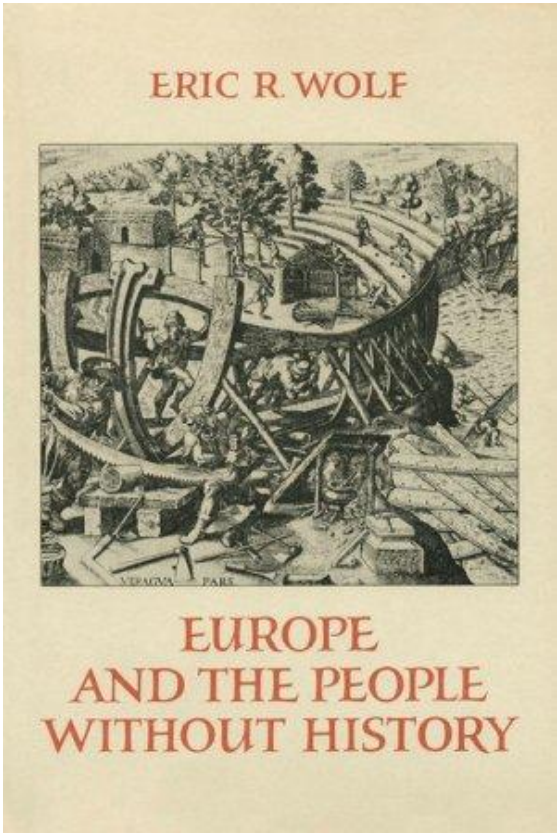
Living Anthropologically
Anthropology – Understanding – Possibility

Geography, States, Empires



Eric Wolf, Europe and the People Without History

Eric Wolf's Europe & the People Without History (1982) is a foundational work for anthropology, history, and global studies. I read parts of *Europe and the People Without History* my first year of college for a seminar titled "Imperialism, Slavery, and Revolution" with Shanti Singham. I tackled the rest over the summer when I returned home to Montana. Eric Wolf made sense of the world. I remained a history major, but I eventually studied anthropology because of *Europe and the People Without History*. Wolf was my introduc to the question of What is Anthropology?

Eric Wolf takes aim at portrayals of a world of relatively isolated peoples, such as Ruth Benedict's Patterns of Culture. Wolf describes a world of interconnection. "The central assertion of this book is that the world of humankind constitutes a manifold, a totality of interconnected processes, and inquiries that disassemble this totality into bits and then fail to reassemble it falsify reality" (1982:3).

> 'the world of humankind constitutes a manifold, a totality of interconnected processes' (Eric Wolf)
>
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Given this central assertion in the very first pages, it's sad that sometimes this lesson seems lost, even on some who had Eric Wolf as a professor, like Napoleon Chagnon. Sad too is that contemporary anthropology textbooks need to relearn this lesson. This may be why people like Bill Gates were never exposed to this way of understanding the world.

A Totality of Interconnected Processes

The central assertion of interconnectedness rests on recapturing the historical details of European expansion in the last 500 years. Even for "The World in 1400" Eric Wolf explains that "everywhere in this world of 1400, populations existed in interconnections" (1982:71). The world from the 16th century knits together every continent, plying trans-oceanic linkages. The question is to understand how it was Europeans who directed this expansion. This question is critical for world history and contemporary realities:

> An observer looking at the world in A.D. 800 would barely have taken note of the European peninsula. Rome had fallen, and no effective centralized power had taken its place. Instead, a host of narrow-gauged tributary domains disputed rights to the shattered Roman inheritance. The center of political and economic gravity had shifted eastward to the "new Rome" of Byzantium, and to the Muslim caliphate. Six hundred years later, in A.D. 1400, an observer would have noted a very different Europe and a marked change in its relation to neighboring Asia and Africa. The many petty principalities had fused into a smaller number of effective polities. These polities were competing successfully with their neighbors to the south and east and were about to launch major adventures overseas. What had happened? (1982:101)

Starting in the 1960s, Eric Wolf was already asking what Jared Diamond in the 1997 Guns, Germs, and Steel called Yali's Question: "Why is it that you white people developed so much cargo and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had little cargo of our own?"

Answering that question, as Eric Wolf understood, means accounting specifically for how Europe went from being a land that in A.D. 800 "was of little account in the affairs of the wider world" (1982:71) to those effective polities that could launch overseas adventures. Diamond would have us believe that the answer lies in the shape of the continents, latitude and longitude gradients, and agriculture, particularly large domesticated animals. Although this much older story may account for the fact that many of the most powerful polities have been in Eurasia, it cannot account for the rise of Europe 800-1400 A.D.

Everyone agrees that geography matters. Eric Wolf's survey of the world in 1400 is full of maps, descriptions of terrain, and accounts of available resources. But serious historians reject Jared Diamond's rationale for the rise of Europe.

To truly get a grip on Yali's Question, we have to turn back to Eric Wolf in 1982.

The World in 1400: Political Geography, Agriculture, Empires, Trade

By 1400 A.D., cities, states, and empires had already risen and fallen throughout Africa, Eurasia, and the Americas. In effect, there were surely hundreds of local varieties of Yali's question: Why is it that you Turk – Mongol – Mali – Bantu – Indian – Chinese – Sriviyaya – Chimu – Inca – Chibcha – Maya – Aztec – Cahokia (to name a few) people developed so much and conquered us? Just as surely there were people and rulers who justified their power by invoking divine authorities, or claiming biological, cultural, intellectual superiority. There were also those who would marvel at the sometimes quite rapid rises and declines, the shifting balances of power. (See Rob Gargett's short but potent Other Africas story of African kingdoms.)

Geography is of course important. As Eric Wolf sets forth, "to understand this world of 1[illegible] we must begin with geography" (1982:25). And undoubtedly agriculture, especially intensive

agriculture, is important in this story. Agriculture may not be necessary for sedentary existence–the peoples on the Pacific Coast of North America had settled life through fishing. Agriculture may not have even been necessary for the rise of some of the first states. As textbook authors Robert Lavenda and Emily Schultz explore through their account of state formation in the Andes, "if the first complex societies on the Peruvian coast were based on a steady supply of food from the sea, rather than agriculture, the notion that village agriculture must precede the rise of social complexity is dealt a blow" (Anthropology: What Does it Mean to be Human?q 2015:224). Nevertheless, it seems difficult, if not impossible, to run an empire without intensive agriculture. There may also be geographical features which encouraged city and state formation. [**Update April 2013:** Some of the latest findings indicate Maize was key in early Andean civilisation, and so it would seem almost all urban-state forms have relied on agriculture.]

But this kind of large-scale geography cannot account for the rise and fall:

> Can anyone say that the present balance of economic and political power will be the same in 2500 as it is today? For example, in the year 1500 some of the most powerful and largest cities in the world existed in China, India, and Turkey. In the year 1000, many of the mightiest cities were located in Peru, Iraq, and Central Asia. In the year 500 they could be found in central Mexico, Italy, and China. In 2500 B.C.E. the most formidable rulers lived in Iraq, Egypt, and Pakistan. What geographic determinism can account for this? (McAnany and Yoffee, Questioning Collapse 2010:10)

Moreover, it is important to note that although there could be shifts of power and rapid declines, this rarely meant a complete end to the social system:

> Over two decades ago the sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt wrote that societal collapse seldom occurs if collapse is taken to mean "the complete end of those political systems and their accompanying civilizational framework." . . . More recently Joseph Tainter, after a search for archaeological evidence of societal "overshoot" and collapse, arrived at a conclusion similar to Eisenstadt's: the wasn't any. When closely examined, the overriding human story is one of survival and

> regeneration. Certainly crises existed, political forms changed, and landscapes were altered, but rarely did societies collapse in an absolute and apocalyptic sense. (Questioning Collapse 2010:5-6)

Finally, and of extreme importance as we turn back to Eric Wolf, these places exist not in isolation but interconnection:

> Groups that defined themselves as culturally distinct were linked by kinship or ceremonial allegiance; states expanded, incorporating other peoples into more encompassing political structures; elite groups succeeded one another, seizing control of agricultural populations and establishing new political and symbolic orders. Trade formed networks from East Asia to the Levant, across the Sahara, from East Africa through the Indian Ocean to the Southeast Asian archipelago. Conquest, incorporation, recombination, and commerce also marked the New World. In both hemispheres populations impinged upon other populations through permeable social boundaries, creating intergrading, interwoven social and cultural entities. If there were any isolated societies these were but temporary phenomena–a group pushed to the edge of a zone of interaction and left to itself for a brief moment in time. Thus, the social scientist's model of distinct and separate systems, and of a timeless "precontact" ethnographic present, does not adequately depict the situation before European expansion; much less can it comprehend the worldwide system of links that would be created by that expansion. (1982:71)

In many introductory anthropology textbooks–even my preferred textbook for Introduction to Anthropology–there is a curious juxtaposition of the sections on the archaeology of complex societies and the state with a leap from there into cultural anthropology, the culture concept, and ethnography. Such juxtapositions perpetuate the view that cultural anthropology studies others as relatively isolated laboratories who can reveal something about human nature–and this takes us back to the themes considered in my Amazon-available Kindle e-book on human nature, evolution, and race. Yet 500 years before anyone who called herself an anthropologist arrived on the scene, these peoples were neither isolated nor static. Eric Wolf's paragraph, or something like it, should be in every Introduction to Anthropology textbook. As should some account of the rise of the European powers that would eventually create anthropology as an academic discipline.

Eric Wolf – Europe, Prelude to Expansion: Long-Distance Trade, Political Consolidation, State Making

The first factor Wolf considers for explaining the rise of Europe from provincial backwaters to powerful polities 800-1400 A.D. is the shift in patterns of long-distance trade. Before 800 A.D. much of Europe was more likely to be conquered than to do any conquering:

> Islam expanded quickly from its center in the caravan city of Mecca, and in the course of the seventh century A.D. it overran North Africa. During the second decade of the eighth century, Muslim armies occupied most of the Iberian peninsula; in the ninth century Sicily fell to the Muslims. When the capital of the Islamic caliphate moved from Damascus to Baghdad in the mid-eighth century, however, the Islamic center of gravity moved eastward away from the Mediterranean, in a movement parallel to the eastward shift of Byzantium. Trade with the Caucasus, Inner Asia, Arabia, India, and China grew more important than trade connections with the western Mediterranean. (1982:103)
> [See also Janet Abu-Lughod, Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350. Abu-Lughod (1991:40) calls Wolf's book "a breath of fresh air in an otherwise self-centered literature."]

In other words, the balance of trade and power was firmly in the East. Europe provided raw materials and even some slaves: "Europe furnished mainly slaves and timber, receiving some luxury goods in return. European slaves reached the Near East not only across the sea-lanes of the Mediterranean but also, along with precious furs and other products, down the Russian rivers into the Black Sea. They were brought by the Varangian Rus, a branch of the seafaring and sea-raiding peoples who had fanned out from their *viks*, or inlets, in Scandinavia to harass the European littoral and to carry off slaves to Near Eastern markets" (1982:105). One can imagine yet another perplexed European Yali, seeing a bustling Near Eastern city for the first time after being sold into slavery from a forest hinterland!

The key shift would be the rise of the Italian ports, especially Venice and Amalfi, then lat Pisa and Genoa:

> Through their success in trade and war, these Italian towns began to tilt the balance of exchange between the western and eastern halves of the Mediterranean in favor of the West. Largely deprived of an agrarian hinterland of their own, their frontier of expansion lay in sea-borne commerce. They were thus in a position to become the main beneficiaries of the new conjuncture of power and influence in the Mediterranean after the year A.D. 1000. By then, Byzantium had initiated a policy of military consolidation on land, relying on its armed peasantry to defend it against growing attacks on all sides. Venice became virtually the commercial agent of Byzantium and engrossed most of its sea-borne trade. (1982:104)

The second factor Eric Wolf turns to is political consolidation. Here after A.D. 1000, there was an

> intensification and extensification of cultivation. This was particularly true of areas north of the Alps, where the introduction of triennial rotation by means of the heavy horse-drawn plow resulted in an absolute increase of the surplus product. Clearing of the dense forest cover of continental Europe and plowing up of the European plain expanded the arable from which surpluses could be taken. Both processes took place under the aegis of tribute-taking overlords, and both, in turn, increased the political power of the dominant class. Increased production of surpluses further enhanced the military capability of this class, which rested upon the ability to sustain the high cost of war horses and armor. (1982:105)

Here Wolf is obviously discussing things related to Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*: horse-drawn plows, agriculture, war horses and armor. And it is true that you need non-human animal muscle power and certain technologies to increase surplus production. However, Wolf explains this all under the heading of "political consolidation": the key factors are political and economic. Plows, non-human animal muscle power, and armor were available across Eurasia. What needs to be explained is how they were coming together in the northwest part of the continent during this period, and under the aegis of relatively small-scale polities. Here again, the key motivations were political and economic–Wolf describ how these polities used war abroad, commerce, and enlarging the central domain. As Wo

outlines (1982:105-108), the war abroad tactic was important for the Iberian peninsula as they carried out a long *Reconquista* of Muslim Spain; commerce became important shifting north from Italy; France and England followed the expansion of the central domain:

> All the European states grew slowly, as composites of many different segments and accretions. Their boundaries might well have been drawn differently, creating a map of Europe quite different from the arrangement of countries that we think of today as inalieanable national entities. The map might have shown a sea-based empire, comprising Scandinavia, the northern seacoast of Europe, and England; a polity comprising western France and the British Isles; a union of eastern France and western Germany, or a state comprising the valleys of the Rhone and the Rhine intervening between German and France; a union of Germany and northern Italy; a state uniting Catalonia and the south of France; an Iberian peninsula divided into a northern Christian tier of kingdoms and a southern Muslim tier. Each of these represents a possibility that in fact existed at some time, and each suggests that the geopolitical boundaries segmenting Europe today require explanation and should not be taken for granted. (1982:108)

Wolf proceeds to discuss state making and expansion. Interestingly, this seems driven in part by what has been called a crisis of feudalism around A.D. 1300: "Agriculture ceased to grow, perhaps because the available technology reached the limits of its productivity. The climate worsened, rendering the food supply more precarious and uncertain. Epidemics affected large numbers of people debilitated by a poorer diet. . . . The solution to the crisis required an increase in the scale and intensity of war" (1982:108-109). In other words, to a certain extent there were both internal strengths–and weaknesses–that spurred increased militarization and the search for new frontiers.

Eric Wolf among the Historians – Why Europe?

Eric Wolf was hardly the only one trying to explain, or better re-explain, the European transformation that set the stage for colonialism and global capitalism. In addition to the traditional histories, Wolf was in dialogue with Immanuel Wallerstein, and his work on The Modern World-System. He read Andre Gunder Frank's World Accumulation which "details the global scope of the stockpiling of mercantile wealth, although he calls capitalist what I would, with Marx, treat as 'the prehistory of capital'" (1982:408). Wolf also cites several books from J.H. Parry. In Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past (2003:58-73), Patrick Manning nicely summarizes this scholarly ferment re-investigating the question of why Europe and why capitalism, in a global context.

When I first read and taught *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, I thought Jared Diamond would be in some kind of dialogue with this earlier work. But search the text for Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein, Eric Wolf, even for John H. Parry. Nothing. Sure, one could claim all these arguments are irrelevant for this enormous time-scale, but that's hardly an adequate answer, or even the beginning of an answer, to Yali's Question.

These scholars recognize the importance of geography, but this geography does not explain the reasons for European expansion. Contemporary historians broadly verify that Jared Diamond's account in *Guns, Germs, and Steel* is inadequate. In an otherwise positive review, The World According to Jared Diamond, historian J.R. McNeill makes precisely this point. First, although he is generally quite appreciative about Diamond's approach, McNeill comments that it is probably not so surprising to see the most formidable societies arising in Eurasia:

> The fact that Eurasia spawned the world's most formidable societies does not pose a truly vexing question. Eurasia accounted for some eighty percent of humankind over the past 3,000 years, and probably well before that. Even if formidability were randomly distributed, one would expect to find it more often in Eurasian societies than elsewhere. Indeed because greater population ordinarily means greater interaction, more intense intersocietal competition, and the faster and more thorough acquisition of a broader array of disease immunities, the probability would be even higher than eighty percent that Eurasia should at any given moment have produced history's most formidable societies. The deck was stacked even without Diamond's biogeographical factors. So Diamond has proposed some excellent new answers to a less-than-perplexing question.

Then McNeill goes on to ask "a more vexing question, and one more familiar to historians is, why Europe?" and investigates Diamond's answer in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. McNeill contends "that Europe's emergence in modern centuries cannot be put down to geography" and states that Diamond has oversold geography as a substitute for history (my thanks to Patricia Galloway for the link).

Other historians tell the same tale. There are several global histories of empire and attempts to account for the rise of Europe that do not even mention Jared Diamond. Neither The World That Trade Created: Society, Culture, And the World Economy, 1400 to the Present by Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik nor The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History (2003) by J.R. McNeill and William H. McNeill mention Diamond. The Origins of the Modern World: A Global and Ecological Narrative from the Fifteenth to the Twenty-f Century (2006) by Robert B. Marks includes minor references to Jared Diamond, but not for

explaining the rise of Europe. Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper briefly discuss what they term the "steel and germs" explanation, only to dismiss it (Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference 2010:163)–see the follow-up Myths of the Spanish Conquest – Indigenous Allies & Politics of Empire for a full assessment.

I also turned to the November 2012 *New Yorker* review by Adam Gopnik, Faces, Places, Spaces: The renaissance of geographic history. Jared Diamond is unmentioned in this review of those seeking to reassert the importance of geography. Gopnik pans this renaissance, which is all about retrospective unfalsifiability: "If you compress and expand the time scale just as you like, you can make *any* event look inevitable." Gopnik is rightly unconvinced: "Once the sight of a Viking prow coming down a river was as terrifying a sight as any European could imagine. Now the Scandinavian countries are perhaps the most pacific in the world. Whatever changed, it wasn't the shape of Scandinavia."

In short, some historians cite Diamond's ideas for the big Eurasian overview. It's a safe citation, since the time-scale is outside their customary purview, and sometimes lends popular gravitas. Patrick Manning's summary is apt: "Diamond's argument, while it has been contested by other scholars, is an elegant simplification of a major issue in world history and an effective illustration of long-term trends in history. Yet when he attempts to use the same reasoning to explain the comparatively short-term changes of imperialism and racism in recent centuries, his results are far less satisfactory" (Navigating World History 2003:100). More bluntly, I don't find any reliable historians who use Diamond's work to ponder the truly more vexing question–for world history, for anthropology, for contemporary understandings–Why Europe?

Europe and the People Without History–and Yali's Question

As I stated in Guns Germs and Steel–versus Real History, I am sympathetic to Frederick Errington and Deborah Gewertz's interpretation that Yali's Question was not actually about getting more stuff, but about being recognized as fully human, about being treated with dignity and respect: "Yali and many other Papua New Guineans became preoccupied with the reluctance, if not refusal, of many whites to recognize their full humanness–to make blacks and whites equal players in the same history" (Excusing the Haves and Blaming the Have-Nots in the Telling of History 2010:335). If anything, Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History* could be criticized for a similar materialistic focus. Wolf brings an essentially Marxian political economy to the explanation of world history. While that may be the case, it seems nevertheless important to do the materialist answer to Yali's Question, if only for the revised understanding of European power in the past 500 years. Why was it the European powers?

Eric Wolf did the spadework in 1982 for answering Yali's Question. In 1997, Jared Diamo inexplicably dialed back our knowledge, in a book that still seems to captivate the world. But

if anthropology wants to build on anything, wants to deliver a true understanding of the global transformations shaping our modern world, then Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History* remains the best place to begin.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen's new introduction remarks that Wolf's "perspective is even more sorely needed than it was when *Europe and the People Without History* was written in the early 1980s" (2010:xvii).

I agree.

Eric Wolf: Why Not More Influential?

Eric Wolf's book and work are extremely influential–many anthropologists mention him for Anthropology: The Landmark Books and his titles are still the source of inspiration of clever riffs on "X and the Y Without History."

But Eriksen's remark raises the question of why this perspective is more sorely needed now than in the 1980s. After all, I've suggested that Wolf could have been a key influence forQuestioning Collapse–but he does not appear. *Europe and the People Without History* is also absent from the accounts by Burbank and Cooper, McNeill and McNeill, Pomeranz and Topik, or Robert B. Marks cited above. Eric Wolf gets a footnote for Charles Mann's 1491 and 1493.

What happened?

Part of it may be the title–it's difficult to pull off irony. I remember trying to explain *Europe and the People Without History* to friends in Ecuador–their first reaction was quite negative! Ulf Hannerz's assessment of a title like Exotic No More could be equally applied:

> When the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland commissions a volume to present a more current understanding of the discipline, it gives it the title *Exotic No More*–once again providing above all a negative statement, which might at worst be taken to mean that anthropology has given up its attempt to understand human lives across boundaries and is now "anthropology at home." The wide-ranging contents of the book in question show that this is not

> the case, but I would have preferred a more positive formulation up-front. (Anthropology's World 2010:48)

The book also was a long time in writing: "The project for this book emerged from the intellectual reassessments that marked the late 1960s. . . . I began to write this book in the spring of 1974; the final draft was completed in 1981" (1982:x). Obviously for a book of such magnitude, scope, and erudition–as well as trying to write histories for regions which had hardly received historical attention–it's ludicrous to expect rapid writing. However, in the intervening years Clifford Geertz came out with The Interpretation of Cultures (1973), which helped revive the notion of cultural wholes. On this matter, Eric Wolf's 1980 *New York Times* piece about the 79th annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association, They Divide and Subdivide And Call It Anthropology, was a call for a new agenda, a call that may never have been answered (see also Anthropological Concept of Culture).

Not long after *Europe and the People Without History*, the Writing Culture (1988) volume took a quite different tack from Eric Wolf's vision. Anthropology seemed to be turning both elsewhere and inward upon itself, as the Sidney Mintz and Eric Wolf Reply to Michael Taussig (1989) illustrates. The *New York Times* obituary for Eric Wolf headlines him as an Iconoclastic Anthropologist.

For Manning, part of the issue was the book's organization:

> The book is made hard to follow by the alternations in themes: a general introduction, a survey of the world in 1400 (ranging as much as several hundred years earlier), an analysis of modes of production in general, a survey of Europe's prelude to expansion, and chapters of European impact elsewhere. While the work focused on the creation of the world community as a capitalist order, it provided no clear chronology on the creation of that community. . . . A stong concluding section underscored the need to examine the history of culture in the modern world. But the text itself looked mainly at economics and the influence of Europe beyond the seas. (Navigating World History 2003:69)

This may help explain why the Wikipedia page on Wikipedia page on *Europe and the People Without History* is presently an unfinished stub.

It could also have been the Marxian framework. Even though it was much updated and a fluid concept rather than a straitjacket, Wolf's "Modes of Production" chapter–wedged between the two chapters I have discussed the most, "The World in 1400" and "Europe, Prelude to Expansion"–may have served too much as an argumentative detour. In what is probably the most famous review, Are There Histories of Peoples Without Europe?, Talal Asad concentrates mostly on that modes of production chapter, with pages of arguments that seem more than a bit arcane today. Nevertheless, Asad's ideas on history are instructive,

especially given the ever-enticing idea that history can be mined as a science of natural experiments:

> 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. (1987:602; for some related thoughts on the uses of history, see Black Swan Anthropology)

What the Histories of Peoples Without Europe Once Were

"In 1968 I wrote that anthropology needed to discover history, a history that could account for the ways in which the social system of the modern world came into being, and that would strive to make analytic sense of all societies, including our own" (1982:ix). Almost a half-century later, it seems anthropology needs to rediscover history. Returning to Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History* would be a good place to start.

It seems fitting to conclude here with Asad's call for another book by Eric Wolf:

> 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. (1987:607)

To my mind, the two books that would most answer this call are Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History and Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World by Michel-Rolph Trouillot. At the same time, if I remember correctly, one of Trouillot's comments about Eric Wolf was that he worked in Max Weber's tradition of the ideal type–it was something that Wolf could pull off from individual brilliance, but so ver difficult to emulate. Or as Manning notes, "over the longer run [*Europe and the People*

Without History] seems to have been most successful in demonstrating the difficulty of carrying out a coherent analysis of the topic" (Navigating World History 2003:69).

Indeed, it seems Trouillot was working on what might have been this book before his untimely passing:

> He could not complete his most ambitious project, "The West." The project, ranging from the Renaissance to the present, intended to combine a trenchant critique of European colonialism and Euro-American capitalism with a thorough investigation of possibilities for cultural creativity and constructive political-economic development for peoples too often considered the objects of world history or marginal to its main crosscurrents. (Woodson and Williams, In Memoriam Dr. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1949-2012), 2013:156)

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Archaeology

agriculture, ambushing anthropology, capitalism, culture, Eric Wolf, human nature, Jared Diamond, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, political economy, Sidney Mintz, textbooks

This is a very good piece, and I find myself in agreement with most of it. I agree with almost the entire argument (except the entirely fallacious and ridiculous notion that Europe in 800 CE was a 'backwater'; it was anything but). I don't agree with the straw man of Diamond that, again, has appeared; Diamond is not saying that everything is wholly determined by geography such that Viking activity and pacific modern Scandinavia are determined by the geography of the Scandinavian peninsula.

Anyway, like I said, I agree with most of the argument. Clearly there's a lot to the question of how European imperialism began, and Diamond's answer to the question of 'Why Europe?' isn't quite good enough. But actually geography factors *are* partly to blame, and shouldn't be under-estimated. Europe's position in the west, combined with the belief in a spherical earth and knowledge of the Indian Ocean spice trade, encouraged attempts to circumnavigate the globe or produce new navigational technologies. Chinese navigators had no reason to go east; beyond Japan, they believed there was almost nothing to see, and the spice trade was to their south. European navigators had every reason to go west, and south around Africa. Geography is at least partly to blame here.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

John Schaefer ➚ Al West • 8 years ago

Regarding Europe as a backwater, I like to repost the numbers from David Graeber's book for revenue in grams of silver per head:

Persia, c. 350 BCE: 41
Egypt, c. 200 BCE: 55
Rome, c. 1 CE: 17
Rome, c. 150 CE: 21
Byzantium, c. 850 CE: 15
Abbasids, c. 850 CE: 48
T'ang, c. 850 CE: 43
France, 1221 CE: 2.4
England, 1203 CE: 4.6

David Graeber (2011) Debt: The First 5,000 Years (NY: Melville House), p. 272

France and England might not have been the Somalia or Afghanistan of the time, but they seem to have played Nigeria and Pakistan to China's United States and Baghdad's Western Europe...

1 ^ | v 1 • Reply • Share ›

Al West ➚ John Schaefer • 8 years ago

Ah, a good resource. Yes, it's certainly true that Europe was poorer than the rest of the world in 800 CE. That seems to be incontrovertible. What's important isn't that Europe was wealthy, because it wasn't. It's rather that it had a number of important features, including urbanism and widespread literacy in a common language, that make the term 'backwater' a bit of a misnomer in this context.

(Btw, does Graeber use the spelling "T'ang" in the book? It's a very out-moded orthography.)

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

@Bryllars ➚ Al West • 8 years ago

Aristotle believed in a spherical earth. 'Culture' behaves in ways that can find no breathing space in these arguments. (Please don't say I'm reifying, just using shorthand for a reality.)

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Al West ➚ Al West • 8 years ago

I've decided to put some of my own thoughts about why Europe dominated the world on my blog. I have decided to go all-out and not resign myself to tentative conclusions, so it may be a bit forthright! But it seems about right to me.

http://alwestmeditates.blog...

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Jason Antrosio Mod ➚ Al West • 8 years ago

Hi Al, thank you for this and for extending the conversation. I recommend West's Meditations generally for anyone wanting to sharpen their thoughts, and Why Europe? forthrightly tackles some issues that I'll hope to address in a follow-up.

We can agree that geography is important. As Talal Asad writes above, "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"

without making a priori determinations.

With regard to the specifics, I probably need to revisit the backwater-in-800AD pieces, and also clarify that Gopnik's comments about Scandinavia are directed at some very different geography-as-key-to-everything, not at Diamond's formula.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Al West ➚ Jason Antrosio
• 8 years ago

Thanks, Jason. I could not agree more with Asad's view there. I've found that a lot of the opposition to Diamond is based not only on his supposed 'geographical determinism' but also on the idea of finding causal explanations, as if finding a cause for human activity involves completely overriding human choice and decision-making.

I think we're getting nearer and nearer to consensus on these matters. Like I said, I'm less interested in defending Diamond than in defending a causal approach to human history, rather than leaving a bulk of it up to 'agency', which seems to be a bit of a black box. Geography is a key determinant to human actions because it makes some actions easier than others - and this is something humans always take into account when making decisions. My view is that geography helps determine human actions because of the way 'agency' works in the first place.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Abby • 6 years ago

I found some aspects of this chapter interesting, especially in correlation to one of my business classes I am currently taking. The chapter in Lavenda & Schultz talks about consumption being studied today and uses the example of Coca-Cola being consumed in Trinidad even though it is a Western/American commodity

(LS:342). I found this section interesting because I am learning about companies going global and how they adapt to their new markets.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Jason Antrosio Mod ➚ Abby
• 6 years ago • edited

Thank you, Abby, the appropriations of items like Coca-Cola is indeed a signal that perhaps all is not the same in the world. For more, see Globalization Stories.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Anthropologist turned sophist • 8 years ago

You should have gone into more detail on the "Why Europe?" question. What about Andre Gunder Frank's _ReOrient_ or even the more Eurocentric analysis found in Braudel's work--that the exploitation of the "New World" and consequent access and exploitation of Eastern markets led to a parasitic and eventually imperialistic relationship? Why not discuss how the Ottoman and Mughal Empires were strife with economic inequality that led to a decline in state power and the ability of European merchants to gain a stronghold in their trade?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Jason Antrosio Mod ➚ Anthropologist turned sophist • 8 years ago

Hi Anthropologist turned sophist,

Thank you for reading and for these references. Will be very helpful for a follow-up. For this post I concentrated on the material that would have been available to Diamond when he was writing Guns Germs and Steel, so ReORIENT wasn't out yet. Braudel certainly, and has been very useful to me, but I'm not sure how much he figured into these debates. I have to look more at that.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Helga Vierich • 8 years ago

This is a very thought-provoking essay. What hit me immediately was the idea of an inter-connected human world. This is vitally important. The idea that all cultures are adaptations to their "environment" has, as in many ethnographic writings and even in Diamond's writings, failed to include the interdepedency and interactions among cultures. What is "human history" but the record of the often unpredictable outcomes of more and more obligatory defensive and offensive complexity as

population grew denser and trading relationships snared larger and larger polities into interdependency?

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Jason Antrosio Mod ➚ Helga Vierich
• 8 years ago • edited

Hi Helga, thank you for this. The idea of interconnection, interdependence, and in fact the co-production of "us" and "them"--something I alluded to in the previous Ruth Benedict, Patterns of Culture--is immensely important, and I plan to take that up two posts down the road. This is of course still an empirical question, but certainly the idea of each people group as an isolated laboratory needs to be adjusted.

I recommend watching Jared Diamond on the Colbert Report. Other than the Montana part (my home state!), it was particularly striking how he said that people in Papua New Guinea might take an electric can opener and try "sticking it through their nose or over their ears" because they would not know what to do with it. To say that in 2013--after hundreds of years of pre- and post-capitalist interconnections--is truly astounding.

1 Reply • Share ›

Tilman ➚ Jason Antrosio • 7 years ago

Hi Jason! First of all, thanks for all the interesting thoughts! Although many topics and debates on here to me are somewhat unfamiliar due to the often US-specific focus (I'm German) I find your meditations quite inspiring, not least because of your proclivity for M.-R. Trouillot, whose work I devoured within the last months (not all of it digested yet...) while trying to find a subject for my thesis in "Transcultural Studies", a Master's program at University of Bremen. I actually came across your blog while searching online in order to find more from and about Prof. Trouillot (whose name and work I first heard of during a course with Walter Mignolo, by the way, who was visiting professor here in Bremen

see more

1 Reply • Share ›

Jason Antrosio Mod ➚ Tilman

• 7 years ago • edited

Hi Tilman, many thanks for this reply and finding my blog. I do have some more Trouillot bibliography and you are correct that I've tried to develop some of the themes here in my most recent post on Globalization Stories. Very early on in this blog I collected some tribute links when Fernando Coronil passed away, and I've revisited those.

With regard to your question, I think Coronil's critique of Wolf (and also Mintz) is quite in line with Talal Asad's critique above, in that Coronil may feel that Wolf leans far too heavily on the side of who was doing the directing and dominating. Although there are differences in style and emphasis, I see several overlaps between Coronil's work and Trouillot's. First would be an attention to history and a mistrust of stories that tell current globalization as newness. Second, better attention to how Latin America and the Caribbean were crucial contributors to modernization and modernity, not simply those upon whom domination was exercised. Third, how Coronil insists that Latin America is part of the West--not a non-Western exotic, which is where at least some anthropologists placed it.

Let me know what you think! All the best with your program and thank you again!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Julie S ➚ Jason Antrosio
• 7 years ago • edited

This is a helpful article and comment. Fernando Coronil's work intersected and overlapped with Trouillot's in many ways, including the argument about the historical

neglect of the Spanish empire by colonial and postcolonial studies, and the critique of contemporary notions of globalization. His article

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