

Materialism Reference Sheet

- ❖ Materialism—focus on tangible, touchable, "real" things as opposed to studies of the mind that divorce mental processes from lived experience / reality
 1. Historical materialism—writing (or thinking or having an understanding) about the past that is rooted in the tangible. Such "tangible" things include, but are not limited to: demographics (population), environment (raw materials, etc.), disease, social relations and economics. Types of "historical materialism" include: Annales School (Braudel), Marxism (Thompson), Environmental (Crosby), Social History (alltagsgeschichte, "the history from below") and Feminist History (see Scott's work).
 - Dialectical Materialism—Materialist theory that focuses on importing the "dialectic" to a study of the struggle between classes throughout history
 - Dialectic—thesis—antithesis—synthesis. How this works: there is an idea or concept (the thesis) then there is a competing view, idea or concept (antithesis). These two concepts merge to create a different understanding or version of the two competing ideas—this new idea is synthetic, it brings together both—hence, synthesis. This synthesis now becomes the new "thesis" and provides us with a new and better understanding of the original idea. It is, in some sense, a more perfect variation on the original. For Hegel, this brought us closer to truth. The process continues forward until absolute truth is discovered and an end to history is reached. Hegel used his theory to form greater understanding of his "times" and of the civic society in which he lived—religion, politics, society, etc. In other words, the dialectic of the mind was used in tandem with an understanding of the material world—consciousness gave an understanding of the world around.
 - So, it's simply a contradiction of ideas that, when put together, develop a new idea
 - Another way of looking at the term "dialectic" is simply as an argumentative technique—"a formal system of reasoning that arrives at the truth by the exchange of logical arguments"
 - For Marx, a young follower of Hegel, this dialectic was useful, but it really didn't go far enough. His dialectic was based on material conditions, since in his understanding material conditions informed mental processes, not the other way around. So, with dialectical materialism, history moves forward based on changing relationships centered on material conditions. And that material world can be understood "scientifically" as having an objective reality. And the material conditions he's interested in are those of the worker. "The history of all hitherto existing societies has been the history of class struggle." Thus, the movement towards the "truth" (in this case revolutionary movements leading ultimately to a classless society) is based on experience.
 - Look at Marxist theory. There is much in Marx and Engels' writing that deals with counterargument. They ANTICIPATE possible refutations and respond to them.
 - Dialectical materialism means that history "progresses" through the form of the dialectic, and it will only end after the proletarian revolution
 - Dialectical materialism is a version of **historical materialism**.

- Early Marxism, emphasis on the struggle between the exploiters and the exploited.
 - Considered to be more "scientific" than previous histories, considered to be universally applicable (over time and over space: i.e. you could talk about class struggle in ancient Rome, medieval England and nineteenth-century China)
 - At first highly deterministic/teleological (classes act "this way" because they are moving history in a logical progression to the revolution)
 - With Revisionism (the New Social History, the New Left), focused on interrelations between classes at a particular historical moment (how do the gradations of peasants [rich, middle, poor] interact in pre-Revolutionary China? What is the relationship between the patricians and the plebeians in eighteenth-century England?)
 - With revisionism focus moves to "history from below"—studying the stories of people from the lower orders, their **shared lived experience**. Still believed on some level the importance of economics as a "base" that shaped the "superstructure" of society, culture, politics, etc. (refer to EPT for an example)
 - No longer wrote about great events and great causes, no longer focussed on "the revolution." Some aspects of old Marxist history were untenable. Some saw modernity as problematic, not as something to move towards
 - New recognition that stories of women and minorities didn't fit well with earlier models of Marxist history (all about class, class superseded all). Old stories denied other groups outside of "class" their agency. So new stories of women, minorities, etc.
- ❖ Some final comments:
- You CAN be a materialist historian and not be a Marxist
 - You CAN be a materialist historian and STILL be interested in culture (Stedman Jones, EPT)
 - You CAN be dialectical and NOT be material (another can of theoretical worms!)
 - You CAN be material and NOT be dialectical
 - You can be material and NOT claim to have your finger on some "universal truth"
 - You can be material and NOT be teleological

Major aspects of Cultural History

- Borrows from anthropology (think Geertz), linguistics (think Semiotics—ultimately Foucault's relationship to semiotics and philosophy) and "New Historicism" (think literature departments thinking about literature historically)
 - Major task is to decipher meaning of the past, not explain a progression from past to the present. The past is a different culture; how can we understand it for its own sake? (According to Natalie Zemon Davis, "What I hope my readers will do is not so much learn the precise origins of the feminist tradition, but see the varieties of ways of being a woman and the varieties of ideas people have had about why the relations between the sexes were wrong and how they could be changed.")
- Influenced by the "public" scholars of the New Left who were not affiliated with institutions
- Puts doubt on the idea of one absolute material truth (you can't necessarily find it in the population studies, etc.)
 - Recognized that cultural beliefs, actions, etc. worked in tandem with one's socioeconomic status—they were intermingled—not that they mirrored one's position. (In other words, many believe that you cannot completely divorce culture from the social world).
 - Recognizes that historical documents are not transparent, we cannot take them at face value. They have a cultural context, a political meaning that informed their very creation. We need to keep that in mind when examining seemingly "objective" documents from the past. (ask yourself, what is the motivation of this writer? Why include some material and exclude other?)
- Does not accept that economics is the base upon which all else is built. Culture is not secondary or tertiary to economics. In fact, economic and social relations themselves are cultural practices. [this btw, is a very strong paraphrase from Lynn Hunt in the "Introduction: History, Culture, Text" in The New Cultural History]
- New emphasis on language, cultural representation, etc. to constitute meaning for the past (and present). Move away from the quantitative towards the qualitative. (such as Lynn Hunt's analysis of guardsmen creating a French "nation" through their language of questioning, or Dipesh Chakrabarty's analysis of domesticity in creating Indian nationalism.) To quote Stuart Hall, "Questions of culture and cultural change lay at the very heart of social life and... issues of language were central to the understanding of the national culture."

Some final comments:

- ❖ You can be a cultural historian and be interested in the material world (think Darnton, think Gilroy, Clark, etc.)
- ❖ Cultural History is part of a larger genealogy of history (go to Lynn Hunt's introduction and see her discussion)
- ❖ Cultural historians search for meanings in the past, not necessarily a teleology to the present
- ❖ Different theoretical traditions also use cultural methods:
 - ✚ Gender / feminist history
 - ✚ Subaltern Studies

AT-HOME EXERCISE: "Venn" Diagramming (with umbrellas)

A.



MATERIALISM UMBRELLA

B.



CULTURAL UMBRELLA

A. On the various prongs, list the materialist histories we have encountered in this class. On the lines below, provide a **one-sentence** synopsis of each.

B. On the various prongs, list the cultural histories we have encountered in this class. On the lines below, provide a **one-sentence** synopsis of each.

C. Now that you have outlined each separate theory, combine the umbrellas into overlapping sections. Provide one or two examples from our readings to show how the various theories (and the umbrellas) overlap:



Looks a bit messy, doesn't it? There do not seem to be very clear boundaries. What should be placed where, and why? That's what makes theory so exciting; it's also what makes theory the cornerstone for historical inquiry. Your decisions about these matters reflect your theoretical position and inform your own historical method.