Eric Wolf: *Europe and the People Without History*

- Overview: what the book is trying to do
- Comparison with Diamond
- Modes of Production
- The World in 1400
Overview

• Anthropology + History + Political Economy
  – “to search out the causes of the present in the past” (p. xv)
  – “to develop a global culture history” by rethinking anthropology “in the light of a new, historically oriented political economy” (p. xv)
• “We thus need to uncover the history of ‘the people without history’” (p. xvi)
Societies as open, active and interconnected

“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.” (p. 3)
Anti-teleological

“We have been taught…that there exists an entity called the West, and that one can think of this West as a society and civilization independent of and in opposition to other societies and civilizations…[and] that this West has a genealogy…” (p. 5)
Teleological history is misleading:

• “turns history into a moral success story, a race in time...a story of how the winners prove that they are virtuous and good by winning.” (p. 5)

• Denies the agency, history, complexity and value of other societies
Example: US history

• In school history books, “a complex orchestration of antagonistic forces is celebrated instead as the unfolding of a timeless essence” (p. 5)

• Manifest destiny obscures slavery, wars, persecution, and the possibility “that things might have been different” (p. 6)
History as contingent

• “By turning names into things we create false models of reality.” (p. 6)

• Must “account in material terms for what happened at each juncture...for how some relationships gained ascendancy over others.” (p. 6)

• “European expansion everywhere encountered human societies and cultures characterized by long and complex histories.” (p. x)
Capitalism and “other” societies

• “Since much of this history involved the rise and spread of capitalism, the term ‘Europe’ can also be read as shorthand for the growth of that mode of production.” (p. x)

• “it is a major argument of this book that most of the societies studied by anthropologists are an outgrowth of the expansion of Europe and not the pristine precipitates of past evolutionary stages.” (p. 76)
Wolf and Diamond

• Different scale: 600 vs. 13,000 years
• Different questions
  – Interactions after 1492 vs. isolated developments before then
• Different kinds of evidence
  – Political and economic drivers vs. environmental and evolutionary ones
• Geography still matters, but in a different way
  – E.g. Western European access to waterways
Three modes of production

- Kin-ordered
- Tributary
- Capitalist

“The concept of mode of production aims... at revealing the political-economic relationships that underlie, orient, and constrain interactions in a society...” (p. 76)
Concept of *social labor*

- Humans are part of nature
- They exist by working on, transforming nature
- They are also social beings: capable of language, reason, consciousness, symbolism
- In transforming nature, they transform themselves
- Society mediates these transformations
Modes of Production

- Encompass:
  - Human relations to the natural environment
  - Social relations of humans to humans
  - Institutional structures of state and society
  - The ideas through which these relationships are conveyed

(Preface, p. xi)
Kin-ordered mode of production

• Found on peripheries of tributary societies in 1400
• Production and consumption organized through kinship
• Power/politics organized *in terms of* kinship
• Encompasses Diamond’s bands, tribes, and some chiefdoms
Tributary mode of production

• Found in major agricultural areas ca. 1400
• These areas were “held by states based on the extraction of surpluses from the primary producers by political or military rulers.” (p. 79)
• “social labor is…mobilized and committed to the transformation of nature primarily through the exercise of power and domination--through a political process.” (p. 80)
Tributary mode of production

• May be more or less centralized
  – “feudal” vs. “Asiatic” variants
• Almost always involves some commercial intermediaries or merchants
  – Mediate within and among societies
• Claims “supernatural origins and validation” (p. 83)
• Encompasses some chiefdoms and some states (Diamond)
Capitalist mode of production

• “came into being when monetary wealth was enabled to buy labor power.” (p. 77)
• Historically specific: did not exist in 1400
• Alters how production, distribution, consumption, and social reproduction take place
• Articulates in complex ways with other modes of production