

The Dictionary of Anthropology

Edited by Thomas Barfield

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global society, or the view that a variety of transnational processes are critical for understanding cultural change among all peoples. The world is viewed as increasingly integrated economically, politically, socially, and culturally. EH

further reading Lowie 1917

cultural ecology See ECOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

cultural materialism is a major theoretical approach in sociocultural anthropology that was named and largely developed by Marvin Harris (1968, 1979), although numerous other anthropologists (and even a few sociologists) have contributed to it. It represents a kind of theoretical synthesis of marxist historical materialism, ECOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY, and social EVOLUTIONISM. It emerged in the period between the 1950s and the 1970s and in recent years, with the fragmentation of anthropology and the increasing growth of skepticism about the possibility of a scientific anthropology, has become less influential. However, it is still a major and important approach within anthropology.

Cultural materialism identifies three major components to all human societies, what Harris called the "universal pattern."

All societies can be divided into infrastructures, superstructures. The infrastructure consists of those natural and cultural elements fundamental to human adaptation and survival. It has two subcomponents, the MODE OF PRODUCTION and the mode of reproduction. The mode of production includes technology, work patterns, features of the geographic or physical environment, and technoenvironmental relationships. It is basic to economic adaptation. The mode of reproduction consists of those things relating to the propagation of the species and is primarily demographic. It includes birth rates, death rates, size and density of population, rates of population growth, and technology relating to birth and population control. The structure consists of domestic and political economy. Domestic economy largely involves modes of family and kinship organization and gender and age roles. Political economy consists of patterns of

political organization, and warfare. Finally, the superstructure consists of shared cognitive and ideological patterns, as well as behavioral patterns that represent underlying patterns of thought and symbols. It includes such things as religion, science, art, music, dance, literature, sports, and rituals.

Cultural materialism has also depended on an important epistemological distinction between EMIC AND ETIC modes of analysis. Cultural materialists stress that both approaches are important to the conduct of anthropological research, but they consistently favor etic approaches in their own research endeavors.

Cultural materialism is best known for the way in which it links infrastructure, superstructure, and superstructure. In Harris' terms, these three sociocultural components are related through the Principle of Infrastructural Determinism. This principle asserts that the infrastructure provides the basic foundation of sociocultural life and is laid down first; it then exerts a strong determining influence on the formation of the structure, which in turn exerts a strong determining influence of its own on the formation of the superstructure. Harris stressed that the causal relationships between these components are probabilistic and room is left for causal influence to operate in the reverse direction; that is, from superstructure to structure to infrastructure. However, it is assumed that causal influences flow in this reverse direction much less often and much less significantly. Harris has also formulated an argument to why infrastructure should have the causal importance it does. In his view, infrastructure has causal priority because it involves those things that relate most fundamentally to human survival and physical well-being, aspects of life that humans must grapple with before they become concerned with matters relating to social organization and ideology.

Fundamental to cultural materialism is the notion that human individuals are cost-benefit calculators who choose courses of action that are rational from the standpoint of minimizing the expenditure of time and energy, maximizing health and physical well-being, transmitting wealth from one

generation to the next, and a variety of other concerns. In his early work Harris's analyses were often carried out in a functionalist mode, but later (in approximately the mid-1970s) he shifted toward a more methodologically individualist position. Eschewing any notion of group selection, his nature work assumes that cultural patterns are large-scale aggregations of cultural selection operating at the level of individual cost and benefit. This makes cultural materialism highly analogous to Darwinian natural selection theory.

As a form of theoretical materialism, cultural materialism has drawn heavily on marxist historical materialism by dropping some of its assumptions and combining its materialist core with some of the leading notions in cultural ecology (i.e., the determining role of the physical environment) and social evolutionism (i.e., the cultural selection of adaptive sociocultural patterns). However, it is important to spell out the major differences between historical and cultural materialism. First, it is obvious that cultural materialism is a broader form of materialism, since it gives a degree of importance to the physical environment far beyond what Marx ever did. Moreover, cultural materialism's strong emphasis on demographic factors, especially the roles of population growth and population pressure, is totally at odds with historical materialism. Marx reacted very negatively to Althusser's notion that overpopulation was the primary cause of poverty, and marxists this day are extremely reluctant to give population growth and population pressure an important causal role in social life. Indeed, they stress that rates of population growth are dependent rather than independent variables.

A second major difference between cultural and historical materialism concerns the placement of what Marx called the relations of production, or the forms of ownership of the productive forces. For Marx, these formed a fundamental part of the economic base. Harris, on the other hand, placed them within the political-economic component of the structure and argued that it is important to see how modes of economic ownership are shaped by the modes of production and reproduction.

However, it should be pointed out that Harris has not always been consistent in applying this formal theoretical argument to actual sociocultural cases. In his analyses of preindustrial and precapitalist societies, Harris generally has treated the form of economy as part of the structure; but in the analysis of modern capitalist societies, he has generally treated the relations of production (under the general heading of "economy") as among the leading causal determinants of the remaining sociocultural components. Thus, Harris comes closer to the original marxist position when he is engaged in studying the modern capitalist world.

Finally, Harris has been adamant in his rejection of the dialectical component of historical materialism. He has referred to Hegel as the "monkey on Marx and Engels's back," and asserted that dialectics is nothing but rarefied philosophical nonsense. For him, the main weakness of dialectics is the absence of any operational principle for specifying which particular social contradiction might be fundamental in any particular place and at any particular time. Since the notion of dialectics has no scientific validity, Harris recommends simply dropping it (see DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM).

As the person who named and largely created cultural materialism, Harris has unsurprisingly been the most vigorous proponent of its research application, and he has made more such applications than any other anthropologist. In a series of books Harris has attempted to explain a variety of cultural phenomena (Harris 1974, 1977, 1981, 1985). These include FOOD TABOOS and dietary practices (the Indian sacred cow, the Jewish and Muslim abominable pig, Aztec CANNIBALISM, and many others), primitive WARFARE, the great WITCH craze of late medieval Europe, the long-term evolution of human societies, the recent feminist movement in the Western world, the proliferation of religious CULTS and violent crime in the United States. Other anthropologists have also made important cultural-materialist research applications. For example, M. Kay Martin and Barbara Voorhies (1975) have developed a cultural-materialist interpretation of gen-

der roles, Mark Cohen (1977) has developed a cultural-materialist explanation of the origins of agriculture, and Robert Carneiro (1970) has developed a famous materialist theory of the origin of the state. (An excellent summary of the wide anthropological application of cultural-materialist principles is provided in Harris 1979: 77-114.)

See also EVOLUTION, MATERIALISM
further reading E. Ross 1980

cultural pluralism See PLURAL SOCIETIES

cultural relativism expresses the idea that the beliefs and practices of others are best understood in the light of the particular cultures in which they are found. The idea is predicated on the degree to which human behavior is held to be culturally determined, a basic tenet of American cultural anthropology. This is often joined with the argument that because all extant cultures are viable adaptations and equally deserving of respect, they should not be subjected to invidious judgments of worth or value by outsiders. Alternatively, some argue that since all norms are specific to the culture in which they were formulated, there can be no universal standards of judgment.

Cultural relativism in American cultural anthropology is often attributed to the critique of social evolutionist perspectives by Franz Boas and his students, especially Ruth BENELECT, Margaret MEAD, and Melville HERSKOVITS. Boas criticized the use of EVOLUTIONARY STAGES as the basis for organizing museum displays, arguing that exhibits should display artifacts in the context of specific cultures.

Most societies are not relativist: they view their own ways as good, other people's as bad, inferior, or immoral — a form of ETHNOCENTRISM. However, the reverse is also possible, a syndrome Melford Spiro (1992b: 62-7) termed "inverted ethnocentrism," in which some anthropologists go well beyond relativism to assert that Western culture is globally inferior to Primitive or Third World cultures.

Cultural relativism as an approach can be contrasted with the search for human UNIVERSALS, the latter often grounded in claims based on such analytic perspectives as Freudian psychology, marxist political economy, Darwinian natural selection, or technoenvironmental determinism. Strong cultural relativists often see anthropology more as an art than a science and prefer to interpret symbolic meanings rather than explain social mechanisms. Clifford GEERTZ (1984b) has been an influential spokesman for this approach.

In the broader philosophical context, cultural relativism is sometimes merged with cognate forms of relativism (moral, ethical, cognitive, linguistic, historical, etc.) under the general rubric of Relativism, which is then seen in opposition to Rationalism, or occasionally, Fundamentalism (see M. Hollis & Lukes 1982). In treating the lively debates on cultural relativism in anthropology and philosophy, Spiro (1992b) discussed cultural relativism in relation to both cultural diversity and cultural determinism. Taking the existence of cultural variation as well documented, as do most anthropologists, he distinguished three types of cultural relativism — descriptive, normative, and epistemological — each with its attendant subtypes.

These detailed distinctions have not become conventional within the discipline. Most anthropologists remain content to distinguish the first-order methodological use of cultural relativism in anthropology from insensitive ethnocentric attempts to arrive at final ethical, moral, or scientific judgments.

culture The earliest anthropological use of "culture" was by E. B. TYLOR (1871), who defined it memorably as that "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." Tylor's formulation can still serve today to express anthropologists' views. First, culture comprises those human traits that are learned and learnable and are therefore passed on socially and mentally, rather than biologically. Second, culture is in some sense a "complex

whole." Although hotly debated, the fundamental idea that all those "capabilities and habits" can and should be considered together is a powerful one. It means that vast areas of human life, spanning everything from techniques of food production to theories of the afterlife, have some coherence and a distinct logic that can be discovered by a single discipline.

It was Franz Boas who championed the concept of culture, and with it the discipline of anthropology, to challenge the elaborate and influential late-nineteenth-century theories that attributed most human differences to RACE — that is, biological inheritance. Anchored in the new science of biology by evolutionary ideas, they suggested that some races, when compared to northern Europeans, were more primitive and therefore more animal-like in bodily form, mental ability, and moral development.

Boas (1911) broke the evidently seamless simplicity of this theory by showing that bodily form was not linked to language nor to any of the matters we associate with culture. In addition, he challenged the assumption that other "races" were less moral or less intelligent than northern Europeans. Whereas Tylor had spoken of "culture" in the singular, on the assumption that all societies possessed a more or less advanced version of the same heritage, Boas wrote of plural "cultures" that were different and could not be measured against some supposed single standard of advancement. Moreover, he argued that the complex forms and patterns in human life, when investigated through FIELDWORK, were so various that they could not arise from a uniform process of social or cultural EVOLUTION, or from biological or geographical causes, but were fruits of complex local historical causes that escape simplification.

These ideas were later elaborated by his students, including Edward SAPIR, Alfred KROEBER, Margaret MEAD, and Ruth BENELECT. They argued that although human beings everywhere possessed much the same biological heritage, human nature was so plastic that it could sustain kaleido-

scopically different sets of values, institutions, and behaviors in different cultures. Margaret Mead, for example, spent a long career of fieldwork demonstrating how matters that might appear to be easily explained by human biology — the experience of ADOLESCENCE, patterns of SOCIALIZATION, SEX roles in society — vary so greatly that no simple natural scientific explanation could comprehend them. And Kroeber espoused the notion that culture is "superorganic," possessing a unique character within itself that goes beyond anything that could arise in the course of biological evolution.

Other Boasians devoted themselves to exploring the notion of culture within the bounds of anthropology. Benedict (1934a) argued that a culture was not simply a "planless hodgepodge" or an affair of "shreds and patches," as her older contemporary Robert LOWIE supposed. Rather, each culture "discarded elements which were incongruous, modified others to its purposes, and invented others that accorded with its taste" (p. 34). The result was a way of life arranged around a few aesthetic and intellectual principles that produced a unique *Weltanschauung*, a WORLDVIEW. These arguments contributed to setting an aspiration that is still very powerful today: the task of the anthropologist is not just to record a myriad of details about a people, but to demonstrate a deeper unity integrating different features of a culture. Running through her, and others', arguments were an aspiration to tolerance and a mutual informing and respect among societies.

It is difficult today to realize how important the ideas of Boas and his students were. At the end of World War II, US cultural anthropology set out upon an expansion that has made it by far the largest, and perhaps alongside French anthropology, the most generally influential national body of anthropology in the world. It was Boas and his students who set the agenda for that expansion, by establishing a faith and proposing a project. The faith lay in the force of culture, which distinguished human beings from animals and created an autonomous cultural and mental logic.

H

hallucinogens See DRUGS

Harris, Marvin (1927-) Marvin

Harris is one of the most important anthropologists of the second half of the twentieth century. His main contribution to anthropology is the development of a distinctive theoretical approach, CULTURAL MATERIALISM, which is a synthesis of marxist historical materialism, cultural ecology, and social evolutionary theory. Harris was born in Brooklyn, NY in 1927 and educated at Columbia University, where he took his Ph.D. in 1953. He then taught at Columbia until 1980, when he moved to the University of Florida as Graduate Research Professor of Anthropology.

Harris has authored or edited nearly 20 books. His first major work, *Patterns of race in the Americas* (1964), was based on his own fieldwork in Brazil. It looked at the development of different patterns of RACE and ETHNIC relations in the US South, highland Latin America (largely Mexico), and the Latin American lowlands (largely Brazil). Harris tried to explain, for example, the striking differences in the modes of racial categorization in the US South and Brazil. He also inquired into the question as to why the Spanish colonies in the Americas made such limited use of SLAVERY while Portuguese America (Brazil) employed it on a large scale.

In 1968 Harris published his most erudite work to date, *The rise of anthropological theory*, 750-page history of anthropological theory from 1750 to the present. In this work, Harris laid out quite systematically the basic principles of cultural materialism and traced its origins. Other anthropological theories are discussed and assessed in terms of their degree of departure from a materialist perspective. The book garnered

both praise and criticism, the latter particularly intense from partisans for views Harris attacked.

Harris also wrote extensively for non-professional audiences. He is best known for *Culture, people, nature* (1997), a general anthropology textbook first published in 1977 that is now in its seventh edition and widely used. It provides an excellent introduction to cultural-materialist thinking extensively applying it to a wide range of social and cultural phenomena. In 1981 Harris published *Cows, pigs, wars, and witches: the riddles of culture*, based on a series of essays published regularly in *National History Magazine*. The book attempted to explain so-called cultural riddles, such as the Hindu sanctification of the cow, a ban on eating it, or the Jewish and Muslim abomination of the pig, by showing that they were sensible ADAPTATIONS to practical conditions of life that people faced in different times and places. It was quickly followed by *Cannibals and kings: origins of cultures* (1977), where Harris laid out a theoretical model of social EVOLUTION and applied it to the last 10,000 years of human prehistory and history. The model made population growth, ecological depletion, and technological change the basic driving forces of history responsible for the evolution not only of economic systems, but of all the major features of human society. In 1985 Harris published *Good eat: riddles of food and culture*, one of his most engaging works. This work was devoted to explaining FOOD TABOOS and DRINKING PATTERNS all over the world in terms of cultural materialist principles.

Harris developed the basic principles of cultural materialism in the 1950s and 1960s, but it was in the 1970s and 1980s that he wrote many of his most important

works applying this perspective to particular cultural phenomena. In 1979 Harris published *Cultural materialism: the struggle for a science of culture*, which laid out the basic principles of cultural materialism more extensively than Harris had done previously. The book also criticized, quite heavily in most cases, the other major competing paradigms in anthropological theory. In a short book Harris (1981) later applied cultural materialism to explain the important changes in US society since the end of World War II; in another he attempted to explain population growth and the world and throughout history (Harris & Ross 1987a).

Harris's production has slowed in recent years, and he may have reached the end of his intellectual creativity. But even if he writes another word, his intellectual production has been prodigious and enormously important. Modern anthropology is indubitably indebted to him, and his intellectual influence has been great.

SS
CLASSIFICATION, ECOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY, ECONOMIC ANTHROPOLOGY, MATERIALISM

Hawaiian kinship systems classify kin terms primarily by generation relative to Ego, so that, for instance, all men of father's generation are referred to by the same term as the father, and cousins are referred to as "brothers" and "sisters" (see figure 1). Hawaiian kinship terms are a variety of CLASSIFICATORY KINSHIP SYSTEMS.

ITEM, often associated with AMBILINEAL DESCENT and AMBILOCAL RESIDENCE. MR

head-hunting is the decapitation of enemies and the collection of their heads. It has been reported in the Americas, Asia, and Europe, but the motives given and the treatments of the severed heads vary. During interethnic warfare in the Balkans in the last century, men wore the heads of their enemies on their belts as proof of bravery (Durham 1923). The Ilongot of the Philippines left the heads of their victims at the scene of the killing, which they explained as relieving the "weight" of grief or insult (R. Rosaldo 1980: 140-2). In Papua New Guinea, the Marind Anim reportedly took heads in order to replenish their stock of personal names, whereas in Borneo newly obtained heads provided the focus of major festivals, which were said to revitalize whole communities. The Jivaro of Ecuador preserved only the scalp and facial tissues to produce the famous shrunken heads, whereas the ancient Scythians of the Black Sea region used the skullcap as a drinking cup (Herodotus 1987 [440 B.C.E.]: 4-65). The North American practice of scalping might be seen as a variant of head-hunting (Axtell 1981a).

The variety of beliefs and practices concerning head-hunting undermines universal explanations. The most prevalent theory posits a kind of alienable "soul-substance" concentrated in the head. The idea was first applied to the Toraja of

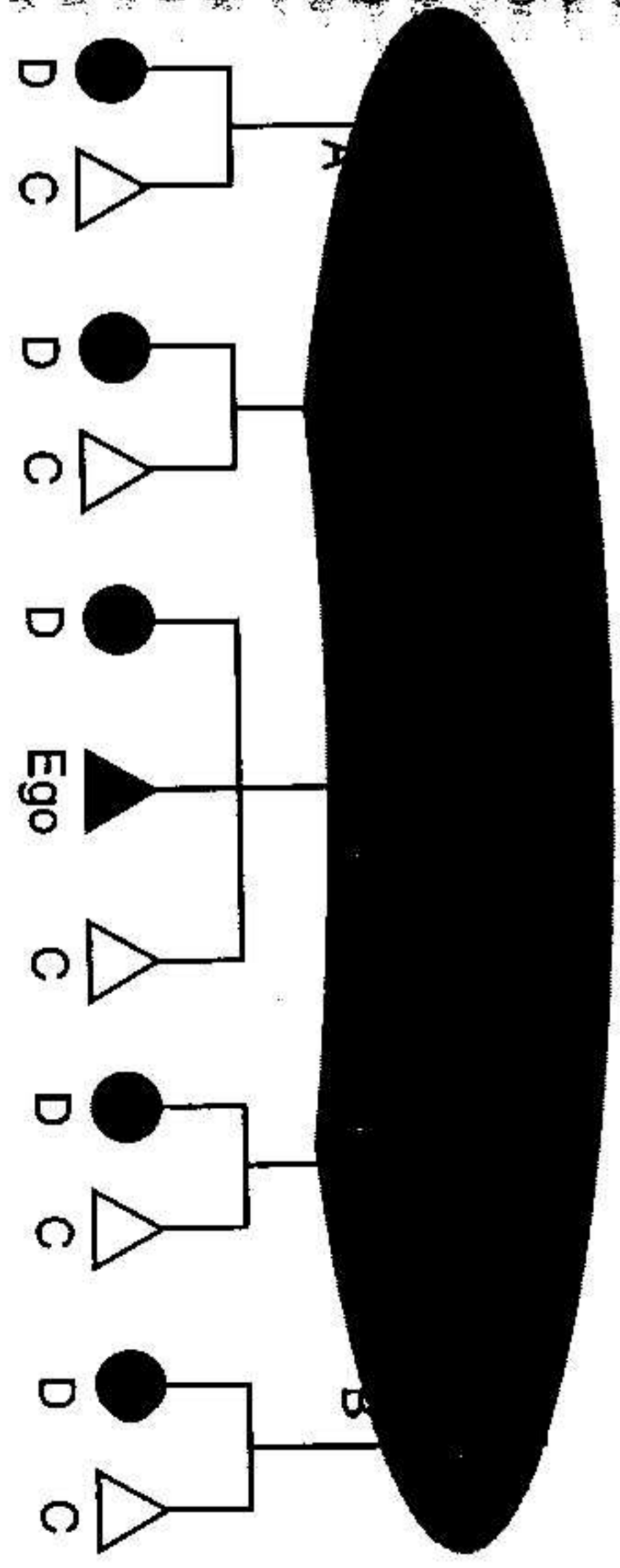


Figure 1 Hawaiian kinship system.