

# This Week's Citation Classic®

**Harris M.** *The rise of anthropological theory: a history of theories of culture.*  
New York: Crowell, 1968. 806 p.  
[Columbia University, New York, NY]

This book presents an extensive critical historical review of attempts to explain cultural differences and similarities written from a neopositivist and materialist perspective known as cultural materialism. [The *A&HCI*® and the *SSCI*® indicate that this book has been cited in more than 685 publications.]

## The Intellectual Ancestry of Cultural Materialism

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This book (*TRAT*) was a by-product of a graduate course I gave in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia in the 1960s. Criticism and replacement of the prevailing idealist and idiographic approaches had already become something of an obsession with me.

I organized the course to show how previous generations of social scientists and anthropologists had closed off the option of pursuing a materialist and nomothetic research strategy dedicated to the explanation of the evolution of sociocultural differences and similarities. My goal was to extricate the materialist position from the hegemony of dialectical Marxian orthodoxy with its anti-positivist dogmas while simultaneously exposing the theoretical failure of biological reductionism, eclecticism, historical particularism, and various forms of cultural idealism.

*TRAT* (a.k.a. *RAT* among graduate students) was the second book in a trilogy. *The Nature of Cultural Things*<sup>1</sup> provides the epistemological basis for materialist theories by demonstrating the feasibility of etic<sup>2</sup> descriptions of the human behavior stream; *TRAT* (1968) formulated the theoretical principles and

identified their intellectual pedigree; and *Culture, Man, and Nature*<sup>3</sup> (later editions entitled *Culture, People, and Nature*) demonstrated the ability of cultural materialism to produce an integrated set of nomothetic explanations pertinent to the entire range of biocultural and sociocultural phenomena treated in introductory anthropological textbooks.

It was in the introduction to *TRAT* that the research strategy of cultural materialism was first given its name: *cultural* to denote the association with anthropology; *materialism* to indicate the priority accorded to the material conditions (identified in *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture*<sup>4</sup> as the demographic, technological, economic, and environmental infrastructure). But strongly convergent strategies had been developing during the 1960s in anthropological archaeology under the rubric "The New Archaeology." As M.B. Schiffer has acknowledged, "The principle of infrastructural determinism...underlies modern archaeology, at least in North America."<sup>5</sup> And, according to David Thomas, "Roughly half of the practicing American archaeologists consider themselves to be cultural materialists to one degree or another."<sup>6</sup> Despite a surge of anti-scientism in the guise of "postmodern" and "interpretationist" approaches, cultural materialism is a flourishing research strategy for anthropology and related disciplines.<sup>7,8</sup>

Much to the publisher's surprise, *TRAT* became a veritable best-seller, even though it was published in hard cover, was aimed primarily at academic anthropologists, and advocated a novel, quasi-Marxist research strategy. I think the chief attraction of *TRAT* for many years was that graduate students found that, aside from its intended value, they could use it as a crutch to study for their qualifying examinations.

1. Harris M. *The nature of cultural things.* New York: Crowell, 1964. 209 p. (Cited 90 times.)
2. Headland T, Pike K & Harris M. *Emics and etics: the insider outsider debate.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990.
3. Harris M. *Culture, man, and nature: an introduction to general anthropology.* New York: Crowell, 1971. 660 p. (Cited 135 times.)
4. ----- *Cultural materialism: the struggle for a science of culture.* New York: Random House, 1979. (Cited 240 times.)
5. Schiffer M B. Review of cultural materialism. *Amer. Antiq.* 48:190-4, 1983.
6. Thomas D. *Archaeology.* Fort Worth, TX: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1989.
7. Sanderson S. *Social evolutionism: a critical history.* Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990.
8. Johnson A & Earle T. *The evolution of human societies from foraging groups to agrarian states.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987. (Cited 5 times.)

Received November 6, 1990