

Dialoguing with the Ghost of Marx

Mode of Production in Archaeological Theory

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Abstract ■ Eric Wolf's 'Modes of Production' chapter in *Europe and the People without History* is a masterful reconceptualization of a key interpretive and tactical concept in the Marxian storehouse of ideas. The concepts of kin-ordered, tributary and capitalist mode of production capture important differences in the ways that human groups produce and distribute social surplus across space and time. Wolf's formulation thus sends an important message about the specific kinds of social processes that are of analytical interest. It also supports the more activist goal of clarifying exactly how the present is different from the past so as to stimulate critical reflection and debate. This article considers how Wolf's work has been engaged by archaeologists and how we might more fully redeem and extend his insights for an explanatory and emancipatory archaeology.

Keywords ■ ancient North America ■ class ■ emancipatory archaeology ■ power

It is a privilege to contribute to this issue honoring Eric's Wolf's *Europe and the People without History* (*EPWH*). The occasion provides an opportunity not only to explore Wolf's influence on the field of archaeology, but also to acknowledge his enormous impact on my own thinking. My focus is on Wolf's main theoretical contribution: an 'eclectic' (Wolf, 1982: 400) reconceptualization of the concept of mode of production. I will use this concept as a touchstone for considering how Wolf's work has been engaged by archaeologists and how we might more fully redeem and extend his insights for an explanatory and emancipatory archaeology.

Archaeology and *EPWH*

When *EPWH* was published I was halfway through graduate school at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Encouraged by a faculty that included Wolf's student and collaborator John W. Cole, *EPWH* was closely read and discussed. The impact was immediate and profound. The book provided abundant moral support for those of us trying to develop a historical political economy for archaeology. Wolf's notion of social science as 'one

long dialogue with the ghost of Marx' (Wolf, 1982: 20) legitimized the Marxist theory that we were using – sometimes reluctantly, given our graduate student status and fragile emotional state – in this cause. The book's title alone provided a wonderful catchphrase that could be used to justify archaeology's existence. That is, we saw the 'people without history' as including all of those folks who lived in 'deep' time, before capitalism and before historians. This of course covers most of the people who have ever lived. Their lives, histories and complex interrelationships can only be *scientifically* investigated though a global, comparative archaeology (indigenous peoples, of course, have their own ways of understanding 'deep' time).

The intellectual support provided by *EPWH* was equally substantial. Wolf's focus on partitive conflict within cultures and global interconnections between cultures provided an appealing alternative to the normative and local perspectives that dominated the archaeology of the day. Wolf's understanding of mode of production as a set of strategic relationships for mobilizing social labor produced a causal dynamic that challenged mainstream functionalist accounts driven by demographic and environmental factors. Wolf's 'typology' (I use the term loosely, because Wolf was uninterested in constructing new typologies of organizational form or new evolutionary sequences) of kin-ordered, tributary and capitalist modes of production was an attractive alternative to classifying societies in terms of levels of social integration (Service, 1962) or forms of subsistence. A follow-up to *EPWH* published in *American Antiquity*, the leading North American journal of archaeology (Wolf, 1984), highlighted the importance of ideology in sustaining the social differences and tensions created by particular modes of production. In short, Wolf offered a way for archaeologists to integrate the material and the ideal in a single coherent framework.

Archaeological reactions to *EPWH* were mixed. Some historical archaeologists criticized Wolf's failure to engage the substantive findings of that discipline (e.g. Schuyler, 1988). Others forgave the relative absence of archaeological detail and embraced the theoretical orientation. Today, thanks in part to Wolf, the word 'capitalism' can be spoken in polite company within archaeology. It has been used by our most creative historical archaeologists as a touchstone for developing a more coherent and engaged practice (Paynter, 1988; Orser, 1996; Leone and Potter, 1999).

Prehistoric archaeologists also came to embrace *EPWH* as a source of uniquely intelligible ideas about structure and change in pre-capitalist social formations, vastly more accessible than the structural-Marxist approaches criticized by Wolf in *EPWH*'s 'Bibliographic Notes' (Wolf, 1982: 400–4). Wolf's notion of the 'kin-ordered' mode of production – a way of committing social labor to the transformation of nature through appeals to filiation and marriage, and to consanguinity and affinity (Wolf, 1982: 91)

– contained useful leads for theorizing social dynamics in formations that lacked obvious hierarchies and other trappings of complexity. In Wolf's two other modes of production – the tributary and the capitalist – the dynamics of change are conditioned by unequal political relationships and labor market relationships, respectively. The role of these inequalities in activating change are easily appreciated. Wolf's labor-theoretic definition of kinship produced an accounting of the characteristic oppositions (elders vs juniors, original settlers vs newcomers, old vs emergent lines of descent) and surplus-accumulating limitations of the kin-ordered mode that could also activate change. His formulation thus gave us a way to see kinship as generating conflict instead of always containing and diffusing it. When combined with Wolf's sensitivity to historical contingency, we finally had a model of change for 'simple' societies to parallel those available for complex societies.

Today, in part because of Wolf's influence, archaeology has a rapidly maturing body of thought about the internal dynamics of ancient societies (e.g. Price and Feinman, 1995; Dobres and Robb, 2000; O'Donovan, 2002; see also Gledhill, 1999). Many of these theories aggressively focus, as Wolf himself did, on social power. Power is everywhere in the social archaeologies. Many scholars are considering the different ways that social power can be built through mobilizations of labor, long-distance exchange, manipulations of ritual and other social practices, strategies and negotiations (Blanton et al., 1996; Arnold, 2000; Feinman et al., 2000). We have Wolf to thank for helping, especially in his final articles and books, to encourage the discourse about power and its role in shaping social change.

But the rush to theorize power has, paradoxically, crowded out other contributions from the body of Marxist thought that Wolf found so useful during his career (see also Heyman, this issue). Perhaps the most important of these is Marx's notion of class. Marx made important distinctions between the processes organizing flows of power, property and social labor in society (see Resnick and Wolff, 1987). He used the term 'class' specifically to refer to the production and distribution of surplus labor. In *EPWH* and subsequent archaeological theorizing there is often a conflation of power and class; that is, class relations of surplus flow are seen to be a relatively straightforward reflection of structural power; power is a *proxy* for class. Certainly, particular forms of power relations are associated with all modes of surplus appropriation. But those individuals who exercise power (as well as those who own property or 'means of production') are not always those who extract and distribute surplus labor. This is clearly evident in capitalism (Resnick and Wolff, 1987, 2002), and the power-class relationship is conceivably just as variable and complex in non-capitalist social forms.

The point here is that the conflation of power and class in archaeological theory potentially limits our understanding of the character and variety of the social distinctions and identities created by different political

economies. It hamstrings our ability to imagine ways that individuals could be conflicted by multiple positions and identities. This in turn limits possibilities for theorizing the dynamics of change. To understand variety in social life and its transformative tensions, we need to distinguish, as Marx did, an individual's position in class relations of surplus flow from their position in a host of non-class flows of power, property and meaning.

On this alternative view *all* societies are class societies in the specific sense that they all require the social production and appropriation of surplus labor. Class, like power, is an inherent part of the group life of human beings. As Wolf argued, societies vary with respect to the precise way or combination of ways by which surplus labor is appropriated; that is, they vary in the precise specificity of their class relations. Appropriation can range from collective to exploitative, and social differences can be theorized between people all along the range (see Saitta, 1994a, for an archaeological and ethnographic analysis of the social differences associated with collective class appropriation).

There is a tactical as well as intellectual rationale for embracing a cross-cultural and trans-historical understanding of class. Conflating class with power reifies class. This reification is evident in *EPWH* with Wolf's endorsement of the idea that class has historical origins at the transition from kin-ordered to tributary modes of production; that is, at the point when coercive political power replaces kinship as a way of mobilizing surplus labor (Wolf, 1982: 97–9). On an alternative Marxist view, it is not class but the class *division* – a circumstance in which the extractors of surplus are no longer the producers, and in which class and power relations are reconfigured to produce *exploitation* of some people by others – that has historical origins. Thus, the challenge is not to understand the origins of class, but the origins of class division. By preserving the distinction between class and class division, and between domination and exploitation (the latter does not always accompany the former), a Marxist approach preserves theory's ability to recognize difference and understand change at all ranges of societal scale. It also reaffirms the importance of class as an intellectual tool for cross-cultural and trans-historical analysis and comparison. With this tool we can produce more nuanced and useful models of the relationship between individuals, and between power and class, in human life, and conceivably offer more compelling and relevant interpretations of the ancient past.

I have sketched what this class-theoretical approach comes to in my studies of pre-Columbian social change in the American Bottom and San Juan Basin at the great centers of Cahokia and Chaco Canyon, respectively (Saitta, 1994b, 1997). In both cases kin-communal class relations (a term I find preferable to Wolf's kin-ordered because it more closely specifies the nature and form of the entity that mobilizes surplus labor) were secured by particular forms of structural power based on political hierarchy and perhaps even hereditary inequality. The impetus to change in both cases

involved contradictions between the class and non-class identities of particular agents (ritual specialists, exchange agents, political functionaries) who were pushed by historical circumstances and compromised social positions to build tributary relations of production. These contradictions came to a head when the same structures of power were called upon to simultaneously support different class relations (communal and tributary). In both cases efforts to mobilize surplus through tributary rather than communal means were truncated by factional conflict and popular resistance. The outcome in both areas was reorganized forms of kin-communalism.

This particular configuration of Marxist ideas points the way to more detailed and conceivably richer accounts of causality and change. Like Wolf's approach, it depends upon the reworking of old categories (class, primitive communism) and disaggregation of the variables traditionally used to define organizational complexity. This produces a theory of kin-communalism having a unique and counter-intuitive combination of features, including collective appropriation, political hierarchy, institutionalized inequality and 'class struggle' over the conditions of surplus appropriation. I think that we need such counter-intuitive political and economic models in order to make sense of the real-world empirical puzzles and ambiguities that bedevil archaeological interpretation in North America and elsewhere. A warrant for reworking theory in such imaginative ways is certainly part of Wolf's intellectual legacy for anthropology.

EPWH and an emancipatory archaeology

Just as Wolf pointed archaeologists to a better way of engaging the past, he also pointed us to a better way of engaging the present. Wolf's well-known activism (Gledhill, 1999; Schneider, 1999) depended upon his commitment, expressed in his American Anthropological Association Distinguished Lecture (Wolf, 1990), to formulating concepts for 'naming and comparing' things within a realist epistemology that stipulated a knowable world. But his activism likewise depended upon a healthy suspicion of the very same categories that we use to name and compare. That is, he brought to the table an awareness that categories are historically and culturally contingent, and that they have differential effects in and on the world.

Archaeologists have been slower to embrace this self-critical epistemological stance. With the exception of those historical archaeologists identified above and other vocal advocates of Marxist theory, archaeologists have always been ambivalent about applying our knowledge in political or emancipatory projects that aim to foster critical thought about contemporary lived experience and impel social change (see Leone and Preucel, 1992: 121, for a definition of emancipation as 'greater participation in democratic society'). Today, the activist strain in archaeology is at risk of

disappearing altogether as Marxist concepts are appropriated and tamed by those lobbying for allegedly more 'scientific' approaches to the past. Several commentators have recently worried about the blunting of archaeology's critical/activist edge by such appropriations, and about the emergence of new cognitive and phenomenological approaches to challenge those concerned with power (Thomas, 2000).

As noted above, I think that even the archaeologies of power can be dulled without a parallel concern for class. To me, the bigger threat is the tendency to describe subject societies with concepts that rest on a foundational belief in continuous variation. These include descriptions of ancient societies as 'small-scale', 'middle range', 'transegalitarian', 'intermediate' and 'heterarchical'. Such terms are held by some to better capture organizational variety and/or address the 'classificatory ambiguity' (Neitzel and Anderson, 1999) of archaeological cultures. But the rub for the activist scholar is that these concepts do not assign a distinctive ontological status to the subject societies of interest. They neither highlight specific causal powers that can focus comparative work, nor do they engagingly explain to our varied constituencies (native peoples, 'working classes', general public) exactly *how* the present is different from the past. We need something stronger, with a sharper critical edge, for capturing and comparing organizational differences across time and space, and for fostering the kinds of critical self-consciousness about contemporary lived experience that can impel broader interest, engagement and change.

Marx's categories nicely serve the activist agenda in this regard. His typology of primitive communal, feudal, Germanic, ancient and capitalist social formations sends an important message about the specific kinds of social processes that are of analytical interest. It captures important differences in the ways that human groups produce and distribute social surplus across space and time. As several recent commentators have noted, typologizing doesn't preclude the study of process, nor does it imply that any given type must follow only one historical trajectory (Zeitlin, 1996). Process can't be conflated with outcomes, and thus social types can still be useful constructs for meeting the comparative and explanatory goals of archaeological inquiry (see also Spencer, 1997; Stein, 1998). Types are also uniquely well-disposed for clarifying exactly *how* the present is different from the past, in ways that can further archaeology's emancipatory project.

Wolf recognized the explanatory and emancipatory potential of Marxist thought. As Gledhill (this issue) notes, 'the Marx that Wolf recommends to us is the Marx who remained mindful of historical variability and relativity'. Wolf redeemed much of this view with his brilliant condensation and translation of the mode of production. Other reworkings are possible, for example Gilman's reconceptualization of the Germanic mode as a way to interpret European prehistory (Gilman, 1995), and my own reworking of the primitive communal mode to understand organizational complexity

in ancient North America. Like Wolf and Gledhill, I believe that if we consider more carefully the nuances of Marx's work on the *variability* of human social arrangements we can still find much to enrich a scientific and humanistic anthropology.

Conclusion

Twenty years ago, Eric Wolf showed archaeologists a different way to understand social forms in history. Some of us have drawn on Wolf and others in the Marxist tradition – most particularly William Roseberry (1997a, 1997b), whom I also honor with this article – to good effect. We can build on their work by reconceptualizing other concepts in the Marxian storehouse, and more vigorously embracing a critical attitude toward the concepts we use to name and compare alternative social realities.

Redeeming a non-essentialist, non-reified concept of class is perhaps the most important move we can make in this regard (Resnick and Wolff, 1987; see also Knapp, 1996: 143; Durrenberger, 2001). A long-standing tendency within both the Marxist and non-Marxist archaeologies to insist on a distinction between 'class' and 'non-class' societies (e.g. Spriggs, 1984) – a distinction that Wolf also endorsed – unnecessarily hamstrings explanatory theory. Class is a powerful concept, a vitally important tool for imagining what individual and collective human agency might look like, and for determining what is most important for individuals and collectives to struggle over. At the very least, class analysis can enhance our search for the more complexly historicized and edifying past that was the object of Wolf's anthropology.

Similarly, it is important to evaluate the merits and limitations of other theoretical constructs – especially the various types and anti-types doing battle for naming rights today – not only in terms of how they help us explain the past, but also in terms of their ability to produce critical reflection about the nature of lived experience across time and space, including the hegemonies of life and thought that govern *us*. Critical comparison of the organizing relationships of past and present is the first step toward imagining and creating other 'ways of doing'. Eric Wolf's pioneering vision in *EPWH* remains anthropology's best guide for achieving an integrated explanatory and emancipatory project.

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