FBI documents released in the 1980s which reveal more information than those currently released on the three CDs.¹

The question this paper asks, and attempts to answer, is *why*. Why is the FBI maintaining, and even increasing, classification of documents pertaining to events that happened more than a quarter century ago? While there may have been compelling reasons to withhold information in 1979, by 1998—when we filed the FOIA request that led to the current lawsuit—a number of things had changed. The Cold War had ended with the fall of communism; many principals, including the president of Guyana, the U.S. ambassador to Guyana, and other key players, had died; all prosecutions involved in the Ryan assassination were concluded.² Yet as recently as 2003, a FOIA official at the FBI told us off the record that some documents would never be released, not even after the mandatory declassification review period of thirty years.

Release of classified material would answer a number of questions about the federal role in, and foreknowledge of, the Jonestown tragedy. The exempted materials raise questions about government spying on religious groups, and government manipulation by biased sources to pursue investigations and other activities. The documents might reveal how a group comprised of relatives and apostates created a cohort of “cultural opponents” comprised of government agencies and the news media (Hall), which ultimately convinced the people in Jonestown that revolutionary suicide was their only option (Chidester 2003). Release of the classified information, therefore, would shed light on the relationship between government and religion in one particular, and particularly fatal, instance.

While there are a number of answers to the question “why is classification maintained,” they all relate to the question of initial classification and reclassification. This paper considers three possible answers to this question. First, information is classified by individuals who have an

interest in controlling information. Declassification would result in a loss of control—and of course, a decrease in power and authority—although these individuals would, and do, argue that the information would be dangerous if it fell into the wrong hands. Leo Strauss’ discussion of writing “between the lines” best describes this rationale for keeping government secrets. The real story of Peoples Temple is told in the materials that have been edited out, which are accessible only to the elect who are sufficiently trusted to handle the information.

Second, information is classified by institutions, that is, structures which have naturalized popular opinion and prejudice. Mary Douglas’ *How Institutions Think* describes this process. Information can be released only if the institution alters its thinking, that is, if the “orthodoxy” concerning Peoples Temple changes. Though Douglas admits that institutions can and do make adjustments, her examples come from the world of business rather than government. In this model, there may be no secret subtext in the redactions, or even a compelling reason for classification. A blind, impersonal institution takes over and thinks for us.

A final explanation for classification-mania comes from Pierre Bourdieu’s notions of *habitus* and field. The mindset within which government bureaucrats work—in this case the “universe” of the Freedom of Information and Privacy Act (FOIPA) Department of the Federal Bureau of Investigation—creates a disposition to classify, rather than release, information. It wouldn’t take a hurricane to dislodge this mindset, but it would require a modification in the rules of the game, that is, the way that bureaucrats view release of government information. We have actually seen the rules change over the course of several presidential administrations. Bourdieu’s theory therefore seems to present a middle ground between the extremes of individual (or even individualistic) classification and institutional classification

After first providing a brief background to Peoples Temple and Jonestown, I will take up each explanation in turn. I hope to show that though the models suggested by Strauss and Douglas have explanatory power, Bourdieu’s analysis of the way people work within institutions offers a better account of why the FBI continues to classify, and even reclassify, documents pertaining to Jonestown. Furthermore, I will argue, Bourdieu’s scheme allows for the possibility of declassification in future.

PEOPLES TEMPLE AND JONESTOWN

The prevailing orthodoxy about Jonestown that was initially established has not changed much in the intervening twenty-eight years. A group of disaffected Americans belonging to the Peoples Temple church, a congregation within the Disciples of Christ denomination, immigrated to Guyana, South America in the late 1970s. Peoples Temple had already moved in the 1960s from Indianapolis, Indiana, to California, spreading outward from Redwood Valley to San Francisco and Los Angeles. Headed by a charismatic white preacher named Jim Jones, and directed by a predominantly young, white, educated leadership group called the Planning Commission, the church attracted large numbers of African Americans. In 1974 the group reached an agreement with the government of Guyana—a small English-speaking “cooperative socialist republic” sandwiched between Venezuela and Surinam—to develop almost 4000 acres of land near the Venezuelan border. A cadre of twenty to thirty young adults cleared the jungle and constructed housing, school rooms, and other buildings over a period of several years. Beginning in 1976 and continuing in 1977, however, an oppositional group called the Concerned Relatives, comprised of estranged Temple members and anxious family members, mounted a publicity campaign designed to expose the inner workings of the organization. They charged that

members of Peoples Temple had been beaten, humiliated, and coerced into turning their property over to the group. Activities by the Concerned Relatives, coupled with an audit by the Internal Revenue Service, led to the mass migration of almost 1000 Temple members to the agricultural project in Guyana in 1977 (Hall).

There, the group lived a life of hard work and generally high spirits in the community now called Jonestown. Meanwhile, the Concerned Relatives continued to agitate in the United States, focusing especially on child custody and family welfare issues. The relatives persuaded Congressman Leo J. Ryan (D-Ca.) to travel to Jonestown to investigate conditions there firsthand. In November 1978 Ryan took a group of media representatives and family members—almost all of them part of Concerned Relatives—to Guyana and, after intense negotiations, persuaded Jim Jones and the Jonestown leadership to let them enter the isolated jungle community. Ryan seemed impressed with what he saw, but a few disaffected people asked for safe passage out of the project. On the morning of 18 November 1978, sixteen residents of Jonestown accompanied Ryan and his party to the Port Kaituma airstrip, located six miles away. As they waited to board two small aircraft, a small group of young men who had followed the party from Jonestown began firing upon them, killing Ryan, three newsmen, and one resident attempting to leave. A dozen others were wounded, some quite seriously.

Back in Jonestown, about 900 residents gathered in the central pavilion, where Jones told them what had happened, and exhorted them to drink a cyanide-laced fruit punch. Although a tape recording of the incident reveals that a few residents protested, other residents shouted down all opposition (U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation). Eyewitness accounts are conflicting, with some saying that people were coerced into taking poison, and others saying that people willingly drank the mixture. By the end of the day, 918 Americans in Guyana were dead: 909 in Jonestown; five on the airstrip; and four in the Temple's residence in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana.

It took a number of days for investigators to find all of the bodies, and daily news reports updating the body count gave birth to conspiracy theories about the nature of the deaths. Some theorists assert that Jonestown residents were actually killed by U.S. Special Forces or British Black Watch troops. Many believe that residents were brainwashed into killing their children and taking poison. The CIA's MK-ULTRA program, which tested drugs on unsuspecting individuals during the 1960s and 1970s, has also been blamed. Those who reject conspiracy scenarios continue to debate whether or not the deaths should be called suicide—as they were described very early on in the news reporting—or whether they ought to be called murder. Moreover, those who argue that the people of Jonestown were murdered have different definitions of what they mean by the word “murder.”

The release of government information relating to Peoples Temple and Jonestown could put to rest a number of these theories. Although many agencies have pieces of the story—from the State Department and the U.S. Air Force, to the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Communications Commission—certainly the FBI has the largest collection of documents of any government entity. Withholding files through the classification process both obscures the truth and gives birth to conspiracy theories.³ While initially there may have been sufficient reason to classify government files—for example, to pursue an investigation into Leo Ryan's death—by the time the documents were reclassified in the 1990s, most reasons had become moot. Moreover, embedding the files onto compact disks made them harder, both literally and figuratively, to declassify. The remainder of this paper looks at three reasons why the FBI might

have done this.

LEO STRAUSS

Leo Strauss argues that in times of persecution, writers encode messages into texts so that a select group of readers can understand the “true” intention of the writer (1952). While texts may present a completely accessible meaning to ordinary readers (their exoteric sense), only a few “trustworthy and intelligent readers only” can comprehend their secret meaning (their esoteric sense). “The real opinion of an author is not necessarily identical with that which he expresses in the largest number of passages” (1952: 30). Strauss claims that veiled messages can be identified when a writer “contradicts surreptitiously” the prevailing orthodoxy. At that point the careful reader must re-examine the entire work, reading between the lines to discover the truth.

Strauss’ ideas clearly appeal to the convictions, and vanity, of an elite corps of intellectuals dedicated to shaping the world in their own image.⁴ Such plans must remain secret, of course, because they undermine western liberal democratic assumptions about humanity, equality, and freedom. I would like to shift the focus from secrecy, however, to classification, though the two are related: the ones who categorize and withhold information maintain power through these processes. The Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza recognized this relationship in his *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670),⁵ as did Strauss, who critiqued Spinoza’s views (1930).⁶

Spinoza is relevant because Strauss argues against his democraticizing hermeneutics. Strauss sees permanent differences in human nature, “the difference between the many who require a categorical moral teaching and the few who are capable of ordering their own lives in the face of the hypothetical status of all moral commands” (Kochin: 261). Although he is concerned with philosophy and morality, and not secrecy *per se*, the idea of different human types relates to classification because some people are privy to information—those who can handle it, who know what it means and how it is to be used—and those who are denied access—by implication, ones who cannot handle it and do not know how it is to be used. “A writer is concealing his or her true meaning not only to avoid persecution but also in order to conceal from a vulgar reader a truth which she cannot understand and might very well employ to ill effect...” (Levene: 64).

This is where persecution comes in, Strauss’ justification for concealing truths from the vulgar. When persecution existed, writers had to resort to the subterfuge of hiding truth in plain sight, namely in their texts. By admitting to telling “noble lies” or “probable opinions” they could draw the attention of philosophical readers to their true feelings (1952: 35). This type of writing is needed in contexts of persecution where freedom of thought is neither assumed nor guaranteed. But Strauss concludes his essay by asking of what use it could be in a truly liberal society. The battle against Communism in the late twentieth century suggested an answer, where national security justified government secrecy and gave birth to a paranoid style, in Hofstadter’s words, in which persecution was perceived to be “directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life” (4).

These were times of persecution in the Straussian sense, when democracy appeared to be under siege by a variety of Marxist movements for national liberation, and when America was attacked by its own citizens within the civil rights and antiwar movements. Peoples Temple was part of this “enemy within.” It was involved in progressive politics in San Francisco in the 1970s, it relocated to a “cooperative socialist republic” and it had contacts with representatives of the Soviet, Cuban, and North Korean embassies in Georgetown, Guyana. The emigration of 1000

citizens espousing radical ideas would make the group suspect in almost any era, but especially during the Cold War.

The battle against Communism was fought at home and abroad, and the history of U.S. intervention in Guyana's politics to ensure an anti-Communist regime is paradigmatic (Naipaul, Lewis). Clandestine activities financed by the CIA helped place Forbes Burnham and the Peoples National Congress (PNC) in power in 1964, two years before independence in 1966. The U.S. found the PNC much more palatable than the popular, but Marxist, Peoples Progressive Party. The U.S. helped engineer the re-election of Burnham in 1968 and in 1973 recognized the illegally-obtained PNC a parliamentary majority. In 1978—the same year as the deaths in Jonestown—the PNC government passed legislation which, in effect, made Burnham president for life. Assassinations and violence against political opponents continued until the Peoples Progressive Party finally ousted Burnham and the PNC in 1992. The U.S. sided with Burnham throughout this turbulent period in Guyana's history.

It was no surprise that in racially divided Guyana, those who opposed the PNC viewed the arrival of one thousand African Americans with suspicion.⁷ Did Jonestown constitute Burnham's insurance against U.S. attack, given the fact that U.S. citizens were living there? Was it an American beachhead against a Marxist Guyana? Jones frequently voiced opposition to the PPP, the more "pro-communist party than Burnham's PNC" (Harris and Waterman: 120), while PNC party officials visiting Jonestown were always well-treated. Nevertheless, Peoples Temple was only marginally on the right side of the Cold War in Guyana, and its rhetoric was clearly wrong.

Thus, the group's real or perceived connections to communism would prompt individuals within the FBI to withhold any information they deemed dangerous to the nation. The real story of Peoples Temple could only be told in the redactions—the excisions, or rather exemptions—made on the basis of national security, privacy, or law enforcement. "The truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines," that is, between the lines of material released to the public. "That literature is addressed, not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only" (Strauss 1952: 25). Although the redactions should direct our attention to the material that actually is released, they become self-referential instead, and point to themselves, and to their editors. The redactors know what is best for us to know, and ordinary citizens play no part as they have no ability to read between the lines.

"Exoteric literature presupposes that there are basic truths which would not be pronounced in public by any decent man, because they would do harm to many people who, having been hurt, would naturally be inclined to hurt in turn him who pronounces the unpleasant truths" (Strauss 1952: 36). Do the "unpleasant truths" hidden from view indicate U.S. culpability for Jonestown in some way? Certainly the conspiracy theorists would say so. In any event, Strauss' concept of persecution and hidden messages offers one explanation for the initial classification, the recent reclassification, and the ongoing exemption of certain materials from public review.

MARY DOUGLAS

In *How Institutions Think*, Mary Douglas demonstrates that "[t]he entrenching of an idea is a social process" (45). She begins by explaining how institutional structures get established. A key element of the process is the naturalizing of the institution, grounding it in nature and reason. It seems natural and reasonable for human beings to polarize the world into different classes, e.g. good-bad, play-work, pleasure-pain. Once this happens we are able to turn the classification

process over to social institutions.

Individuals, as they pick and choose among the analogies from nature those they will give credence to, are also picking and choosing at the same time their allies and opponents and the pattern of their future relations. Constituting their version of nature, they are monitoring the constitution of their society. In short, they are constructing a machine for thinking and decision-making on their own behalf (63).

It is a short step from this practice to turning the decision-making process over to institutions that we trust and support. At this point it is institutions, rather than individuals, which confer identity by seeing things as similar, no matter how disparate they may be in reality.

Douglas examines how things get lumped together in ways that reinforce structures of authority. She looks at socially-based analogies, identified by Claude Lévi-Strauss, to see how hierarchies are maintained. For example:

culture : nature
 human nature : animal nature
 male : female (64)

She calls these concepts “proto-theoretical pieces,” or more colloquially, bric-a-brac, which people unite into a pattern that has the appearance of cohesion. This process occurs largely unnoticed, however, and works only because the process is unseen. Moreover, it succeeds only if it coheres with contemporary thought.

Even before the mass deaths of November 1978 occurred, Peoples Temple had been classified by two institutions—the news media and government agencies—thanks to an apostate group called the Concerned Relatives (Hall). We can use Douglas’, and Lévi-Strauss’, scheme to see how the following analogies led to the classification of Peoples Temple as a dangerous cult.

America : Soviet Union
 capitalism : communism
 individual : group
 religion : cult

These dichotomies appear in the language used by the Concerned Relatives, in news reports, and even in government documents. For example, an “Accusation of Human Rights Violations by Rev. James Warren Jones,” released by the Concerned Relatives in April 1978, contrasts traditional American values with the socialistic views of Peoples Temple members. In particular, the statement highlights alleged violations of individual liberties, such as the inability to leave Jonestown, mail censorship, and lack of freedom to criticize Jonestown leadership (Concerned Relatives). The statement also refers to Jonestown as a “jungle encampment,” thereby eliminating its identity as an agricultural project, and comparing it to a concentration “camp.”

After the deaths, the media suggested additional analogies, which stigmatized Peoples Temple further:

Leo Ryan : Jim Jones
 murdered : murderer (of self or others)
 good : evil

The apotheosis of Leo Ryan began at his death and continues today, with the establishment of

monuments, memorials, and foundations to his memory. Although a flawed individual, like most of us, Ryan achieved the glory due a martyr because of his violent death. Jim Jones, on the other hand, has been demonized by comparisons to Adolf Hitler and Charles Manson, and more recently, Osama bin Laden (Moore: 2003). Those who were murdered—Ryan, children, the elderly—were innocent, and therefore considered “good,” while those who committed suicide, and presumably murder as well, were “evil.” Each category has explanatory value as well as moral weight. They provide an easy shorthand for understanding an enormously complex event like Jonestown. By creating categories, the institution of the news media did the thinking about Jonestown for us, invisibly and quite naturally.

Various government agencies relied upon the frame identified above to process information about Jonestown. Peoples Temple was a dangerous cult, possibly involved in criminal activities; it was anti-religious, communistic or at least socialistic; it had ties to radical political groups, such as the American Indian Movement and the Black Panther Party. The group emphasized collective guilt and responsibility (as evidenced by apostate reports of punishments for anti-social or elitist behaviors). In short, Peoples Temple was un-American, anti-religious, and anti-individual. The Jonestown massacre did nothing to change this view; rather, it merely confirmed that un-American, anti-religious, and anti-individual sentiments lead to violence and mass murder. Conservative columnists like Robert Novak subscribed to this classification schema (U.S. House of Representatives: 495-503). Progressive columnists used the same classification system, but defended their criticism of Peoples Temple by saying that Jim Jones perverted the practice of communism and practiced racism within the organization which prevented it from truly developing a collective (group as opposed to individual) identity.⁸

Thus, in the Douglassian world, it would have been virtually impossible in 1978 for government bureaucrats to consider Peoples Temple outside the polarities of good and evil, which seemed so obvious to society at large. Given the nature of the events in Jonestown, it was hopeless to understand Peoples Temple on its own terms outside pre-existing classifications at that time. The passage of two decades, when the FBI reclassified information, would not dramatically alter this scheme.

Contrary to the Straussian world in which individuals work in a sort of elite cabal in the name of national security, the Douglassian world has institutions doing the thinking for us. On the one side there is purpose and intent, albeit in an undemocratic and exclusive way; on the other, unconscious and unreflective activity. While each explanation has some validity, neither seems entirely satisfactory. It is true that some individuals may have acted in bad faith to protect national security, at the expense of open government; and it is true that pre-existing frames dictated how Peoples Temple was understood. Yet the elements of determinism in Douglas, and conspiracism in Strauss, are problematic.

PIERRE BOURDIEU

Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus*, field, game, and symbolic capital may resolve the dilemma inherent to explanations of individual or institutional decision-making, and shed light on the continuing effort to withhold information about Peoples Temple and Jonestown. Although a number of scholars have criticized these concepts as deterministic and limiting of human agency (see, among others, Vladiv-Glover and Frederic, Margolis, Butler), Bourdieu himself would argue that agency exists within the constraints of *habitus* and field.⁹ Some definitions are in order before continuing.

Bourdieu developed the concept of *habitus* in his anthropological fieldwork among the Kabyle people of French Algeria, although he admits his debt to others, especially to art historian Erwin Panofsky, for first suggesting the notion. In his early work, *habitus* describe the process of “inculcation and appropriation” necessary for a culture to reproduce itself (1977: 85). They comprise the “mental structures” through which the world is apprehended, and by which a person’s social world is internalized, or embodied, within that individual. More recently, he writes that *habitus* “are generative principles of distinct and distinctive practices.” They are both differentiated and differentiating, in that they serve as “classificatory schemes, principles of classification, principles of vision and division, different tastes” (1998: 8). The most frequently cited definition states that *habitus* are

systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (1990a: 53).

Nash summarizes *habitus* in this way: “social structures, or social positions, generate socialized dispositions, and socialized dispositions generate practices (and those practices have the effect of *reproducing* social structures)” (Nash 188).

Each *habitus* operates in its own universe,¹⁰ which Bourdieu calls a “field” (*champ*). “Fields denote arenas of production, circulation, and appropriation of goods, services, knowledge, or status...” (Swartz 117). A field is “a certain distribution structure of some kind of capital” (Bourdieu 1980; cited in Swartz 117). They are autonomous and have their own laws, or rules, of operation. The *habitus* incorporates the rules and operates as “a socialized body” on the field (Bourdieu 1998: 81). For example, “a scientist is a scientific field made flesh, an agent whose cognitive structures are homologous with the structure of the field and, as a consequence, constantly adjusted to the expectations inscribed in the field” (2004: 41).

Everyone acting on the field knows the rules of the game, which, though unwritten, are universally known within a particular *habitus*. “You can use the analogy of the game,” Bourdieu writes, “in order to say that a set of people take part in a rule-bound activity, an activity which, without necessarily being the product of obedience to rules, *obeys certain regularities*” (1990b: 62, Bourdieu’s italics). People have a “feel for the game,” and know what to say and what to do without thinking about it. Thus, there is a relationship between the *habitus* and the field in the playing of the game. “Habitus ‘makes sense’ only in the context of specific local contexts of ‘fields’—the ‘games’ for which ‘the rules of the game’ equip us” (Lawler: 112). A contemporary example would be the scientific community’s rejection of the religious argument for “intelligent design” because that theory does not play by the rules of the scientific field.

A final concept Bourdieu develops is that of symbolic capital, which in effect serves as the object of the game. It is not all about money, according to Bourdieu (who is highly critical of economic assessments of human behavior), but rather about things which are valued within a particular field. “There are immaterial forms of capital—cultural, symbolic, and social—as well as a material or economic form and ... with varying levels of difficulty it is possible to convert one of these forms into the other” (Calhoun: 69). Artists may disdain financial success, something which business executives value highly; a novelist’s rejection slips might indicate the true (noncommercial) merit of the work; and Bourdieu suggests that the concept of honor is a form of symbolic capital within Mediterranean societies (1998: 47).

With these definitions provided, abbreviated though they are, I can now show how Bourdieu may provide a more defensible explanation of the way classification works at the FBI than either Strauss and Douglas.

The *habitus*, that is, the “structuring structure” of the FBI predisposes FOIPA bureaucrats to maintain the symbolic capital of the agency: namely, information. The field on which they play—whether defined as national security or law enforcement—requires that the nation be protected and secrets be kept. In this light, there is a “practical logic” to the decision of government workers not only to maintain classification, but to reclassify at greater levels of exclusion: it makes sense according to the rules of the game. The fact that the secrets may well be moot in light of the passage of time is irrelevant. The rules of the game tend to demand withholding, not release.

Indeed, the rules become apparent when individuals bend them. The head of the Department of Justice’s Criminal Division FOIPA Unit told Fielding McGehee by telephone that he could make him file an appeal and go through all the various hoops; but since the man knew McGehee, he would not require all the necessary steps. Similarly, an administrator in the FBI’s FOIA office made, in her words, an under-the-table deal with us to give us some materials for free because they would not be included in an appeal we were filing. A final example of bending the rules came from the manager of the FBI’s collection of audiotapes generated by Peoples Temple. Art Rider was more willing to release all of the audiotapes we requested if we agreed to let the agency set its own pace for duplication and transfer. Audiotapes which the FBI initially withheld from disclosure were released as well, undoubtedly due to our pressure and because they no longer had any bearing on law enforcement proceedings. These exceptions, however, prove the rule, or rather indicate that those playing the game are aware that there are rules.

Thinking about information as symbolic capital helps to explain the FBI’s resistance to declassification. “The state is the *culmination of a process of concentration of different species of capital*,” Bourdieu writes, and information is one form of this capital (1998: 41, 45, Bourdieu’s italics). “The state concentrates, treats, and redistributes information...” (45), and by doing so, maintains a monopoly on an important type of symbolic capital. Although Bourdieu is not discussing state secrets in particular, his analysis is useful for understanding why the FBI zealously guards access to its files, even when such access is harmless to national security. Those files are capital; in fact, the less that is known about their contents the more valuable they are. This value accrues to the authority of the individual classifier, as well as to the institutional FBI. As Bourdieu notes, “the bureaucrat is not just the servant of the state, he is also the one who puts the state at his service” (1998: 87). In other words, individuals gain status through holding symbolic capital.

Restricting access and maintaining capital reveals a potential conflict between interests, and this is exactly how Bourdieu views fields: as sites of conflict and engagement. “His concept of field designates arenas of struggle rather than fundamental functions thought to be vital for social life” (Swartz 120, referring to Bourdieu and Wacquant 103). Since the field is where capital is distributed, it makes sense to view continuing classification as a way to prevent, or to slow down, the redistribution of information capital.

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distributed, it makes sense to view continuing classification as a way to prevent, or to slow down, the redistribution of information capital. Understanding resistance to declassification as occurring within a field of conflict seems very a propos. While the FBI has indeed released thousands of pages, it has done so only in response to concerted efforts to force disclosure: for example, by the Church of Scientology (39,000 documents); by our 1998 request and the intervention of Congressman Waxman (three CDs); or by court order to refer and receive a review of State Department documents (hundreds of pages). The FBI did not voluntarily choose to release information. It was forced to when engaged on its own field.

By showing the relationship of individuals to their social structures, *habitus* and field seem to offer a way out of the determinism implicit in Douglas' model of institutional thinking. It isn't institutions that think, Bourdieu might argue, but individuals who embody the worldviews of their particular fields. *Habitus* merely suggests that individuals are predisposed to think in certain ways, and to not think in others. Using this model, we can see that government officials reviewing information about Peoples Temple were operating within a *habitus* which did not question the analogies identified above (e.g. communism : capitalism, good : evil). As Bourdieu said about scientific practice, the classification system at the FBI is a set of "largely unconscious, transposable, generative dispositions, which tends to generalize itself" (2004: 41).

Nash calls the concept of *habitus* a middle way, the means by which Bourdieu can "transcend the dichotomy of objectivism and subjectivism" (189). Bourdieu recognizes the social construction of many of our ideas and habits, that is, the "social categories of perception" (1998: 8). At the same time, however,

the habitus goes hand in glove with vagueness and indeterminacy. As a generative spontaneity which asserts itself in an improvised confrontation with ever-renewed situations, it obeys a practical logic, that of vagueness, of the more-or-less, which defines one's ordinary relation to the world (1998: 77-78, Bourdieu's italics).

In Nash's words, "people are not bound by 'unconscious rules,' but have a 'feel for the game,' and so are able to make choices within the limits of what is made possible by the *habitus*" (189). This kind of indeterminacy means that nothing can be taken for granted, and that things can change. While we may be products of our environments, born into a set of dispositions of which we are generally unaware, we are not prisoners of them.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has examined three different ways we might begin to understand why the FBI has continued to withhold information about Peoples Temple. In the first instance, the perceived realities of the Cold War prompted officials at the agency to classify, and then reclassify, a number of documents for national security reasons. Individuals revealed the story of Peoples Temple and Jonestown between the lines, in the redactions of material that were available only to those able to read and understand highly sensitive material without posing a threat to the interests of the United States. Using Leo Strauss we come up with an explanation that depends upon individual decision-making in favor of maintaining secrecy.

In the second instance, individual initiative is abandoned in favor of institutional thinking. The FBI, influenced by media reports, apostate complaints, and its own internal investigations, had a ready-made paradigm by which to consider Peoples Temple. Impersonal forces worked in an ad hoc manner and shaped perceptions of the religious group and its end in ways that

precluded the release of government information. Using Mary Douglas we can see the social construction of understanding about Peoples Temple and how it shaped decisions made at the FBI.

In the final instance, we see individuals working within the givens of their *habitus* and their field of endeavor. Decision-makers at the FBI's FOIPA office know the rules of the game of classification, and understand the value of information as symbolic capital. Redistributing that capital—in the form of releasing government documents—would require a symbolic exchange that does not currently exist. That exchange might be found in the value of open government, accountability, or accessibility: that is, in forms of cultural capital not appreciated in the current administration as far as the Freedom of Information Act goes.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory has the advantage of recognizing the interaction between individuals and institutions, and the ways that individuals embody the values and rules of their respective fields. It avoids the potential for elitism and conspiracism that arises from Strauss' views, and the pitfall of determinism inherent in Douglas' views, by identifying the dynamic relationship between individuals and institutions. It also suggests the possibility of change at the FBI, if *habitus* and field embodied different attitudes toward the relationship between the government and its citizens.

It remains to be seen if this transformation will occur. As of this writing, our FOIA lawsuit has been in court for six years. During that time, we have received hundreds of documents from the State Department that were released, pursuant to a court order, after a referral by the FBI. Much material on these and other documents remains classified, however. With almost 50,000 pages available from the FBI alone, it would appear that the story of the federal government's relationship to Peoples Temple and Jonestown is complete, but this is far from the case. First, many of those documents have material excised from them. Second, there is a story that remains to be told in the documents—dozens? hundreds? thousands?—yet to be released. No account of Jonestown will be complete without full access to them. We will be asking the court to order the creation of a new set of CDs—to include newly released items and newly scanned items (to replace illegible ones)—in a computer-searchable format. We will also continue to appeal various classificatory exemptions, item by item. My role as an observer makes these tasks important for the writing of history. My role as a participant gives me the obligation to ensure that these tasks will be accomplished.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The same is true of the Central Intelligence Agency, which released documents to us pursuant to the judgment in *McGehee v. CIA* in 198??, but has since exempted some of these same materials from release.

² Larry Layton, the only individual prosecuted in the United States for crimes arising out of the events of 18 November 1978, served eighteen years in prison, and was released in April 2003. Documents we had obtained before Layton's conviction have been reclassified and withheld since his incarceration.

³ I will not examine the issue of secrecy *within* Peoples Temple and Jonestown in this paper, but

rather focus solely upon that of the FBI.

⁴ Hugh Urban has thoroughly examined Leo Strauss' influence on the contemporary neo-conservative movement and its reliance on religious ideology to achieve its ends (2004).

⁵ The *Theological-Political Treatise* provides a way to read the Bible which depends upon reason rather than revelation. Spinoza notes a number of techniques for understanding scripture, which, he asserts, was written for everyone to understand. Just as scientists group natural phenomena together by observing similarities and differences, biblical readers can form their own groups or types from texts by observing patterns, motifs, and themes. Implicit in Spinoza's advice is a critique of the hermeneutical lenses provided by religious authorities, and explicit is a critique of the Jewish philosopher Maimonides. "There is nothing, then, in our method that requires the common people to abide by the testimony of biblical commentators" (104). Clearly Spinoza democratizes the process of biblical exegesis, hence the inclusion of "political" in the title of his treatise.

⁶ A discussion and critique of Strauss' influence on contemporary readings of Spinoza is ongoing. See Harris (1995, 2000), Bagley (1996), and Levene (2000).

⁷ President Forbes Burnham and the PNC represented the Afro-Guyanese minority, while the PPP represented the Indo-Guyanese majority.

⁸ An unspoken analogous pair was that of white : black. The significance of the African American composition and nature of the group has only recently begun to be investigated (Moore et al.: 2004).

⁹ *In Other Words* offers responses to a number of criticisms of his theories (1990b).

¹⁰ *Habitus* appears as both a singular and plural noun in the literature.