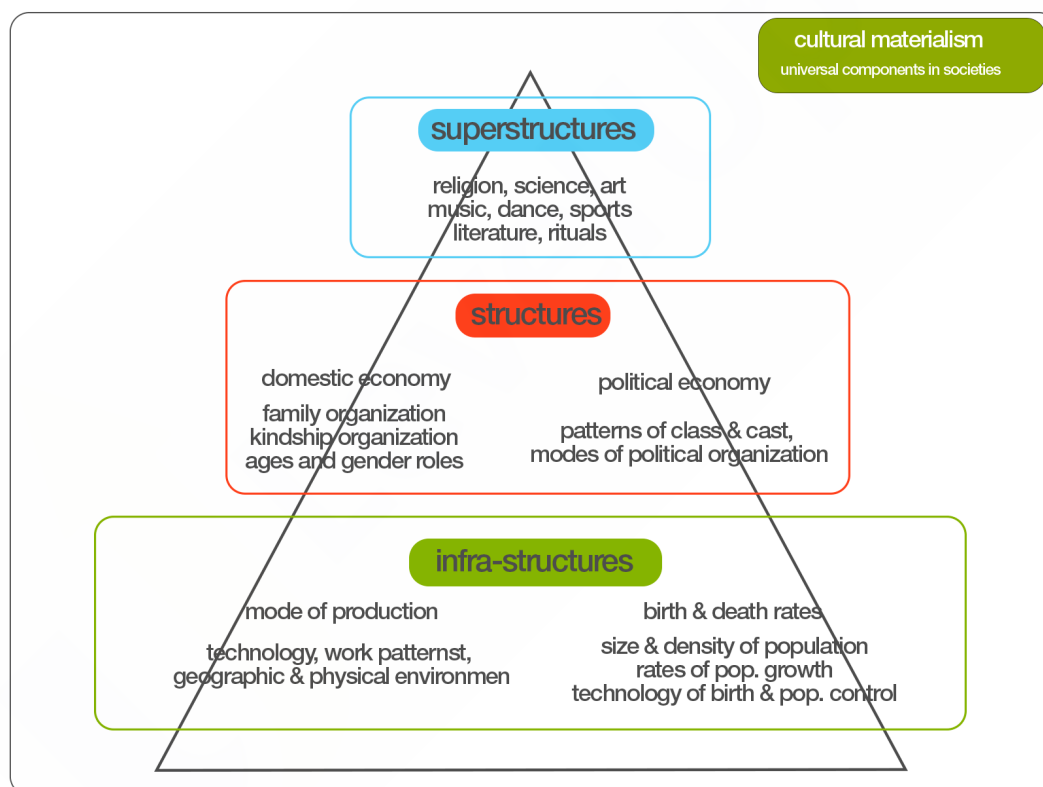


## CULTURAL MATERIALISM

Coined by Marvin Harris in his 1968 text, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, cultural materialism embraces three anthropological schools of thought, **Marxist materialism, cultural evolution and cultural ecology**. Risen as an expansion of Marxism materialism, cultural materialism explains cultural similarities and differences as well as models for cultural change within a societal framework consisting of **three distinct levels: infrastructure, structure and superstructure**. Cultural materialism promotes the idea that **infrastructure, consisting of “material realities” such as technological, economic and reproductive (demographic) factors mould and influence the other two aspects of culture**. The **“structure”** sector of culture consists of organizational aspects of culture such as domestic and kinship systems and political economy, while the **“superstructure”** sector consists of ideological and symbolic aspects of society such as religion. Therefore, cultural materialists believe that technological and economic aspects play the primary role in shaping a society. Cultural materialism aims to understand the effects of technological, economic and demographic factors on moulding societal structure and superstructure through strictly scientific methods. As stated by Harris, **cultural materialism strives to “create a pan-human science of society whose findings can be accepted on logical and evidentiary grounds by the pan-human community”**.



Cultural Materialists believe that all societies operate according to model in which production and reproduction dominate and determine the other sectors of culture effectively serving as the driving forces behind all cultural development. They propose that **all non-infrastructure aspects of society are created with the purpose of benefitting societal productive and reproductive capabilities**. Therefore, systems such as government, religion, law, and kinship are considered to be constructs that only exist for the sole purpose of promoting production and reproduction. Calling for empirical research and strict scientific methods in order to make accurate comparisons between

separate cultures, proponents of cultural materialism believe that its perspective effectively explains both intercultural variation and similarities. As such, demographic, environmental, and technological changes are invoked to explain cultural variation.

#### Leading Figures:

**Marvin Harris** Harris wrote **The Rise of Anthropological Theory** in which he lays out the foundations of cultural materialism (CM) and critically considers other major anthropological theories; this work drew significant criticism from proponents of other viewpoints. Harris studied cultural evolution using a CM research strategy.

Harris developed the principle of techno-environmental and techno-economic determinism. This principle holds that similar technologies applied to similar environments tend to produce similar arrangements of labor in production and distribution, and that these in turn call forth similar kinds of social groupings, which justify and co-ordinate their activities by means of similar systems of values and beliefs.

His work with India's sacred cow myth (1966) is seen by many as his most successful CM analysis (Ross 1980). In this work, Harris considers the taboo against cow consumption in India, demonstrating how economic and technological factors within the infrastructure affect the other two sectors of culture, resulting in superstructural ideology.

A group of people in India, do not kill or eat cows because they believe that cow is sacred. They do not kill or sell their cattle even in extreme needs. We can see large population of cows, wandering freely through both rural areas and streets, undisturbed by the millions of hungry and malnourished people. The concept of sacred cow actually plays an adaptive role in the ecosystem. Cattle are very essential in Indian economic set up where ploughs and carts are pulled by the cattle, cattle manure is used as fertilisers and fuel. For all these, the cows need to be protected. The doctrine of ahimsa towards cows puts full command of unorganized religion, not to destroy the valuable resource even in extreme needs.

(Adapted from Marvin Harris, 1974. *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches: The Riddles of Culture*)

Along with **Michael Harner**, Harris is one of the scholars most associated with the suggestion that **Aztec cannibalism** occurred, and was the result of **protein deficiency** in the Aztec diet. An explanation appears in Harris' book **Cannibals and Kings**.

Several other publications by Harris examine the cultural and material roots of dietary traditions in many cultures, including *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches: The Riddles of Culture*.

A second case is Harris's (1992) analysis of the demise of the Soviet Union. The deterioration of Soviet state Communism was not, as some contend, due to the triumph of capitalism. Instead, Harris argues that the Soviet Union collapsed because of infrastructural devolution. Per capita economic growth in the Soviet Union was at zero or less, grain production was unchanged over the previous decade in spite of heavy investments, and between 1970 and 1987 output per unit of input declined at the rate of 1 percent per year. Factories, agricultural equipment, generation plants, and transmission systems were worn and antiquated.

Such problems at the level of infrastructure were compounded by impediments at the structural level of the Soviet political economy. State-owned factories' budgets were allocated based on the number of employees rather than on the efficiency of production, creating payrolls of unneeded workers. Production quotas were stated in terms of output without quality control. "This meant that the

penalties for inefficient and irrational management, such as excessive inventory, over-employment, and excess investment, were minimal and did not lead to the extinction of the enterprise". "The collapse of state communism and the Soviet empire," Harris concluded, was "a case of selection against a political economy that increasingly impeded and degraded the performance of its infrastructure".

Another good example of cultural materialism at work involves the study of women's roles in the post-World War II United States. **Maxine Margolis** empirically studied this phenomenon and interpreted her findings according to a classic cultural materialist model. The 1950's was a time when ideology held that the duties of women should be located solely in the home (emic thought); however, empirically, Margolis found that women were entering the workforce in large numbers (actual behavior) (Margolis 1984). This movement was an economic necessity that increased the productive and reproductive capabilities of U.S. households. Furthermore, Margolis argues that the ideological movement known as "feminism" did not cause this increase of women in the workforce, but rather was a result of this movement by women into the workforce. Thus, here we see how infrastructure determined superstructure as ideology changed to suit new infrastructural innovations.

**Leslie White** (1900 – 1975) was concerned with ecological anthropology and energy capture as a measure by which to define the complexity of a culture. He was heavily influenced by Marxian economic theory as well as Darwinian evolutionary theory. He proposed that  $\text{Culture} = \text{Energy} * \text{Technology}$ , suggesting that "culture evolves as the amount of energy harnessed per capita per year is increased, or as the efficiency of the instrumental means of putting the energy to work is increased". Energy capture is accomplished through the technological aspect of culture so that a modification in technology could, in turn, lead to a greater amount of energy capture or a more efficient method of energy capture thus changing culture.

#### **Criticisms:**

Cultural materialism has been **termed "vulgar materialism"** by Marxists such as J. Friedman because opponents believe that the cultural materialists empirical approach to culture change is too simple and straightforward. Marxists believe that cultural materialists rely too heavily on the one-directional infrastructure-superstructure relationship to explain culture change, and that the relationship between the "base" (a distinct level of a sociocultural system, underlying the structure, in Marxist terminology) and the superstructure must be dialectically viewed. They argue that a cultural materialist approach can disregard the superstructure to such an extent that the effect of superstructure on shaping structural elements can be overlooked.

Idealists such as structuralists (e.g., Durkheim and his followers) argue that the key to understanding culture change lies in the emic thoughts and behaviours of members of a native society. To idealists, the etic view of culture is irrelevant and full of ethnocentrism; furthermore, they argue that culture itself is the controlling factor in culture change. In their view, culture is based on a panhuman structure embedded within the brain, and cultural variation is the result of each society's filling that structure in their own way. They argue that the cultural materialist emphasis on an etic perspective creates biased conclusions.

**Key words**

**Etic behavioural mode of production:** The etic behavioural mode of production involves the actions of a society that satisfy the minimal requirements for subsistence (Harris 1979: 51). The important thing to remember here is that these actions are determined and analysed from a scientific perspective, without regard for their meaning to the members of the native society.

**Etic behavioural mode of reproduction:** The etic behavioural mode of reproduction involves the actions that a society takes in order to limit detrimental increases or decreases to population (Harris 1979: 1951). These actions are determined and analysed from a scientific perspective by the observer, without regard for their meaning to the members of the native society.

**Infrastructure:** The infrastructure consists of etic behavioural modes of production and etic modes of reproduction as determined by the combination of ecological, technological, environmental, and demographic variables (Harris 1996: 277).

**Structure:** The structure is characterized by the organizational aspects of a culture consisting of the domestic economy (e.g., kinship, division of labour) and political economy (Harris 1996: 277). Political economy involves issues of control by a force above that of the domestic household whether it be a government or a chief.

**Superstructure:** The superstructure is the symbolic or ideological segment of culture. Ideology consists of a code of social order regarding how social and political organization is structured (Earle 1997: 8). It structures the obligations and rights of all the members of society. The superstructure involves things such as ritual, taboos, and symbols (Harris 1979: 229).