

---

---

## INTRODUCTION

---

---

Robert Leonard Carneiro was born in New York City on 4 June 1927 to Cuban parents. His father's business, A. M. Carneiro & Company, manufactured rotary printing presses. Robert attended the elite Horace Mann School for Boys, where he found herpetology particularly interesting. Upon graduation, he turned down Harvard in favor of the University of Michigan, due in part to the strength of its herpetology program (Brett Carneiro, pers. comm.). At Michigan, however, his interests turned from natural science to social science, and he majored in political science. Anthropology courses with Leslie A. White impressed him deeply though, and would profoundly affect his career. Upon his graduation in 1949, his father presented him with a grand four-month world tour by ocean liner, piquing the son's interest in cultural diversity. On his return, Robert took a position in his father's business, with the prospect of eventually taking it over.

After a few months, however, Robert felt quite unhappy in this work. Disappointed, his father nonetheless accepted his son's decision to return to Michigan for doctoral work in anthropology under Leslie White. Along with Gertrude E. Dole ([1915–2001], another White student, and Carneiro's first wife), Carneiro conducted fieldwork among the Kuikuru, in Brazil's Upper Xingu. Observing archaeological traces of much larger prehistoric populations, Carneiro made a compelling case that tropical soils in fact were not, as had been believed, too poor to support large human populations. Upon acceptance of a dissertation entitled "Subsistence and Social Structure: An Ecological Study of the Kuikuru Indians," he was awarded a doctorate in 1957.

Upon receipt of his doctorate, Carneiro began his long, distinguished career at the American Museum of Natural History, rising from Assistant Curator of South American Ethnology to Curator Emeritus (2010). In 1999 he was elected to the National Academy of Sciences. He passed away on 24 June 2020, preceded in death by his second wife, author and anthropologist Barbara Bode-Carneiro (1933–2020); he was survived by their son, Brett Carneiro, and three grandchildren—Charles, Wren, and Silas.

Among his many important published scholarly papers, best known and most influential is "A Theory of the Origin of the State" (1970). His several

Carneiro

The Concise Evolutionary Essays

Edited by Robert Bates Graber

<https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/GraberCarneiro>

Not for Resale

books include *The Muse of History and the Science of Culture* (2002), *Evolutionism in Cultural Anthropology* (2003), and *The Evolution of the Human Mind, From Supernaturalism to Naturalism* (2010).

Janet Chernela begins her authoritative review of Carneiro's work and influence this way: "Robert L. Carneiro (1927–2020) is widely regarded as one of the most outstanding and influential figures in anthropology of the twentieth century. His career of nearly seven decades, most of which was spent as curator of South American ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, had lasting impact in the fields of ethnology, archaeology, geography, history, political science, and demography" (2021: 452). Excellent additional sources are Chernela's interview with Carneiro (Chernela 2012), and Richard Chacon's obituary for him (Chacon 2020).

The essays included in this volume, originally published from 1968 to 2002, cover a period that began near the height of what has been termed neoevolutionism. By 1970, "cultural materialism" was often used to designate a closely related—if perhaps not quite identical—perspective, signifying the considerable influence of Marvin Harris's *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*. To place these essays in historical context, the ascent of neoevolutionism must be sketched, if only briefly.

The brightest stars of nineteenth-century anthropology were English writers Herbert Spencer and Edward B. Tylor, and American Lewis Henry Morgan. While they were brilliant and meticulous scholars, some of their theories were seriously flawed by prevailing assumptions, such as social organization's supposed origin in promiscuous hordes that eventually gave way to a stage of matriarchy, followed by a stage of patriarchy. Moreover, many of the contemporaries of Spencer, Tylor, and Morgan had much lower standards of argument and evidence; indeed "unbridled speculation" is not unfair as a characterization of much of what passed for the anthropology of the times. Added to this must be the regrettable taints of Eurocentrism and racism in their writings.

Led by Franz Boas, anthropology in the early twentieth century reacted vigorously against these predecessors. Instead of being mined for the valuable insights and analyses it offered, including Morgan's careful delineation of stages running from savagery (hunting-gathering) through civilization, nineteenth-century scholarship was simply rejected, and therefore fell into neglect. Aversion to proposed sequences of stages became an enduring feature of the reaction against evolutionism. What was needed, Boas taught his many students (among whom the most famous were Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead), was less armchair speculation and more actual fieldwork. Theoretical generalizations would have to await the careful gathering of facts.

That this reaction went too far, and indeed went quite astray, has been argued by Marvin Harris: "It has been said in defense of this [Boasian] period

Carneiro

The Concise Evolutionary Essays

Edited by Robert Bates Graber

<https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/GraberCarneiro>

Not for Resale

that anthropology had become overspeculative and that an interval of intense dedication to the collection of empirical data was precisely what was most needed at the time” (1968: 2). But gathering all the data is of course impossible; the real problem is which data to select, how they are to be interpreted, and to what end. Here Harris minced no words:

On the basis of partial, incorrect, or misinterpreted ethnographic evidence, there emerged a view of culture that exaggerated all the quixotic, irrational, and inscrutable ingredients in human life. Delighting in diversity of pattern, anthropologists sought out divergent and incomparable events. They stressed the inner, subjective meaning of experience to the exclusion of objective effects and relations. They denied historical determinism in general, . . . and above all, they denied the determinism of the material conditions of life. By emphasizing inscrutable values, vain prestige, irrational motives, they discredited the economic interpretation of history. Anthropology came increasingly to concern itself with the study of the unique and the nonrepetitive aspects of history. (Harris 1968: 2)

Thus the stage was set for the emergence of neoevolutionism—the reaction against the reaction against nineteenth-century evolutionism. It was indeed objectivist, determinist, and materialist. Its first, best-known achievement was “White’s Law”: culture evolves as the amount of energy harnessed per capita per year, or the efficiency with which it is harnessed, increases. Additional laws were proposed in the slim but influential 1960 volume, *Evolution and Culture*. David Kaplan put forth therein the Law of Cultural Dominance: “that cultural system which more effectively exploits the energy resources of a given environment will tend to spread in that environment at the expense of less effective systems” (Sahlins and Service 1960: 74); and Elman Service added the Law of Evolutionary Potential: “The more specialized and adapted a form in a given evolutionary stage, the smaller is its potential for passing to the next stage” (Sahlins and Service 1960: 97). “Another way of putting it,” Service goes on, is that “specific evolutionary progress [i.e., adaptive specialization] is inversely related to general evolutionary potential” (1960: 97). (Service discusses Thorstein Veblen and Leon Trotsky as having adumbrated this law. To these may be added Herbert Spencer’s aphorisms: “any arrangement stands in the way of re-arrangement” and “the more elaborate and definite” the arrangement, “the greater . . . the resistance it opposes to alteration” [Spencer 1897: 254]).

Noteworthy is the fact that these three laws are general and highly abstract; indeed, they share a quasi-mathematical phrasing. Abstractness, then, may be added to neoevolutionism’s qualities of objectivism, determinism, and materialism. The central fact, for contextualizing Carneiro’s work, is that his commitment to the principles of neoevolutionism and cultural materialism was, throughout his long career, entirely unwavering.

Carneiro

The Concise Evolutionary Essays

Edited by Robert Bates Graber

<https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/GraberCarneiro>

Not for Resale

Despite the influence and optimism of Marvin Harris's 1968 tome, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, cultural anthropology after 1970—in North America at least—was to take a rather different direction. Led by the clever prose of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Clifford Geertz, anthropologists found inspiration from the latter's vision of cultures not primarily as evolved energy-capture systems allowing humans to survive in diverse habitats, but as symbolic “webs of significance” satisfying human hunger not for food but for meaning. In retrospect, this appears to have been the beginning, for too many anthropologists, of a descent into postmodern skepticism about science and reason.

Sherry Ortner, whose doctoral work was at the University of Chicago with Clifford Geertz, has taken vigorous issue with determinism, emphasizing instead the “agency” through which individuals can hope to make a difference. She also has warned against going too far in the direction of detached abstraction and grand generalization—of getting too far from “real people doing real things.”

Sensitive exploration of what things mean to “real people doing real things” in specific places and times indeed can prove illuminating, as richly demonstrated by Anton Daughters (2019) and Kathryn Graber (2020). Their conclusions, however, allude to what sound rather like recurrent and inexorable trends. Daughters nicely contextualizes recent changes in the fishing villages of the Chilean archipelago of Chiloé: “As rural communities across the world are increasingly caught up in global free market forces and processes of industrialization, many of them will witness an attrition of the very livelihoods and practices that gave rise to long-standing expressions of group belonging” (Daughters 2019: 152). And Graber, concluding her study of language change in the Siberian Republic of Buryatia, suggests—if less explicitly—a similarly recurrent and relentless process: “even in cases in which there appear to be substantive institutional support and high political stakes for speaking a minority language, the language continues to recede from most domains of use” (Graber 2020: 218). The attrition noted by Daughters, and the recession by Graber, indicate that cultural-evolutionary forces, even when not the focus of a case study, become difficult—if not impossible—to ignore when the time comes to place the case study in broader context.

Why, after 1970, did neoevolutionism and cultural materialism surrender the center stage of cultural anthropology? (It remains influential in archaeology, as well as in Russian ethnology.) Actually, the enduring strength of humanistic rather than scientific leanings of scholars drawn to cultural anthropology suggests that a better question may be: how did a highly abstract, determinist, and materialist perspective ever manage to hold the center stage at all? The answer scarcely can be charismatic leadership: the neoevolutionists appear not to have compared favorably, in this regard, with Boasians

such as Benedict, Kroeber, and Mead. The answer to both questions lies, I think, in the susceptibility of cultural anthropology to intellectual fashion. In the years leading up to 1959, the centennial of Darwin's magnum opus, evolution was all the rage; around the same time, ecology was blossoming as an exciting new field. After 1970, however, what seemed novel on the intellectual scene was postmodern French philosophy and literary criticism, claiming a cryptic new method of its own ("deconstruction"), and offering a thoroughgoing rejection of "truth claims" and "metanarratives."

Yet the conclusions drawn by anthropologists such as Daughters and Graber suggest the continuing viability—indeed, perhaps, the inevitability—of cultural evolutionism as an anthropological perspective. Archaeology, as inherently less likely than cultural anthropology to focus on "real people doing real things," bids fair to remain more receptive to the search for abstract, law-like generalizations. But cultural evolutionism, even when unfashionable, will continue to find at least some adherents across the broad field of anthropology. "After all," writes Carneiro, "the most salient feature in human history is the fact that, beginning as small, simple Paleolithic bands, human societies were eventually transformed into the large, powerful, and complex states of today. And tracing the course of this transformation—this evolution—and laying bare the factors and forces that brought it about, remains the most challenging and rewarding task that any anthropologist can undertake" (2003: 288).

## References

- Carneiro, Robert L. 1970. "A Theory of the Origin of the State." *Science* 169: 733–38.
- . 2002. *The Muse of History and the Science of Culture*. Amsterdam: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- . 2003. *Evolutionism in Cultural Anthropology: A Critical History*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- . 2010. *The Evolution of the Human Mind, From Supernaturalism to Naturalism: An Anthropological Perspective*. Clinton Corners: Eliot Werner Publications.
- Chacon, Richard. 2020. "Robert L. Carneiro (1927–2020)." *Social Evolution & History* 19(2): 186–200.
- Chernela, Janet. 2012. "Amazonia and the Origin of the State: An Interview with Robert L. Carneiro (1927–)." *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 10: 65–70.
- . 2021. "The Work and Influence of Robert L. Carneiro, Cultural Evolutionist and Pioneer in Amazonian Anthropology." *Journal of Anthropological Research* 77: 452–56.
- Daughters, Anton. 2019. *Memories of Earth and Sea: An Ethnographic History of the Islands of Chiloé*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Graber, Kathryn E. 2020. *Mixed Messages: Mediating Native Belonging in Asian Russia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Carneiro

The Concise Evolutionary Essays

Edited by Robert Bates Graber

<https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/GraberCarneiro>

Not for Resale

- Harris, Marvin. 1968. *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company.
- Sahlins, Marshall, and Elman R. Service. 1960. *Evolution and Culture*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Spencer, Herbert. 1897. *The Principles of Sociology*, vol. 2 (1), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: D. Appleton and Company.