How Society is Shaped by Technology

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She/Her/Hers

"My name is Sarahi Vargas. I graduated from CSUDH in May 2020 with a B.A. in Anthropology, with a focus in Archaeology. I chose this essay because I wanted to write on how anthropology methods can be used to view how technology today affects society."

Technology has been rapidly shaping American society for the past thirty years, and anthropology can help explain what is happening. Marvin Harris, Franz Boas, and Eric Wolf are three anthropologists with different theoretical positions. Marvin Harris believes anthropology should be a science as he touches on the concept of Marxism and designs a model that shows how cultural materialism affects the sociocultural system. Franz Boas believes anthropology to be a part of the humanities as he uses a holistic approach to understand the lives of humans. Eric Wolf's beliefs lie in between the other two since he believes in understanding all aspects of culture. Though I am most favorable of Franz Boas' position, the other anthropologists mentioned share many similarities and differences that can help describe how society has been shaped by technology. For instance, Marvin Harris would say that technology plays a big role in materialism, which influences human relationships in America's sociocultural system. With further elaboration of the three anthropologists' theoretical positions, it will be easier to understand how society has changed to

adapt to new technologies.

To begin, Marvin Harris believes in the theory of cultural materialism, meaning he believes anthropology should be a science. He elaborates on Karl Marx's concept that materialism defines the spiritual, social, and political parts of human existence (Moore 2019, 193). Infrastructure, structure, and superstructure are three different parts to Harris' scientific model. Infrastructure is a combination of the mode of production and reproduction, whereas mode of production is how humans adapt to an environment or produce technology, and mode of reproduction includes birth rates, longevity, and mortality (Moore 2019, 193). Structure makes reference to political economy and domestic economy. Domestic economy is the order of consumers, and politics is the organization between the consumers (Moore 2019, 193). Superstructure points out to the ideational realm, where we look at religion, worldview, and ideology (Moore 2019, 193). Harris argues that material factors shape social relationships, which affect the ideational realm. Humans are interacting with each other and sharing a culture, or the relationship they share between humans, and society is referred to as a sociocultural system (Moore 2019, 193). Harris designed this model to understand the sociocultural system. He argues that a scientific approach to anthropology is needed to understand human events, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was behind in technological advancements compared to the West, which affected their political economy. Since structure is part of the three-part model, the model fell apart. Its economy affected the rest of the model, which led to the fall of the Soviet Union.

In contrast to Marvin Harris, Franz Boas believes anthropology should be one of the humanities. Boas led a holistic approach to understanding the lives of humans (Moore 2019, 21). His work led to the combination of linguistic, sociocultural, physical or biological, and archaeology approaches to anthropology (Moore 2019, 21). He argues that when studying anthropology, no variable should be left out, and that all aspects should be taken into consideration. For instance, when discussing cultural variation, there must be enough ethnographic evidence to support the claim the anthropologist is trying to make (Moore 2019, 21). Boas argues that making a claim does not necessarily mean that it is true. Enough evidence must be provided to defend their statement. For example, evolutionists state that the stages of cultural evolution are significant for all societies, but there is no evidence to defend this statement (Moore 2019, 21). Boas argues that all methods of ethnology must be used in order to understand how similar cultural traits come from different societies but are modified to fit the society they are in.

Contrary to Franz Boas and Marvin Harris, Eric Wolf's beliefs lie in between them. Wolf believes that in order to understand all aspects

of culture, new questions must be asked as anthropologists build upon past studies (Moore 2019, 367). In "Facing Power: Old Insights, New Questions," Wolf uses three past projects as an example of how he developed new ideas. For instance, he explains how power causes many issues for anthropologists. One issue is how some anthropologists reduce the term "power" into a single meaning. Wolf says that power should be thought of as having four modes: personal power, ego influencing will on others, tactical or organizational power, and structural power. Structural power happens in its own setting, as it is responsible for its own organization, directing its flow of energy, and forms the field of action. Wolf continues by saying that structural power can help anthropologists understand how real-world issues constrain the people they study. In his three projects, one was a study conducted by the anthropologist, Julian Steward. This project was known as *The People of Puerto Rico*. The second project studied labor migration of towns and mines in Central Africa. The third project was conducted by Richard Adams, and it studied the national social structure of Guatemala. In all three of these projects, they showed how structural power and tactical power were able to view humans adapting to their modern society they were in. Wolf develops a solution to the issues anthropologists face when discussing power for theory and methods by establishing a system where there are four different modes of power.

While these three anthropologists are very different, they also share some similarities. For instance, both Franz Boas and Eric Wolf call for ethnographic data, whereas, Marvin Harris calls for a scientific approach and Franz Boas is humanistic. However, all three develop methods to solve the issue they are focused on studying. Also, they all study groups who are deeply impacted by other societies, some being larger nations. Marvin Harris studies the collapse of the Soviet Union and finds that it fell because of its failure to keep up with the western civilization. Franz Boas discusses how primitive societies can lose stability as a result from fast changes. Eric Wolf discusses how peasant communities exist because of either the spread of capitalism, empires, or city-states. These are examples of how changes of neighboring societies can negatively impact certain societies. Some key differences would be their approaches to figuring out their different theories. Marvin Harris uses a scientific approach of cultural materialism to understand Marxism and the fall of the Soviet Union. Franz Boas uses all methods of ethnology to describe how they are all important in studying cultural variation. Eric Wolf uses different kinds of approaches, such as anthropological literature, to define peasantry.

Another similarity that Harris, Boas, and Wolf share is their understanding that technological advancements shape our society today. For instance, the iPad has developed a powerful relationship between parents and

their small children. Boas would view the use of the iPad in its cultural context. He would argue that the iPad became a source of diffusion that caused an evolution of all cultures in America. Since children are in contact with other children, seeing another child with an iPad can influence children to convince their parents to get them one. Parents see that iPads keep other children distracted and assume that the same would hold true for their own children. No matter their cultural background, parents have come to rely on the iPad as an influential tool. Eric Wolf would describe the use of the iPad as a power relationship. In all of the four modes of power that Wolf describes, the iPad holds power over American society. In the personal power mode, the iPad holds power since parents believe it helps them control their children. For the second mode of power, children may show off their iPads to other children who do not have one. Children with the iPad are influencing other children to want one, who will then convince their parents to get them one. For tactical and organizational power, the iPad controls the setting by keeping people interacting with the iPad instead of socializing with people around them. This is also applicable for people on their phones. Finally, for structural power, the iPad requires Wi-Fi for better function. Better Wi-Fi services exists in a primarily indoor setting, thus keeping iPad users inside and less sociable. This is how the prevalent use of the iPad controls social settings.

Marvin Harris' model can be used to describe the need for society to be shaped by new technology. For instance, the Soviet Union fell as a result to prioritizing infrastructure. If people choose not to rely on the use of an iPad just like everyone else, then it would cause an imbalance to America's infrastructure, which includes mode of production. People need to adapt to the use of the iPad in their environments to sustain the mode of production. Only then can this allow for further production of technology. For example, many schools have updated themselves by giving every student access to an iPad. At first, it was the schools who could afford it, but the practice has now spread to schools who are located in low-income communities, who have enough iPads for all their students. If only the schools in better communities had access to iPads while the schools in low-income neighborhoods did not, an imbalance can be created that can ruin the infrastructure. Since children are the future generations, they get a head start of technological advancements.

Franz Boas' theoretical position on anthropology is the most persuasive. Though his theory is a humanistic approach, he provides a convincing explanation for his ideas. First, he develops the idea of four different fields of anthropology. Then, he calls for the need of more evidence-based-ethnographic fieldwork to be precise. Finally, he argues that statements should be exactly correct and not interpreted.

To sum up, Marvin Harris, Franz Boas, and Eric Wolf all have a different understanding of what anthropology should be. Marvin Harris argues that anthropology should be a science, and that anthropologists need to study its sociocultural system. Franz Boas believes that anthropologists should use all aspects of anthropology and provide enough evidence. Eric Wolf argues that peasant societies have developed as a result of societies around them. These characteristics can help in understanding the shape of our society due to the advancement of technology. For instance, humans have evolved to depend on tablets/ iPads, but if we do not, we will be behind others. In Harris' view, falling behind can be unstable to the infrastructure. I agree with Franz Boas the most since he asks for anthropologists to be correct and to provide evidence to defend themselves. His need for accuracy and not interpretation is what makes his argument the strongest to me.

Works Cited

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