

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Eric R. Wolf. *Envisioning Power: Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. xi + 339 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-21536-8; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-21582-5.

Reviewed by Robert Rotenberg (DePaul University)

Published on H-SAE (March, 2000)

## The Nexus Between Ideas and Power

I approached the reading of this book, Eric Wolf's last before his death, with awe. I met Eric in 1975 as he was researching and writing *Europe and the People without History*. We shared a common fascination with Central European culture, and Vienna in particular. He had gone to school in Vienna before the war. As two anthropologists who had been touched by the disaster of National Socialism, he certainly more than I, we shared a common interest in trying to understand the full dimensions of that social formation.

He was gracious enough to share his thinking about issues of ideology and power with me, as these evolved in the 1980s, culminating with his 1992 Distinguished Lecture at the American Anthropology meetings, *Facing Power*. In that lecture, he detailed the analytical structure that is the backbone of this book: social organizations with the capacity to structure the environments in which other organizations form are not the essentialized fantasies of theorists. They are real phenomenon made up of people acting out the ideological desirability of some social relationships over others. This work on structural power was itself an evolution of his work in *Europe and the People without History* on the organizational implications of differing modes of mobilizing social labor. This focus on social labor allows us to examine the fine detail in the strategic relations between people that shift as the familial-based local communities in the world move first to tributary, and later to capitalist modes of mobilization.

The single most influential theorist in Wolf's thinking about social labor was not Marx, but Norbert Elias. It was from Elias's lectures to Central European nationals in a detention camp in Liverpool in 1940 that Wolf first heard and absorbed the principle he has enunciated in almost every one of his published works: differences of power are present in every social relationship. The 1992 lecture was about the ways that power enters these relationships, but especially the way in which power op-

erates in the relationships that underlie all structuring organizations. *Envisioning Power* is about the way ideology legitimates and authorizes the asymmetries of power in organizations. The awe I felt in approaching this book stemmed from my knowing that in this work Wolf was finally addressing the question that had brought him to anthropology in the first instance and the one that had lingered behind all of his earlier work: what can anthropological analysis offer to our understanding of the dislocations and destruction of the twentieth century? With this book, he had brought his project full circle.

The relationship of ideology to power is a common theme in post-War writings. The War made apparent, in ways that earlier ideological states did not, the importance of tracing out the threads of causality and contingency that can lead a socially heterogeneous, politically mature society to murder. The ethnographic record contains other instances of complex societies who paint themselves into corners ideologically and destroy valuable resources or people in their efforts to span the gap. Power for Wolf is a double-edged concept. It is the specter haunting mainstream twentieth century anthropology. While the other social sciences have been blind to culture while seeing power, anthropology has been blind to power while seeing culture.

That a field-based research effort sensitive to the nuances of ideas and cognitive structures should have avoided the mechanics of power intrigues him. He treats us to a history of the turns in enlightenment history that led to this impasse. On the other hand, the willingness to engage ideas as having effects on social life privileges anthropology to analyze power in unique ways. Ideology for him is not merely any set of ideas. It is a unified scheme or configuration developed to underwrite or manifest power. This is not very far from Elias and Mannheim. Wolf wants anthropology to take on the project of explaining when and how ideas are concentrated into ideologies and how ideologies become pro-

grams for the deployment of power at different levels of organization.

To get us started, he analyzes three classic cases in this book: the potlatch ideology of post-contact Kwakiutl villagers of the Northwest Coast of North America, the sacrifice ideology of the pre-contact Tenochca (Aztec) State, and the racist ideology of Germany under the National Socialism Reich. In all three, Wolf treats us again to the technique he employed so well in *European and the People without History*, expertly mining the specialist literature for patterns that support his arguments.

The Kwakiutl discussed here are the overly stressed, post-contact Northwest native Americans. Wolf is interested in explaining how potlatch came to take on the extreme levels of reciprocal feasting that led to its being misinterpreted and banned by Canadian authorities. In post-contact village life, leaders here were resource managers for clans who came to occupy their positions through the strategic deployment of sacred communication, sorcery, and kin relations. Potlatches were opportunities for these chiefly statuses to be affirmed. More precisely, they were displays and affirmations of privileges and in transfers of valuables in the presence of witnesses that coincided with life-cycle events and seasonal events. Each event involved a give-away, a feast or both. Wolf refocuses the existing evidence to demonstrate that colonial relationships weakened the traditional relationships that had chiefs emerging from within their clan groups. As a result, coalitions between chiefs evolved to protect existing chiefs from the rapid rise of younger contenders. The potlatches made famous in the ethnographic discourse came about in the period between 1860-70.

Wolf uses an observation from Goldman to change direction away from the usual Maussian analysis of competitive feasting as a tournament of rank and toward his efforts to understand ideology and power. Goldman notes that these contests are “in fact, invidious demonstrations of supernatural powers ... of *nawalak*. *They manifest aggressive hostility against rivals to demonstrate that the capability of destroying is one of the attributes of nawalak (1975:81)*” *Nawalak* is the general term for the supernatural, the wonderful. The competitive feasts were not only economic and political, but also transactions with supernatural power. Objects, especially copper shields, hides and skins, embodied vital forces. By multiplying the vital energies available to the group, the chief enhanced the well being of all his followers. The colonial economy meant that commoners and second-rank nobles had access to objects with supernatural value, especially the Hudson Bay blanket, the symbolic hide of the

White Man, distorting the established flow of energies from the chiefs to the people. In the chiefs’ struggle to retain power, the principle weapons were the ideas that they drew together into a coherent configuration through the feasts, and that served to underwrite and manifest the power of the chief.

What is at stake in the ritual is the very relationship between humans and the natural world on which they depend for their material and spiritual sustenance. As competition increased, the chiefs lost out not only in the realm of the material exchanges, but also lost control over the recitations of myth-history through which the human world and the natural world were co-substantiated.

The Tenochca world Wolf depicts is the familiar one of warfare, trade and human sacrifice. Like the Kwakiutl, we encounter a classic problem in twentieth century anthropology, namely to account for state sanctioned human sacrifice and cannibalism. Despite Marvin Harris’ and Michael Harner’s efforts to account for these practices as part of a rational calculus of resource use, and William Arens challenge to the evidence of cannibalism in the source material, Wolf allies himself with Marshall Sahlins in an effort to discover how the Tenochca could have thought themselves into a world of anthropophagic allosacrifice. The case is appropriate to his purpose because the structural parallels between the Tenochca State and the tributary states in the Old World undermine support for explaining the practices as a bizarre, idiosyncratic mode of production. Instead, we confront a situation in which these practices resulted from widely held beliefs that supported the power relationships. Tenochca sacrifice was ideological.

The formation, maintenance and expansion of the Tenochca State resulted from a cosmology of social relations that ordered gods, nobles, commoners and slaves in a graduated series of rights and obligations. This cosmology preceded the rise of the Tenochca leadership in a military revolt against the Atzacotalco State in 1428. They then rewrote the history to legitimate their claim to control the city-states of the Central Valley, connecting themselves to the older Toltec states of Tula and Teotihuacan.

Their myth of the new age of the Fifth Sun built on the older Toltec mythos. The new myth legitimized Tenochca domination and rights to tribute, but also their obligation to reenact the older rituals and sacrifices that maintained the ordered relations between the gods, people and nature. The birth of the new age had created a primordial cosmic debt that could only be managed through sacrifice. Human sacrifice was widely distributed throughout

Mexico before the rise of Tenochca State, but it was a infrequent practice reserved for important or dire circumstances. Beginning with the ascension of Motecuzoma I to the kingship in 1440, sacrifices began to be performed more often and in larger numbers.

The kingship itself was a sacrilized as the mediator between the gods and men in the service of the cosmic debt. As Wolf outlines it: "the gods gave life and food and installed the cycle of time; the nobles managed the exchange of prestations to requite the debt to the gods; the commoners supplied the basic resources for that management. The postulate of the sociocosmic hierarchy was also phrased as a hierarchically organized chain of gifts and counter-offerings between the gods and people, nobles and commoners, superiors and inferiors" (p. 190). The hook in this ideology was the apocalyptic threat that if the system of sacrifice were ever to breakdown, the age of the fifth sun would end, and the life of the gods and men would perish, never to be restored again.

According to the current scholarly estimates, there were no more than 1,600 to 2,150 men between the ages of twenty and fifty in the military nobility, or approximately one percent of the 150,000 to 200,000 inhabitants of the Tenochca State. Their privilege and office revolved around the capture of soldiers from several specific competitor states, the return of these captives to Teotihuacan where they were killed and dismembered by the King and specialized priests, with specific pieces of the body being consumed by the captor and his guests. Specific pieces of the captive's life force and soul were transferred to the noble through this consumption.

Tenochca lived under threat of a growing pool of something called tlazolli, entropic pollution, in their bodies and their society. The duties of the noble increased the amount of tlazolli in their body that could only be cleansed by autosacrifice, piercing the body and allowing one's own blood to flow into the world, and the eating of the thigh flesh of the captive. More importantly, the captive's blood and heart contributed to the cosmic debt, helping to literally make the sun rise one more day.

As Tenochca rule unfolded, it had to deal with a four-year drought, the Great Famine of One Rabbit (1450-54), that reduced its population and left its nobility impoverished. Fed by migration and the growing wealth of the city, the population eventually climbed to one million by 1500. The threat of famine, periodic earthquakes, devastating floods, crop failure, the rapid population, the mix of Tenochca and foreigners in a restricted area, and the periodic threats of rebellion of client states and menacing

by competitor states kept the nobility off-balance. Their millennial ideology had pushed their backs to wall. They could only maintain their position in the state by fulfilling their sacred duties of warfare, captive taking, and sacrifice, cleansing the society of tlazolli. Wolf cites the extant texts of Tenochca survivors of the Spanish Conquest as conveying a "prevailing sense of anxiety about whether the self-control and penance, as well as government policy and public ritual, would ever suffice to maintain personal balance and political continuity. . . . When we are told "the city never slept," that its inhabitants were forever mobilized for collective dances or public festivals, and that much of the time and energy was devoted to autosacrifice to avert entropy, we may conclude that in "the Aztec arrangement" satisfaction and tension were closely linked, each acting in synergy upon the other" (p. 194). When Cortes entered the city and dealt the deathblow to the Tenochca State, its power was already under threat from competitor states.

Europeanists will be particularly interested in this book for its treatment of Fascist Germany in the period before and during the Second World War. There are several differences in his treatment of the relationship of ideas to power in the first two cases and among the National Socialists (hereafter, NS). An industrial capitalist society has both a different scale of social organization and operates in a world where there are competing ideologies. The documentation for the NS is rich and detailed, providing the scholar with the words of the principle actors themselves and multiple accounts of events from different perspectives. Like the Kwakiutl and the Tenochca, the NS committed themselves to an ideology that produced blazing effects in the short-run, but ultimately destroyed the society. Wolf carefully lays the groundwork for understanding the general conditions of Germany in the 1920s when the NS came to power. Basing his summary on the work of well-known historians, he shows how culturally fragmented and particularized the German lands were before Bismarck's Second Reich (1871). The existence of this particularism is an important part of his argument about the basis for the seeming acquiescence to NS ideology. It is a direct result of the sovereignty granted the local aristocrat by the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), that ended the Thirty Years War.

The second historically derived feature of German thought is the proliferation of social distinctions and the emergence of status honor as a common feature of German experience. The evidence for this point is not as well developed as the evidence of particularism, in spite of its centrality to his argument. What the habitus of status honor permits him to show is that bounding so-

cial groups in a system of abilities and disabilities was prevalent throughout the region. The system defined the boundary between aristocrat and commoner, but also between Christian and Jew. Subcategories proliferated and different principalities developed different systems of distinctions. Wolf portrays the origin of dissent in this practice as external, notably republican France, and later Communist Soviet Union. France in particular was a direct challenge to German parochialism (under Napoleon) and status honor (purging the aristocracy). The nineteenth century culture history of Germany is portrayed as a reaction to the French challenge. Bismarck's Second Reich with its aristocratic, militarized bureaucracy is one artifact of this reaction. The nationalist program of the German Volk community, based on common "blood," as opposed to the French citizen, based on common rights is another.

After the emancipation of the Jews in the Second Reich, modern anti-Semitism, one based on non-religious principles, intensifies. This anti-Semitism changed over time. Following Zygmunt Bauman, Wolf sees Germans interpreting the diversity challenge of Jews in German society in increasingly radical ways: first, through fear and resentment, then through the construction and enforcement of exclusionary boundaries, and finally through outright removal. These then are the general principles, the necessary conditions for the NS ideology.

The specific conditions that led to the NS seizure of power were the First World War, the defeat of Germany and the failure of the post-war government to cope with its aftermath. This part of the story is well known. Pushed to wall by the high cost of war reparations, demographically injured by the loss of an entire generation to battlefield death, unbalanced by hyperinflation that destroyed pensions and standards of living, and hobbled by uninspired and inept leadership, Germans elected a parliament in 1933 in which the NS party won 37.3 percent of the vote. Together with the Conservative Party they formed a coalition, with Hitler as Reich Chancellor. Soon after, a fire in the Reichstag building provided the opportunity to pander to popular fear of an external threat (the Soviet Union) and Hitler was given dictatorial powers to deal with that threat. In the twelve years that followed, NS ideology would lead Germany through recovery from the depression into a disastrous war.

In Wolf's description of NS ideology, many of the themes of the general conditions are evident: the need to unify the Volk into a contiguous territory, the need to strengthen nationalist labor organizations, the need to

remove women from the public sphere and strengthen the pronatalist policies of the state, the need to separate the Germans from lesser races, especially Slavs, and the specific demonization of Jews and communists. There is also the general Fascist notion of creating a link between capitalists and labor through a common national ideology.

In his reading of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Wolf reminds us of another important theme that was particular to NS, the idea of struggle. Hitler believed that struggle was the basis of all achievement. He avoided making firm decisions that would prevent his ministries from competing with each other because he felt that if they competed, better policy would result. The NS established shadow versions of the bureaucracy, the military, and the education system to provide competition with civil institutions. It was this commitment to struggle in the paramount leader that proved to be the most serious contradiction in the ideology. Another theme that weaves through the ideological pronouncements is the image of strength or hardness as an aristocratic, military quality that should be widely dispersed through all social practice. Wolf sees this as part of the idea system producing a wartime ethos of unusual brutality. German soldiers were encouraged to ask for no mercy and to offer none. Rules of war for the treatment of civilians and prisoners were violated consistently. Even in day-to-day life, NS adherents would strive for an emotional hardness to show their embodiment of the ideology. When the tide of war turned against them, leaders and followers used these ideas to explain their situation and harden their morale.

In interpreting this ideology, Wolf points out that the actions of the NS played out in cultural space, rather than political space. He sees NS Germany as more akin to Ghost Dance or cargo cults. That is, it was a revitalization movement, filled with the extremity and excess that so often characterizes these movements. By any definition of the state, NS Germany was not a state. The NS leadership, though they attained power by parliamentary means, was not a political party and its authority was not based on appeals to political practice of any kind. Its appeals were cosmological. It offered to establish a world order that put Germans at the pinnacle of civilization and redeemed the historical legacy lost in the defeat of World War I. It had no viable political rivals after it destroyed the Left opposition through intimidation and assassination. When it waged war, it did so purely for ideological reasons.

After the war began, it sustained itself through the capture of industrial resources. Wolf departs from most

historians who see the war as an imperialist grab for nearby resources. Resources were grabbed from captured territory, Wolf shows, only after the war exhausted German resources. And even this would not have been necessary if the Germans had been able to wage the war as they originally planned, a little at a time. The entry of England and France after the invasion of Poland made that strategy impossible. The NS lost the war for ideological reasons, as well. They invaded Russia to enslave the Slavs and “recapture” “German” lands. The war was expected to take a matter on months because they believed that the Soviets were Slavs and Jews, and therefore, disorganized, under-mobilized and inefficient. They were wrong. When the tide of the war turned, Hitler remained true to his ideology of struggle, suggesting to his ministers that if the Germans were not capable of defeating the Russians, they did not deserve to have a Reich. In defeat as in victory, no quarter would be asked and no quarter given. On May 1, 1945, Soviet troops raised their flag over the burned-out shell of the Reichstag building in Berlin. Hitler had shot himself the day before.

In the final analysis, Wolf asserts a necessary relationship between ideology and power. Structural power engenders ideas about the necessary distinctions between the asymmetrical positions in society: between the organizers of social labor and the laborers, between leaders and followers. These ideas support the legitimation of the qualifications and disqualifications of people and groups, and rationalize the authority of power holders. Without them one cannot imagine these asymmetries holding together for very long. The Kwakiutl made the exchange of fetishized objects the basis for exchanges of vital energies between animals and humans. The organization of the exchange was vested in chiefs and their heirs. The Tenochca believed they were responsible for repaying a debt incurred in the origin of the world. Royals and Nobles functioned to wage war and sacrifice people to feed the gods and maintain the vital rhythms of the cosmos. The National Socialists believed that Germans existed to struggle through warfare.

The Fuhrer and his cadres led the people to the level of hardness necessary to realize their cosmic mission, while destroying the primordial source of weakness in German society, the Jews. Ideology works because of its appeal to the imaginary: vital energies; time carrying gods; and primordial races. These can neither be falsified nor verified. Therein lie their contradiction and their strength. Imaginary worlds exist in human experience for reasons beyond the issues of genre and structure, and interpretations of these worlds by powerful actors have real and serious consequences. They legitimate the fact

and the form of leadership. They establish community-wide goals and reward those who reach those goals. They define individual success (virtue) and provide a means for individuals to claim having lived up to the ideals. They define and motivate the ruling cadres. They anchor leadership in a cultural structure of imaginings. “These imaginings postulate cosmologies; cosmologies in turn articulate the ideologies that assign to the wielders of power the role of mediators or executors on behalf of larger cosmic forces and grant them ‘natural’ rights to dominate society as delegates of the cosmic order” (p283-4). This works because, Wolf notes, quoting Roy Rappaport, “the unfalsifiable yields the unquestionable, which transforms the dubious, the arbitrary and the conventional into the correct, the necessary and the natural (1979:217).”

Wolf draws a different conclusion from the force of the imaginary in the structuring of power. Where Rappaport sees it as reinforcing stasis and adaptive persistence, Wolf sees the powerful as increasingly dependent upon the imaginary. He sees their inherent ambiguity as inviting destabilizing challenges that can only be overcome through adequate means of domination. That is, some combination of outright force with hegemonic power of persuasion.

Though all of this virtuoso analysis and argumentation is stimulating, the piece of the book that is likely to generate the greatest number of quotes is the very last section. Here, Wolf turns the magnifying glass around and looks at the concept of culture as an ideological construct. Rejecting both universalized enlightenment view and parochialized “folklore and custom” approach as representing two competing organizations of structural power, namely those of the internationalized “Third Estate” and its historical opponents. Wolf challenges us to forge a comparative anthropology in which culture is inextricably tied to power, while open to heterogeneity and variability. Once we assume this stance, our primary question becomes “who and what holds it all together, who and what are organized, by what kinds of imperatives, on what level. If organization has no central core-no motivating Hegelian spirit, no economy ‘in the last instance,’ or Mother Nature in the guise of the environment-how are we to understand the manner in which organizing imperatives are orchestrated?” (p. 290) This book is his answer to that question: look to the nexus between ideas and power. That is what society is really *about*.

While Wolf is clearly in favor of a transition from an anthropology that focuses on a diversity of organizations to one that studies the organization of diversity,

his choice of evidentiary authority in his case studies is still old school. We are afforded no insights into the dissidents and outcasts of the Kwakiutl cosmology, especially those who were direct beneficiaries of the colonial largess. We see their challenge to traditional village authority, but not the alternative structuring of power and its attending cosmologies. Wolf tells us that the Tenochca State was different from NS Germany in that NS Germany arose in a world of competing ideologies. What, then, were the legitimating cosmologies of the competitors states in Mexico? If they did not require allosacrifice to maintain their elite grasp on power, how did they do it? Why did these alternative ideologies not create dissidents in Teotihuacan, especially among the merchant group. This group was prosecuted frequently because of its ideological threat. In ideological ways, they played the same role as the Jews in NS Germany; they were living proof of the contradictions in the prevailing cosmology. Who would be most likely to be infected by these ideological subversives among the Tenochca?

In Germany as well, we have what has come to be known as the Goldhagen problem: To what extent did the NS shape German popular opinion as opposed to reflecting it. Wolf's analysis touches on this crucial issue in the organization of diversity only in form of the "French" republican alternative, best exemplified by Left Socialist organizations, primarily labor organizations, and religious alternatives, primary Catholic. Each dissident position had its politicians, organizations, and ideologically based solutions to Germany's problems. Was it merely an accident of history that the rhetoricians of the NS prevailed over these alternatives? Goldhagen has offered his evidence that popular opinion was readily anti-Semitic before and in spite of NS propaganda and therefore more open to political stratagems cast in an anti-Semitic rhetoric.

Uli Linke, in her recent book, *Blood and Nation* shows the considerable time depth to many of the images that Wolf portrays as modern, at least in the hands of the NS interpretation of the Jewish presence in Germany society as a metaphorical infection. Habermas has offered a different picture of public opinion in general as having many potential positions toward issues, some of which are effectively activated through rhetoric, while other po-

sitions are weakened. Since the effect of ideology is to mobilize political support across a diversity of organizations, in all three cases, Wolf could have modeled more fully the comparative anthropology he envisions if he had dealt with the dissident faction and the process of rhetorical mobilization of the minority ideology.

This book will be of extraordinary value to the next generation of anthropologists. This is fitting since we are on the verge of a rebirth of ideological competitors for structural power. When the commentators of both political stripes identified the fall of the Soviet Union with the end of ideologically based political movements, they could not have been more wrong. The Balkan nationalisms, the religious fundamentalisms, environmentalist challenges to post-Fordist capitalism, right-wing populist political party successes in France, Switzerland and Austria, to name only a few, are the harbingers of an era of ideological competition on a scale at least equal to that of the turn of the last century. If anthropologists are to make a contribution to our understanding of this emerging world, we need to take Wolf's model of how we incorporate ideas into our understanding of power very seriously.

#### References:

Goldman, Irving, *The Mouth of Heaven: An Introduction to Kwakiutl Religious Thought*. New York: John Wiley Sons. 1975

Hitler, Adolph, *Mein Kampf*. New York: Reynal and Hitchcock. 1939 [1925]

Linke, Uli, *Blood and Nation: The European Aesthetics of Race*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 1999

Rappaport, Roy A., *Ecology, Meaning and Religion*. Richmond, CA.: North Atlantic Books. 1979

Wolf, Eric, *Europe and the People without History*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1982 Distinguished Lecture: Facing Power-Old Insights, New Questions, *American Anthropology* 92:586-96, 1992.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

**Citation:** Robert Rotenberg. Review of Wolf, Eric R., *Envisioning Power: Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis*. H-SAE, H-Net Reviews. March, 2000.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3956>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).