

Eric Wolf's Case Studies of Power: A Critical Review Essay

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Eric Wolf's (1999) *Envisioning Power* (U. of California Press) can serve as a useful example for further discussion of Ragin's comments on the "historical turn" of the 1980s and the "cultural turn" of the 1990s. Wolf's last major work can serve as a kind of test of the possibility of accomplishing the kind of sophisticated comparative and historical analysis that Smelser sees as "our social-science enterprise." Wolf writes: "As an anthropologist, I believe that theoretical discussions need to be grounded in cases, ..." (pp.2-3).

He examines three cases: the Kwakiutl (*Tsaxis Kwakwaka'wakw*), the Aztecs (*Tenochca*) and the Nazis (NSDAP). "I have fastened on these three," he says, "because each of them is characterized by unusually evocative and elaborate repertoires of ideas [,] and practices based upon these repertoires" (p.16). He "locates" each case in space and time and attempts to integrate them theoretically. Unlike ahistorical versions of world systems theory or even more abstracted "grand theory" approaches, Wolf seems to be very sensitive to case specificity and diversity in this book. He not only reports "observed behavior" but also takes into account "recorded texts" and "ideas" that "...take on forms of their own that are not directly deducible from material or social facts, but ... are implicated in material production and social organization ..." (p.19).

Comparative and historical sociologists will be particularly interested in Wolf's analysis of the National Socialist (NS) "Third Reich," a distinctive "reactionary-modern" state, "... combining the apparent modernity of capitalism and technology with a reactionary fascism" (p.16). For example, Wolf comments that Barrington Moore (1978) is correct to reject an explanation for the rise of fascism that relates "abstract class position in linear fashion to modes of consciousness..." (p.224). He further points out that Moore's analysis is "...apt in emphasizing culturally specific conditions..." and he extends Moore's theory by summarizing some of "... the unfolding contexts of a much longer history..." in terms of local variations.

It will be up to scholars of NS in Germany and fascism in general to critique the specifics of Wolf's approach and to argue whether or not he "got the case

right." What is directly relevant here is that Wolf has clearly absorbed the debates of the 1980s and 1990s and has provided a comparative-historical analysis that is theoretically-based and methodologically-sophisticated. In his work he is not an atheoretical or ahistorical "grand theorist." He explicates a systematic theoretical framework and summarizes a wide range of well crafted case studies. Even if his specific points prove to be inadequate, he has helped to improve our understanding of the relation between power and ideas. The Kwakiutl employed metaphors of kinship to model social relations. The Aztec (Tenochca) rulers also claimed a right to rule based on cosmological principles in which "... the ruling elite was accorded a special role in managing the cosmic arrangements of predation and commensality" (p.277). Their ideologies were based on rhetorical skills and "major hortatory orations." Wolf finds analogies in NS ideology and a "myth-history" which identified advocates of internationalism and utilitarianism as "Germany's enemies within and without" (p.278). "These three cases serve as entry points into a discussion of ideology," Wolf writes, "but as historical manifestations they remain incommensurate." What makes them comparable, however, is that "[in] each instance, the repugnant ideology had its roots in a distinctive prior cultural history" (p.279). He refers to Georges Duby's (1980) analysis of "...the imaginary medieval European tripartite division of society and cosmos into warriors, priests and peasants" and draws the conclusion that "imaginary worlds" and "imaginary beings" have played a part in social struggles and transformations. Hence, Wolf suggests "comparative phenomenology" is necessary for the study of cosmologies. Study of the links between ideology and power, culture and legitimacy, will need to take account of Wolf's nuanced and sophisticated work.

During the *Methodenstreit* of the 1890s the chasm between idiographic description of specific times and places and nomothetic laws true for all times and places seemed enormous. Weber's *verstehende Soziologie* can be viewed as an effort to overcome the idiographic-nomothetic dichotomy, utilizing both "meaning adequacy" (historically-based *Verstehen*) and "causal adequacy" (transhistorical "causation"). For Weber the bulk of social science would consist of ideal type generalizations true for a range of times and places. There would be few transhistorical and transcultural "real types" such as those which are believed to be characteristic of physical science (e.g. the Periodic Table of the Elements). But it would also be necessary to move beyond the very strictly historical case study

that was limited to a kind of "thick description" of an "ethnographic present." In his chapter on Theory and Methodology, Wolf (Chap. 2) discusses Dilthey and the Baden Neo-Kantians (Windelband, Rickert, Lasch). He examines how Weber "complements" Marx and how Mannheim and Gramsci attempted to combine elements of Marxian "grand theory" with Dilthey-Baden emphasis on human meaning in specific settings. He then examines anthropology and linguistics in terms of the "counterposition" of class and culture.

Wolf's *Envisioning Power* is built on a very sophisticated comprehension of the issues that Ragin, Smelser, Amenta and Walder discuss. It would be useful for those interested in comparative and historical social science to confront the book seriously.