IDEATIONALISM VS. MATERIALISM:  
CONTRASTING GOALS, CONTRASTING ENDS

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Recent debates over the meaning and content of culture have divided anthropology into two main camps: ideationalists and materialists. On one aspect of the controversy, food taboos and preferences, the ideationalist viewpoint is represented in the writings of the neo-structuralists, and that of the materialists in the works of the cultural materialists. The explanations offered by the respective schools are indicative not only of their conceptions of culture, but also of the contributions of each toward making anthropology a relevant area of study and a useful tool in solving the problems facing humanity.

Structuralism was introduced to anthropology by French sociologist Emile Durkheim. In The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, Durkheim wrote,

The collective consciousness is the highest form of the psychic life, since it is the consciousness of the consciousness. Being placed outside of and above individual contingencies... it alone can furnish the mind with the molds which are applicable to the totality of things and which make it possible to think of them (1915:444).

Structural anthropologists have followed Durkheim in trying to define the nature of the "molds" or "deep structures" which regulate human social behavior.

In contemporary anthropology, structuralism's main proponent has been Claude Levi-Strauss. Following Durkheim, Levi-Strauss's goal is to uncover "universals," basic psychological structures that are hidden beneath overt social behavior (DeGeorge and DeGeorge 1972:xxiii). These structures are integrated systems, so that no element of the structure may be modified without altering the other elements. The elements must also be so organized as to make possible predictions about changes in the structure due to change in one element (Ibid.:xxv).

Neo-structuralist interpretations of food taboos and preferences are therefore cast in psychological terms.
According to Marshall Sahlins, why Americans eat what they eat has not "biological, ecological, or economic" basis. Exploitation of the American environment "depends on the model of a meal that includes a central meat element" along with supporting grains and vegetables (Sahlins 1976:171). Included in the structure are the facts that beef is a more prestigious meat than pork, and that there is a taboo on the eating of horse and dog flesh, even though they are "nutritionally not to be despised" (Ibid.).

The rationale for this preference system is provided by a symbolic logic that organizes the objectified and the subjectified. Cattle are more objectified than pigs because cattle are used for traction or kept grazing out on the range, whereas pigs live closer to humans and cannot be used for traction or other work. Both are objectified in comparison to horses and dogs, which are in close contact with humans. Of the latter, dogs are more subjectified than horses, for dogs are kept only for companionship and horses are used for traction and riding (Ibid.:173). This logic yields the structuralist formula—cows are to pigs as horses are to dogs as nature is to culture as objectified is to subjectified. Subjectified animals are treated like people; objectified animals are treated like tools. Since "edibility is inversely related to humanity," (Ibid.:175) American food preferences are an extension of the cannibalism taboo: you do not eat close kin; those you have been introduced to; those who have been subjectified (Ibid.:175).

This symbolic logic also extends to inner versus outer parts of animals. "Meat" is an objectified term for muscle. "Heart," "kidney," and "liver" are subjectified terms. Therefore, meat is more prestigious (and more expensive) than innards (Ibid.:175).

This logic even organizes price and demand. Nutritional considerations do not justify rankings of meats as "choice" or "inferior." Tongue should cost more than steak due to relative scarcity, but does not (Ibid.:176). As history shows, people can be conditioned to like the taste of almost anything, so it cannot be that steak is intrinsically tastier than, say, liver, and thus more expensive.

The neo-structuralist view of the Jewish taboo on pork is also psychologically oriented. According to Mary Douglas (1966:3-4), taboos—purity and impurity—are symbolic statements reflecting social structures. Taboos are not dependent on physical circumstances; they are integrating, solidary mechanisms, not responses to economic or ecologic pressures.
According to Douglas, pigs are tabooed by the Jews for three reasons. First, pigs defy classification as livestock because they have cloven feet but do not chew the cud, as all other livestock do. Since "dirt is matter out of place," pigs are dirty, unclean (Ibid.:35). Second, pigs eat carrion and therefore violate the cannibalism taboo. Third, pigs are eaten by non-Israelites, and an "Israelite who betrothed a foreigner might have been offered a feast of pork;" here, the taboo plays an integrating role (Douglas 1972:79).

Economist Alan Heston's analysis of the Indian cattle complex provides support for stuctural ideationalism. Heston (1971:191-200) observed that the ratio of cows to oxen in India is 54:72.5. Since only 24 million cows are needed to maintain a population of 72.5 million oxen, there are 30 million excess cows that can only be justified by the need to observe "ahimsa." "Ahimsa" is the doctrine of non-violence towards all life forms epitomized by cow worship. Since the excess cows place added strain on an already overloaded system, Heston concluded that the spiritual benefits of "ahimsa" outweigh the costs of having too many cows.

Materialists were largely inspired by Karl Marx; they believe that condition determines consciousness. Unlike structuralists, they focus on the causality of consciousness rather than on its processes. Cultural materialists believe that the purpose of anthropology is to discover the "causes of the divergent and convergent evolutionary trajectories of sociocultural systems, which consist of behavior and the products of behavior as well as thought" (Harris 1979:170). These causes lie in the infrastructure - the basic means of production and reproduction - rather than in the structure and superstructure - the relations of production and reproduction. Thus, cultural materialists focus on what people do to stay alive rather than on how they think they stay alive.

In his analysis of diet in the United States, Eric Ross (1980:192-195) has found that meat preferences are indeed based on environmental and economic considerations. He notes that pork was the choice meat, the prestige meat, in America for over two hundred years for practical, mundane reasons. For one, pork could be slated and preserved for shipment and remain tasty, beef could not. For another, pigs were the most efficient means of turning surplus grains into meat: the rise of pork consumption in the early 1800s coincided with the expansion of the frontier into the cornbelt states.
Beef consumption on a significant scale did not begin until the 1880s, and did not surpass pork consumption until 1960 (Ibid.:191). The 1880s saw the opening of the Great Plains and the replacement of the buffalo by cattle. Cattle were able to make use of otherwise useless grasslands, something pigs could not do. Coupled with the advent of railroad refrigeration cars, the grasslands made the large-scale production of beef possible for the first time (Ibid.: 198-200).

Due to depletion of the grasslands by the 1920s, cattle were increasingly being fattened on corn, which raised the price of beef and lowered its consumption. Consumption levels did not rise again until after World War II. The introduction of petrochemical fertilizers and Federally sponsored irrigation produced vast corn surpluses. Cheap corn lowered the cost of beef, and consumption rose. To this day, beef prices rise and fall with the amount of surplus corn available for fattening (Ibid.:206).

The demand for beef has been organized by conglomerates owning huge cross-sections of corn-producing, beef-producing, meat-packing, and retail-food companies. Their interests lie in being able to sell all of their products. The USDA designation of "choice" as marbled meat, meaning corn-fed beef, leads to higher prices for such meat, although it is not nutritionally more valuable (Ibid.:209-215). And when export markets offer a more profitable outlet for corn surpluses than do feed-lot operations, these surpluses are sold overseas instead of being fed to American cattle herds. The herds decrease, beef prices rise, and consumption decreases (Ibid.).

As Marvin Harris (1977:289) has pointed out, the "green revolution" is largely an oil revolution. America's ability to eat beef will last only so long as oil remains cheap and plentiful. Beef eating is a cultural form dependent on the material conditions of the world, not an example of a "self-perpetuating, structurally autonomous ordering of human life," as Sahlins believes (in Ross 1980:216).

In seeking a cultural materialist explanation of the Jewish pork taboo, Harris has focused on mundane factors such as what pigs eat, how they survive, and what their adaptations are, not on what Jews think about pigs (or on what pigs think about Jews). What he has found is that pigs are creatures of forests and riverbanks, and as such were originally well suited to the Middle East. However, a sixty-fold increase of human population in the area between 7000-2000 B.C. resulted in extensive deforestation, and pigs became increasingly more expensive to feed and maintain
During the same period many Middle Eastern peoples became pastoral nomads. Nowhere in the world do pastoral nomads raise significant numbers of pigs. Why not? First, pastoralists rarely exploit their animals for meat; pigs provide only meat: they cannot be ridden, milked, or sheared. Second, pastoral herds range on grass; pigs cannot eat grass. And third, the world-wide zone of pastoral nomadism is generally hot and arid; pigs are not adapted to such climates. Pigs die in direct sunlight with temperatures over 98 F (Ibid.:34). The early Hebrews were pastoral nomads until 1300 B.C., when they conquered Palestine and the Jordan valley, where temperatures of 110 F. are common in summer, and the sun shines intensely year round (Ibid.:35).

Even for settled communities in the Middle East, pigs were a bad investment. Without forests to forage in, pigs must be provided with food, and pigs eat the same things that people eat. And in the arid heat, pigs must be provided with both shade and water to wallow in.

According to Harris (Ibid.:36), the purpose of the Jewish pork taboo was to prevent the rise of a pig/grain complex. The early domestic pig always provided a relatively small part of village diet. Pig remains account for only 5% of bones found at sites throughout modern Turkey (Ibid.). In the absence of grain surpluses, pork remains an expensive yet tempting meat source, Harris (1979:193) states that "total interdiction by appeal to sacred sanctions is a predictable outcome in situations where the immediate temptations are great, but ultimate costs are high . . ." In this case, the benefits of pig-raising - meat and meat only - are outweighed by the long-term costs to society in the form of grain diversion - producing pork instead of producing people. Limited production of pork would only increase the temptation to raise pigs; besides, "a total taboo is always easier to administer than a partial one" (Harris 1974:26).

Similar conditions prevailed among the neighbors of the early Hebrews. According to Harris' theory, one would expect them to have had similar taboos, which they did: Babylonian, Sumerians, early Egyptians, and pre-Islamic Arabs all had pork taboos (Harris 1979:194).

The case of India's sacred cattle is often cited by ideationalists as an example of blatant economic wastefulness in the name of spiritual satisfaction. Why else would starving people refuse to eat all of those cattle roaming the cities and clogging the highways, if not because of religious sanctions?
First, is the Indian cattle complex an inefficient system? Stuart Odend'hal (in Harris 1974:26) analyzed the gross energetic efficiency — calories returned for calories consumed — of the system, and found it to be 17%, versus 4% for American cattle.

Second, "ahisma" — the doctrine of non-violence towards all life — is supposed to prevent the slaughter of useless cows. Does "ahisma" prevent cow slaughter?

The observable ratio of 54 million cows to 72.5 million oxen, or 70:100 shows that 30% of India's cows are being killed. The fact is that Hindu farmers do kill unwanted cows, although usually not outright. Harris (1966:56-57) reports that older cows are picketed with short tethers and allowed to starve to death. Unwanted calves have triangular yokes placed about their necks; when they try to nurse, the yoke jabs the cow in the udder, and it then kicks the offending calf to death. In addition, unknown amounts of cows are sent to slaughterhouses on the sly.

Cows are needed to produce oxen for traction. Where water buffalo are a preferred form of traction, the ratio of cows to oxen is 47:100 approaching Heston's theoretical optimum. And where does this occur? In the Gangetic Plain, the heartland of Hinduism (Harris 1974:24).

"Ahisma" in practice is neither wasteful nor loving. Cows are not fed; they are forced to forage stubble and other garbage for themselves. Feed grains are given only to working oxen (Harris 1966:55). "Ahisma" also goes along with a system in which every last drop of milk is mercilessly squeezed from each cow. When a cow will not give milk, a "phooka," a hollow tube, is used to blow air into its uterus, a painful process meant to irritate the cow into giving milk. Or Hindu farmers resort to "doom dev," in which they stuff the cow's tail into its vagina in order to produce the same result (Harris 1974:21). Gandhi believed that the cow was treated more cruelly in India than anywhere else in the world: "How we bleed her to take the last drop of milk... how we starve her to emaciation, how we ill-treat the calves, how we deprive them... how cruelly we treat the oxen, how we castrate them... beat them... overload them" (in Harris Ibid.).

Many Westerners — scholars included — equate with vegetarianism. This is not the case; Hindus eat meat when they can. Ninety percent of the population of southern India eat goat, chicken, and mutton and around half of those in the north do likewise (Mencher 1971:202-204). And, all dead cattle do get eaten, "ahimsa" notwithstanding. Cattle that die in the villages are eaten by the untouchables, and
those that do not, end up in slaughterhouses catering to city dwellers. According to Joan Mencher (1971:203), many urban middle-classed Hindus would admit to liking beef curry once informed that "upper caste" American like beef.

What role, if any, does "ahisma" play in the Indian cattle complex? According to Harris (1974:15-16), the taboo on cow slaughter is an adaptation to extreme conditions. It evolved to prevent the slaughter of cows during times of drought and famine. Cows are the only means of producing oxen for traction, which is the only means of plowing the fields. If a farmer eats his cow when things get tight, he eats his future. Gandhi (in Harris 1977:223) said that Hindus worshipped the cow not only because "she gave milk, but because she made agriculture possible."

Harris (1974:16) concludes that inefficient distribution of cattle might be caused by private ownership of livestock, plows and ox-carts, coupled with a land tenure system stressing private ownership of small plots (inspired and encouraged by the British), but that these conditions were not caused by "ahimsa." Rather, "ahimsa" is an effect of a system in which cattle play a pivotal role in the mode of food production. Attacking the consciousness of the system would do nothing to alter the system itself.

Neo structuralism, with its emphasis on "deep structure" and universals, has three major consequences. First, it offers no explanations as to why different cultures have different cognitive systems or how these developed. Second, it produces theories which, when testable, are frequently proven wrong. And lastly, it offers few ideas which can be directly applied to planned social change.

On the other hand, cultural materialism, with its emphasis on the physical origins of cultural behavior, does offer reasons why different cultures have different cognitive systems. It also offers theories about how such systems evolved. And it does offer information relevant and applicable to guiding future change; only when we have an understanding of why cultures have developed in the ways that they have do we stand a chance of being able to offer meaningful suggestions about options for change. Above all, cultural materialism presents a holistic approach to humans, their behavior, and their relation to the rest of the world. Structuralism would divorce anthropology from the real world, reducing it to a sociological psychology, and a sterile one to boot.
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