

The Question of Cultural Stupidity *The Applications of Cultural Materialism*

“Everyday consciousness cannot explain itself.”
Marvin Harris

A third of the world's poor live in India, in degrees of poverty that are difficult for a Westerner to comprehend. In India, poverty is hunger. Even today, after decades of gradual improvement, over 50% of Indian children are malnourished; with a population that exceeds 1 billion people, this equates to more than 60 million starving children. In the midst of this squalor, the overburdened government of India provides shelter, food, and medical care for homeless aging cows.

Hindus worship cows. To the Western mind, the belief that the divine comes to life in a very ordinary cow is deeply alien. And from a perspective in which beef is a highly valued food, the juxtaposition of widespread starvation with the reverential treatment afforded cows is painful to consider. This distress increases when one learns that there are tens of millions of Indian cattle that serve no obvious purpose. They are poor dairy animals, they are allowed to browse at will in gardens and market stalls, wander city streets, defecate on sidewalks and block traffic.

The late anthropologist Marvin Harris was drawn to such cultural puzzles, which he believed revealed important information about man as a social being. Harris believed that a society's customs are strategies for providing life's basic necessities, adapted to the peculiarities of the local environment. As he put it, “A solution to each of the riddles lies ... in a better understanding of practical circumstances.”

From this premise, Harris developed a comprehensive anthropological theory he called Cultural Materialism. Cultural Materialism states that the purposes, the benefits and the detriments of cultural behavior can be assessed in basically economic terms. What must always be included in this assessment is a detailed knowledge of the local physical environment. Behavior can be compared to alternatives that are realistically available to the society. It should be stated that Cultural Materialism is an anthropological theory, not an economic one, and that it is concerned with providing reasons for why cultures behave so differently.

By no means did Harris believe that a culture understands its own behavior – quite the contrary. A serious challenge facing the anthropologist is to analyze the true purpose of these puzzling behaviors in the presence of what the locals may believe (even fanatically) about them. “Everyday consciousness,” Harris writes, “cannot explain itself.” In fact, he asserts that one of the functions of social institutions is to hide the true purpose of cultural behavior from the population.

Harris enjoyed writing popular essays about Cultural Materialism, and the best known of these is his explanation of the practical benefits of Hindu cow worship. Harris does not

deny its harmful aspects; on the contrary, his hypothesis is that the benefits of cow worship must be critical, even if deeply hidden, and the neglect of cow worship must be truly perilous for it to be maintained in the face of life-threatening contradictions.

Harris argues that cow worship and the prohibition against using cattle for food has these benefits:

- Most importantly, it protects cattle as draught animals, essential to agriculture and irreplaceable in India by the tractor.
- It prevents the establishment of a beef industry, which would lower the per capita calories produced by an agriculture that already operates below subsistence level (more calories are produced by raising crops for food than by feeding them to meat animals).
- It preserves the essential benefits that cow droppings provide to the poor: they serve as the only practical source of fertilizer, fuel and flooring.
- It preferentially benefits the poor, as their cattle are subsidized in a variety of ways by the higher castes.
- And most immediately, it preserves the cattle that are well adapted to India's recurring droughts. Their otherwise meager dairy output is vital during these periods of famine.

The Indian farmer who in desperation slaughters his cow will, according to Harris, certainly bring starvation to himself, his family, and perhaps his community in the not very distant future. Even so, the temptation of beef consumption is so great that it requires the most powerful interdictions to prevent it. At some time in the distant past, the cultural doyen resorted to myth and religious stricture to enforce the greater good. (In the words of deToqueville, society is held together by shame and guilt.) For a devout Hindu, eating beef was equated to cannibalism.

Evidence indicates that beef was consumed in India in the pre-Hindu era. Hinduism likely originated with the Arayans, who moved into the Indus valley from the north starting around 2500 BC. As the population grew, so too did the importance of cattle as draft animals. A choice had to be made between raising cattle for plowing and raising them for meat; the Indian environment could not support both functions.

The Brahmans, who in ancient times were the caste responsible for the slaughter of cattle, evolved to become the caste responsible for the protection of cattle against slaughter. An understanding developed and spread from them that the life of a cow was holy. Those who held such beliefs over generations were more likely to succeed at farming than those who believed differently.

The institutionalization of behavior is a cultural strategy with its own dangers. The behavior itself becomes rigidly codified, unconnected to its true purpose, and its original motivation obscured or lost altogether. As is true in other cases of moral proscription, when a need passes some threshold of desperation, some individuals resort to clandestine but nevertheless established methods to circumvent the forbidden behavior. Cows are

eaten in India, under certain conditions and often out of sight. It is simply not discussed openly.

Today India has over 100 million cows, as well as the 1 billion people mentioned earlier. It would be surprising indeed if any dietary plan did not have maladaptive aspects after 4,500 years. Harris did not believe that cow worship is perfectly suited to modern conditions; rather he found it to be an intricate, precise, historically successful method for coping with a complex local environment. It cannot be improved without first being understood. Harris would not deny that the “sacred cow” can be an apt metaphor, but he would have challenged someone using it to justify its application.

There is an element in the West that regards strange or apparently illogical practices as evidence of our own superiority. Harris had an abhorrence of this chauvinism. In his popular books, such as *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches*, after describing an aboriginal practice that is particularly bizarre or distasteful, he often drew comparisons with behaviors of Western culture, often to its disadvantage.

Harris wrote numerous scholarly and popular essays on seemingly irrational aboriginal behavior. For example, in an essay reminiscent of his analysis of cow worship, he describes how the potlatch ceremony, in which a tribal chief gives away or destroys vast amounts of goods, is actually a strategy by which a society can increase its population and thrive within a certain environment. Harris was especially interested in dietary practices, including the abstinence from and the indulgence in pork, but he extended his analysis to relate nutritional strategies to cannibalism, gender roles and marriage, ritual warfare, and so on.

In his later years Harris focused his attentions on industrialized nations to examine issues not typically studied in anthropology, such as the fall of the Soviet Union. Harris examined industrial societies using the same methods that he applied to non-industrial ones, believing as he did that all cultures are governed by the same needs.

Cultural Materialism is controversial. Modern anthropology, however, is a disjointed field, even by academic standards, and it is not possible to advance a theory of culture without encountering vehement disagreement. Major branches of anthropology are not only incompatible with Cultural Materialism, but, either completely or to a large degree, are also incompatible with one another. Here are a few of the theses of several major branches of modern anthropology:

Sociobiology theorizes that cultural behavior is genetically determined.

Structuralism holds that understanding cultural beliefs is of primary importance in explaining cultural behavior.

Cultural relativism states that each society possesses a unique character that cannot be compared to other cultures.

Post-modernism asserts that an objective anthropology is a tool that privileged societies use to maintain dominance over poorer societies.

While Cultural Materialism states that beliefs are subordinate to environmental factors in explaining behavior, it does not attempt to explain all human behavior or belief – artistic expression, the individual religious experience, and so on are outside of its domain. It does assert, however, that it is possible to objectively analyze cultural behavior as a strategy to provide the basic elements of life for its practitioners.

While highly technical in its details, the criteria Cultural Materialism uses to analyze such behavior can be simply stated:

Humans must expend energy to obtain food, and will pursue diets that offer higher caloric and protein content. In this, as in other vital tasks, people will seek to conserve energy while fulfilling their needs.

The relationship between food and population is paramount, and it is the driving force behind both warfare and technological innovation.

The reproductive capacity of humans exceeds their ability to provide food for their offspring. Finding a balance to this condition may conflict with humans' highly sexed nature, which seeks pleasure in sexual, most often heterosexual, intercourse.

Humans require love and affection, and other factors permitting, they will act to increase these essentials.

It is striking how sensible these principles appear. While Harris himself was combative in his criticism of competing theories, he welcomed controversy, and believed that it could serve to further the discovery of truth.

Cultural Materialism in its essence is an optimistic theory. If all of human behavior is governed by genes, or if cultural values are too alien to be understood, or too precious to be analyzed, then there can be little real expectation of abolishing war, rectifying social injustice, or safeguarding the environment. The interactions between societies competing for the same resources while striving to provide life's necessities and coping with the drive to procreate could hardly be more complex. Cultural Materialism, however, states that these behaviors result from rational causes, and that, at least in principle, the possibility exists of managing them to a better end.