Paranoid Materialism

On Marvin Harris’ Cultural Materialism
— a Review Article

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Cultural Materialism is Marvin Harris’s attempt at a major theoretical opus. Starting with the outside cover, embossed with the initials M.H., we already confront what is to be yet another of Harris’s exercises in arrogance. The book is a vast undertaking that aims at establishing the absolute supremacy of cultural materialism as the only real science of anthropology. It seeks to destroy the enemy by force of calumnny and academic excommunication rather than by force of argument. Harris’s general attitude to non-cultural materialists is nothing new in spite of the fact that it shocked one reviewer into the assertion that the “author’s vanity has dulled his wits” (Sennett 1979). What is astonishing is that an anthropologist of Harris’s stature, who claims to adhere to the strictest canons of theory and falsification, should never have changed his mind in all these years. On the contrary, cultural materialism appears instead to have become an instrument in an academic power struggle, suggesting a deeper “etic” reality beneath the pompous materialist discourse.

It is to be expected that this reviewer, as one of Harris’s targets and a critic of cultural materialism, should maintain a negative stance. But I would claim that I have attacked Harris’s work with rational arguments rather than with a barrage of hysterical propaganda, and it is this I shall continue to do in this unjustly brief review.

There is one good thing about Cultural Materialism. It lays bare, for the first time, Harris’s complete theoretical outlook and, presumably, all his best arguments concerning the inadequacy of other approaches. As such it is an extremely important presentation which is, for the first time, worked out in a systematic form. All the bad things follow from the one good thing. There are so many of them that I must, for the time being, restrict my discussion to major themes.

Harris begins with epistemology. He eulogizes science, the “unique and precious contribution of western civilization” (Harris 1979: 27), contrasting it with all varieties of obscurantism, mysticism and eclecticism.

“The alternative to science is not anarchy but ideology ... aggressive fanatics and messiahs eager to annihilate each other and the whole world if need be.” (Harris 1979: 27.)

This is the conclusion of a rather uneventful discussion of Popper and post-Popperian philosophy of science to which, moreover, Harris fully subscribes on the surface. Cultural materialism is defined as a “research strategy”, an explicit framework within which theories can be generated. Its purpose is “to account for the origins, maintenance and change of the global inventory of socio-cultural differences and similarities” (op. cit.: 27). Very ambitious and very academic! Why differences and similarities? There must be more important questions to ask, fundamental questions about social transformational processes, crises, collapse, exploitation, the mystification of social life. The fundamental processes of human social systems cannot be reduced to sociocultural differences and similarities. If physicists defined their research strategies as does Harris, we would never have had a classical mechanics nor a theory of relativity. It is indeed odd that Harris, who is clearly interested in fundamental human problems, should maintain such a trivial definition of “science”. He is, of course, entitled to his definition, but his tendency to conflate his own approach with science in general is pure ideological wishful thinking. His attitude is best captured in the violent condemnation of relativists, those who would reject the emic/etic distinction, i.e. those who would plunge us into a “new age of ignorance and oppression” (op. cit.: 341). This is clearly an attempt to eliminate the rest of anthropology from the realm of science. It also demonstrates a megalomania more characteristic of political party bosses than of anthropologists—perhaps a response to the effective alienation and powerlessness of social science in its own society. If, as Harris claims, the absence of science is tantamount to catastrophe, how then did humanity come this far, especially as everything before the nineteenth century was apparently ideology. Social science has in fact had surprisingly little to do with the real world, and it is not likely that the absence of cultural materialism will prove relevant to the course of history.

I say that Harris uses propaganda rather than rational argument. He claims to follow Popper’s and Lakatos’s view of science as a process of theory and falsification. I have expressed the same view as have many others. But Harris obviously misunderstands their philosophy of science.
Scientific activity is defined as a process dependent on a relation between a theory or competing theories and an object. This implies nothing about the content of theory. To equate cultural materialism with science in general is an act of faith. A theory is never scientific in itself. It is only the way it is used, developed and replaced that is scientific. Harris's confusion, here, leads to a terrible muddle. Althusserian philosophy is a more sophisticated attempt to guarantee the exclusive scientificity of historical materialism on epistemological grounds. Like Harris, Althusser defines science as opposed to ideology in terms of the content of theory instead of as the process of theoretical development. But this is to be expected from the combination of French rationalism and intellectual elitism of academic communists. Historical materialism is, after all, the theoretical wing of an enormous political apparatus. In Harris's case, however, it is simply a question of a perverted desire to gain a monopoly over TRUTH. It indicates the extent to which cultural materialism is an academic ideology rather than a scientific approach. All that is missing is a political party.

It might appear useless to expend so much verbiage on a mere intellectual attitude, but the latter is in fact the foundation for much that is wrong in the following chapters.

The proof of my argument comes in chapter II, where Harris elevates the emic/etic distinction to the status of epistemology. As this distinction is the basis of the cultural materialist enterprise, its definition as the necessary condition of social science enables Harris to eliminate other approaches from the outset. The “foundation” of science consists in the four-fold set of distinctions:

emic/etic = participant's viewpoint/observer's viewpoint
mental/behavioral

This Harris considers to be a revolutionary new advance on the Marxist distinction between real conditions and mystified experience.

For Harris, behavior and thought represent two entirely discrete realms of reality subject to two separate kinds of theories (p. 31). Now this is not a question of epistemology but a testable empirical hypothesis. The assertion that the behavior stream is independent of mental activity is falsified by the very linguistic science from which Harris takes his emic/etic distinction. The phonetic output of human speech is a product generated by the phonemic and higher level emic structures of language. There is no purely phonetic behavior as such, only phonetic results and a set of phonetic possibilities. Language behavior is a result of a specific mental organization—but all this should be obvious. Harris's arbitrary division of human beings into purely behavioral and mental components is contrary to everything we know about the organization of human activity. Even behaviorist psychologists had to admit some years ago that they could not account for the causes of so-called operant behavior . . .

The emic/etic distinction is a classic example of the elitist attitude of cultural materialists. Harris tries in vain to define an absolute "scientific community" whose categories of time, space, weight etc. (op.cit.: 36) define the scope of the etic. The emic/etic distinction as used by Harris leads to the following absurdities:

1. What is etic for the observer is emic for the observer of the observer. The emic/etic distinction as defined is entirely relative to the positions of observer and observed communities. The only escape from this is to define an absolute and therefore static scientific community, i.e. an absolute scientific subject. It is questionable whether this is any more than an ideological reification of a social relation defined by a monopoly over TRUTH.

2. If participant and observer happen to have the same view of reality then the entire emic/etic distinction collapses. Only the dominance relation between scientist and subject remains.

The emic/etic distinction has, thus, nothing to do with the real issue of the truth value of participants' conceptions of reality, with the nature of social mystification. A psychoanalytic patient who discovers the real dynamics of his behavior passes from emics to etics. A member of a society who correctly analyses its structure and yet continues to function as a member, displays emic and etic qualities simultaneously. A linguistic theory of emic structures that generate actual speech utterances is both etic and emic.

Now if the emic/etic distinction tells us nothing about the content of statements about reality, it surely cannot be used as an absolute criterion for a science of society. The secret of Harris's criteria is that, while falsely dividing up reality, they offer an invaluable ideological prop for cultural materialism. The "scientific way of knowing" implies that "one accepts etics" (op.cit.: 45). Otherwise, one surrenders to "the supreme mystification of total relativism" (ibid.).

The entire scheme dissolves as soon as one considers the misconceptions on which it is founded:

1. Thought and behavior are not discrete independent realities.
2. Emics and etics refer only to the social structure of academic science and imply nothing in the way of criteria for the evaluation of the truth value of statements about reality.
3. The above criteria are subject to empirical falsification and thus can only be promoted to the status of epistemological axioms by an act of total arbitrariness.

The Cultural Materialist Model

Harris's social system model is, if anything, a more vulgar form of the already vulgar historical materialism of the Second International. By vulgar I mean coarsely functionalistic. The terminology is taken from Marxism but the meanings are altered. The social system is defined as an adaptive machine whose parts function as follows:

1. To cope with minimal subsistence:  etic behavioral mode of production

2. To cope with population reproduction:

3. To cope with maintaining order in allocation of labor and goods:
   a) etic behavioral domestic economy
   b) etic behavioral political economy

4. "given the prominence of speech acts" (p. 52) and importance of symbolic behavior: etic behavioral superstructure

These etic behavioral components determine in their turn a corresponding set of emic components for infrastructure (mode of production and reproduction), structure (domestic and political economy) and superstructure. This is referred to as the mental emic superstructure. The model is based on so-called infrastructural determinism: Behavioral infrastructure determines behavioral structure determines behavioral superstructure. Then, in some unspecified way, the etic behavioral determines the emic mental, thus giving rise to the mental-emic superstructure. Harris's innovation with respect to historical materialism is his removal of social relations from the infrastructure and his removal of thought from behavior. But there is nothing really new in the basic relationships of the model. Plekhanov and Bukharin constructed more or less the same model half a century ago. The question of the convergence of historical and cultural materialism is something that I overlooked in my earlier critique of Harris. It now appears that there is no fundamental difference between the orthodox materialism of Bukharin's *Historical Materialism* and Harris's present conception, this in spite of the latter's surprisingly ignorant presentation of dialectical materialism. Harris is, if anything, even less clear than Bukharin on the reasons for the belief in infrastructuralism. The most that is said is that Nature is not indifferent to how it is used. Its unchanging properties are restraints that are "passed on to structural and superstructural levels" (*op.cit.*: 57). We are not, of course, told how this occurs. To say that we must eat in order to survive or that we have to reproduce biologically in accordance with our capacities to produce subsistence is clearly inadequate. Such trivialities imply nothing about how social systems work. They merely supply some limiting factors. Instead of repeating the same criticisms of the materialist model, I would like to take this opportunity to suggest an interesting parallel between cultural materialism and orthodox Marxism.

For Harris, infrastructure, structure and superstructure form a tight functional unity. The structure functions as a negative feedback device to maintain the infrastructural adaptation. Changes in the system tend to come from the infrastructure. Superstructure functions as a system maintainer as well. Political activity, even revolutionary movements, are capable only of "sustaining, accelerating, decelerating and deflecting the direction and place of the transformational process initiated within the infrastructure" (*op.cit.*: 73). All this can be found in Plekhanov: "Political institutions influence economic life. They either facilitate its development or impede it" (Plekhanov 1972: 163). Bukharin's model is strikingly similar to Harris's. The social system is defined as a moving equilibrium in which "the internal structure of the system (its internal equilibrium) must change together with the relation existing between the system and its environment" (Bukharin 1969: 79). Harris goes to great efforts to distinguish himself from Marxism, but a quick reading of Bukharin ought to convince anyone that little new has been added by Harris to that hallmark of functionalist materialism to the older orthodoxy do little to alter the basic scheme:

1. The malthusian dynamic of population pressure replaces the older technological dynamic as the driving force of history.

2. The cost/benefit mechanism is installed to narrow down the older functionalist-adaptationist explanations for the existence of given social institutions.

3. Statistical probability is introduced in place of the older notion of the complexity of interacting forces—i.e. dialectic (Bukharin 1969: 264).

Harris was once, like Bukharin, a proponent of the notion of the independent growth of technology. This has been replaced by a purely demographic approach inspired by the work of Boserup. The growth of technology is now seen as a mere response to population pressure generated by our uncontrollable sexual drive. Bukharin, too, is aware of the potential contradiction between population and production, but he assumes that
societies adjust their growth rates to their productive potential, a quite widespread hypothesis among cultural materialists. And he even refers back to the Physiocrats who claim, just like Harris, that primitive infanticide is a method of population control. The only difference here, is that while Harris accepts that there are a number of institutions that are invented to control population growth, he implies that they don’t work in the long run. This clearly contradicts his model of functional determinism, and it would seem, strangely enough, that the old Moscow academicians are more consistent than Harris’s New Science.

Causality as Accounting: the Idealism in Materialism

Cost/benefit analysis is Harris’s proposed way of linking material conditions to institutional arrangements. Evolution is a game of optimization where cultural change is often the sum total of individual choices (i.e. the Indian sacred cow).

“Cultural evolution, like biological evolution has taken place through opportunistic changes that increase benefits and lower costs to individuals” (Harris 1979: 61).

Cost/benefit analysis is the essential content of cultural materialist causality. We need not dwell on the implications of this notion, i.e. that social evolution has been largely beneficial to the majority of people. Even Harris doesn’t believe that any more. Nor is it necessary to point out that Harris never actually uses cost/benefit analysis to find out what happens in reality; that he merely claims that such optimization occurs. Instead we might point out the implications of cost/benefit analysis for the status of cultural materialism. Harris implies that social evolution can be reduced to a strategic planning operation in which the entire institutional structure of society is no more than a tool in an essentially practical exercise in population adaptation. Is this materialism? Might it be that materialist causality is no more than a mystified form of idealism? What, after all, is cost/benefit analysis if not a mental operation, whether conscious or not. No more can it be said that material conditions produce social forms. On the contrary, material conditions are actively responded to by an operations analyst. Not only is this idealism, but an extreme form of idealism that reduces society to the collective product of individual decisions. But then, perhaps what Harris means by materialism is that people are materialistic, a rather unusual interpretation. In any case, it makes Marx an idealist and Pareto an arch materialist.

The Dissolution of Determinism

As previously, Harris is still aware that infrastructural causality does not really work. In order to correct this situation without having to take the trouble to rethink the whole nature of social causality, Harris introduces a purely statistical notion of probability. Determination by the infrastructural can be more or less complete. Other factors can thus play decisive roles. The actual distribution of correlations in the HRAF appears to determine the causal weight of the several instances of society, i.e. the degree to which they deviate from the pure causal model. I have tried to demonstrate the tautological nature of this misuse of empirical statistical distributions as if they were real probabilities (Friedman 1974), but this has been ignored by Harris. It would, however, appear that Harris has been overwhelmed by reality to the extent that there is not much left of his causality. For he has to admit that,

“Cultural materialist theories may invoke different degrees of infrastructural causation, ranging from virtual certainty to virtual indeterminacy” (op.cit.: 74).

This might come as a shock to those who were convinced of Harris’s dogmatism. This weaker materialism now restricts itself to the claim that infrastructural determinism is a good theory because it works most of the time. The curious thing about this new position is that it is openly ECCLECTIC! Now there is a term that used to inspire rage in Harris. Can he now actually admit to such theoretical weakness? If structure and super-structure can play determinant roles, then the innocent cultural materialist baby has truly drowned in its bath of statistics. But Harris does not take this self-inflicted defeat seriously, since he continues, throughout the book, to express the usual disgust at other people’s decadent eclecticism.

Lust and Evolution

Chapter III is a presentation of the sum total of cultural materialist results concerning human social evolution. It can best be summed up as a combination of traditional neo-evolutionary stages and categories linked by the causal arrow of population pressure. Man’s filthy lust is, thus, the driving force of history. It has led to disastrous population growth pressing the limits of technologies, causing overintensification, depletion and, luckily, new technologies and social arrangements, the latter which are no more than necessary structures of adaptation to the material conditions created by increasing population. Most of the chapter is a recapitulation
of Cannibals and Kings.

I suggested above that Harris has increasingly moved towards a kind of historical materialism that is more than reminiscent of the old academicians. This is reflected in Cannibals and Kings where a frankly pessimistic view of evolution is taken, a view which has been spreading among cultural materialists and ecologists for some time and is, I think, an effect of the decline of Western hegemonic power (cf. Friedman 1978). In order for Harris to maintain his functional materialism in which all social organization is an adaptation to external conditions and therefore cannot be in contradiction to them, he must locate the problem in nature, in this case sex. It is easier to have children than to feed them. Hence evolution is reduced to a mad scramble to develop adaptive socio-technical systems capable of feeding larger populations. The contradiction is one between population and material conditions.

“If there was a dialectic at work it was a dialectic between population and resources” (op.cit.: 88).

This dialectic of demographic development continues until industrial capitalism when, due to capital intensification, people become less important for production. The intensification and depletion continue, however, in spite of the disappearance of population pressure, the original driving force. Why should this be the case? Harris provides no answer.

Harris’ Pandora’s Box: Social Relations

If “industrial modes of production” are able to solve the population problem by simply reducing the demand for people, we may rightly ask what then is the relation between population and production. Harris implies, with reference to capitalism, that population growth is a function of the demand for labor. This, in turn, implies that population growth is socially determined, that is, that it cannot be accounted for by natural biological drives. If demographic growth could be checked by the effects of capital intensive production, then pre-industrial growth ought also to have been controllable by social means. Demand-for-labor theory implies that significant categories, such as family heads, are largely responsible for the number of children to be had. One can only conclude, on the basis of what Harris himself says, that social relations have a determinate effect on the rate of population growth. The idea of autonomous demographic dynamics is thus put in serious jeopardy. Similarly, if population pressure is removed from the industrial mode of production, what is it that drives it forward?

We are confronted with the dangerous possibility that it is the nature of the social system itself that determines whether or not it is expansionist.

Harris has opened his own Pandora’s Box. Out fly the furies, social relations. If, as we have argued, Harris’s inconsistencies lead to a necessary recognition of the determinant role of social relations in the evolutionary process, then the entire cultural materialist edifice crumbles. The disasters of social evolution cannot be blamed on anything so innocent as human biology. It is rather a problem of the social nature of human social systems. Harris, of course, could never accept that human society is to blame for its own catastrophies. That would be tantamount to rejecting the functionalist causality on which his materialism is based.

Throughout the chapter we find a sprinkling of inanities that can only be understood as products of the fundamental inconsistencies of the general framework, a framework where social systems that are defined as finely tuned adaptive machines seem continuously to plunge Mankind into new calamities. Warfare, female infanticide, abortion, female oppression, polygyny and patriliney are all elements of a complex whose cost/benefit determined function is to maintain populations within viable limits. How unfortunate that all this oppressive machinery is a failure. Demographic growth is not checked. But if an institutional complex is meant to be an optimal adaptation, how can it be a failure unless there is something seriously wrong with the theory. The “intensifier-redistributor-warrior complex” is assumed to be a key to the evolution of the state. And yet its adaptive significance is never explained. Again we are confronted with the possibility, so frightening for Harris, that the social properties of a system may determine its expansionist and evolutionary potential. When dealing with the earliest states, Harris is confronted with the widespread occurrence of theocratic forms. Instead of the usual kind of materialist explanation of ideology we are offered the fantastic conspiracy-optimization theory, that it is “cheaper to produce obedience through mystification than through police-military coercion” (op.cit.: 96—100). Some may find it amusing to be told that pyramids were just part of a device to trick people into docility—a cheaper method than military force. This is the kind of nonsense that should not get past the editors. But the fantasy does not stop here. We are soon told that world religions are simply mystified replacements for the former redistribution of meat by elite classes, a result of “their futile attempt to relieve reproductive pressures by intensification, exploitation and warfare” (op.cit.: 105—110). Here we find the author tottering on the brink. Can he really believe that the ancient empires were so beneficial that exploitation and warfare can be described in adaptive terms?
There is no need to add more to the long list of Harris’s “explanations”. They all indicate the lengths to which one can go in order to avoid confronting the obvious fact that social evolution has been dominated by power structures whose accumulative tendencies are anything but adaptive. While Harris is certainly no admirer of the dominant classes of history, he is incapable of understanding that what’s good for the elite is not a function of the survival needs of dominated populations.

A Catalogue of Errors

The remainder of the book consists of a massive assault on sociobiology, structural Marxism, structuralism, cognitive anthropology, eclecticism and, finally, obscurantism.

Sociobiology comes out better than the others. Its methodology is accepted as fully scientific. But cultural materialism is superior insofar as it can account for everything claimed by sociobiology without reference to the genetic level. It can also explain differences that cannot be discussed by sociobiology which aims at universals. Cultural materialism and sociobiology clearly make excellent bedfellows in their total alienation from reality.

Dialectical materialism is so caricatured as to be hardly recognizable. We are told that in this approach matriliney is the negation of patriliney and that Homo Sapiens is the dialectical negation of Homo Erectus. If there are real sources for these supposed products of dialectical materialism, they must be quite obscure. The simple accusation of hegelianism is astonishing in light of the extensive discussion within Marxism itself of the contrast between hegelian and Marxist understandings of dialectics (e.g., Colletti 1973). Astonishing is the—perhaps strategic—omission of orthodox Marxist social theory, Plekhanov, Lenin, Bukharin and later products of the Moscow Academy who are in fact no closer to Harris’s picture of dialectical materialism than is his own brand. This is a case either of ignorance or of propaganda.

Structuralism is characterised as in previous discussions. We are again treated to some of Harris’s gems. It is, for example, most enlightening to discover that patrilateral cross-cousin marriage is not a form of exchange but a “simple reassertion of fathers’ control over male descendents in a matrilineal system” (op.cit.: 182) and a reflection of the “capacity of women to control labor and resources through their female descendents” (ibid.) in a patrilineal system. The problem is that patrilateral cross-cousin marriage implies just what Harris claims to be its cause. The reader immediately recognizes this as a tautology. But does Marvin Harris?

Structural Marxism, according to Harris, is eclectic, dialectic and structuralist and thus, quite useless. This is not the place to take up criticisms made of my own work, but one remark is in order. While it is, perhaps, due to an unclear sentence that my characterization of capital as a dominant fetish, an organizer of material relations, is reduced to an example of idealism by Harris. It ought to be clear that “fetish”, taken in context, refers to fetishized social relations that exist as material realities. If Harris cannot come to grips with this, it is because material reality is purely physico-behavioral for him, whereas for most of us it has a definite social form in which meaning, semantic properties, information, or what you will, play a crucial part. Harris compounds his error by being hard-headed enough to deny the reality of money. Capitalism, he claims, is based on the police force’s control over the population. The childishness of this argument becomes apparent when we ask why the police are not identical to the upper class. Now force is necessary to the maintenance of an exploitative system, but it is not the police who do the exploiting. They must also be paid in order to survive. Money, unfortunately, is not just an idea; nor police who do the exploiting. They must also be paid in order to survive. Money, unfortunately, is not just an idea; nor are other social relations. It ought to be obvious! Harris is quick to see similarities between Godelie’s exercises in structural causality and his own materialism. Other approaches continue, however, to confuse him. Thus, his failure to differentiate between operators and constraints (dominance and constraint), is revealing. Generally, the major confrontation has to do with Harris’s refusal to accept the autonomy of the social. Anything that neither occupies space nor has weight is by definition ideological and emic and, therefore, a mere effect.

The farce continues, and I feel forced to shorten the list which merely demonstrates the same thing time and time again. Thus, Durkheim’s collective consciousness is labeled reactionary. Furthermore, “leftists who accept emics do so in contradiction to their theory” (op.cit.: 285). Goody is better than other Englishmen, as I’m sure he is delighted to know. But his materialism is flawed by his eclectic unwillingness to reduce everything to population density. Phenomenology, Castaneda, people who challenge the absolute validity of Western science, especially cultural materialism, as forms of human alienation, all are degenerate enemies of humanity.

Sahlins has characterized the cultural materialist paradigm as “business on the scale of history”. Harris denies this on the grounds that his cost/benefit categories are not “measured in monetary terms” (op.cit.: 232). I leave it to the reader to assess the competence of the response.

Cannibals and Kings was, at least, good reading. Cultural Materialism
is not. M.H. has gotten himself into big trouble by saying too much. If he continues in this direction, it may no longer be necessary to criticize him.

REFERENCES

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