Are There Histories of Peoples Without Europe? A Review Article

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1.

Wolf's book is a stimulating one from which every reader will derive some profit. His project is to demonstrate that the societies typically studied by anthropologists have been continuously changed over the past five centuries by global political-economic forces. The demonstration takes the form of a fascinating story that draws on travel narratives, on economic, political, and social historiography, and on ethnographic reports. But the story is informed by Marxist concepts that serve to give it a coherence and a theoretical interest that it might otherwise have lacked. Two explicit assumptions are made in this work: first, that no society is completely self-contained or unchanging, and, second, that a proper understanding of societal linkages and transformations must start from an analysis of the material processes in which all social groups are necessarily involved—the production, circulation, and consumption of wealth. Given these two guiding assumptions, the story begins with a survey of the often tenuous, mediated connections between societies in the fifteenth century, and culminates in an account of the emergence of a more strongly structured, global capitalist system by the end of the nineteenth, in the course of which we are informed of the transformation of innumerable non-Western societies.

After a preliminary chapter surveying the world in 1400, the reader is invited to consider the changes in early modern Europe that were to make possible the world we now live in. Already by the fifteenth century, European polities "were competing successfully with their neighbors to the south and east and were about to launch major adventures overseas" (p. 101). Strong, centralised kingdoms were beginning to emerge in northwestern Europe; the patterns of long-distance trade were shifting in its favor; and the military ambitions of its rulers were combining with the commercial interests of its merchants to promote European hegemony abroad. Wolf describes the Iberian
conquests in America: the opening of silver mines worked by forced labor, the establishment of haciendas, the cultivation of sugar cane, and the running of sugar mills worked by slave and wage labor. The demands for labor and products within the developing political economy of the Spanish and Portuguese empires wrought an often brutal change in the life of Indian communities. Less familiar, but equally far-reaching for the reorganization of indigenous "tribes," was the fur trade in North America and Siberia, which Wolf recounts in detail. This is followed by a sketch of the notorious African slave trade, and of the profound social, economic, and military consequences it had for political units on that continent. A final chapter in this part of the story about the extension of European power overseas deals with what an Indian scholar has called "the Vasco Da Gama epoch of Asian history": the creation of the Portuguese, Dutch, and English empires in Asia. From the point of view of the story of world capitalism, it is fitting that in this chapter Wolf devotes most of his attention to the English. Their conquest of India and the radical restructuring of the entire subcontinent set the scene for the final part of Wolf's story. The last quarter of the book—entitled "Capitalism"—tells of the Industrial Revolution in England, of crisis and differentiation in capitalism as a world system, and of the international movement of commodities and of wage labor—to the United States, South America, the West Indies, South Africa, etcetera. This account of the world hegemony of capitalism concludes with a brief consideration of ethnic identities and working-class formations that is summed up in this final paragraph:

Capitalist accumulation thus continues to engender new working classes in widely dispersed areas of the world. It recruits these working classes from a wide variety of social and cultural backgrounds, and inserts them into variable political and economic hierarchies. The new working classes change these hierarchies by their presence, and are themselves changed by the forces to which they are exposed. On one level, therefore, the diffusion of the capitalist mode creates everywhere a wider unity through the constant reconstitution of its characteristic capital-labor relationship. On another level, it also creates diversity, accentuating social opposition and segmentation even as it unifies. Within an ever more integrated world, we witness the growth of ever more diverse proletarian diasporas (p. 383).

The broad outline of this epic story is certainly convincing, and the detail impressive. Indeed, the merit of this particular version—unlike the versions produced by Frank and Wallerstein—is precisely its major concern with the multitude of non-European societies that have been caught up in the various moments of the West's adventure. And yet, some readers may be struck by a sense of uncertainty. Is this essentially a history of the origin and growth of world capitalism, or of the societies affected by it? Or are these alternatives themselves based on a misconception, since the latter story is inevitably part

of the former? I shall return to this question in the final section after I have discussed some of the ideas that underlie that story.

There is no doubt that Wolf’s use of the notion of mode of production enables him to construct a single narrative in which political-economic forces and structures throughout the world, and their systematic interaction, can be described together. To this end, three basic categories are employed: the capitalist mode, the tributary, and the kin-ordered. “The three modes that we employ should not be taken as schemes for pigeon-holing societies,” we are warned. “The two concepts—mode of production and society—pertain to different levels of abstraction. The concept of society takes its departure from real or imputed interactions among people. The concept of mode of production aims, rather, at revealing the political-economic relationships that underlie, orient, and constrain interaction” (p. 76). Strictly speaking, of course, the two concepts do not belong to different levels of abstraction (one of “real interactions” and the other of “theoretical constructs”), but to the same level, the level of narrative, which recounts a causal sequence between events: something happened (did not happen) because something else was previously the case. All historiography, because it consists of textual representations, is based on discursive constructs—some explicit but most implicit—and on attributed causalities. Abstractions do not constrain social realities; real discourses and practices construct and change them. Wolf is aware of the importance of a carefully constructed narrative in which the idea of mode of production is to be deployed as a major theme. “The use of the concept enables us, above all,” he writes, “to inquire into what happens in the encounters of differently constituted systems of interaction—societies—predicated upon different modes of production” (p. 77).

Marx himself represents in Capital what happened when the expanding forces of European capitalism encountered societies predicated upon precapitalist modes of production:

The obstacles presented by the internal solidity and organisation of pre-capitalistic, national modes of production to the corrosive influence of commerce are strikingly illustrated in the intercourse of the English with India and China. The broad basis of the mode of production here is formed by the unity of small-scale agriculture and home industry, to which in India we should add the form of village communities built upon the common ownership of land . . . . In India the English lost no time in exercising their direct political and economic power, as rulers and landlords, to disrupt these small economic communities. English commerce exerted a revolutionary influence on these communities and tore them apart only in so far as the low prices of its goods served to destroy the spinning and weaving industries.2

Thus capitalism subverts, however gradually, the precapitalist modes of production that it encounters—or else it subordinates them to its own historical requirements.

Marx's analysis was the starting point of debates among Marxists about the way world capitalism (in its political form of imperialism) transforms non-European societies, because how that trajectory is to be described determines the kind of politics it is rational for socialist parties to pursue. Far more is therefore at stake here than the presentation of an historical perspective for the study of non-European societies. It is also a matter of specifying in those societies the conditions for a "progressive" politics—a politics designed to hasten their "development" in a "universal" direction. "Precapitalist" societies are those whose fatal destiny has been written by the dramatic narrative that culminates in the triumph of world capitalism.

II.

The systematic elaboration of the mode-of-production concept and its application to the study of non-European societies was largely initiated in our time by French Marxist structuralists, and although Wolf's book is indebted to their ideas he is by no means their uncritical follower. For the former, the concept of mode of production articulates an integrated totality containing economic, political, and ideological instances in which the economic is always determinant ("in the last instance") but not always dominant (as it is in capitalism). 

Wolf does not adopt this conception in its entirety, but stresses, as all Marxists do, the basic importance of social labour. Indeed, the very fact that he has opted for a trinity of production modes ("capitalist," "tribute," and "kin-ordered"), instead of the extravagant typologies others have produced, indicates a sensitivity on his part to the dangers of dogmatic historiography. Wolf's three modes are not simple classifications: The "capitalist" focuses on a dynamically interacting process of production, the "tributary" isolates a politically sanctioned relation of wealth extraction, and the "kin-ordered" emphasises a way of organising labour and access to resources. Unlike the work of many anthropologists who employ the concept of mode of production, Wolf's account explicitly invites the possibility of asking questions that might lead to different writings of the history of societies that Europe conquered and dominated: "No argument is presented here to the effect that this trinity exhausts all the possibilities. For other problems and issues it may be useful to construct other modes drawing further distinctions, or to group together differently the distinctions drawn here" (p. 76). So let us examine the distinctions drawn for the trinity of concepts presented here, for as Wolf makes it clear they are not only central to the way he tells his story but theoretically dependent on each other.

The basic distinction between capitalist and precapitalist modes of production turns on the well-known contrast between economic and non-economic
means of surplus extraction. Political and military pressure is said to be a pre-condition of precapitalist extraction; market exchange of labour-power for wages the pre-condition of capitalist extraction. Wolf accepts this classic distinction without question. But to what extent is it an ideological offspring of the Enlightenment opposition and separation between "the state" and "civil society," between the domain of authority and repression on the one hand, and that of natural exchange among free men on the other? Of all modern social theorists, Marx was perhaps the most aware of the varieties of coercive social power, and yet the definition of the capitalist mode of production partly in terms of economic as opposed to political and military forms of extraction obscures historical complexities that need to be identified.

If one follows carefully the epic story that Wolf tells, it is impossible to miss the fact that state and other forms of coercive power have been fundamental at various points in the operation of profit-making capitalist enterprises, that the historical development of capitalism is inseparable from political and legal preconditions. The reader may also recall at this point that the struggle between workers and capitalists over the limits of the working day, which Marx describes in Chapter 10 of the first volume of Capital, is integral to his account of the process by which absolute surplus-value is generated. This political struggle is over the enactment of legislation by which a crucial condition of surplus extraction is determined—a form of struggle that has certainly not declined in importance in the era of the Welfare State (presently under attack in Britain) and of transnational corporations that continually seek to manipulate political conditions in order to optimise profits. An obvious implication of industrial legislation is the legal form that can be taken by labour contracts, whose clauses are themselves objects of bargaining and pressure (including lockouts, strikes, and strike breaking), because they define the conditions within which capitalist production is organised.

The purpose of these remarks is not to launch into an argument about the nature of capitalism. It is to ask what happens when we characterise complex historical structures and processes in terms of some permanent criterion. Thus if we define the tributary mode of production (which is said to underlie, orient, and constrain noncapitalist societies) in terms of an extraction mechanism "exerting other than economic pressure" (p. 81), we may be at a loss to explain the existence—the massive, economically vital presence—of taxation in capitalist states and empires; for taxation is represented in Wolf's scheme as tribute, and tribute is said to be the method of surplus extraction characteristic not of capitalist but of noncapitalist modes of production. Yet no account of capitalist production would be adequate if it did not include the variable effects on it of implementing taxation policies. And once they are taken into account, nothing of substance is gained if we then classify taxation as "external" to the capitalist mode of production but "internal" to the social formation within which that mode operates.
If taxation by the state is a form of tribute, the question may also be asked whether significant distinctions can be made among varieties of "tribute" in noncapitalist societies. In other words, can we distinguish, as orthodox Marxist writers do, between "Asiatic" and "feudal" modes of production? Wolf argues, persuasively, that the difference between politically centralised and politically decentralised patterns of tribute extraction has wrongly been used to set up two fundamentally opposed ideal-types. The patterns are to be understood, he insists, as unstable outcomes of the competition for power and wealth among nonproducers at the top, not as "enduring and unchanging opposites" (p. 81). Most Marxist scholars, however, would not agree with him.

In a recent paper, Wickham (a Marxist historian of medieval Europe) has argued in favour of a basic distinction between two forms of tribute-taking and tax-raising—which he calls, respectively, a feudal and a tributary mode of production, and which he maintains can be found in a single state. His survey of Roman, Chinese, and Islamic state systems deals at length with the oscillation between central ("state") and local ("landlord") powers, to which Wolf draws attention. But, unlike Wolf, Wickham insists that the distinction is crucial for the development of the production process, in which landlords (that is, rent-takers) are often involved and states (tax-raisers) rarely so: "In one sense, one can say that the difference between the ruling classes of the feudal and the tributary modes is between the relative separation of the former and the near-total separation of the latter from the process of production (just as, on the other side, the capitalist mode entails total control by owners over such processes)." At first sight this is an attractive suggestion, but in the end unconvincing for reasons that have a direct bearing on Wolf's discussion of precapitalist societies. To begin with, notice that the "mode of production" is here reduced to the "relation of production," which in turn is represented as wealth claimed by nonproducers from producers (a form of surplus-extraction). Where the state claims that wealth, we are told, we have tax, and where it is claimed by the landlord, rent. But this raises a question that is not considered by those who use a simple definition of extraction: Precisely how are claims to the appropriation of wealth socially and culturally conditioned? This is a matter not only of the identity of the claimant (state or landlord, public or private body, corporation aggregate or sole, etcetera) but of the content of the claim (the types of right—usufruct, alienation, inheritance, etcetera), its object (land, water, implements, labour, etcetera), and its effectiveness (practical conditions in which the claims can be secured). At least as important as who appropriates surpluses from producers is therefore the question of how (with what degree of thoroughness or resistance, in what

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forms and quantities, under what conditions of continuity, in relation to what rates of accumulation, etcetera). It is surely a mistake to ignore such questions on the grounds that politics and law are superstructural: “Public vs. private,” writes Wickham, “is a convenient shorthand, but it derives from the ideological superstructures of a social formation, and cannot define an economic opposition. . . . The formal constitution of the state, and the legal characterisation of landed property, are equally superstructural. . . . What matters for the constitution of states . . . is not so much law as power.”

This way of putting things seriously misses the point that legal enactments, definitions, and processes are elements in power struggles. As elements of strategies they are especially crucial in non-Western societies subject to pressures from European powers, and so must be taken into account in any explanations of their continuities and changes. The development of political economies is not adequately explained in terms of typological contrasts between state indifference to, landlord involvement in, and capitalist total control of the production process.

The concept of kinship-ordered mode of production is addressed to a category of societies variously labelled in classical anthropological literature as “primitive,” “acephalous,” “tribal,” “kin-based,” etcetera. The major problem underlying that category was how to represent homogeneous societies—that is, how to write about social types that lack external determinations. French Marxist anthropologists developed their concepts of classless (that is, stateless) precapitalist modes in the course of re-describing in “materialist” terms the autonomous order of “segmentary lineage” societies described in anglophone ethnography. Wolf’s discussion here takes that category of classical anthropology for granted, although his historical narrative suggests that no “primitive society” of which anthropologists have records was entirely isolated and unchanging. How should a mode-of-production history treat this category? “Claude Meillassoux,” writes Wolf, “has rightly argued that to characterize such populations by an absence of features, calling them ‘classless,’ ‘acephalous,’ or ‘stateless,’ tells us nothing about what they are” (p. 89). What they are must be specified in terms of some essential criterion or set of criteria by which they can be conceptually isolated and

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5 Ibid., 184.

6 For example, the Ottoman land code, which was promulgated in 1858 partly in response to pressures from the European powers, created new strategic possibilities by its requirement that title to holdings be registered. For contingent local reasons the occupying owner was often unable or unwilling to register. The resulting conflict between custom and law, especially in the Mandatory period after the dismemberment of the Ottoman empire, gave various groups the opportunity to manipulate claims to their advantage. For general discussions, see D. Warriner, “Land Tenure Problems in the Fertile Crescent in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in The Economic History of the Middle East: 1800–1914, C. Issawi, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); and K. H. Kerpat, “The Land Regime, Social Structure, and Modernization in the Ottoman Empire,” in The Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East, W. R. Polk and R. L. Chambers, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).
analyzed as *types*. That criterion is *kinship*. This starting point leads Wolf to enquire into the essential nature of kinship and, after a brief review of anthropological disagreements on this subject, to offer this definition: "kinship is a particular way of establishing rights in people and thus laying claim to shares of social labor" (p. 91).

Wolf points out that kinship works differently according to whether access to resources is open or restricted, and suggests that it is typically in the latter case that kinship groups larger than the domestic family are formed, by which exclusive claims to social labour can be determined. Ranking, and even a measure of inequality, may emerge between kin groups, but until outstanding leaders can make others permanently dependent on them for their means of livelihood, the basic order of kin-based societies remains unchanged. Such institutionalised inequalities occur for contingent reasons, because the intrinsic mechanisms in such societies promote equilibrium:

All these forces and factors threaten the continuance of the kinship order. What, then, prevents its disintegration? How do kin-ordered units cohere at all over time?

The ability of the kin-ordered mode to regenerate itself may lie in the absence of any mechanism that can aggregate or mobilize social labor apart from the particular relations set up by kinship. The oppositions as they are normally played out are particular, the conjunction of a particular elder with a particular junior of a particular lineage at a particular time and place, and not the general opposition of elder and junior as classes. In everyday life the kin-ordered mode contains its oppositions by particularizing tensions and conflicts (p. 94–95).

But I find this kind of reasoning worrying, not merely because of its circularity, but because it is *kinship* that is proposed as the defining feature of a precapitalist mode of production and its essential mechanisms. I would not, of course, wish to deny that kinship links are crucial for mobilising labour and for gaining access to agricultural land in many noncapitalist societies. But that function is not what kinship is: Kinship links exist prior to their function in this regard, which is precisely why they can be taken up, emphasised, underplayed, or ignored in different historical situations. As Wolf notes, in chiefdoms with hereditary aristocracies “the function of kinship changes from that of ordering similarly organized groups to that of drawing a major distinction between one stratum and another” (p. 98). But even at the level of the production process, the fact that labour is recruited on a kinship basis does not tell us very much. The patrilineal Ibo, Yoruba, and Hausa in Nigeria before independence had very different political-economic organisations. Among nomadic pastoralists in the Sudan, the Arabic-speaking Kababish and Baggara appear in the nineteenth century not only to have (1) depended on

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7 There is now a considerable historical literature on these three ethnic groups, but the relevant volumes of the *Ethnographic Survey of Africa*, published by the International African Institute in the 1950s, are perhaps still the most useful source for an outline of the very different political-economic arrangements found among the three at the time of the British conquest.
kinship claims in organising production, but (2) had comparable patterns of herd management and pasture use: And yet these arrangements diverged significantly under British rule in the twentieth century, for a variety of reasons. Again, cultivators in the Sikh kingdom of the Punjab held and worked their land, and paid their taxes, in accordance with broadly similar kinship principles (which the British judicial system in India was to describe as custom)—and yet after the British conquest Punjabi peasants responded in diverse ways to changed systems of land revenue, market conditions, and legal processes. All these examples, which might be multiplied indefinitely, can of course be taken as confirmation of Wolf’s own warning that “the ways in which [kinship] rights and claims are established vary widely among different culture-bearing populations” (p. 91). But they suggest a more radical conclusion: that nothing can be deduced about the structure and development of local economies from the fact that they employ kinship as the general principle for claims to social labour. In another article I have criticised the attempted demonstration by French Marxist anthropologists of the thesis that the forces and relations of production, defined in a precise manner, necessarily determine political and ideological structures within historically evolving African social formations. Here, I wish merely to question the utility of defining a precapitalist mode of production in terms of kinship—especially as that concept is taken (as Wolf explicitly takes it) as an heuristic device. I suggest that the history of noncapitalist societies can not be understood by isolating one a priori principle, that the important thing always is to try and identify that combination of elements (environmental, demographic, social, cultural, etcetera) in the past of a given population that will serve to explain a particular outcome—in the narrative (or weak) sense of “explain,” not in the natural science (or strong) sense, because the past of human societies cannot be tested, it can only be made more or less plausible as part of the same story as the present. If it is objected that such an approach would make a predictive science of society impossible, I can only agree.

In a sympathetic review of French Marxist contributions to the study of tribal society, an anglophone anthropologist observes:

... all the writers agree that while the property relation between worker and capitalist may actually be the key to uncovering the secret of capitalist formations, such is not the case for pre-capitalist societies in general, and segmentary [lineage] societies in particular, where there has been no separation of labourer from the means of produc-

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9 I have dealt with this subject in “Aspects of Change in the Legal Structure of the Muslim Family in the Punjab under British Rule” (B. Litt. thesis, Oxford University, 1961).
tion. The key must therefore lie, they conclude, elsewhere—in social ties which are more directly personal. Whether these social relations are taken to be basically egalitarian (Godelier, Hindess, and Hirst) or inegalitarian (Terray, Rey, Meillassoux) they must nonetheless be personal.11

This, I suggest, expresses very well where the trouble lies. We can surely accept that noncapitalist social relations in production, as in other areas of life, are more personal, and that reciprocal obligations across wide bodies and networks of kin are more common, than they are in capitalist societies. But there is no key to the secret of noncapitalist societies. It is only when we assume that such societies are determined by some single principle, or integrated into a determinate totality, that we look for the key that will explain them. But there is no good reason to assume that such is the case, and indeed the thrust of Wolf’s entire narrative throws doubt on that assumption. Only in capitalist societies, based as they are on production for profit, on the drive for unceasing growth, on the penetration of money-values into various spheres of life, and on the continuous transformation of productive forces, is there something approaching “a key” to its understanding. This is not to say that capitalist societies are integrated totalities, autonomous and homogeneous, without contradictions and without heterogeneous cultural spaces, because that they clearly are not. It is merely to argue that, if the concept of mode of production has any explanatory use, it is in relation to capitalism, and not in relation to “kin-ordered” societies.12

The concept of “the capitalist mode of production” is a way—the most powerful way—of writing a particular history of relations, institutions, processes, that have hegemonised (but by no means homogenised) the world. There is not and cannot be any conceptual parallel to it in the form of “precapitalist modes of production.” Practices of work and power are central in any collective life, but there is no a priori way of determining how these are articulated, let alone how they will change.

III.

In his “Afterword” Wolf argues that the story of the formation of world capitalism is the story of all the societies and cultures in America, Africa, and


12 In case some readers mistakenly think this conclusion is similar to that of M. Sahlins, Culture and Practical Reason (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), it should be made clear that (1) whereas I maintain that there is no key to the secret of any noncapitalist society, Sahlins argues that there is, and that the key is always inscribed in “the cultural logic” of each society, and (2) whereas Sahlins says that the cultural meanings in each society are generated by “symbolic structures,” I argue that they are the product of practices, and that the practices of Western capitalist societies render the cultural meanings of non-Western societies vulnerable but that the practices of the latter do not undermine the cultural meanings of the former.
Asia: “The global processes set in motion by European expansion constitutes their history as well” (p. 385; Wolf’s emphasis). But is this so? Is it not really the history of world capitalism we are talking about in which these societies have been variously involved, and which is therefore their history too? Or, to put it more precisely: (1) to what extent is that history equally their history, and (2) is that history the only one that can be written of them?

In the story of the formation of world capitalism, the societies that Wolf focusses on in his narrative do have indispensable parts to play, and they are in that sense its coauthors. But these authors do not occupy symmetrical positions in determining that story. It is true that in the innumerable conflicts throughout the world encouraged or initiated by Europe’s expansion the results have not always been what Europeans have wanted—in fact Europeans themselves have rarely been united in their particular political economic aims. But in the formation and growth of industrial capitalism the main story has been written by Europe, and later also by those who have adopted Europe’s historical project as their own. Of course this story has always involved struggle. But the struggle has been an unequal one, and in the end it has been about the particular details of an emerging world order, a matter of the various accommodations to be made to the local conditions of existence of world capitalism.

The story of world capitalism is the history of the dominant world order within which diverse societies exist. But there are also histories (some written, some yet to be written) of the diverse traditions and practices that once shaped people’s lives and that cannot be reduced to ways of generating surplus or of conquering and ruling others. “As Marx said, men make their own history but not under conditions of their own choosing. They do so under the constraints of relationships and forces that direct their will and their desires” (p. 386). Do we not therefore need to understand the traditions and practices by which people’s desires were once constructed if we are to recount precisely how they made (or failed to make) their own history? The concept of culture is crucial in such an anthropological enterprise, but what kind of concept should that be? Wolf is surely right in insisting that cultural discourses be related to differentiated and changing material conditions, and is consequently right in denying that cultures are necessarily homogeneous, integrated entities. However, the bifurcated conception of culture he adopts from Lowie seems to me unsuitable:

Nearly fifty years ago Robert Lowie distinguished between “‘matter-of-fact usage’ and ‘secondary interpretations’ or ‘rationalizations.’ . . . The distinction is still useful. Even the simplest food-collecting group deploys an impressive array of objects, customs, and knowledge in its dealing with the world, together with a body of instructions for their use. This constitutes the matter-of-fact level of cultural phenomena. On another level, such instrumental forms—objects, acts, and ideas—appear as elements in cultural codes, which purport to define their place in the relations of
human beings to one another, and of human beings to the surrounding world. Instructions about the instrumental use of cultural forms are synchronized with communications about the nature and praxis of the human situation. This is the level of interpretation, rationalization, or ideology, of assumptions and perspectives defining a particular view of the human lot (p. 387–88).

In these distinctions we are confronted once again with the old formula of base and superstructure, which in its least satisfactory version postulates a systematic connection between “reality” and “(mis)representations of reality.” Many Marxist anthropologists continue to employ this formula although it has long been subjected to damaging criticism. The main epistemological objection to it derives from the Kantian argument that, since “reality” is accessible only through “categories,” the two cannot be distinguished in terms of a relationship of determination. There is no privileged access to “reality” independent of accounts that tell us what it is.

Marxist anthropologists such as Bloch and Godelier use the notion of ideology first to identify a superstructural part of culture (the “representation/misrepresentation of real conditions”), and then to explain how domination takes place in noncapitalist societies. In effect, they assume that relations of unequal power are essentially dependent either on consensus or on force—or on a combination of the two. One trouble with their consensus argument is that it fuses the distinction between deceiver and deceived with the opposition between dominator and dominated. There is no a priori reason to suppose that social categories that define relations between dominators and dominated must involve credulity on the part of the latter and cynicism on that of the former. In any case, such suppositions are irrelevant to the problem. What is shared in such situations is not “belief” as an interior state of mind but cultural discourses that constitute objective social conditions and thus define forms of behaviour appropriate to them. Such conditions do not rule out the possibility of conflict—by which I mean not merely that conflicts may erupt to upset them but that conflicts including the use of force are entirely compatible with them. Therefore “force” is not a logical alternative to “consensus”—that is, to the sharing of concepts that define common social conditions. Indeed, we can go a step further and say that the effectiveness of “force” as a means of domination is itself dependent on a minimal sharing of concepts—as Hobbes long ago pointed out. At one level, this is simply a

matter of recognising that Roman emperors facing Christian martyrs do not dominate the latter by using force—they merely destroy them. At another it is a matter of appreciating that when two armies are engaged in war, the working out of effective strategies requires that each side take into account the concepts that constitute their shared social condition, and that each try to construct the conditions that both must share. Deception may certainly be an element in that agonistic construction, but it is rarely the major element and never the defining condition of domination. Control of information that enables autonomous activity is what matters to dominant power, not control of the way that other minds “perceive reality.”

Thus, when Wolf writes that “the ability to bestow meanings—to ‘name’ things, acts, and ideas—is a source of power,” he is right, but right for the wrong reasons. “Control of communication allows the managers of ideology to lay down the categories through which reality is to be perceived” (p. 388). I suggested above, in the context of the question of law as power, that the process of naming and defining relations is a modality of power, not because it confounds people’s perceptions of reality but because it constructs the unequal social conditions within which groups of people are obliged to live and struggle. Strategies of resistance or liberation cannot be effective if they ignore such shared constructs.

The general difficulty with assuming that ideology is a superstructural part of culture that makes domination possible is twofold. First, it underestimates the complex and shifting ways in which discourses relate to historically defined behaviour. There is no way of determining in advance how people with given economic interests will behave in relation to each other—either as individual class members or as class-based political movements—in varying historical circumstances. Political discourses do not simply “legitimise” behaviour from outside, as it were, or simply mobilise people with given “interests”; they operate in diverse historical circumstances to construct motivations, to transform commitments, and to reorganise experiences \[14\]—as well

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\[14\] Jones, a Marxist historian of nineteenth-century England, stresses the multidimensionality of concepts signifying and engaging classes: “because there are different languages of class, one should not proceed upon the assumption that ‘class’ as an elementary counter of official social description, ‘class’ as an effect of theoretical discourse about distribution or production relations, ‘class’ as the summary of a cluster of culturally signifying practices, or ‘class’ as a species of political or ideological self-definition, all share a single reference point in an anterior social reality” (G. S. Jones, Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History, 1832–1982 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 7–8, Jones’s emphasis). Historical languages of class, although never static, have their distinctive morphologies and functionalities. The languages of class employed in nineteenth-century Britain are not replicated in twentieth-century Egypt. The assumption is made by many students of the Arab world (those writing in English or French as well as those writing in Arabic) that in both places we may identify an urban bourgeoisie, a nascent working class, a Lumpenproletariat, each displaying a recognisable class ideology—but such an assumption is profoundly mistaken. Historical languages constitute classes, they do not merely justify groups already in place according to universal economic structures.
as to produce and codify knowledge about social behaviour that is essential to all these creative functions. “The managers of ideology” do not command silent audiences: Political discourses are collaborative processes. The collaboration may rarely be equal, but it remains nevertheless a quite different phenomenon from conditioning.

The second major difficulty with the classic assumptions about ideology is that they exaggerate the importance of consciousness in explaining historical patterns of inequality: Historical conditions change like landscapes created by glaciers—usually slowly, always contingently—on which old paths that followed old inequalities simply become irrelevant rather than being consciously rejected. The classic conception of ideology as the glue of consciousness that holds political structures together (in a “precarious” and “dialectical” manner) obscures the fact that the story of industrial capitalism can be told not just as the collective adventure in which all the world’s peoples have combined to make their own history, but as the progress of glacial powers that have altered the conditions, the values, the desires of the peoples in our world. There was no agent in our past who intended what we have all become. Nor is it the case that a better perception of the Truth now leads us to reject an oppressive reality. What makes us see and desire new things is the prior re-formation of conditions that was only marginally the result of intent.

IV.

This is an admirable book—erudite, politically committed, thought provoking. Few anthropologists would have had the courage to write it. Many readers from a variety of disciplines will admire it. But another book remains to be written by Wolf telling another story, the story of transformations that have reshaped those conditions which are not of people’s choosing but within which they must make their history. We should not think of those conditions as though they merely set varying limits to preconstituted choices. Historical conditions construct those choices, just as distinctive choices constitute historically specific subjectivities. It is when we have anthropological accounts of what those constructions were, and how they have changed, that we may learn what the histories of peoples without Europe once were, and why they cannot make those histories any longer. We may then also understand better why and in what ways so many peoples are now trying to make other histories both within and against the hegemonic powers of modern capitalism that had their origins in Western Europe.