Harris's Cultural Materialism

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Credit

This presentation is based on the theory of Marvin Harris as presented in books listed in the bibliography. A summary of this and other macro-social theories can be found in *Macrosociology: Four Modern Theorists*, by Frank W. Elwell.

Cultural Materialism

Marvin Harris (1927-2001), a cultural anthropologist, is responsible for the most systematic statement of cultural materialist principles.

Cultural Materialism

Cultural materialism is a systems theory of society that attempts to account for their:

- origin
- maintenance
- change

Dept. of Ethnology, Royal Ontari

Assumptions:

Cultural Materialism is based on two key assumptions about societies. First, the various parts of society are interrelated. When one part of society changes, other parts must also change.

Assumptions

This means that an institution, such as the family cannot be looked at in isolation from the economic, political, or religious institutions of a society. When one part changes it has an effect on other parts of the system.

Assumptions

Viewing society as a system of interrelated parts is at the core of most sociological theory.

Difference in most theories is in terms of organizing principles.

Assumptions

The second assumption of CM is that the foundation of the sociocultural system is the environment.

David Curl, Oxford Scientific Film

Environment

The physical, biological, and chemical constraints to which human action is subject.

Steffen Hauser, Oxford Scientific

Environment

Like all living organisms, Humans must draw energy from their environment.

The environment is limited in terms of the amount of energy and raw material it contains, and the amount of pollution it can tolerate.

Environment

The need to draw energy out of the environment in order to satisfy the biological needs of its people is the first and central task of any society.

Environment

Therefore, each society must ultimately exist within the constraints imposed by its environment.

George Holton, Photo Researche

Environmental Constraints

- Chief among these constraints is the availability of natural resources. A further constraining factor is the amount of pollution created by society.

- While mankind can modify these constraints, they cannot be escaped.

Universal Pattern of Societies

All human societies are patterned along similar lines. Based on an environment, all can be classified as having:

- Infrastructure
- Structure
- Superstructure

Infrastructure

The material infrastructure consists of the technology and social practices by which a society fits in to its environment.

Infrastructure

It is through the infrastructure that society manipulates its environment by modifying the amount and type of resources needed.

Francois Gohier, Photo Research

Infrastructural Components:

- Technology (mode of production)
- Population (mode of reproduction)

Dr. A.C. Twomey, Photo Researc

Infrastructure

The modes of production and reproduction are attempts to strike a balance between population level and the consumption of energy from a finite environment.

Mode of Production

Consists of behaviors aimed at satisfying requirements for subsistence.

- Technology of subsistence
- Technological-environmental relationships

Modes of Production through History

- Hunting and Gathering
- Horticulture
- Pastoral
- Agrarian
- Industrial
- Hyper-industrial

Arthur Tress, Photo Researchers

Criteria for Classifying Societies

Type	Cultivate	Metal	Plow	Iron	Fossil Fuel	HiTech
H&G	-	-	-	-	-	-
S. Hort	+	-	-	-	-	-
A. Hort	+	+	-	-	-	-
S. Ag	+	+	+	-	-	-
A. Ag	+	+	+	+	-	-
Ind.	+	+	+	+	+	-
Hyper	+	+	+	+	+	+

Mode of Reproduction

Consisting of behaviors aimed at controlling destructive increases or decreases in population size.

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MODE OF REPRODUCTION

- Demography
- Mating patterns
- Fertility, natality, mortality
- Nurturance of infant
- Medicine
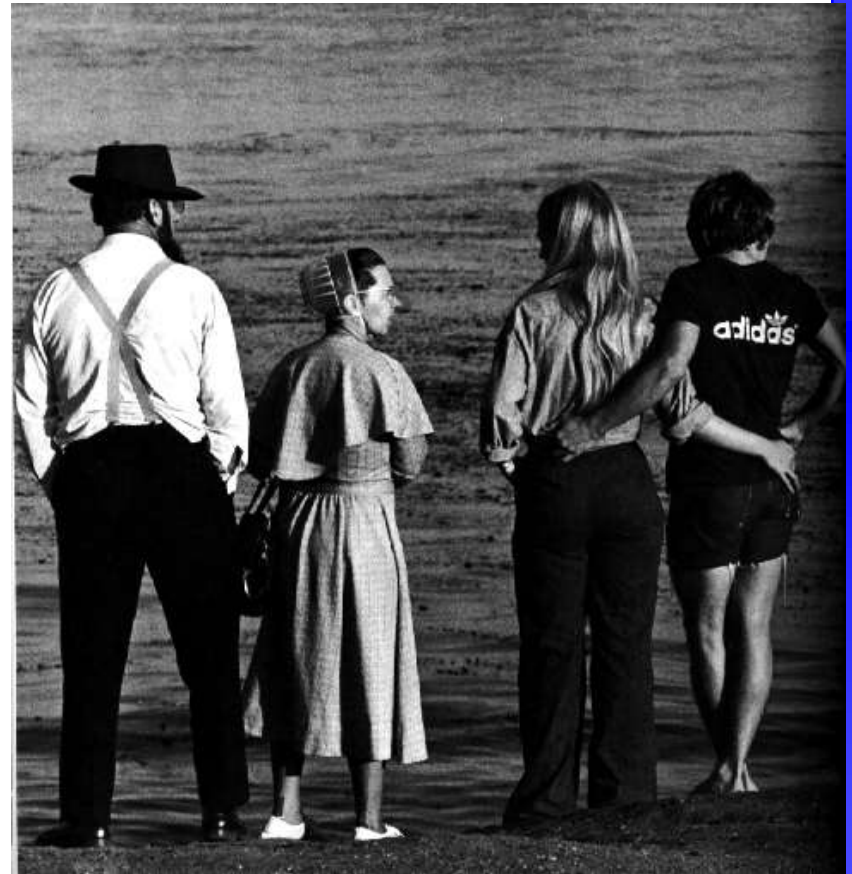- Contraception, abortion, infanticide

Infrastructure

It is upon this environmental-infrastructural foundation that the remaining parts of the social system are based.

Social Structure

This component of sociocultural systems consists of the organized patterns of social life carried out among the members of a society.

Social Structure

Each society must maintain secure and orderly relationships among its people, its constituent groups, and with neighboring societies.

Nevada Hist. Society

Social Structure

The threat of disorder, Harris asserts, comes primarily from the economic processes which allocate labor and the products of labor to individuals and groups.

Social Structure

- Thus Harris divides the social structure into two parts:
  - Political Economy
  - Domestic Economy

Political Economy

These groups and organizations perform the functions of regulating production, reproduction, exchange, and consumption within and between between groups and sociocultural systems.

Political Economy

- Political organizations, factions, military,
- Corporations, Division of labor, police,
- Education, media, taxation, urban, rural hierarchies, war, class, caste,
- Service and welfare organizations,
- Professional and labor organizations.

Domestic Economy

The organization of reproduction, basic production, exchange and consumption within domestic settings (such as households, camps, apartments).

Domestic Economy

- Family structure, domestic division of labor, education, age and sex roles,
- Community, domestic discipline, hierarchies, sanctions,
- Voluntary organizations,
- Friendship Networks,
- Some religious groups.

Superstructure

Given the importance of symbolic processes, Harris also posits the universal existence of a superstructure.

Superstructure

- Again, Harris divides this component into two parts:
  - Behavioral
  - Mental

Behavioral Superstructure

The Behavioral Superstructure includes recreations activities, art, sports, empirical knowledge, folklore, and other aesthetic products.

Behavioral Superstructure

- Art, music, dance, literature
- Rituals, advertising,
- Sports, games, hobbies,
- Science

Mental Superstructure

The mental superstructure involves the patterned ways in which the members of a society think, conceptualize, and evaluate their behavior.

Mental Superstructure

Harris posits that these mental categories actually run parallel to the universal behavioral components of the social structures--that is, there are belief systems that serve to justify and encourage behavior in each of the three components of society.

Mental Superstructure

- Infrastructure: Ethnobotany, ethnozoology, subsistence lore, magic, religion, taboos.

- Structure: Kinship, political ideology, ethnic and national ideologies, religion, taboos.

- Superstructure: Symbols, myths, aesthetic standards and philosophies, ideologies, magic, religion, taboos.

Mental Superstructure

However, for the sake of simplicity he designates them as the "Mental Superstructure" by which he means "…the conscious and unconscious cognitive goals, categories, rules, plans, values, philosophies, and beliefs about behavior elicited from the participants or inferred by the observers" (p. 54).

Universal Structure

All sociocultural systems, according to Harris, have these three major components: Infrastructure, Structure, and Superstructure. The major principle of Cultural Materialism concerns the relationships between these components.

Principle of Infrastructural Determinism:

The mode of production and reproduction (infrastructure) "probabilistically determines" (strongly influences) political and domestic structure, which in turn probabilistically determines the behavioral and mental superstructure.

Principle of Infrastructural Determinism:

This principle is based on a reformulation of the insights of Karl Marx (production) and T. Robert Malthus (reproduction).

Principle of Infrastructural Determinism:

Harris' unique contribution is in clearly defining both population and production variables (eliminating the "dialectic" from Marx and the moral angst from Malthus) and in combining and interrelating these two powerful forces in the infrastructure.

Principle of Infrastructural Determinism

The principle is a research strategy. When attempting to explain or understand a widespread practice, event, or belief, Harris advocates that your first step should be to look to the phenomena's relationship to infrastructural practices.

System Feedback

While the infrastructure is considered to be of primary importance, the structure and superstructure are not mere reflections of infrastructural processes, but are in interaction with the infrastructure.

Negative System Feedback

Societies are very stable systems. The most likely outcome of any change in the system is resistance in other sectors of society.

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Negative System Feedback

System maintaining negative feedback is capable of deflecting, dampening, or extinguishing most system change.

Negative System Feedback

The result is either the extinction of the innovation or slight compensatory changes that preserve the fundamental character of the whole system.
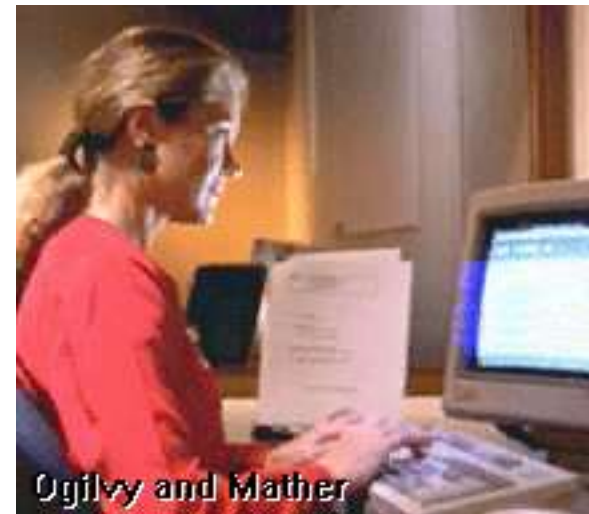
Positive System Feedback

But there are times when change is rapid and fundamental--revolutionary in character.

Hulton-Deutsch Collection

Positive System Feedback

In general, sociocultural change that releases more energy from the environment is likely to be swiftly adapted.

Ogilvy and Mather

System Feedback

So while infrastructural - environmental relationships are central in explaining sociocultural change, CM also recognizes the importance of structures and superstructures in determining the speed, and character of change.

Individual Behavior

There is a basic imbalance between our ability to have children and our ability to obtain energy for their survival.

Individual Behavior

The link between sociocultural systems and individual behavior is through individual cost/benefit decisions regarding sexual behavior, children, work, and living standards.

Individual Behavior

There are several "selective principles" operating at the individual level that guide these decisions. These selective principles are the bio-psychological cost/benefit calculus that serves to guide human behavior within a given sociocultural system.

Individual Behavior

The selection process responsible for sociocultural evolution therefore operates on the individual level.

Biopsychological Needs

According to Harris, there are four such bio-psychological selective principals:

- Eat
- Energy
- Sex
- Love

Need to Eat

People need to eat and will generally opt for diets that offer more rather than fewer calories and proteins and other nutrients.

Ken Graham, ALLSTOCK, INC.

Need to Conserve Energy

People cannot be totally inactive, but when confronted with a given task, they prefer to carry it out by expending less rather than more human energy.

Need for Sex

People are highly sexed and generally find reinforcing pleasure from sexual intercourse.

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/Veni

Need for Love

People need love and affection in order to feel secure and happy, and other things being equal, they will act to increase the love and affection others give them.

Individual Selection

Since we are relatively free from biological drives and pre-dispositions, we learn the vast repertoire of human behavior through the socialization process.

Individual Selection

So, while the needs are universal, the ways in which societies meet these needs are highly variable. The entire sociocultural system rests on the way society exploits its environment to meet the bio-psychological needs of its population.

Role of Elites

But it is not the simple calculation of the greatest good for the greatest number of people that accounts for sociocultural change.

Role of Elites

Many changes are more satisfying to some members of society than to others.

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Role of Elites

Infrastructural change that enhance the position of elite are likely to be amplified and propagated throughout the system.

Role of Elites

Sociocultural materialism is in agreement with Marx when he states: "The ideas of the ruling class in each epoch are the ruling ideas."

Role of Elites

The elite are able to impose direct economic and political sanctions to get their way. Elite also encourage ideas and ideologies favorable to their position.

Role of Elites

The amount of power and control exercised by elite varies across societies and through time.

UPI/BETTMANN

Elite Interests

One of the first tasks of a Cultural Materialist analysis is to attempt to identify the elite, gauge the amount of power that they wield, and uncover their biases and assumptions when analyzing sociocultural systems.

The CM Research Strategy:

A society's infrastructure is the primary cause of stability and change in its structure, and the structure, in turn, is the primary cause of stability and change in its superstructure.

The CM Research Strategy:

Through the principle of infrastructural determinism, cultural materialism provides a logical set of research priorities for the study of sociocultural life.

The CM Research Strategy:

It is a research strategy uniquely suited to exploring short-term sociocultural stability and change -- or the long-term social evolutionary process itself.

Note:

For a more extensive discussion of Harris' theory, as well as a fuller discussion of its implications for understanding human behavior, refer to *Macrosociology: Four Modern Theorists*. For an even deeper understanding of Harris' thought, read from the bibliography that follows.

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