

World View



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Chandler & Sharp Publishers, Inc.

Novato, California

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Kearney, Michael.

World view.

(Chandler & Sharp publications in anthropology and related fields)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Ethnophilosophy. 2. Cognition and culture. 3. Philosophy, Comparative.
4. Social structure. 5. Methodology. I. Title. II. Series.

GN468.K42 1984

306

83-20945

ISBN 0-88316-550-3

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International Standard Book Number: 0-88316-550-3

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 83-20945

Printed in the United States of America.

Book design by Joe Roter.

Cover design and art by Jackie Gallagher.

Edited by W. L. Parker.

Composition by Publications Services of Marin.

FOURTH PRINTING, 1995

Preface

I was moved to write this book when, in the course of my previous work on world view, I struggled to discern exactly what a world view might be and how it was formed. World view has occupied an important place in anthropology, but surprisingly no comprehensive model of it has been formulated prior to this effort, which I regard as a preliminary attempt that I hope will engender further work.

The concept of world view is distinctly American in that it is a variant of the concept of culture which is the fundamental notion of American anthropology. Therefore, when I refer to "American" anthropology, or "American" anthropology's concern with world view, culture and so forth, I am referring for the most part to North American anthropology. In this general sense, the European counterparts of American cultural anthropology are British structural-functionalism and French structuralism. There are within these intellectual traditions concern with what is in effect world view, although not as great as in American anthropology. A critique, similar to the one developed here of American anthropology, could also be leveled against them. But that must be the subject of another study. The present one is therefore distinctly part of a dialog within American anthropology.

My prior involvement with world view has been marked by ambivalent feelings. On the positive side there is no doubt that it is a potentially powerful tool for exploring the recesses of socially constructed human consciousness, and thus has a potential—as yet largely unrealized—for liberation in all senses of the word. The negative side of world view as a social-science concept is that as it has been constituted in American anthropology it has, I argue, often functioned not to illuminate the social construction of consciousness but to the contrary to obfuscate such an advance. This

conservative aspect of world view is not a result of anyone's intentional design. Rather, it is inherent in the constitution of the idea of world view itself, and the fundamental assumptions of culturology in general as they have evolved within American anthropology. This condition itself thus becomes an historical anthropological problem and necessitates a reflexive anthropological world view—one that can examine these adjacent paradigms as well as its own assumptions.

The basic argument that I develop is that the concept of world view, as a variant of American anthropology, is best regarded as embedded within American liberal bourgeois culture in general. If this position be substantiated, then it follows that the construction of a progressive, truly liberating model of world view must first roll back the hegemonic influence of the liberal model which hitherto has preempted most theoretical space within this arena. Once this task is completed, it may then be possible to self-consciously develop a model of world view that is not encumbered by the tacit assumptions of liberal anthropology.

Carole Nagengast has labored through several earlier versions of my manuscript and John Comaroff also scrutinized and commented in detail on the next-to-final version. I have incorporated their suggestions in a number of places and thank them heartily. I am also indebted to other colleagues and friends who have read parts of or complete earlier versions of my manuscript, and offered their reactions. I take this opportunity to thank Gene Anderson, Pat Barker, Lowell Bean, Tom Blackburn, Bob Edgerton, Lew Langness, Harry Lawton, David Kronenfeld, Sandra Maryanski-Turner, Rick Mines, Rick Nihlen, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, Bob Randall, Clay Robarchek, Lynn Thomas, Ron Tobey, and Dave Warren.

In earlier phases of writing I benefited from the research and bibliographic assistance of Tekla Morgan, and in the latter phase from that of Michelle Butler. Their help was made possible by Intramural Grants from the Academic Senate of the University of California at Riverside. I also owe a special debt—as does the reader—to Bill Parker for his masterly editing of the manuscript.

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Introduction

Anthropological literature abounds with descriptions and analyses of the ways in which different peoples think about themselves, about their environments, space, time, and so forth. The investigation of such things is referred to as the study of *world view*. Although world view is one of the central subjects of American cultural anthropology, there is surprisingly little theoretical literature concerning it (see Kearney 1975). This lack of conceptual framework has been one of the main obstacles to the study of particular world views and their cross-cultural assessment. Therefore, as a contribution to the theory and study of world view, and also as a means of organizing this book, I am presenting a model of human world view. Though by no means comprehensive, this model does address the major issues having to do with the nature and role of culturally organized macro-thought: those dynamically interrelated basic cognitive assumptions of a people that determine much of their behavior and decision making, as well as organizing much of their body of symbolic creations—myth, religion, cosmology—and ethnophilosophy in general.

The first chapter of this book discusses the history of world-view studies and theories, and their place in contemporary anthropology. The main argument here is that there are two distinct traditions, two distinct ways of thinking and analyzing world views. **One of these, and the one pre-eminent in anthropology, we can refer to as cultural idealism.** The other, which has had little impact on anthropology, is the historical materialism that derives from Karl Marx. This present book is aligned with the second of these two schools of thought, and as such is in part a critique of the cultural idealist treatment of world view. The discussion of these two general theories is reflexive anthropology in that these two concepts of world view

are examined within their own social and historic contexts. The assumption here is that a world-view theory as well as any general world view is more often than not an outlook of a group or class, defined as such in opposition to others, hence it tends to be ideological in nature. That is, it serves to advance or perpetuate the social position of those who held the view, depending on how they sit in relation to their antagonists. In a classless society we would expect its world view to be affected by this different social condition. Because of this sociological relativity of world-view theory, the following order of priorities must be established: before we can deal with world view in general, we must examine not only the philosophical and scientific but also the ideological nature of world-view theory itself. Not to do this is to be unaware of the source and nature of the basic ideas informing our project. Another implication of this relativity is that there can be no neutral "value-free" starting point of analysis. The positivistic notion that there can and should be is, aside from being poor philosophy and poor science, an ideological prejudice, as is discussed in my first and fifth chapters. Here I am in agreement with Joan Robinson, who says the following about value judgments in the social sciences. She points out that every human being has ideological, moral, and political views. To deny these views, pretending not to have them and claiming to be purely objective, she says,

must necessarily be either self-deception or a device to deceive others. A candid writer will make his preconceptions clear and allow the reader to discount them if he does not accept them. This concerns the professional honour of the scientist. But to eliminate value judgments from the subject-matter of social science is to eliminate the subject itself, for since it concerns human behavior it must be concerned with the value judgments that people make. The social scientist (whatever he may privately believe) has no right to pretend to know any better than his neighbours what ends society should serve. His business is to show them why they believe what they purport to believe (as far as he can make it out) and what influence beliefs have on behaviour. (Robinson 1970:122)¹

One of the basic axioms of historical materialism is that the ideas in a society are to a great extent a result of their social origin within that society, especially the class in which they originate. Building on this principle, we examine the idealist and materialist models of world view in terms of their class origins, and in doing so consider the degree to which their basic assumptions serve the special interests of the respective classes with which they are associated. Here we see that cultural idealism as an intellectual tradition comes primarily out of the upper strata of class societies in the same way that theology and other idealist ideologies do. **Historical materialism**, on the other hand, arising in opposition to idealism, is a world view

which comes from the lower socioeconomic classes of complex societies and serves their class interests in that it demystifies the false consciousness created by idealist world views. In criticizing the cultural idealist tradition I do not mean to imply that there is nothing that can be salvaged from it. Chapter 2 thus concludes with a review of some orthodox concepts that are of use in building an alternative model of world view.

Chapter 3 introduces some basic concepts used in later chapters and also explores a set of *world-view universals* (Self, Other, Relationship, Classification, Causality, Space, Time) which I argue are necessary aspects of any human world view. Because they are world-view universals, they thus afford a means of comparing world views cross-culturally. There are two aspects of a world view. There is first of all its *content*, the description of which is the basic empirical, ethnographic task. But apart from the content of a world view is the *structure*—the basic categories of thought—which it has in common with all human world views. This problem of the origin and structure of world view is the heart of Chapter 3. Here there are two perennial antagonistic positions: either, as the empiricists argue, the categories of knowledge are given to us by reality; or, as the rationalists hold, they are inherent features of the human mind and do not necessarily exist in the outer world. Any discussion of world-view universals must ultimately come to terms with this opposition. This short essay does not, however, afford an opportunity to do so at length. And I therefore take this opportunity to alert the reader that the basic philosophic stance of my treatment of universals is a rationalism modified with a strong dose of what might be called dialectical constructionism or interactionism, which proceeds, as in the psychology and epistemology of Marx and Piaget, by the interaction between subject (Self) and the object (Other).

While Chapter 3 shows how the structures of the world-view universals are to a great extent systematically integrated, one of the main points of Chapter 4 is that the contents of these universals are also in various ways interdependent. This chapter discusses the forces that shape this organization of world views and considers the complementary question of the role of world view in shaping behavior and society. One intent of this chapter is to further dispel the likely expectation that this world-view theory is yet another example of idealist anthropology. Such a misconception is understandable. Although this world-view theory does not posit idealist or nominalist assumptions about the relationships between thought and environment (environment taken broadly to include both geography and social institutions and relationships), it does have a mentalist bias in its pragmatic insistence that the best immediate understanding of behavior is offered by understanding the thoughts that underlie the behavior. Furthermore, it assumes that, other things being equal, the economy of human thought and

the nature of culture are such that cognitive assumptions at work in one area of life, say economic production, will also organize thinking in others, say religion or ideas about human nature. World-view theory thus addresses the problem of the integration of cultures, both synchronically and diachronically. Here I have attempted to go beyond the general paradigm of cultural integration in American anthropology with its attention to "themes," "patterning," and "configurations," by adding the consideration of logical as well as structural integration. Hence the barbarism *logico-structural integration*, which is discussed mainly in Chapter 5.

Part of the defense against the inevitable charge that this world-view theory is anthropological idealism proceeds by demonstrating that the debate over whether or not thought and superstructures in general are determined by material conditions and existing social arrangements is a spurious question. The debate between materialism and idealism is itself but a projection of a distinction in Western ethnophilosophy onto the anthropological data. The proper question is not whether mind or reality determines the structure of thought, but how do reality and thought shape each other. Chapter 4 thus discusses the influences of environment and history on world view as forces that are often contrary to internal logical and structural imperatives seeking their own formal equilibria.

It is inevitable, I suppose, that casual readers, and perhaps even more critical ones who are so predisposed by their dualistic Western world view, will assume that I am attempting to steer a middle course between materialism and idealism. My intent, however, is to bypass that entire tedious debate by giving ideas *nearly* equal importance as material and social conditions, much as a biologist examining either the present functioning or the evolution of an organism would grant comparable status to the digestive and nervous systems. In biology the issue is not whether one system determines the other, but how they evolve and work together. I think that this analogy of stomach and brain with reality and mind is not overdrawn (it is actually somewhat of an homology) and that such a stance will lead to a more realistic anthropology.

In the short run people's actions are best explained by the ideas they have in their heads. This is the main strategy of cultural anthropology. But in the long run the problem is to explain these ideas, and to do this we must examine the social, economic, political, technological, demographic, and geographic conditions in which they developed. In a word, we must examine their environment and history. And here the balance tips in favor of social and material conditions. We can say that this world-view theory is tactically mentalistic, but that strategically it is founded on historical materialism. To pursue the biological analogy, history is comparable to evolution. And just as the physical environment selects certain morpholo-

gies and behaviors, so historic forces shape world views, which of course then become historic forces themselves.

The view taken here is that humans, working with the conditions given to them by history—technology, environment, social structure, world view, and their social relations with other peoples—**create their own society**. As Marx (1969a:398) put it, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.” A people live and work within such constraints and fashion their world through praxis that is guided by images and assumptions, by ideas about reality. The elaboration of culture proceeds by this dialectic relation between individual and collectivity, and between collectivity and history. The truly unique thing about humans is that images and assumptions intervene between needs and actions to such a great extent. Images and assumptions differ greatly from one society to another, and, having a certain autonomy of their own, become forces in history. But the more fundamental issue is, how do these ideas come to be formed?

An exclusive concern with culture seen as a set of rules, structures, or ideas of whatever form is doomed to incompleteness, to never getting to the motive force of human society. Cultures and societies exist in history, through time, and are constantly self-creating by responding to historically given conditions. Idea systems and culture in general, while having a certain autonomy, are primarily responses—continuities—of that which has gone before. Intellectual creativity does occur; **new ideas do pop up** rather like mutant genes. (To pursue the biological analogy we can say that it is the environment which selects “mutant” ideas.) But the primary forces shaping ideas are the nonmental external social and environmental realities that the perceiving mind responds to. **Ideas do influence ideas, they do combine and recombine**, but it is primarily ideas from the past that shape those of the present, and when this historicity of ideas is recognized, the practical conditions that originally shaped them are seen as being indirectly the main influence on the present.

A world view is linked to reality in two ways: first by regarding it, by forming more or less accurate images of it, **images that mirror the world**; and second, by testing these images through using them to guide action. By being put into action faulty images are corrected and brought more into line with the external world. And of course in the process of acting, of getting on with making a living, the actors modify the world they perceive. This dialectic relation operates not only at this level of macrothought and macro-behavior, but at the most primary levels of perception. This is the main

point of the discussion of perception in Chapter 2. It is at the level of sensory awareness and perception that the validity of historical materialism is most apparent. Although the thinking, perceiving, mobile organism constantly interacts with its environment, altering it and its relationship with it (feedback), still, in final analysis the environment is primary: heat is perceived as heat, and food as food.

Sahlins (1976) has recently argued that culture is autonomous and leads a life of its own largely undetermined by material or economic conditions. What Sahlins does not realize in criticizing historical materialism is that more often than not history and economic infrastructure are indeed primary because they are given to a local society by virtue of its relationships vis-à-vis other societies. Few peoples make their own history and create their own culture entirely by themselves. Much of it is made for them by their neighbors. Culture is to a large extent a response to such external conditions. This case is easiest to make for state societies and peoples who have been dominated by states. In such cases, and we are now talking about almost all known contemporary human societies, their infrastructures are but one link in the world system. Local cultures are not free to evolve like some island isolate with no ecological interaction with other species. Inevitably these relationships are hierarchical. Some of the interacting societies have more power and wealth than others. And within each local society there are similar asymmetries between strata. Inevitably the more wealthy and powerful are most able to shape society in their interest and in response to the resistance offered by the less wealthy and powerful. In both cases each stratum—each subsociety and subculture—responds to externally given conditions. In the tradition of historical materialism such relationships are summed up as class conflict. But Sahlins and other culturologists do not deal with the dynamics of class. This is like writing a natural history of malaria and failing to mention mosquitoes.

The situation with pristine aboriginal tribal and band societies is more ambiguous. For here history-making of the kind we have been talking about just above is less pronounced. And local societies are under less external restraint in organizing their own modes of living and elaborating a cognitive construction of their reality. But if history has less power to shape the economic and social relationships in such societies, the natural environment has more. As local autonomy is greater, so is technological sophistication less. And the less sophisticated a people's technology which mediates between their physical environment and their social and cultural forms, the greater determining power the former has on the latter. Here, where class relationships are absent, the more purely material aspects of historical materialism exert the most force in shaping world view and culture in general. Thus, it is not simply because of some spontaneous unconscious

processes that hunting and gathering nonagricultural peoples such as aboriginal California Indians (Chapter 6) have a world view markedly different from that of middle-class New York apartment dwellers, and that Mexican peasants (Chapter 7) have yet another.² This primacy of history and of environment taken broadly is represented graphically in the world-view model by the wider arrows in Figures 2 and 7.

Each of the basic ideas presented in the first five chapters is illustrated with ethnographic examples, but to demonstrate more fully the integration of one entire world view, Chapter 6 presents an analysis of California Indian world view, employing the concepts presented in the preceding chapters.

Chapter 7, "Mexican Peasant World View," is somewhat more ambitious. In addition to showing how some of the universals of a world view are integrated among themselves, it demonstrates how the contents of the universals have been formed through history. The argument here is that peasant world view—its origin, nature, and the conditions which perpetuate it—can be understood only in an historic perspective that includes economic, political, and demographic relationships with the greater world of which any peasant community is a part. This is the reason for the long section on *historic determinants* in this chapter. Implicit in this historic treatment is a critique of contemporary non-Marxist anthropology's neglect of history, which seriously limits its ability to understand the workings of complex societies. The main structural differences between the California Indian societies of Chapter 6 and the Mexican peasantry is that the former have no social classes while the latter exists within a class society. Furthermore, I take the position that peasants, as I define them in terms of relationships of production, themselves constitute a class within the capitalist economy and state. Being a class within a class society correlates with a type of world view different from that of California Indians. Much of this difference results from the large role ideology (Chapter 1) plays in world-view formation in class societies and its relative absence in classless societies.

Chapter 1

ISSUES AND APPROACHES

Although world view is a subject of immense importance in the social sciences and philosophy, a coherent theory of world view is nonexistent. Since a purpose of this essay is to advance the study of world view, a reasonable way of beginning is to look at the present state of the art. Having done this we will be able to stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before—not that we will necessarily want to stand on all of them since, as I see it, some stand taller than others. As the Introduction notes, this book takes a definite point of view on several fundamental issues in world-view theory. Because these ideas are at odds with many anthropologists and philosophers who have written about world view, it seems appropriate to begin by jumping into the middle of these controversies. This is not to imply there is intense debate on these issues in American anthropology, for there is not. Rather, the majority of my colleagues are either unaware of them or simply choose to ignore them for whatever reason.

As I see it, the best way to begin this **overview** is by contrasting the **two main approaches** to world view: **historical materialism** and **cultural idealism**. Since this book is within the first tradition, this order of presentation will serve to alert the reader to some of the basic assumptions of the author.