Book Reviews

A Historical Brief for Cultural Materialism

The Rise of Anthropological Theory. A History of Theories of Culture. MARVIN HARRIS. Crowell, New York, 1968. x + 806 pp. $16.50.

To begin with, a capsule statement and a word of explanation. This is a frankly controversial book whose often rather prickly polemic for a minority viewpoint in contemporary anthropology will raise a great many hackles. But in the absence of an adequate history of the discipline, it must at least temporarily preempt the field. More positively, it is in its own right a big book, an informative, interesting, and stimulating book which does indeed often illuminate the past of anthropology even as it seeks to redefine its present. Nevertheless, it is a book whose methodological assumptions seem to me in some respects profoundly unhistorical, and whose substance is at many points open to serious question—even, ironically, in terms of Harris's own point of view. Because Harris's explicit disagreement with a historiographical viewpoint I have elaborated elsewhere [see especially "On the limits of 'presentism' and 'historicism' in the historiography of the behavioral sciences," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* **1**, 211–18 (1965)] is quite central to the purpose of his book, my review can hardly avoid smacking a bit of personal intellectual confrontation. But so long as this does not subvert the normal informational and critical purposes of a book review, it seems to me not only appropriate, but indeed called for.

In a word—or more precisely, in two words—the issue between Harris and myself has to do with "presentism" and "historicism" as orientations toward the study of the past. Limits of space make extensive explication here impossible, but perhaps Harris's own comments will provide a minimal orientation, on which we can build as the argument proceeds:

> Anthropologists who seek to understand the history of their discipline are warned by Stocking that "the present day polemical point obfuscates historical understanding." To this we must at once reply, on the contrary, present-day polemical point alone makes historical understanding possible.

Harris's polemical point may be briefly stated: "My main reason for writing this book is to reassert the methodological priority of the search for the laws of history in the science of man." Lest we be in doubt where to search, Harris goes on to suggest that "the basic principle of a macro-theory of sociocultural evolution is already known"—the principle of "techno-environmental and techno-economic determinism," or, more familiarly, of "cultural materialism." History, then, is strictly instrumental—something Harris is "compelled" to undertake "in order to achieve a fair hearing for the cultural-materialist strategy." It has two quite specific purposes: first, to prove that anthropologists have never given cultural materialism a fair try (although they have played a major role in discrediting it); and second, to "demonstrate" that the reason for this neglect lies in "covert pressures of the sociocultural milieu in which anthropology achieved its disciplinary identity."

If it is subordinated to a polemical purpose, Harris's book is nonetheless explicitly a "history," and a professional historian may perhaps be excused for evaluating it as such, and for ignoring the problem of its validity as a program for contemporary anthropology. To facilitate historical evaluation, however, it will be helpful to suggest some further characteristics of the anthropological outlook in terms of which Harris approaches the past. He is much concerned with methodological and epistemological issues, with what he refers to as the "logico-empirical structure" of various anthropological points of view. To employ his terms, Harris's own anthropology is not only "materialist," it is also "nomothetic," "scientistic," "comparative," "etic," and "diachronic." Without pretending to offer a systematic "logico-empirical" contrast, one might pose against these such frequently recurring negatively charged terms as "idealist" (or "mentalistic"), "idiographic," "humanistic," "particularistic," "emic," and "synchronic." It is the evaluative antitheses of these two sets of terms which largely underlie the structure of Harris's history.

That history begins with the cultural-evolutionary scientism of the Enlightenment, which was unfortunately contaminated by the "fallacy of cultural idealism"—the "implacable dedication to the power of individual rational choice" which prevented the "great luminaries of the eighteenth century" from breaking through the "mind-culture-mind tautology" to an appreciation of the changing material conditions which provide the ultimate dynamic of cultural causation. From there, Harris proceeds through the early-19th-century reaction against scientism, its reaffirmation in the work of Quetelet and Buckle, its unfortunate misalliance with racial determinism, down to its efflorescence in the evolutionary schemes of Spencer, Tylor, and Morgan. But if the Spencerian "biologization of history" led *toward* materialism, "Spencerism in practice" was in fact "eclectic." Guilty of "distortions of history in the name of science," their "understanding of sociocultural causality blinded by the sands of racism," the evolutionists were not "cultural materialists in the full sense." That "breakthrough" was the contribution of Marx and Engels, who were "the first to show how the problem of consciousness and the subjective experience of the importance of ideas for behavior could be reconciled with causation on the physicalist model." Unfortunately, however, Marx and Engels read Lewis Henry Morgan, bought him "lock, stock, and barrel," and thereby wedded "the cultural-materialist strategy" to "an interpretation of primitive culture which was a by-product of a definitely non-materialist research strategy," and to an anthropological point of view which was subject to the sharpest sort of criticism in the 20th century.

As Harris enters the present century, his history becomes somewhat multilinear. However, the plot of the last two-thirds of the book can be briefly summarized. The turn of the century saw a worldwide resurgence of idiographic and idealistic orientations both within and outside anthropology. In the United States, Boasian "historical particularism," preoccupied with the exceptions to every law, initiated a 50-year period of "programmatic avoidance of theoretical syntheses"; in France, the scientism of Durkheim suffered from an "unfortunate idealist and mentalist bias which eventually overwhelmed all of its

virtues"; in Britain, the scientism of Radcliffe-Brown was vitiated by its commitment to synchronic analysis and its underlying psychological reductionism, and that of Malinowski by its inability to deal with culture change and its antimaterialist "emic" approach to economic phenomena.

If, however, "we must acknowledge the continued dominance of idiographic currents right through to the present moment," there has nevertheless been since the mid-1930's a resurgence of scientism, and by now "the full methodological initiative has been restored to the nomothetic tradition." ("The age of the computer will not be held back by the handful of exceptions with which the Boasians brought the machinery of social science to a grinding halt.") The "final rupture of the humanist and scientific traditions" is now at hand, and indeed "we have already entered a new era of creative theory in which once again a science of man based upon the comparative method boldly confronts the great questions of origins and causality." 'Tis the final conflict, let each stand in his place—for cultural materialism shall define the human race!

Commitment and Historiography

That Harris's polemical viewpoint structures his history should be clearly evident. The critical issue, however, is how, and within what limits, it contributes to our historical understanding. In the first place, it is necessary to note that when Harris argues that "present-day polemical point alone makes historical understanding possible," his choice of my words in his preceding sentence makes the opposition between us just a bit more polar than full context would justify. In fact, I specifically allowed that historical investigation motivated by present interests "can contribute in some ways to our historical understanding" at the same time that I emphasized the "all too frequent" concomitant of distortion and obfuscation. Thus in the present case I am quite willing to grant that Harris's commitment has raised for serious consideration a historical question which would have been much less likely to preoccupy someone not similarly *engagé*. Beyond this, it has governed his selection of data in such a way as to bring to the fore previously neglected topics and figures.

Thus his is certainly a broader and on the whole more inclusive history of anthropology than the one to which on many grounds it invites comparison: Robert Lowie's now 30-year-old *History of Ethnological Theory*. As Harris points out, one looks to the latter in vain for any treatment of Spencer or of Marx, or for any discussion of a number of figures who can be excluded from the history of anthropology only by a narrowly ethnographic definition of the discipline. Indeed, Harris's book is considerably more detailed than Lowie's on most questions. Furthermore, it avoids certain traditional misreadings of the history of anthropology: the notion that cultural evolutionism was a direct reflex of Darwinism, or that evolutionists were all believers in "unilineal" stages, or that they denied the role of cultural diffusion, or that they were untouched by 19th-century racialism. Perhaps more surprisingly, Harris is considerably more temperate and perceptive in his interpretation of Franz Boas than certain other recent historian-critics of Boasian assumption.

One might argue, of course, that cultural materialism, as a form of historical determinism, would encourage one to understand rather than to judge—or, in Harris's words regarding Boas: to "rise above personalities and adopt a cultural perspective." But if a "cultural perspective" does occasionally stimulate Harris's insight, or soften his judgment of a particular theorist's inadequacies, the governing perspective of his book is always frankly that of his polemical viewpoint, and in allocating his historiographical energies, he devotes much more effort to evaluation than to understanding. Indeed, as his rhetoric sometimes suggests, what Harris writes might be called "history as report card": so-and-so gets "good marks"; so-and-so must be "credited" with an advance. Now to make out a report card, a standard of evaluation is obviously crucial, and present-day polemical viewpoint serves admirably. But whatever their separate legitimacy or their mutual relationship, understanding and evaluation are not the same thing, and what facilitates one may in fact inhibit the other.

As I have indicated already, Harris's primary concern is to show that anthropology has never given cultural materialism a fair try. In practice, this means that the issue of materialism versus idealism becomes the crucial intellectual distinction of the book, and finer conceptual distinctions or subtleties of historical context tend to be minimized or neglected. Because Harris's overriding purpose is to show that French social science "has never, not to this day, followed a strategy other than that of cultural idealism," the distinction between French positivism and German idealism becomes "a false dichotomy" and Durkheim "in every respect the heir of a mixture of Hegelian and Comtean idealism." Similarly, because Harris is anxious to show that the issue is not, as Leslie White has erroneously assumed, between "evolutionism" and "antievolutionism," but rather "the general principles" which "would account for micro- and macro-evolutionary transformations," he defines evolution so loosely ("the change of one form into another") that not only Herbert Spencer *and* Franz Boas, but also Pater Schmidt, the 19th-century degenerationists, and the first ten chapters of Genesis are evolutionist. The major function of such lumping seems to me to be to facilitate evaluation as opposed to understanding. By the defining of phenomena in such a way as to strip them of historical specificity, by the lumping of a variety of historical manifestations within a single timeless, abstract umbrella category, present polemical issues are more sharply posed, and totalistic judgments are considerably simplified. "If we include not only those who are historical particularists, but the related viewpoints represented within culture and personality, the new ethnography, and structural-functionalism" within the rubric "idiographic," then the final conflict facing anthropology today can be posed a bit more simply than it might be if we insisted on subtler distinctions.

From the point of view of history, it might of course be argued that this blurring of distinctions contributes to our understanding by highlighting points of agreement between divergent intellectual orientations, and focusing our attention on other points of difference than those which have traditionally concerned us. But if so, this gain is won at the expense of other effects which can only be described as "obfuscating."

To illustrate this let me treat very briefly an issue on which I have done considerable historical research. Against A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, who follow the long-traditional view that the culture concept was first defined by E. B. Tylor in 1871, Harris argues that it existed in *"de facto"* form as early as 1750. As opposed to both these views, I have argued at some length, in two articles published in the *American Anthropologist* in 1963 and 1966, that the modern anthropological culture concept—whose crucial element is the notion of a *plurality* of different human cultures coexisting in the present and determining different modes of behav-

ior—did not really emerge until around 1900 in the work of Boas and his students. One might reasonably expect a "history of theories of culture" to confront this issue. Harris does so in two ways: on the one hand, by defining culture so loosely that, in his own words, "in this sense, a *de facto* concept of culture is probably universal"; and on the other hand, by ignoring completely the existence of my articles. The issue, of course, is not one of personal pique, but of historiographical consequences. In this case, they include, among others: a failure to appreciate fully the positive theoretical significance for cultural anthropology of Boas's critique of racial determinism; certain misunderstandings of 19th-century racial thought (which are compounded by Harris's need to condemn Spencer, Morgan, Tylor, and even Theodor Waitz as "racists" while exonerating Marx from the same charge); and a virtually complete neglect of the German roots of the culture concept (Herder is mentioned only once in the whole book).

Anthropology's Milieu

The issues I have discussed so far are related to the first of Harris's two instrumental purposes. Let us now turn to the second: the *reasons* for the failure to give cultural materialism a fair hearing—which Harris finds in the "covert pressures of the sociocultural milieu." The crucial passage on this issue comes at the conclusion of Harris's discussion of Marx and Engels: "With Morgan's scheme incorporated into Communist doctrine, the struggling science of anthropology crossed the threshold of the twentieth century with a clear mandate for its own survival and well-being: expose Morgan's scheme and destroy the method on which it was based."

In developing his argument, Harris rejects Leslie White's attempt to identify antievolutionary anthropologists directly with "reactionary and regressive" political currents. He acknowledges Boas's liberalism, and the radicalism of many others. The impact of reaction is a bit more indirect. It is manifested in the fact that Kroeber's salary during his first five years at the University of California came from the mother of William Randolph Hearst: "Under these circumstances, it is difficult to imagine how someone from the left end of the intellectual spectrum could personally have achieved a strong institutional base, much less how he could have advanced a whole new branch of learning against its many competitors." If cultural anthropology developed "in *reaction* to, instead of independently of, Marxism," it was, apparently, because the likes of Mrs. Hearst kept a close watch lest traces of cultural materialism express themselves in the University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology, and because left-liberal anthropologists, realizing which side their bread was buttered on, attacked Morgan so that anthropology would not succumb from lack of Mrs. Hearst's largess.

I do not mean to suggest that the political economy of anthropology, or the nature of its institutional base, or the political ideology of its personnel is irrelevant to understanding the development of anthropological theory—or to deny that anthropology has, like the social sciences generally, developed in relation (if not always in reaction) to Marxism. Indeed, I am inclined to agree with Harris that various factors have operated to prevent the open-minded consideration of Marxist hypotheses in anthropology. But it is one thing to believe this and another to "demonstrate" it. Anyone who consults the manuscript sources of American anthropology in the period Harris is referring to will see that its relation either to American capitalism or to Marxism cannot be dealt with in simple terms. Far from "demonstrating" in any systematic way that "covert pressures" have affected anthropology, what Harris has in fact done is to offer a number of asides to a basically "internal" intellectual history—some of them suggestive, some of them simplistic, but all of them of a rather *ad hoc* character, based on a textbook knowledge of general history, or on anthropological gossip, or on Marxist preconception.

This carries us to the last point of my criticism: the contradiction between Harris's anthropological theory and his historiographical practice. One might reasonably expect that someone who was trying to establish a "science of history" in anthropology would approach the intellectual history of his discipline in a fairly rigorous manner. Now I am not exactly sure what an "etic" or "nomothetic" approach to this problem might be. But if "etic statements depend upon phenomenal distinctions judged appropriate by the community of scientific observers," there are many of Harris's historical statements which would seem to me not to measure up. On the contrary, to paraphrase Harris's own comments on "the threat of politics" to scientific objectivity, "it is clear that a history which is explicitly bound to a polemical program is dangerously exposed to the possibility that the values of that program will gain the ascendency over the values of history."

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Classics of Chemistry

Source Book in Chemistry, 1900–1950. HENRY M. LEICESTER, Ed. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1968. xx + 408 pp., illus. $11.95. Source Books in the History of the Sciences.

Classical Scientific Papers—Chemistry. Arranged and introduced by DAVID M. KNIGHT. Elsevier, New York, 1968. xxiv + 391 pp., illus. $11.75.

Discovery of the Elements. MARY ELVIRA WEEKS. Seventh edition, revised and with new material added by HENRY M. LEICESTER. Illustrations collected by F. B. Dains. Journal of Chemical Education, Easton, Pa., 1968. x + 896 pp. $12.50.

Today the classics of science, like the Bible and Shakespeare, are more often quoted than read, but this has not always been true. Goethe recognized that "the history of science is science itself," and Kekulé spent much time reading the classics of chemistry before making any scientific contributions of his own. Of late, there has been an upsurge in the publication of classic scientific papers. Two of the volumes under review are cases in point.

The first collection, *Source Book in Chemistry, 1900–1950*, translated, edited, and provided with commentary by Henry M. Leicester, includes, either in their entirety or in part, 91 classic papers by 123 authors "in all branches of chemistry—papers upon which contemporary research and practices are based." A continuation of and companion volume to Leicester and Klickstein's *A Source Book in Chemistry, 1400–1900* (Harvard University Press, 1952), an indispensable, standard work now in its fourth printing, this latest effort of Leicester's will undoubtedly be greeted with the same acclaim met with by its predecessor, for it possesses all of the earlier volume's advantages and none of its shortcomings.

The new work serves as a veritable mirror reflecting the trends character-