

Hatch: *Growth of Economic, Subsistence, and Ecological Studies in American Anthropology.*
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In this article Hatch claims to resolve what he calls a “striking” paradox of American anthropology – the upsurge of interest in economic, subsistence, and ecological factors beginning in the late 1930s. He argues that it was partly due to the growing uneasiness that had been welling up in American anthropology since the early 1920s, based on a feeling that the discipline was not living up to aspirations and was obsessed with trivia. There was a desire to see principles of broader significance. He identifies 3 outgrowths of these sentiments: 1) Acculturation studies; 2) Culture and Personality studies; 3) Materialism.

He claims that there were predispositions in the structure of Boasian thought that favored developments along certain lines. One of these predispositions was a *nascent* form of materialism in the Boasian tradition. The material component of culture, through which humans adapt to the environment, was a potential focus for both theory and research.

“The principal stumbling block preventing the development or discovery of principles of general significance, it was thought, was the Boasian notion of the historical diversity of institutions. How could the researcher ever achieve generalizations in view of the Boasian insistence on the capriciousness of cultural forms? The solution was to penetrate behind custom and locate a substratum which is immune to the vicissitudes of history and which could be conceived as the foundation of the more superficial and variable features of the cultural whole. Given the nascent materialism of Boasian thought, the material component of culture was the logical place to look. The result was a growing interest in material functions and eventually the emergence of a full-blown cultural materialism (223).”

The 1930s was a watershed in the history of American anthropology and marked the beginning of a distinct period of development. Themes running throughout most of the research of the pre-war era were: 1) Holism/integrationalism; 2) search for general principles behind cultural phenomena; 3) response to events outside anthropology – tendency toward applied work (e.g., national character studies, acculturation studies).

The trend toward applied research contributed to a growing interest in economic phenomena in that the study of practical problems led directly to matters pertaining to the subject population’s material welfare, such as subsistence and health matters (228).

Enter Julian Steward, who had grown dissatisfied with historical studies. The cultural ecological approach was conceived to surmount the impasse of historical particularism. The framework was stimulated by a growing desire to achieve generalizations of broad significance (229). Enter Leslie White, who offered his own alternative to historical particularism.

Why materialism?

1) Boasian thought contained a nascent form of materialism; it was predisposed to develop precisely in that direction. Possibilism – environment seen as a limiting factor, placing limits on man’s ability to meet material needs. These needs were everywhere the same but the environments differed. Close relationship of economics and environment in American anthropology, which manifested a materialist conception of economics (substantive) rather than the formalist version of economists. Economics thus became technology (234).

2) The circumstance that released this potential – the materialist approach was uniquely suited to theoretical needs of those American anthropologists who wanted to rise above historical particularism. Other alternatives (e.g., structural functionalism of R-B and biopsychological functionalism of Malinowski) were rejected for different reasons (235-36).

The other possibility which existed was to root institutions in materialism – natural environment together with universal material needs of members of society that served as a connecting link between human institutions and the physical world (237). “It was these material factors which imposed limits on the historical vicissitudes of diffusion and integration and which kept institutions from developing in a wholly fortuitous manner” (237).

The ideas of Steward and White were ignored in some quarters and chastised in others, but their ideas struck a response in a growing number of American anthropologists to whom the perspective of cultural materialism was a logical step in transcending the theoretical limitations of historical particularism (238).