

# Introduction: The Analytic Strategies of Eric R. Wolf

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At the American Anthropological Association Meeting of 1991, three sessions explored the influence of Eric R. Wolf's scholarship on the field of anthropology and related disciplines. Participants included two generations of students trained directly by Wolf, as well as others who, although their ideas matured elsewhere, were beneficiaries of his interest in their projects over many years. Out of the 1991 sessions the title for this book, "Articulating Hidden Histories," evolved. Here, I use these words to frame what I think are the analytic strategies of Eric Wolf, working from back to front.

The first word is "histories." For Wolf, historical processes are preeminently political and economic, reinforced through ideology. Concentrations of political and economic power generate "forces" or "vectors" with enormous potential to disrupt human arrangements over a wide field. These disruptions put people at risk, demand that they cope, and provoke oppositional responses that at times succeed. Yet even the revolutionary overthrow of a particular concentration of power can end up with the "subjugation and transformation" of the social groups in whose name the revolutionaries struggled. This point was made by Wolf in *Peasants* (1966a, 92-93, 109), a book that predated by twenty years the uprisings against revolutionary socialist regimes in Eastern Europe. It was reiterated in his essay "Freedom and Freedoms: Anthropological Perspectives," delivered to the University of Capetown in 1990. There Wolf compares liberal and Jacobin models of freedom. As a radical faction at the time of the French Revolution, the Jacobins conceived of the state "not as a potential threat to liberty, but as the very embodiment of 'the people's will' to freedom." Yet they, and revolutionary parties after them, were unable to install their principles or protect their gains from foreign and domestic enemies without adopting measures "quite contrary to their initial sentiments" (1990a, 9, 11).

Conclusions such as these are not born of cynicism but rather derive from

a profound sense that concentrations of power, however they might be achieved, will continue to act disruptively out of their location in a competitive, ever-changing, and unevenly developed "field of forces." At times Wolf has used the terms "structure" or "structural power" to refer to power complexes (e.g., 1990*b*, 586–587). He is, however, self-consciously ambivalent about this architectural metaphor, with its implication of fixity. A bibliographic note in *Europe and the People without History* expresses appreciation of the French structural Marxists for expanding on the mode of production concept, yet regrets their abandonment of the Hegelian language of dialectical contradictions in favor of a teleology of "structural causality" (1982*a*, 401). Consistent with this is Wolf's conscious borrowing of metaphors from physics rather than architecture: vectors, forces, and fields of force are frequently evoked in his writing.

Some anthropologists balk at the concept "forces" for being too abstract, disembodied, and determinative. Yet powerful forces like militarized chiefdoms, merchant and industrial companies, banking houses, and governmental regimes (whether tributary, capitalist, or socialist) are conceptualized by Wolf as human products and repositories of human agency, having developed out of historical processes of political-economic-ideological competition. Their seeming impersonality derives from the open-ended and inherently unstable fields within which they are constrained to operate, for any particular concentration of power provokes others into being, with which it must then contend. Wolf's essay "Cycles of Violence" (1987*a*) strongly suggests that the issue is not one of impersonal determinants so much as it is the unpredictable, ever-changing moves of strategizing and self-justifying powerholders in a "world of multi-tiered conflicts."

This means, of course, that ideational phenomena belong to the world of politics and economics; they are not its product or "superstructure." Put differently, foci of accumulation require ideological definition in their very operation; ideology organizes the material and political practices of those who would deploy power. Nor does a concern with "forces" or "vectors" preclude recognizing religion as a realm of symbolic communication contributing to the realms of politics and economics. Appreciating Mart Bax's concept, "religious regime," Wolf emphasizes that religion also generates vectors, at once economic, political, and sanctifying (see Wolf 1984*a*, 1991*a*). Yet of all the forces or vectors that play, and have played, in the fields of interaction we call history, those associated with mercantilism and capitalism are seen to pose the "greatest single threat" (1990*b*, 587). Under capitalism, the "Cycles of Violence" essay argues,

arrangements of power and order are predicated not upon stable and enduring foundations, but upon an economic base forever trembling and subject to major quakes. . . . If capitalism has a special relation to the development of political freedom as we know it, it also exercises an extraordinarily destabilizing power in its continuous search for higher profits and sustained capital ac-

cumulation. Capital forever abandons older sectors of the economy and re-locates in new and more promising industries and areas . . . [.] in its continuous and often unpredictable movements, it also continuously shakes up the foundations of human existence, and as a result also calls into question over and over again the capacity of power groups to wield power and to maintain it. (1987*a*, 147–148)

I belabor Wolf's image of a trembling and quaking field of forces, intrinsic to world history but vastly more disruptive under capitalism, in order to expand on the word "histories"—in particular the choice of the plural form—in the title of this book. Much of anthropology asks whether locally situated, powerless peoples—classical anthropological subjects—can exercise "agency" in relation to the "structures" that would dominate them. This is not Wolf's definition of the problem. His starting point is an open-ended, unpredictable, interaction sphere, whose very fluidity among competing, and often contradictory, forces enlarges the possibilities for empowerment from below. Local and regional histories abound, built up out of the organizational or tactical power of "operating units" with the help of leadership and personal persuasion (see Adams 1975; Wolf 1990*b*, 586). Moreover, there are circumstances under which such mobilizations can enter the force-field as significant vectors.

*Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, published in 1969, exemplifies this process, its chapters covering the rural groups and wider coalitions that supported revolutions in six countries: Mexico, Russia, China, Algeria, Cuba, and—of particular concern to Americans of that time—Vietnam. Rather than present his subjects as romantic champions of social justice, restorers of a "moral economy," Wolf took pains to locate them in relation to regionally specific histories, each history the source of distinctive social and cultural forms. David Hunt, in his essay for this volume, poignantly reminds us how the resulting vision of peasant rebels partook at once of tragedy and hope: "Coming at a moment when many Americans saw the Vietnamese as scarcely human, this affirmation was an extraordinary act of political courage and human sympathy. . . . There was both grandeur and humility in his demonstration that a new language, a new science, was needed to understand these rural revolutionaries."

At the time of the Vietnam war, Eric Wolf was among those who illustrated the potentialities of local agency through political activism as well as scholarly writing. William Gamson, in a retrospective study (1991), describes how Wolf participated in the invention and planning of the first "teach-in" on the war in Vietnam. During this all-night event, held on the campus of the University of Michigan, 24 March 1965, Wolf also spoke to packed audiences about the exigencies of peasant life. "Teaching-in"—that is, using the "down time" of the university to develop new, critical ideas and understandings—became a highly effective strategy in the mobilization of American college students against the war. Here too was a local

history that mattered. It was reinforced in 1970–1971 when, as chair of the newly formed Ethics Committee of the American Anthropological Association, Wolf took a strong and controversial position on ethnographic research that abetted or could abet counterinsurgency (see Wakin 1992).

If the theory at hand makes room for even the most singular of local moves, it also anticipates the eclipse or compromise of oppositional social action. Quite apart from overt repression, failures of nerve are likely, as actors panic over the realization that what they do has effects they never intended and cannot control. In both *Peasant Wars* and its predecessor, *Peasants*, Wolf wrote sympathetically about groups whose members could not rebel because, without land and other resources, to do so would have jeopardized their households' survival. A recent essay on ethnicity (Wolf 1992a) laments anthropologists' lack of attention to the constraints that emerge as struggling groups, constructing symbolic representations, seek to elicit a deeper commitment. Yet ambivalence and failure are no excuse for ignoring or trivializing the continuous production of alternative ways of being and alternative points of view. On the contrary, because the alternatives that percolate around the edges of every social force demand constant vigilance and energy on the part of those who would suppress them, they deserve our closest attention. The point about them, as histories, is not their insignificance, but the tragedy and alienation that frequently accompany their course. The essay by Ashraf Ghani which follows touches on the sense of tragedy in Wolf's work, relating it to Wolf's personal experiences of Nazi Germany and World War II.

If local histories are significant notwithstanding their frequently alienating and unanticipated outcomes, why have we used the word "hidden" in our title? Here, it is worth specifying the purpose of *Europe and the People without History*, Wolf's most comprehensive book, whose title raises a similar paradox. As Joan Vincent has put it (1990, 402), this substantial volume was written "specifically to expose what historians' and sociologists' accounts of the historical process left out." Toward this end, *Europe* begins by historicizing the concept of the "autonomous, self-regulating and self-justifying society and culture [that] has trapped anthropology inside the bounds of its own definitions" (1982a, 18). Self-justifying notions of social order and political process in sociology and political science are similarly revealed to be history-bound and Eurocentric. For all these disciplines, Wolf cites as a formative moment their nineteenth-century "rebellion" against a common parent, political economy. Freed from it, each developed a partial perspective. Yet the revolt was incomplete, for political economy's focus on "production, class, and power" continued as a subterranean agenda—an unproductive, because unacknowledged, dialogue with the ghost of Marx.

Recovering the political economy agenda means, for Wolf, reunifying the social science disciplines. In a 1983 speech about his goals to the University

Faculty Senate of the City University of New York, he concluded that "it is only when we integrate our different kinds of knowledge that the people without history emerge as actors in their own right. When we parcel them out among the several disciplines, we render them invisible—their story, which is also our story, vanishes from sight" (Wolf 1983*f*, 5). Among the disciplines, there would yet be a division of labor in which anthropology would chart the histories of peoples well-studied by ethnographers—the peasants and kin-ordered groups of Latin America, Asia, and Africa; their counterparts in Europe who were transformed by the "political unification and cultural homogenization" of nineteenth-century state making; and globally recruited working classes. Often ignored or caricatured by other scholars and devalued by a wider public, such peoples "are thought by many to have no history" (Wolf 1983*f*, 1).

Clearly, if histories have been "hidden," then the first word of our title, "articulating," refers to their recovery. This means defining written and oral historical "records" as among the sources to be mined by anthropologists. It means systematic use of archaeology, linguistics, ethnographic observation, and interviewing to discern a yet richer past. And it means listening for the histories that others produce for themselves. Because much of the past is unknowable, however, and because both records and memories are partial, Wolf has also sought to model historical interactions. For him, the local social fields that generate "hidden" histories are enmeshed in "webs" or "nets" of relations that connect their actors to a wider context. Revisiting his concept of the "closed corporate peasant community" in 1986, he described himself as striving to comprehend "local and parochial relationships in terms of wider unfolding economic and political processes, while trying simultaneously to grasp how human beings in [these local] communities responded to these processes through culturally informed action and action-involved cultural forms" (1986*b*, 328).

For Wolf, undervalued peoples are not only "among the makers of the modern world, and among its shakers," but knowing their histories is also a way "to recover a significant part of ourselves, so that we may gain more effective knowledge of the world which all of us, with our shared history, inhabit together" (Wolf 1983*f*, 5). This brings us to a second sense of the word "articulating"—the linkages of an increasingly globalized totality. Occasionally, Wolf has been taken as a "world-system" theorist, bent on demonstrating unequal exchanges between "core," "peripheral," and "semiperipheral" regions, differentially capable of producing high-profit goods and services. But, although he is ever aware of unevenness in the world distribution of profit and power, he faults this approach for obliterating the "range and variety" of the micropopulations "habitually investigated by anthropologists" (Wolf 1982*a*, 23).

If anything, the very concept "periphery" reifies difference, as if the

ordering of power in the world had a teleology in which Europe, or more precisely, North Atlantic Europe, had been destined to ascend to “core” status and stay there. Such thinking masks the contradictory reality, attended to by Wolf, that Europeans were “peripheral” to more developed power complexes for centuries, whereas of late they have had to take note of new and potent accumulation processes in Asia. Because his analysis begins with an open field of forces, with relational sets and internal contradictions, he is receptive to the possibility that new complexes might well appear, contra any fixed notion of a core-periphery hierarchy. It is this openness that most profoundly marks his dynamic, processual approach to what history is about.

Not only does the use, here, of “articulation” differ from a world-system outlook, it is also at variance with the multiple usages of the French structural Marxists. In the 1970s, philosophers and anthropologists of this school explored new applications of the mode of production concept, delineating several types or modes that had been absent, or underdeveloped, in the writings of Marx and Engels, and exploring the terms of their coexistence with capitalism. In their language, the colonial and imperial projects of Europeans brought the capitalist mode into “articulation” with other modes, variously labeled by such general terms as “Asiatic,” “African,” “precapitalist,” or by more restrictive designations such as “hunting and gathering,” “horticulture,” “slavery,” and so on. William Roseberry, with his usual clarity, reviews the attempt of Pierre-Philippe Rey to map out stages of articulation between capitalist and noncapitalist modes, as well as other applications of this term (1989, 155–175).

In *Europe and the People without History*, Wolf, too, makes use of the mode of production concept, arguing that, because it is a powerful tool for analyzing the differentiation and appropriation of social labor, it usefully guides us to a fuller consideration of relationships of class and power. Yet he eschews the typological fixity and structural determination implied by Rey and others. Their anthropology, he suggests, shows a tendency “to collapse all culture and cultural diversity into the elements of the mode of production. Furthermore, they reify modes of production into timeless essences, which are then allowed to reproduce themselves or conjugate (‘articulate’) with one another without reference to historical time or circumstance” (1982a, 401). Wolf opts instead for no more than three comprehensive modes, each internally differentiated and capable of much variation. The three—kin-ordered, tributary, and capitalist—are not so much structured entities as heuristic devices for sorting out divergent processes of power and wealth accumulation, these processes in turn fostering divergent patterns of social inequality and ideological justification. Moreover, all three are dynamic. Change, growth, and development emerge from kin-ordered and tributary relations, and from their interactions, as well as from the much touted restlessness of

capitalism. To be discovered are the articulations among the foci of accumulation, both within and across the three modes.

Having related the words of the title to Wolf's theoretical orientation, I turn to a note on methods, for the authors included in this volume consider themselves indebted on this level as well. We might begin by noting that the anthropologist working under the influence of Wolf is strongly oriented toward empirical research aimed at revealing a good sociocultural map. To be discovered and described are various social groupings or classes, extant and in formation, their relationships with one another, and the connection of these relationships to the division of social labor. This does not mean seeking out bounded collectivities. The concept "group" for Wolf shades into "alliance" and "coalition"—social forms that permit the simultaneous pursuit of several roles and are "sufficiently loosely structured to exempt the participants [from commitment] in a period of severe trial" (1966*a*, 80). Nor is people's means to a livelihood the only research question. More often it is cultural phenomena or, in Wolf's words, the "on-going dialectical interpenetration" of social behavior and symbolic form (1986*b*, 327), which are under investigation. But no issue of this sort can be addressed adequately without considering its reciprocal relation with the ecological, economic, and organizational context.

For many researchers influenced by Wolf, groups and the interactions of groups are best discerned in a local setting—usually a community or region—but these localities are conceptualized in a particular way. Rather than discrete or bounded, such small-scale entities are viewed as affected by, and affecting, wider processes, the historical unfolding of which must also be grasped. Until recently, many social scientists short-circuited this step through the convenient but misleading before-and-after dualism of tradition and modernity, perhaps glossed as precapitalist and capitalist, or precolonial and colonial eras. Today, this dichotomy has given way to another—the modern and postmodern—which similarly collapses the processes of an earlier epoch into a single, seamless trajectory, while raising the possibility of history's equally seamless endgame. Eschewing these shortcuts, Wolf shows us what the anthropologist can learn about particular local histories if those histories are charted in relation to the large-scale transformations of, let us say, the last three hundred years. Researchers in his tradition generally want to know what happened in their research site during times of tributary and mercantile expansion, European or other colonialism and imperialism, political and religious movements for national independence, neocolonial or other development initiatives, and the related processes now unfolding.

Depending on the research problem, the setting might transcend a locality or region. For example, Wolf has always been interested in the political and cultural processes of national and religious integration—processes

through which a group or groups promote and maintain their understandings against the assertion of alternatives. Although such processes are central to the writings of Antonio Gramsci, it is interesting to note his minimal use of Gramsci's concept, "hegemony." For Gramsci, as for Wolf, the cultural "work" of hegemony is accomplished by specific social groups—class fractions, organic intellectuals, Catholic priests—but many others who have embraced the term describe hegemonic phenomena in relation to a simplified social landscape, consisting for the most part of dominators and dominated. To Wolf, ever skeptical of dualisms, the word "hegemony" too often glosses over the sociology of cultural construction that needs to be investigated.

Both this sociology and the point about chronological depth are evident in Eric Wolf's most recent explorations into the German catastrophe under National Socialism. Going back to the creation of the Holy Roman Empire, he traces the historical development of a particular rendering of *Gemeinschaft*, characterized by hierarchically ordered estates of noblemen, town-dwellers, and peasants, for whom various rights and obligations were codified in obsessive detail. Although differently manifested from region to region, the codified groups everywhere excluded a large unchartered society "of people in despised occupations or people who lacked local roots . . . tanners, shepherds, linenweavers . . . and the perennial sojourners in Christendom, the Jews" (1992*b*, 4). Thirty years of religious war and the war-driven efforts of the princes to extract ever-higher taxes, then the headlong rush into capitalism to meet the challenge of the industrializing, colonizing giants of England, France, and the Netherlands, are shown to have reactivated and intensified age-old battles over "honor and belonging," especially as Prussian bureaucrats set about creating the "iron cage" of German unification. Hermann Rebel's essay in this volume is similarly concerned with the long-term salience, in Germany, of symbolically marked and ritually guarded boundaries between successful and dishonorable or polluting social elements.

Wolf's method is not just historical; it is also self-consciously comparative. Once one has examined a problem or process in a particular locale, it is necessary to hold that case against others, mulling over the following questions: How does what is locally observed compare with phenomena in other places where the same or similar forces are present and operating? What about similar places subjected to contrasting forces? Two well-known examples illustrate these alternatives. One is the 1957 article on the "closed corporate peasant community." This classic essay begins by outlining the similar cultural-structural features that characterized communities in central Java and highland Mesoamerica during and after the colonial period, then proceeds to contrast these features with those of communities in China, Uganda, and other regions of Latin America. "These casual contrasts," Wolf wrote, suggest that "the kind of peasant community appears to re-



spond to forces which lie within the larger society to which the community belongs rather than within the boundaries of the community itself" (1957, 236). In the case of Mesoamerica and Java, communities with the specific features of communal land jurisdiction, restrictive membership, and wealth-leveling institutions, had crystallized in response to a particular pattern of conquest emphasizing forced settlement on restricted land and a legal arrangement that treated each locale as a relatively autonomous, tribute- and labor-supplying corporation.

A book with John W. Cole, *The Hidden Frontier* (1974), compares two neighboring villages in the alpine reaches of Northern Italy which "share very similar modes of adaptation to a common mountainous environment," but had interacted dialectically with a contrastive "play of forces" over much of their medieval and modern history (1-3). A central socio-cultural difference between them was the assertion by the inhabitants of German-speaking St. Felix of a preference for eldest-son inheritance, as opposed to the Italian-speaking Trettner's preference for partibility. In actuality, inheritance practices converged: the eldest son among St. Felixers was often driven off the land in favor of a younger sibling, whereas Trettner's practice of out-migration for work or education often left only one sibling as de facto heir.

The research problem thus became one of accounting for difference not so much in actual behavior as in the "template of ideas for the ordering of social life" (Wolf and Cole 1974, 19). The authors trace the interactions over several centuries between each village and its wider economic, political, and ideological field. Because, in the one case, relevant forces derived from German-speaking concentrations of power associated with the Austro-Hungarian Empire, whereas in the other they derived from Romance-speaking city-states and the nation-state of Italy, the division was profound, shaping not only the divergent ideologies of inheritance, but a broader contrast in ethnic identity and the ways it would be used. All told, the contrasts are shown to have influenced different responses to the combined agricultural mechanization and expanding urban labor markets that affected both communities in the 1960s.

In pursuing such comparisons, Wolf always expects to be surprised, to stumble on anomalies, to discover instances that do not fit into a pattern. Self-described as one who "loves facts," he appears never to tire of being exposed to yet another set of human arrangements, whether these are unheard of ways of stabilizing power or newly recorded rituals for drinking tea. Possessed of an enormous curiosity, he is a prodigious reader and listener, predisposed to harvest examples from even the most humble sources. One sees the results of this industry in his general essays, such as the 1990 Distinguished Lecture to the American Anthropological Association, which typically spill out a cornucopia of well-selected marvels, provoking wonder

at cultural variation. Far from collections of exotica—trophies of the ethnographic enterprise—these arrays help make a case for human possibilities.

Finally, and most important, Wolf guides the researcher to locate anthropological concepts—peasant, society, culture, class, community, kinship, tribe, race, ethnic group, nation-state—in relation to the social milieus out of which they grow and change through time. As Raymond Williams insists at the end of *Marxism and Literature* (1977), words like these are not definitional, but denote ongoing social processes and problems, embedded in history. What concepts can do depends on where they come from and the uses they serve, peasantry being a telling example. It matters whether peasants are apprehended through the lens of a Kroeber-Redfield world, a Chayanov-Narodnik world, or the world that Wolf shared with his mentor Julian Steward and colleague Sidney Mintz. Understanding the difference means learning about these separate worlds—their historically particular academic institutions and the concerns of their wider publics.

Among the concepts to receive Wolf's attention, one stands out, and that is "culture"—the central tool of anthropology. From a 1950 thinkpiece on the nation-state, outlined in the introduction to part 3 of this volume, to the Capetown Freedom lecture and beyond, he has questioned anthropology's romance with this term. Especially familiar, perhaps, is his criticism of Robert Redfield's folk society notion of peasant culture as value-saturated, timeless, and homogeneous (1964, 53–87; see also Silverman 1979; Vincent 1990, 367–375). Diagnostic, too, is Wolf's exploration of the culture concept's intellectual and political history in a small book called *Anthropology* (1964, 16–19). Drawing on the work of Norbert Elias, whom he heard lecture in an internment camp in England (see Ghani, this volume), Wolf there elaborates on the contrast between "culture" and "civilization" in German usage, relating the divergence to that nation's unusually sharp division, when compared with France and England, between bourgeoisie and aristocracy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Filtered through the German Enlightenment and later Romantic philosophers—enhanced, especially, by the historicity and intuitive methods of Wilhelm Dilthey—culture as a foil for the French-influenced "march of reason," culture as romantic, "informal and internal" (Wolf 1964, 19), made its way into Boasian anthropology in twentieth-century North America. Wolf's critique of its subsequent development parallels his critique of Redfield: that is, except for Alexander Lesser (who argued for "open fields" of interaction), the Boasians wrongly assumed the existence of internally homogeneous and coherent units, each capable of producing its own worldview, its particular patterning of mind. Epitomized by the "culture and personality" texts of Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, and by their forays into "national character" studies, this tendency needed an antidote, which Wolf found in Anthony Wallace's call (1961) to think of culture as the "organization of

diversity," rather than as uniform essences, replicated through time. This antidote, and the reasons for it, underlie all the methods outlined above.

This volume gathers together twenty papers. An overarching essay by Ashraf Ghani examines the concept of power in Wolf. There are then four parts, whose respective introductions follow below. These take up four major themes: peasants, responses to risk in contemporary North America, national integration, and relations between political economy and cultural identity. Sharing a sense that history is at once hopeful, tragic, and surprising, the respective essays demonstrate the sweep and continuance, intellectually and politically, of Eric R. Wolf's influence.

### PEASANTS: CONCEPTS AND HISTORIES

Nowhere are the possibilities of comparative history more clearly brought out than in Eric Wolf's contributions to peasant studies. I have already made note of two—his analysis of the closed communities of Mesoamerica and Java, and his analysis of the contrasting ethnicities of Alpine Northern Italy—but there are others. In his first book, published in 1959, Wolf undertook to reconstruct several centuries of divergence between Mexico's broadly defined regions of north, center, and south, making note, as well, of local variations within them. A student of Julian Steward and admirer of Karl Wittfogel, he paid close attention to the different environmental potentialities and limitations of these regions; indeed the title, *Sons of the Shaking Earth*, evokes the environmental challenge to human existence of periodic earthquakes. Drawing on archaeological information, however, the book compared not only different ecological "adaptations," but increasingly distinct processes of tributary state formation, the interactions of which affected European colonization and, eventually, the contrasting revolutionary traditions of Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. All told, *Sons of the Shaking Earth* synthesizes not only Mexican history, but the comparative histories of Mexico's divergent regions.

Using a strategy of comparison, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* arrives at a tentative theory regarding the revolutionary potential of "middle peasants"—a category defined by Lenin and Chayanov as cultivators who have relatively secure access to modest landholdings worked with family labor. Following Hamza Alavi (1965), Wolf found these peasants to possess at least a minimum of the "tactical freedom required to challenge their overlord"—a condition that also pertained for less well-endowed peasants in marginal areas (1969a, 291). Paradoxically, middle peasants were also the "main bearers of peasant tradition . . . [a] culturally conservative stratum" (292). Wolf resolved the paradox by demonstrating the exceptional vulnerability of precisely these groups to commercial capitalism in each of the cases being compared. Another paradox was left unresolved: that in each example of

revolution, middle peasants entered into coalitions and alliances with other groups, especially the intelligentsia, whose goals included the abolition of the old order which they, the middle peasants, were committed to preserve.

In elaborating concepts like "the closed corporate peasant community" and "middle peasants," Wolf consistently warned his readers against reification; his purpose was to illuminate historical processes, not identify fixed categories. The same warning pervades the presentation of peasant possibilities in his 1966 book, *Peasants*. It is worth revisiting chapter 3 of that book for an example of how one can systematize knowledge without entering into a taxonomic exercise that reifies types.

To some extent, chapter 3 characterizes peasants in the way that Marx did when he applied the famous "sack of potatoes" metaphor to the rural population of France. Wolf emphasizes their need to sustain autonomous households, committing both the energy and the emotions of family members to a round of productive and ceremonial activities intended to ensure the reproduction of the immediate family over time. Another publication of the same year (1966*b*), "Kinship, Friendship, and Patron-Client Relations in Complex Societies," spells out an important reason why the family persists as a viable social form in even the most socially differentiated societies: small in scale and inherently flexible, it can address a wide range of tasks in quick succession with "relatively low cost and overhead" because most, if not all, of its members are willing and prepared to exploit themselves. A multipurpose organization par excellence, the family is also the bearer of virtue, "and of its public reflection, reputation" (1966*b*, 7-8).

Yet not all peasant families were the same. Chapter 3 of *Peasants* goes on to disaggregate three familial sets or dyads: the paternal one between father and children, the maternal one between mother and children, and the conjugal one between husband and wife. (*The Hidden Frontier*, 1974, also calls attention to the sibling dyad.) The device suggests ways for sorting out some of the known variability in peasant family forms. More important, it allows for considering differences of gender and generation. Before much attention had been paid to this problem, Wolf noted, for example, that ceremonial and social supports external to the household could shore up the paternal dyad within it, giving the male role "an importance it might not possess on purely utilitarian grounds" (1966*b*, 64). Such insights prefigured and gave methodological inspiration to a generation of scholars who later examined women's and family history.

Peasants' preoccupation with family meant that their wider involvements were necessarily self-limiting. Wolf chose the word "coalition" to describe transfamily sociocultural structures, highlighting their temporariness and contingency. Although such structures brought people together for a common purpose, they could easily disband or release them when other purposes called. Drawing upon a wide range of ethnography, chapter 3 takes

the reader through a series of paths laid out to systematize “modes” of coalition formation. As we might expect, contrasting examples are viewed as local and creative responses to divergent vectors or forces (paleotechnic and neotechnic investment; capitalist, mercantile, tributary, or socialist powerholders; institutions of colonial intrusion). By activating different pathways, Wolf suggests, such vectors helped to shape the *compadrazgo* and *fiesta* system of Mexican and other Latin American peasantries, the cross-class *tsu* or clan of pre-Communist Southeastern China, and various associations for mutual aid, insurance, burial, labor, and other exchanges familiar to peasants more generally.

Although many forms of peasant coalition are horizontal, bringing together people of roughly equal status, Wolf was especially interested in vertical structures, for example the patron-client chains that linked some peasants with powerful outsiders. Anticipating *Peasant Wars*, *Peasants* draws particular attention to the internal stratification of rural communities, their overt and hidden differences of class, their more or less pronounced processes of differentiation between those with access to land and those without. In the papers of part 1, the reader will revisit these and related themes: peasants’ divided interests, notwithstanding their seemingly cohesive families and communities; their social and cultural resources for interacting with wider forces; and the intellectual origins and limits of the concepts we use to analyze them.

William Roseberry’s “The Cultural History of Peasantries” challenges those who would view *Peasants* as essentially typologizing. Contrasting Wolf’s approach with that of Henry Sumner Maine, it also illuminates his distinctive use of the concept of “community.” James Greenberg likewise takes aim at any simple notion of peasant typologies. In “Capital, Ritual, and Boundaries of the Closed Corporate Community,” he traces how an apparently “classic” Mixe (Mexican) village “cracked open” yet did not dissolve with the intrusion of commodity relations and money. “Conacre: A Reevaluation of Irish Custom,” presents the “hidden history” of both the concept and the cultural practice of a form of lease that tied landless Irish laborers to minuscule potato plots. Analyzed by others as a form of rent or labor exploitation, Joan Vincent shows, rather, how the conacre lease ensured community membership and patronage, even as the British Union forced the impoverished Irish into seasonal migrations to harvest Scottish grains.

In “The Prussian Junker and Their Peasants,” Hermann Rebel demonstrates that, when the East Elbian Junker of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries lowered rents in exchange for an increase in labor dues, they were intensifying the exploitation of their peasants, not advantaging them, as a recent cost-benefit analysis has claimed. Sensitive to the peasants’ full round of life as well as to the economics of rent, Rebel also chillingly spec-

ulates that, in celebrating ideals of lineage, house, dynasty, and family, the Junker provided a “cathected speech about lost kin, lost homelands, dispossession and exile” with horrendous reverberations in the twentieth century.

Finally, David Hunt’s “Prefigurations of the Vietnamese Revolution” provides an appreciative critique of the Vietnam chapter in *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*. There, Wolf refused the image of peasants as a dying, passive class, calling them, rather, “the party of humanity” for their suffering and aspirations. Admiring above all the chapter’s grasp of the complexity of Vietnamese culture and society, Hunt movingly concludes with an update on sociocultural change, based on his own recent research trip to Vietnam.

#### IN THE MARKET’S WEB: RISK AND RESPONSE

“Some of my insights into how the capitalist mode operates,” Wolf tells us in *Europe and the People without History* (1982a, 402), “derive from the experience of growing up among textile workers in the German-Czech borderland of northern Bohemia in the Depression years of the 1930’s.” The memory, it would seem, formed the central question of his anthropology: how to account for the emergence and persistence of a system whose dynamically unfolding relations can catapult the social and cultural arrangements of everyday life into an abyss of uncertainty as if by an act of nature like an earthquake. To understand his approach to this question, and to the related problematic of how people respond to risk in an ever-transforming world, it helps to return to his groundbreaking research on the peasant predicament. His doctoral dissertation on a coffee-producing region of Puerto Rico, chapter 1 of *Peasants*, and especially *Peasant Wars* all analyze a series of processes through which cultivators became separated from land and turned into “disposable” recruits for expanding labor markets. Deriving from the worldwide expansion of industrial capitalism, these processes foretold that the “new laborers”—as he later called them—would be at once highly differentiated, in possession of a range of cultural resources with which to begin a new life and, key to their vulnerability, in over-abundant supply.

An exceptionally powerful process was the competitive spread of the “neotechnic ecotype,” pioneered during the Second Agricultural Revolution in late eighteenth-century England and energized by fossil fuels. Vastly reducing the role of labor in planting and harvesting, neotechnic cultivation also induced environmentally unsound specializations leading in some cases to land abandonment (1966a, 35–36). Yet more telling was the related enlargement of “mercantile domain.” By domain Wolf meant the structure of power through which outsiders exert a claim to land that peasants use. Alternative forms—patrimonial and prebendal domain—involved ceremo-

nialized interactions between peasant and lord that expressed the idea of a contractual exchange of tribute for protection. In contrast, under mercantile domain, claims came to be made by powerholders who viewed land as "private property . . . an entity to be bought and sold and used to obtain profit for its owner" (1966*a*, 50–53). Where mercantile domain expanded, landowners converted tribute to money rent that peasants could only obtain through producing for capitalist markets. Landowners also adjusted this rent in relation to changing land values, borrowed against their holdings, which they used as collateral, and otherwise jeopardized (rather than protected) the stability of the peasant communities in their charge.

A third process, encompassing the other two, was the global extension of commercialized "network markets." Having to purchase many things, often including their own food, peasants who produced for these markets were easily trapped by a "price scissors" effect, in which steeply falling returns for their output coincided with an equally steep increase in the costs of what they consumed. "Even quite small changes in pricing," Wolf wrote, "may have astonishing implications for the entire economy of a country" (1966*a*, 40–45). Larger fluctuations were capable of propelling masses of cultivators into off-farm employment or peripatetic migrations. Meanwhile, a fourth, demographic process added to the volume of the dispossessed. In each case of "peasant war" analyzed by Wolf in 1969, population had tripled or quadrupled during the century and a half preceding armed rebellion, thanks above all to the introduction of crops from other continents—maize, manioc, beans, peanuts, sweet potatoes—in tandem with agricultural commercialization. Furnishing an "existential minimum" for large and hungry families, these crops sustained population growth rates at levels that had not been possible before. Unfortunately, as growth occurred, "many resources, and especially land, were already spoken for . . . [and] existing social structures often failed to absorb the added burden of supernumerary claimants" (1969*a*, 281).

As already noted, Wolf saw peasants managing uncertainty through a wide array of sociocultural structures—the coalitions discussed in part 1. "Sharing of resources within communal organizations and reliance on ties with powerful patrons," as well as any number of "quaint customs," were among their buffers against the curveballs of nature, the wiliness of merchants, the predations of tribute takers and armed bandits, and the exactions of landlords (1969*a*, 279). *Peasant Wars* describes how these protections crumbled as the "cultural system" of capitalism turned land and labor into free and unencumbered commodities in the areas that it engulfed. (We shall return to this Polanyi-inspired understanding of capitalism in part 4.) Stripping land of social obligations and encouraging the differentiation of peasant classes, the system cut away the "integument of custom" to expose people as economic actors, competing in a labor market (1969*a*, 279–280).