

Marvin of Schermerhorn
(Marvin Harris at Columbia in the 1970s)

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I am happy to be back with Columbia anthropology, and to be asked to *look* back. I will giving a personal view of Marvin Harris in his native habitat, Schermerhorn Hall, in the years that I shared the hallways as a graduate student, from 1974 until his departure in 1981. I was a student of, and worked for Marvin, and the same goes for Mort Fried and Bob Murphy. But my own theoretical development was then and remains today, mainly in dialogue with Marvin's Cultural Materialism.

With Marvin, the person and the theory were one, and both thrived in Schermerhorn's real life environment. What was happening at Columbia was related to the development of cultural materialist theory. The weight of anthropological history—the presence of major theorists who themselves were trained at Columbia, the regular presence of older timers, the stories that were told—all created a real *identity* of Columbia Anthropology. Much of The Rise of Anthropological Theory was *about* Marvin's forerunners in Schermerhorn. Being of Columbia meant that his work was truly four-field, mostly cultural anthropology, but engaged with archaeology, physical anthropology, and linguistics.

New York City, was as important. New York was Marvin's home town, and he came of age in its hard edged, intellectual climate. Some of the old lights from the New School and City were around even when I got here, and the old-school style contributed to an in-your-face *praxis*. Then, as now, the New York attitude meant that everywhere else was provincial. Once Marvin came back from a talk in Chicago, where he had been shown around. He told his guide that it was nice, but you could put it all in a corner of Brooklyn and no one would notice.

At Columbia, he was among colleagues who were all ready to rise to the argument, *any* argument. Somebody from Berkeley might *publish* something negative about your work, but

someone in Schermerhorn could call you out in person—collegially of course. The same went for the students, who challenged each other and their teachers.

Columbia, like other anthropology departments, took in far too many grad students. There were about 30 in my incoming class, with very little funding. Job prospects in the middle seventies recession were as bad as today. Selection took its course, and most left for better prospects. To survive, you had to have a *passion* for anthropology.

After 1968, people who wanted to be at Columbia very often were self-conceived *radicals*. I was, when I came to Columbia College in 1969. If you weren't radical before, you could get that way here. The politics were intense, everywhere, personal. 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, as for instance in Marvin's postulation in 1976 (with William Divale) of a cross-cultural "male supremacist complex."

The Big Bust of 1968 and strikes of greater or lesser magnitude up to 1972, often shut or relocated classes. When classes did go on, we discussed the strikes, and the issues behind them. The strikes both united the anthropology faculty—in solidarity with students—or divided them, in splits over the impact of student tactics on education, as with Connie Arensberg. Politics wasn't just in the air, it was in the *water*. Columbia graduate students were looking for a fight.

They found a bunch in Schermerhorn. Marvin was the epicenter. Famously, in his allotted week of the graduate Intro parade of faculty, Marvin threw down the gauntlet. Newbies were told to expect that *sometime* during their sojourn at Columbia, Marvin would ask them directly—"what is your theoretical position, and why do you hold it?" You don't have to agree

him, he'd say, but you should be able specify and defend your own theory. In fact, most graduate students were never asked that directly, but the challenge hung in the air.

It was intimidating. Marvin was intimidating. His favorite question in theoretical discussion, was "what do you mean by that?" During my first year, I asked Marvin's student Jagna Sharff, "what's the real story with Harris?" Was he as ornery as some said? She told me he was actually a warm, open, generous person. I thought she was insane. But when I got to know him, that is really what I found—though I do understand that not everyone had a similar experience with him. Luckily, a big part of the local scene, and buffering Marvin's bluster, was fellow cultural materialist Barbara Price, who was always and ever available to students, and ready to genially argue theory at the drop of a pitcher of beer.

Cultural materialism grew upon a commitment to *science*. Hypotheses should be clear, testable, and integrated within a larger system of explanations. Marvin and his students read and discussed the philosophy of science of the time, Kuhn, Lakatos (positively), and Feyerabend (negatively). Marvin held that scientific methods provided unique and powerful ways of apprehending reality, and that development of a scientific theory of culture could help us understand why a people live and think the way they do—including ourselves. The road to scientific progress was systematic comparison of the explanatory capability of alternative research strategies—the *clash of theory*, as laid out comprehensively in his two theoretical master-works, The Rise of Anthropological Theory—better known as RAT—and Cultural Materialism—for which I was the research assistant.

General systems theory underlay cultural materialist ideas about *causality*. Causation was probabilistic, not strictly deterministic. Epistemology was founded on two basic

distinctions. First, that culture can be separated into “the mental”-- what goes on between peoples ears--and “the behavioral”--what can be observed to happen in the behavior stream. Second, that both the mental and the behavioral can be approached in two different ways: etically, which uses concepts and measures of an outside scientific community, and emically, which utilizes the concepts and evaluations of the cultural actors themselves.

Cultural materialism tilted strongly to the behavioral and the etic. Actions speak--it was held--and when people do explain, they often cannot accurately say what they do or why they do it. Marvin was the first person I knew to raise what he called the Rashomon Problem--from the Kurosawa film where the story of an assault is told in four film sequences, in the perspectives of different participants. How to decide which is true? For Marvin, the answer was clear. If you had the real assault on video tape, you would be able to judge which of the versions was more accurate.

Marvin tried to work out an entirely new, etic behavioral methodology in his 1964 book The Nature of Cultural Things, with a data language of actemes, nodes, and episode chains. In the 1970s, he and his students used the new technologies of cheap video cameras to apply and explore this methodology, as in an etic analyses of speech acts, for instance. You might say they invented “reality TV.” But, as Marvin later told me--“it didn’t catch on.”

By explicitly invoking “materialism,” Marvin simultaneously continued an old Marx-ish tradition in Columbia Anthro, and connected with the happening ideas of the 60s and 70s. In my time, we had a *large* Marx reading group. Marvinites were mostly attuned to the Young Marx, as in The German Ideology, following the idea that social life is essentially *practical*. From Marx also came the central concept that that some aspects of social life--his “base”--determined other

aspects—his “superstructure.”

Marvin, though, came up with a new, tripartite division. The *infrastructure* relates to humans as *biological* populations, made up of variables of demography, relations with the environment, technology, and the forms of labor that go along with that. *Structure* relates to humans as *social* creatures, in patterned interactions of kinship, economy, and politics. *Superstructure* consists of what makes us *thinking* beings, a given culture’s understandings, beliefs, symbols, and values.

In cultural materialism, these three domains come together in the Principle of Infrastructural Determinism. Infrastructural variables probabilistically determine patterns in structure and superstructure. Significant changes in the infrastructure will lead to widely ramifying changes in both social and ideational patterns of culture. A new bright idea, unless so anchored, will change little. Later in his life, Marvin got to see a brilliant example of this Principle in the way the electronics revolution--infrastructural--reshaped social interactions and ideas throughout the world.

Besides Marx, cultural materialism had other powerful inspirations, especially in its strong evolutionary orientation. Darwin was bedrock, for explaining how complex structures can evolve over time, through short-term efforts to cope with environmental realities. Malthus was there too. A natural tendency for populations to grow was seen as the motor of both prehistorical sociocultural evolution and ethnographically observed ecological adaptations. The “problem of population regulation”, as Marvin called it, was a consistent preoccupation, as in his co-authored book with Eric Ross.

Leslie White was another major ancestor, in his idea that culture—what White called the

superorganic--was an *emergent* dimension comparable to the emergence of the organic from the inorganic, having its own non-reducible properties, and requiring its own science. These elements of theory combined made cultural materialism totally receptive to the findings and hypotheses of cultural ecology, with its program of understanding a wide range of cultural phenomena, from subsistence to religion, as *functional adaptations* to environmental circumstances. The classic illustration of this is Marvin's adaptive interpretation of Hinduism's veneration of cattle, which he showed was not a materially irrational religious dictate, but actually made excellent adaptive sense.

Coming back to Marx, adopting *evolution* and *ecology* as the way cultural patterns came to be went along with Marvin's pointed rejection of "*the dialectic*," as in Engels' self-label of "dialectical materialism." Marvin saw that as "the Hegelian monkey on Marx's back," an insubstantial if not mystical idea that progress occurs through the "negation of the negation." The seed is the negation of the plant, the plant is the negation of the seed. In cultural materialism, the dialectic was out. Population growth, variation, and selective retention was in. But lost in this transformation was not only "dialectical," but *historical* materialism.

Marvin was always open to history. He liked it, he read it, he used it. But history was not integral to his theorizing. Here was an area where *my* cultural materialism diverged from Marvin's. In the festschrift for Marvin edited by Marty Murphy and Maxine Margolis, I proposed a strategic modification of the Principle of Infrastructural Determinism—that infrastructure, structure, and superstructure form a nested hierarchy of progressively more limiting constraints. (Yes it is jargon, but it's *my* jargon, and I'm rather fond of it). Seen this way, infrastructural variables establish networks of limitations, possibilities, of what culturally

might be. Structural variables have substantial autonomy within those possibilities. The same goes for structural variables--establishing a pretty specific range of possibilities for superstructure, but superstructure then having *its* own autonomy.

Marvin's cultural materialism, with its orientation 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. With my proposed modification, cultural materialism could be applied toward understanding the changes wrought by colonialism, dependency, and incorporation in the world system--all of which were quite hot issues in the 1970s, and hammered into everyone by Joan Vincent. Applied, for instance, in my chosen area of research--war.

In the late 1960s, in reaction to the Vietnam War, anthropologists became very interested in war. Marvin, Mort Fried, and Bob Murphy co-edited War, The Anthropology of Armed Conflict and Aggression, which launched a new field of study. The three of them also wrote on war elsewhere, as did Pete Vayda and others who were or had been in Schermerhorn--but Marvin did it most often, most consistently. Most anthropologists--here and elsewhere, eco/materialist or not--tried to understand war as an expression of *indigenous cultures*. My approach to war, developed with Mort Fried in my ear saying "That's post-contact Brian"--kept the local culture, but set it in interaction with historical processes of Euro-American expansionism. To understand how and why a given people made war, real wars had to be situated in their actual colonial context.

The key to *doing* that situating--for me--was the modified version of infrastructural

determinism, starting with infrastructural variables, such as introduced plants and animals, new technology such as steel tools, and the demography of deaths and involuntary displacements.

When I began to study Yanomami warfare, it was Marvin's insight on the critical causal role of infrastructure that led me to focus on the impact of introduced steel tools, which were 10 times more effective than stone tools in clearing gardens, and which I claim to be what the Yanomami fight over. Throughout that and much other research, I repeatedly told myself—literally—apply the theory, apply the theory.

But *historical* application of cultural materialism led to a very different explanation of Yanoamami warfare than Marvin's own--which was that war was part of an evolved system of population regulation, via the creation of a male supremacist complex which led to selective female infanticide, all in response to the limited availability of nutritionally necessary animal protein in the tropical forest. It was difficult for Marvin to go along with my idea, and even more difficult to accept the general concept that the comparative basis for theory--our ethnographic record--should be approached in terms of historical change, more than in terms of long-term adaptive evolution. But—and true to Marvin's big spirit—when he did review my book, he said he found my explanation persuasive. *That*, is an evaluation I cherish.

I cannot close without noting the rival theoretical perspectives that most agitated Marvin. Structuralism, very large at the time, was obviously, not materialist. It was an idealist strategy, and Marvin encountered a lot of push back on that front, from Paula Rubel, Abe Rossman, Bob Murphy, good ol' Austerlitz, and sometimes, Alex Alland. But in one of my later conversations with Marvin, when he was finishing his final lament on the state of contemporary theory, Theories of Culture in Postmodern Times, he said to me, "Bring back structuralism. At least you

could argue with it.”

What Marvin labeled “eclecticism”—an openness to a variety of theoretical explanations—he subjected to unrelenting criticism. Being “open-minded, flexible, and reasonable”—as eclectics tried to be, meant to Marvin not developing strong, clear theoretical alternatives, that could be compared and evaluated. It could only lead to an endless number of ad hoc formulations. Mort Klass often engaged Marvin in this debate.

Marvin was a tireless and devastating opponent of sociobiology and other forms of biological reductionism, the greatest after Ashley Montagu. Marvin saw these as more pseudo than science; as failing to understand the emergent, non-reducible nature of culture; and as politically reactionary in implications, even if not in author’s intent. He would not be happy to know that a group of younger neo-Darwinians today are trying to merge inclusive fitness theory with cultural materialism. On the other hand, that seems to be part of broader rediscovery of c.m. theory.

Marvin meant his work to be relevant. He took on politically charged, important topics. In one of his early career shaping events, he was expelled from Portuguese Africa for exposing the lies of Portuguese colonialism. His subsequent work in Brazil helped initiate the modern anthropological study of race in the Americas and beyond. His textbook, on which I cut my eye teeth in Mort Fried’s intro course, and which I have used in more than fifty Intro courses since, is more engaged with modern problems than most others. What other text book asks students to consider whether the U.S. has a ruling class?

His popularly oriented books, such as Cannibals and Kings and Our Kind took up important questions of power, exploitation, and violence. His goal throughout was to show that

understanding the causality of culture was indispensable *if one wanted to change the world*—as Marvin did. His popular book *America Now* tried to bring this home with a holistic, cultural materialist analysis of American society and how it had changed since World War II. He wanted to make his fellow citizens think about how culture works, how change happens.

Marvin had the most active, curious mind I have ever known. After he moved to Florida, I had many long, late-night telephone conversations with him. Of course we argued. But for me, the best part was just asking him, “what are you working on now?” It was always something new, several things. On every one he had fascinating facts and novel ideas. I just had to think, “wow.” For some time, he was excited to tell me about a new fieldwork project he was planning—at his age!--to go into a midwestern manufacturing plant that had been bought by a cooperative of workers, trying to keep it open instead of shutting down. It was a great disappointment to him that the project was not possible.

Marvin, despite his own theoretical labeling, was an idealist. He *truly believed* that by better understanding the world, people could change it in humanitarian directions, in ways that respected and preserved human life, rights, and dignity. That was why anthropology was so *damn important*. Riding in a cab, he once said to me “I’m the biggest idealist of all, because I think ideas matter.” They certainly did matter to Marvin.