



The Rise of Anthropological Theory

Marvin HARRIS

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In the 20th century, anthropologists began theorizing about culture as an object of scientific analysis. Some used it to distinguish human adaptive strategies from the largely instinctive adaptive strategies of animals, including the adaptive strategies of other primates and non-human hominids, whereas others used it to refer to symbolic representations and expressions of human experience, with no direct adaptive value. Both groups understood culture as being definitive of human nature. According to many theories that have gained wide acceptance among anthropologists, culture exhibits the way that humans interpret their biology and their environment. According to this point of view, culture becomes such an integral part of human existence that it is the human environment, and most cultural change can be attributed to human adaptation to historical events. Moreover, given that culture is seen as the primary adaptive mechanism of humans and takes place much faster than human biological evolution, most cultural change can be viewed as culture adapting to itself. Although most anthropologists try to define culture in such a way that it separates human beings from other animals, many human traits are similar to those of other animals, particularly the traits of other primates. Acceleration and amplification of these various aspects of culture change have been explored by complexity economist, W. Brian Arthur. In his book, *The Nature of Technology*, Arthur attempts to articulate a theory of change that considers that existing technologies (or material culture) are combined in unique ways that lead to novel new technologies. Behind that novel combination is a purposeful effort arising in human motivation. This articulation would suggest that we are just beginning to understand what might be required for a more robust theory of culture and culture change, one that brings coherence across many disciplines and reflects an integrating elegance

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