

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND GENESIS OF CULTURAL MATERIALISM IN POLITICAL STUDIES

*The article deals with the main methodological and theoretical background of cultural materialism as an anthropological approach and a research strategy. Synthesizing Marxists' historical materialism, cultural ecology, and neo-evolutionism, first cultural materialist Marvin Harris elaborates a tripartite scheme of the cultural system (infrastructure, structure, and superstructure), extending and extolling the infrastructure as something that includes demography and ecosystems, in addition to the productive forces and mode of production. Cultural materialism rejects dialectical materialism and class struggle, giving priority to infrastructural variables in the causal arrow of determination.*

**Keywords:** cultural anthropology, cultural materialism, determinism, emic and etic, historic materialism, Marxism, neo-evolutionism, reductionism, structure and superstructure.

With the development of the humanities, there was a problem of their scientification, development of uniform and universally accepted theoretical and methodological foundations, principles of obtaining and structuring of knowledge about the man and society. In this respect, natural sciences seemed to be the obvious model for the humanities, as they were much more developed. The principles of causality and nomology that allowed the natural sciences to create an adequate model of the material world and to promote technical progress, could provide for development of social knowledge as well, freeing it from the descriptiveness, subjectivity, and teleology, and enable the social progress.

Immanuel Kant stated that the doctrine of the nature would contain science in its proper sense only to the extent that Mathematics can be applied to it; in XIX–XX centuries, physics rules the roost in the philosophy of science. A “bridge,” which managed to connect the natural sciences and humanities, was embedded in biology. Evolutionism quickly adhered to the social sciences. The success of biology and psychology in explaining the nature of the higher nervous activity contributed to finding the material basis of the “spiritual world” and considering the external stimuli as causes of human behavior. Seeking to adopt the unity of science, which could not be provided by the so-called “first positivism,” Friedrich Engels interpreted social development as the highest form of motion of the matter (mechanical, physical, chemical, and organic), which emerge on the basis of the lower elements; it includes but is not reducible to them.

As a result, the humanities have been scientified by taking materialist methodology. The latter was

not just drown from the natural sciences (as in the case of mechanicism), but converted in accordance with the object of study, the human society, which was seen as an enormously complex, but objective and cognizable system. Historical materialism, developed by Karl Marx, became the blueprint for the modernhistorical and sociological science. On the one hand, scientific schools, positioning themselves as Marxist and neo-Marxist, continue to play a significant role in the academic environment currently. On the other hand, criticism of Marxism not only contributes to the renewal of historical materialism (as in the case of moving the research focus of the culture and ideology by György Lukács and Antonio Gramsci), but borrows many of Marx's postulates (like Max Weber in sociology, Annales School in history); it also became a mechanism for de-politization and legitimizing Marxism.

If at the level of concrete scientific methodology historical materialism successfully seeped in the humanities, in the field of general scientific philosophy came under attacks held in various directions. The actual purpose of these attacks was forcing Marxism out of the scientific horizon. Historical materialism was accused of politicizing science, reductionism, and metaphysics. Of course, Marxist scholars were in sympathy with leftist political movements or even directly participated in them. However, this politicization could not be necessarily explained by the ill will of scientists towards making scientific objectivity turbid. They rather came out of the postulate of post-non-classic philosophy of science about social determinism of the science. In addition, studying the dynamics of social development, social science will inevitably integrate predictive and

prescriptive functions, which leads to the increasingly important interest in the scientific community to political regulation of the social development.

Reductionism has never been a Marxist methodological principle; on the contrary, the classics of Marxism rejected it, stressing the autonomy of spheres of public life, such as politics or culture (although history critics have tried to put the materialist conception as “economic reductionism»). Yet reductionism and the concomitant use of implicit deduction became a bug of the theoretical considerations and case studies of many orthodox Marxists. Nevertheless, this trend has been observed among the other, non-Marxist schools in the social sciences. This can be explained by the fact that society is a chaotic system, the complexity of which increases against the background of progress in different spheres of social life (the economy, social structure, and culture). Social sciences, seeking to fulfill their practical function, tend to simplify their own theoretical constructs and methodological approaches for to give the desired result (the formation of ideologies and social engineering).

In short, the social sciences have not kept pace with the social development, which ultimately leads to an increase in the irrelevance of models they offer. The response to this in the scientific community is either creation of new theories, or update of the conceptual and methodological arsenal of existing ones (development of “protective belt” of the research program, to use the terminology of Imre Lakatos), return to the starting point of epistemology, “blessed” by the founding fathers. One of the most vivid examples of such a return in the history of science is a famous slogan of Otto Liebmann “Back to Kant!” that lay the foundation of philosophical schools of neo-Kantianism.

Thus, the Western neo-Marxists criticized the “mechanistic reductionism” and “economic reductionism” of Second International theorists (Kautsky-Bernstein-Plekhanov), referring to Marx’s “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon” and Engels’s “Letter to Joseph Bloch.” Post-positivists aimed their criticism at the real inherent versatility of the explanatory paradigm inherent to the historical materialism (“metaphysical” in Popper’s terminology). However, according to the criteria of falsifiability, virtually the entire humanitarian science falls beyond the understanding of science in Popper’s sense. This approach has resonated in the part of the humanitarian response of the scientific community. But the construction of humanitarian epistemology (“alloscience”\*) that radically differs from epistemology of the natural sciences leads either to a veiled return to the natural science approach (e.g., quasi-causality

of Finnish philosopher G. H. von Wright) or to the approval of the postmodern “ignoramus et ignorabimus,” defamatory social knowledge.

Construed as being of secondary importance, sometimes secondary constraints needs to be placed at the heart of interpreting the paradigm. All the scientific knowledge is instrumentalized and socially constructed. Any scientific approach and scientific knowledge as such is still massively dependent on political, economic, financial, ideological, moral, and other “non-academic” elements; political stimulus often determines the formation and assessment of the knowledge.

Let us outline the academic and ideological “cradle” of cultural materialism. It was in the Columbia University; then some of these people moved to the University of Michigan. By and large, different people there came from Brooklyn; they have returned from the Second World War and had left-wing leanings, hence the materialism. “It was the time of McCarthyism, – Stephen Reyna, one of the students of Marvin Harris notes. – If you were known as a leftist, you would not get a job. So they tended to create left positions, but they left out the explicitly left language. I was part of them. I was a student of Marvin Harris... We were for the most part “progressives” in the US, not explicit Marxists.”

“There was the counterculture, the War, Black Power, Women’s Lib, Stonewall, SDS and Weatherman. Revolution. They all played out in front of your eyes, from the later 1960s through the early 1970s. You could not escape the power of events to shape ideas,” notes Brian Ferguson, another student of Harris [2, p. 2].

Although McCarthyism, heightened political repression against supposed leftists, became thing of the past, and cultural materialism was born in late 1960s, opened declaring of leftism at that time was not preferable. Left intellectuals, in fact, have also mimicked. It cannot be said though that cultural materialism was a veiled version of Marxism. Cultural materialism was rather a revision of Marxism; and the nature of roots of revisionism seem to be more woven than just camouflaging historical materialism by calling it an anthropological research strategy.

Scientific research strategy is an unequivocal set of guidelines referring to some epistemological status of the studied variables, the kinds of lawful relations between them, and connected theories, created by the strategy [3, p. 26]. Before defining the features of cultural materialism as a research strategy, Harris criticizes Marx and Engels for alligation of philosophical ontological notions and sociostructural issues. The aim of their strategy was to demystify the social life through unveiling socially constructed illusions that distort people’s consciousness.

\* «Инонаучный» – term of Russian semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin.

The people must identify themselves “not as they may appear in their own or their people’s imagination, but as they really are” [5, p. 36–37]. Harris believes that the notion of “real” (*real* living individuals, *real* active men) is quite blurred therefore problematic, arguing that defining reality is the matter of epistemologists, not of the scientific materialists: “thoughts about things and events are separable from things and events” [3, p. 30]. Materialists therefore must get scientific knowledge not by setting “real” against “unreal,” but by dividing social life into mental and behavioral events, in other words. In order to explain people’s thoughts and behavior in scientific Adapting linguistic theory of Kenneth Pike, Harris calls participant’s perspective “emic,” and observer’s perspective “etic” [3, p. 31–32]. Harris premonishes from confusing emic/etic distinction with subjective/objective meaning. Both view of insider and observer are needed to give more precise knowledge about the subject of study; however, the etic explanation is more preferable by the strategy of cultural materialism. The anthropologist claims that divergence between these two standpoints shows the degree to which the members of social group are mystified by their common views.

The aim of cultural materialism is “a statement about the nature of cultural systems, which can include emic human responses to perceived environments that have some measurable etic physical attributes” [1, p. 183].

Next, stating the strategic principles of cultural materialism is in order.

Marvin Harris managed to synthesize three scientific approaches: Marxists’ historical materialism, cultural ecology, and neo-evolutionism. Nevertheless, strategy of cultural materialism is separated from dialectical materialism and from philosophical materialism in order to avoid metaphysical disputations concerning the “question of ontological priority of matter over mind.”

Contrary to its defamation due to the vulgarized Soviet interpretation, historical materialism has found very important application in Western historians. An example of this might be British historical materialism, represented by the Communist Party Historians Group (most of them at different times had left it, expressing their disagreement with the Soviet interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia), and the New Left around the magazines «Past and Present» and «New Left Review». Armed with an appeal of the French Marxist historians Georges Lefebvre and Albert Mathiez to explore the history of masses, representatives of British historical materialism demonstrated the breadth of its non-dogmatic application to the study of history. In such a way, they launched a line of “history from below,” or “people’s history”.

Unlike politicized British historians, members of the French Annales School have never identified themselves as Marxists and actively challenged the latter. However, they can also be included to the materialist approach to history. Assigning primacy of material factors (not just economic ones, but demographic and climate as well), like true Marxist historical materialism, Annales School highlighted the lack of attention to the effects of consciousness on the historical process.

However, in other social sciences, besides historical ones, researchers who were under the influence of Marxism and its historical-materialist paradigm, largely avoided identification of “historical materialism,” using instead a different terminology that tagged their link to the Marxist tradition and critical theory, like “radical geography” by David Harvey.

In international relations theory and historical sociology, in addition to well-known world-system theory (Immanuel Wallerstein, Samir Amin, Giovanni Arrighi, Andre Gunder Frank), which draws upon the writings of Karl Marx and Fernand Braudel of Annales School, when interpreting capitalism, there is a school of “political Marxism” (Robert Brenner, Ellen Meiksins Wood, Benno Teschke), whose representatives put emphasis on class conflict in the center of their analysis. The impact of historical materialism could be also seen in postcolonial studies in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Typical examples of this could be the work of a historian from Guiana, Walter Rodney, “How Europe Underdeveloped Africa,” and the Subaltern Studies in South Asia and Latin America.

«Cultural materialism» can also be counted as the original tradition of historical materialism, taking into account the specific conditions of American anthropology influencing the formation of this direction. First of all, this was the discussion between diffusionists school of Franz Boas and his opponent, the founder of cultural studies Leslie White and his theory of “universal evolution.” The latter had borrowed many of the Marxist approach and achievements of Lewis H. Morgan, to whom Friedrich Engels referred in his work “The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State.” Influenced by White, who paid much attention to the material and technological factors, Julian Steward formulated the theory of “multilinear cultural evolution” and the methodology of “cultural ecology,” which examines people’s adaptation to social and natural environment. Founder of the “cultural materialism” Marvin Harris belonged to a group of White and Steward’s apprentices, students of “Mundial Upheaval Society” who were interested in applying materialist approach to the anthropological theory. Other members of this circle (Sidney Mintz, Eric Wolf, Stanley

Diamond, Robert Manners, Robert Murphy, and Morton Fried, a teacher of Marshall Sahlins) also used historical materialism. This primarily relates to Eric R. Wolf and his “Europe and the People Without History,” which is based on Marxist methodology and considers capitalism as a world system.

Cultural materialism of Marvin Harris has inherited Marxist division of base and structure. Marvin Harris proceeds from four key premises, based on biological and psychological constants of human nature. First, each society deals with problems of production – “behaviorally satisfying minimal requirements for subsistence,” [3, p.50] which is defined as *etic behavioral mode of production*. Second, the society copes with the reproduction issue, which includes balancing between sharp increase and decrease of the population; behavioral mode of reproduction. Third, human collective entity deals with establishing “secure and orderly behavioral relationships among its constituent groups and with other societies,” [3, p.50] or *etic behavioral domestic economies* and *etic behavioral political economies*. Finally, the speech acts and symbolic dimension (which plays a significant role in people’s consciousness) lead to productive behavior in terms of ethics, art, sports, etc. – *behavioral superstructure*.

What belongs to *infrastructure* is mode of production and mode of reproduction. The first means mechanisms that expands or limits the basic subsistence production (different forms of energy, including food) by reference to peculiarities provided by a specific technology interacting with specific surroundings. With regard to production, these are technology of subsistence, techno-environmental relationships, work patterns and ecosystems. With respect to reproduction, these are demography, mating patterns, fertility, natality, mortality, nurturance of infants, medical control of demographic patterns, contraception, abortion, infanticide [3, p. 52].

*Structure* in terms of cultural materialism means domestic economy, organization of reproduction and basic production within the domestic structural units, and political economy, organization of reproduction, production, exchange, and consumption within larger political entities (states, chiefdoms, bands). Domestic economies include family structure, domestic division of labor, age and sex roles, domestic discipline and hierarchies, socialization, education, and enculturation. Political economies embrace division of labor, taxation, tribute, political organization, associations and corporations, political socialization and enculturation, police/military control, urban/rural hierarchies, class, caste, and war [3, p. 52–53].

Behavioral *superstructure* includes art, music, dance, literature, advertising, rituals, sports, games, science [3, p. 53]

In other words, infrastructure deals with human beings as biological population, compounding of variables of relations with the environment, forms of labor, technology, and demography. Structure considers humans as social creatures, which are in a web of economy, politics, and kinship. Superstructure relates to people as thinking creatures that share some ideology, beliefs, and cultural peculiarities.

Marvin Harris merges under a single causal umbrella three fundamental pillars of cultural materialism: infrastructure, structure, and superstructure. But this causal web is embraced with a principle of *infrastructural determinism*, which means that the modes of production and modes of reproduction determine domestic and political economies, as well as superstructural units (ideologies, religion, standards and philosophies). Research strategy of cultural materialism in its strict understanding prescribes investigating social and cultural phenomena with the direct nod to infrastructure. In a broad meaning, infrastructural determinism gives the priority to the infrastructure as a basic mover of cultural and social phenomena and its precedence in the causal arrow of determination.

Any modern approach, sustained in Marxian interpretations of culture, deals with considering Marx’s tenet about determining superstructure and determining base. The very notion ‘*determining*’ has a dual nature (let us call it dialectic) in a sense of setting margins and limits, from the one hand, and external causation, from the other. Infrastructural determinism roots in some bio-psychological constants [6, p. 31].

Actually, Harris is far from being the first scientist that underlines the determining role of the infrastructure in explaining sociocultural phenomena. It was Marx who stated that “the mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness.” [4, p. 21]. However, Harris criticizes Marx’s approach for ambiguity of mode of production, absence of discussion of the mode of reproduction, lack of distinction between emic and etic, and his reliance on Hegelian dialectic, calling it “the Hegelian monkey” on Marx and Engel’s back [3, p. 56].

Adopting ecology and evolution as the causal explanation of sociocultural phenomena, Harris discards dialectics, rejecting the idea that it is “negation of negation” which enables the progress. In addition to dialectical Marxism, he also rejected historical materialism. Cultural materialism that has been oriented to “long term adaptive processes and functional systems, was weak in understanding the

myriad changes observed among non-state peoples – and everyone – in historical time frames, which often seemed highly conflicted, anything but adaptive, and impossible to characterize as functional,” Ferguson claims [2, p. 7].

As we might see, Harris reconsidered Marxist base-structure division into a triple scheme, extending and extolling the infrastructure as something that includes demography and ecosystems, in addition to the productive forces and mode of production. Marx has lambasted Thomas Malthus and his principle of population, referring to the population growth and the well-being of the populace. Malthus argued that overpopulation was the main cause of the people’s misery. Of course, Harris did not directly inherit this idea; Malthus rather inspired him to use the demographic figures into the basis-structure model, giving it an equal primary role.

Summing up the key novelties of cultural materialism in the environment of sociocultural anthropology, the brave attempt to differentiate the true gist of reality beyond imagination should be noted.

First, this is commitment to science. Secondly, emic-etic division should be perceived as a consequence of eliminating the unfalsifiable notions and scientific categories (such as *real* active men of Marx and Engels). Third, idea about pivotal role of environment and demography in explaining the sociocultural phenomena. Harris combines Marx’s idea of forces and relations of production with Malthusian idea of population dynamics in order to make the scientific explanation more comprehensive. Fourth, improving traditional Marxian “base and superstructure” scheme completing it with emic-etic division. Harris proposes tripartite system of human life instead – infrastructure, superstructure (Marxist theory), and structure. Finally, cultural materialism is also suggesting infrastructural determinism, but not in a strict sense of orthodox Marxism, when the base determines the superstructure in a one-way connection. Harris does not exclude the reverse relation between the three dimensions; he argue that superstructure can influence structure and infrastructure, that is, his determinism has a probabilistic nature.

#### References

1. Dow J. W. Cultural-Biological Materialism / J. W. Dow // Studying societies and cultures: Marvin Harris’s cultural materialism and its legacy. Paradigm Publishers. – 2006. – P. 180–193.
2. Ferguson R. B. Marvin of Schermerhorn (Marvin Harris at Columbia in the 1970s) / R. B. Ferguson. Faculty House, Columbia University, 2010.
3. Harris M. Cultural materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture / M. Harris. – New York : Random House, 1979. – 383 p.
4. Marx K. Selected Works, Volume Three / K. Marx, F. Engels. – Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1970 [1859].
5. Marx K. The German Ideology / K. Marx, F. Engels. – Collected Works of Marx and Engels, Vol. 5. – New York : International Publishers, 1976 [1846]. – P. 19–92.
6. Williams Raymond. Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory / Raymond Williams // Problems in Materialism and Culture. – London : Verso, 1980. – P. 31–49.

Бідочко Л. Я.

### ТЕОРЕТИЧНІ ЗАСАДИ ТА ВИТОКИ КУЛЬТУРНОГО МАТЕРІАЛІЗМУ В ПОЛІТИЧНІЙ НАУЦІ

*У статті розглянуто основні методологічні та теоретичні основи культурного матеріалізму як антропологічного підходу та дослідницької стратегії. Культурний матеріалізм – це теоретична парадигма, яка базується на ідеї, що соціальне життя, політична культура є відповіддю на практичні проблеми земного існування. Він постав у американській антропологічній науці наприкінці 1960-х років, на перетині історичного матеріалізму, неоеволюціонізму і культурної екології. Це неопозитивістська спроба привнесення в соціальні та гуманітарні науки методології природничих. У центрі уваги Марвіна Гарріса та інших прибічників культурного матеріалізму стоять такі категорії, які підлягають верифікації. Тож цей підхід продовжує аналіз економічних чинників за Марксом, демографічних за Мальтусом та екологічних за Вайтом та Стюардом. Бувши критиком інонаукості, М. Гарріс розвиває Марксову ідею базису й надбудови, послуговуючись категоріями трирівневої моделі. Кожна культурна система містить три компоненти: інфраструктуру як спосіб виробництва і відтворення, структуру як суспільні відносини та надструктуру як ідеологічні відносини. Принцип інфраструктурного детермінізму вказує, що культурні явища мають матеріалістичне пояснення, проте сам М. Гарріс не виключає зворотного каузального зв’язку.*

**Ключові слова:** культурна антропологія, культурний матеріалізм, детермінізм, емічне і етичне, історичний матеріалізм, марксизм, неоеволюціонізм, редукціонізм, базис і надбудова.

Матеріал надійшов 24.09.2016