Anthropological Theory: Materialism and Idealism

1. Materialism: Anthropology as a scientific discipline
   ▶ Anthropology as an explanatory discipline:
     • Use scientific method ➔ explain cultural evolution and cross-cultural variation.
     ▶ Emphasize humans as part of nature
       • Subject to natural selection in the same way as other animals.
       • Must adapt to the conditions in their natural environment.
       • Culture = one of the ways in which humans adjust to the environment.
     ▶ Emphasize objective reality.
     ▶ Believe:
       • Mode of production (how acquire energy and materials from the environment = the most important influence on other aspects of its culture
       • Technology, environment, and culture have a feedback relationship to one another.
       • Cultural differences exist mainly because of the ways populations exploit the resources in their environments.
       • Cultural evolution and variation can be explained using scientific methods and analysis

2. Idealism: Anthropology as a humanistic discipline
   ▶ Anthropology as a descriptive and interpretive discipline:
     • Reject science as a means to understand human culture; mistrust scientific explanation.
     ▶ Emphasize human uniqueness
       • Although humans are animals, human culture and language make them a special kind of animal.
       • Other living organisms live in the natural world; humans live in worlds of their own making and construction.
       • Requires special methods to understand.
     ▶ Emphasize subjective reality.
     ▶ Believe:
       • Mental components of a culture are fundamental in making it the way it is.
       • A population’s culture is unique, based on it’s particular history and unique traditions.
       • Resources are culturally defined, not inherent in nature
       • Cultural perceptions of nature are as important as the objective conditions of nature.
       • Material wants are secondary to social, emotional, intellectual, & symbolic wants.
       • Human dependence on culture and symbolic communication make scientific explanations of cultural diversity useless.