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Henri Kagan

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Phenomenon of human culture

Edmund Leach

Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture. By Marvin Harris. Pp.381. (Random House: New York, 1979.) \$15.

THIS is the sixth substantial book that Harris has published since the beginning of 1964. It would be unfair to say that to have read one is to have read them all but certainly there is a great deal of repetition. In the present case the author himself points out (page 77, footnote) that chapter 4, "The Scope of Cultural Materialist Theories", is a partial synopsis of his textbook *Culture, People, Nature: An Introduction to General Anthropology* (1971). Other familiar arguments derive from *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (1968), *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches: The Riddles of Culture* (1974) and *Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Culture* (1977), but have also appeared in various shorter productions. Second and third time round Harris has not modified any of his positions in response to the chorus of criticism from professional colleagues. Instead he stridently proclaims that he has been misrepresented and then counter-attacks in like measure.

The book is in two parts. Part 1, "Cultural Materialism as a Research Strategy", summarises Harris' position and only just falls short of claiming that Harris himself will prove to be as significant for the history of anthropology as Darwin has been for the history of zoology. Part II, "The Alternatives", contains chapters labelled "Sociobiology and Biological Reductionism", "Dialectical Materialism", "Structuralism", "Structural Marxism", "Psychological and Cognitive Idealism", "Eclecticism", and "Obscurantism". Collectively these "isms" are all embracing and there are few contemporary anglophone or francophone social or cultural anthropologists of any reputation, either distinguished or undistinguished, who do not get an adverse mention somewhere. Indeed, Harris manages to convey the impression that all current forms of anthropological theorising other than his own are completely worthless. For anyone who already knows the facts of the matter most of this shadow-boxing is extremely boring but Marshall Sahlins, whose long review of *Cannibals and Kings* in the *New York Review of Books* provokes repeated anathemas, must be quite delighted to have

got such a rise out of his victim.

It is useless for a reviewer to comment in any detail upon these exercises in academic abuse. Harris conducts a one-sided shouting match against named but inaudible opponents, but if one takes the trouble to discover what these opponents actually said it nearly always turns out either that the other side has much the stronger case or else that Harris' sarcasm completely misses the point. No doubt there are many of Harris' undergraduate readers who will only be too delighted to learn from a senior Professor that they need not bother to try to understand the mathematical, transformational intricacies of Lévi-Straussian structuralism because it is all a lot of nonsense anyway; but, to the initiated, all that Harris manages to demonstrate in this particular chapter is that he himself has completely misunderstood Lévi-Strauss.

The attack on the structural marxists has a more personal twist. In the first place Harris wants to persuade his readers that Cultural Materialism is a sort of improved Marxism with the Hegelian dialectic left out! But besides that, in attacking the 'idealism' of the structural marxists, he is also trying to get his own back on former colleague and pupil Marshall Sahlins and Jonathan Friedman, both of whom have treated Harris' earlier publications with mocking disrespect. But here again most readers are likely to feel that Harris gets much the worst of the argument. And so it goes on. No doubt some of the targets for Harris' boomerangs deserve to be hit, but his scorn is so indiscriminate that the only impression that survives is astonishment at Harris' personal vanity and lack of scholarly judgement.

So what is at issue? In part it is a very old argument indeed. Harris' favourite jargon which opposes 'emic' and 'etic' approaches to culture is only a rehash of the mediaeval disputations over the existence or non-existence of universals which divided the realists from the nominalists. Here Harris' support for an 'etic' position entails a realist universalist doctrine, which is curious in view of his otherwise passionate antipathy to the metaphysics of idealism in all its forms. In other respects Harris' creed is the unsophisticated materialism of the mid-nineteenth century, the standard definition of which is "the view that all facts (including facts about men's minds and wills and the course of human history) are causally dependent upon physical processes, or even reducible to them". Harris is obsessed with the idea that the anthropologist's essential task is to elucidate the causes which have produced the phenomena of human culture as they can now be observed and as they have occurred in history. He believes further that these causal sequences have been simple rather than complex and that the underlying causal principles can be discovered by *a priori* reasoning concerning energy inputs

and outputs without any reference to the fine details of historical or archaeological evidence. In Harris' view virtually all the diverse peculiarities of human culture can be "explained" by taking close note of such "empirical" factors as ecology, protein resources, and population density; but, above all, a universally valid economic law of nature will ensure that historical development will proceed in such a way that, in the long run, a minimax principle will govern the balance of cultural costs against cultural benefits. Harris seems to regard this principle as a sort of anthropologist's equivalent to the second law of thermodynamics; but, as Sahlin has pointed out, it is simply a value judgement among other value judgements and closely akin to the profit motive which so many of Harris' neighbours on Manhattan Island also consider to be a law of nature. Just how far Darwin was right in this regard on the issue of biological evolution is still an open question, but Harris' support of Adam Smith's earlier contention that, in free-for-all economic competition, efficiency will always win out against both politics and morality is mere mysticism.

Harris' professional colleagues disagree with him on a great variety of issues. I can mention only a few. Most of us would hold that in the absence of detailed historical records it is just as difficult to reconstruct the past as to predict the future, so that anthropologists will be well advised to devote their energies elsewhere. Harris' exercises in conjectural history are no doubt very satisfactory for that wide class of general reader whose members want to believe that everything is very orderly and simple and that everything that has ever happened in history is quite easily understood if only we apply the most simplistic principles of common sense; but it does not seem likely that there can be many members of the scholarly professions who would take that line.

Another major objection that has been raised against Harris' work is his irresponsible misuse of the limited historical evidence at his disposal. Any ordinary non-anthropological reader of Harris' books must get the impression that it is an unambiguous, fully established, historical fact that at the time of the Spanish conquest of Mexico the ordinary diet of ordinary Aztecs was desperately deficient in animal protein. Harris in fact claims that it is this dietetic deficiency which provides a "scientific" explanation for the uniquely elaborated institution of cannibalistic human sacrifice among the Aztec. But in fact there is no clear evidence that human sacrifice and cannibalism were closely associated among the Aztec or that the Aztec were ordinarily any more deficient in animal protein than most human populations at most periods of human history.

Complaints of this sort can be raised against almost the whole of Part I of Harris' book. He exhibits *Cultural*

Materialism as a crudely simplified theory of law-bound social evolution which most professional anthropologists are likely to find even less convincing than that offered by Morgan in *Ancient Society* (1878). The theory is not derived from any ethnographic evidence; ethnography is only brought in as illustration, but often in such a slap-dash way as to be totally misleading. For example, around page 104, Harris is discussing his theory of the origin of the state, which is heavily dependent upon the theory put forward by Wittfogel in 1957 concerning the significance of large scale irrigation works for the formation of centralised forms of administration. "It seems likely", writes Harris, "that there was a causal relationship between the size and importance of irrigation systems and the degree of centralisation of political power". He then illustrates this thesis by the examples which Wittfogel himself used: Nile Valley, Yellow River, and so on. But how likely is likely? How large is large? Harris never tells his readers that the earliest large scale irrigation system so far identified by the archaeologists is in Highland New Guinea, a discovery which runs entirely counter to the whole of Harris' *a priori* argument!

Nor is it only on technical issues of anthropology and archaeology that Harris seems at times to be almost wilfully careless. Harris would like his readers to believe that he is well grounded in the philosophy of science. At pages 13-14 we are given a one paragraph summary of logical positivism which is described simply as "a movement which arose in Vienna" (no names; no dates). Two pages later we are told that the verification principle of the logical positivists has been "severely attacked in recent years" under the influence of "the English philosopher Karl Popper". Needless to say *Logik der Forschung* (1935) is cited only in the English edition of 1959. For a scholar who makes such a fuss about the importance of origins and causal sequences this is surely a very astonishing way of presenting the complicated history of the Vienna Circle of which Popper himself was, almost from the start, a very influential, though peripheral, member.

This book will not add to Harris' professional reputation but, regrettably, the cheap sarcasm which Harris directs against the serious arguments of his colleagues often makes a good read. Consequently it may well reinforce the illusion created by Harris' other books that social/cultural anthropology is not a serious academic pursuit at all and that explanation in these fields exists only at the level of Kipling's *Just So Stories*. Some anthropological writing is like that, but not all. □

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