



*Vision and Method in Anthropology: Forty Years of Eric Wolf's 'Europe and the People Without History'*

**Organizers: Don Kalb (University of Bergen) and Susana Narotzky (University of Barcelona)**

**23/24 September 2022**

**University of Bergen/Frontlines of Value Program.**

It is forty years ago that Eric Wolf published his pathbreaking “Europe and the People Without History” (1982). The book gave an anthropological account of 500 years of European capitalist imperialism, seen from the peripheries. By doing so, it crystallized and clarified multiple debates in anthropology, history, and social theory that had marked the turbulent 60s and 70s of the last century. Issues of materialism and idealism, historical and ethnographic methodologies, spatiotemporal approaches and comparison, the power and problems of Marxism, the promises and pitfalls of the culture concept, the possibilities and problems of world systemic visions and the ‘mode of production’ concept, the role of commodities in development, and the manifold logics of social and political history in regions and cultures outside the West before the mid twentieth century, it was all there. It was a book that in retrospect prepared the discipline brilliantly for the accelerating capitalist globalization that would mark the next fifty years.

Paradoxically, while path-breaking qua vision and method, the imminent paths opened by “Europe and the People” were almost immediately cut off. 1982 was wrong timing. Post-structuralism, postmodernism, and “thick description” combined to destroy systemic, global, and historically explanatory visions. Such theoretical ambitions were shoved aside as “grand narratives” and delegitimized as associated with a totalizing modernism. Post-structuralism and postmodernism were boosted by 1989, the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of ‘really existing socialism’. Fukuyama’s ‘End of History’ reigned (paradoxically an even grander history). Neoliberal hegemonies in the world and in academia emphasized the importance of individual stories, cultural preferences, and a plethora of subjective idiosyncrasies in the market place of global humanity. In the anthropology discipline, all this aligned smoothly, and apparently in profoundly humanist ways, with older anthropological notions of cultural relativism, perspectivism, and idealism, lately giving rise to the extreme relativism of cultural ontology. It also corroborated anthropology’s conventional twentieth century self-definition as ‘doing fieldwork and local ethnography’. This was sometimes coupled, quite paradoxically, with a move away from modes of theory guiding historical explanation to abstract and universalist idealist philosophizing.

Under the guises of “anthropology and history” and “political economy” some of the possibilities inscribed in Wolf’s work were conserved in the 1980s and 90s. They came back to life from the 2000s onwards, carried by a younger generation, as neoliberal globalism became ever more crisis prone and new cycles of contestation were emerging. The new work, now often aligned with critical approaches in geography, focused among others on issues of labor, class, surplus populations, post-development, post-socialism, post-colonialism, austerity, new capitalist extractive and oppressive social forms, migrations, and contestations. This led to a re-uniting of political, economic, and cultural inquiry under a larger dialectical vision and method, and it came with a renewed interest for Marxian approaches next to for example anarchist, Maussian and Polanyian ones.

We are inviting papers that inquire into anthropological vision and method forty years after “Europe and the People Without History”. We are interested in the imminent possibilities of that text that were taken up as well as those that were not (yet) taken up; in contemporary research on the topics singled out by Wolf forty years ago; in competing alternative lines of inquiry and their possible relations with the Wolfian approach. What is the Wolfian take on Marx and where lies its exact value? What ought to be the role of history and comparison in the anthropological endeavor? What is the value of archival and secondary sources in anthropological research and theory, next to ethnography? If we take the whole Wolfian agenda seriously, what sort of questions would a Wolfian anthropology now pose, in the current world? If we compare the Wolfian approach to thinking big with other large scale visions in anthropology – Sahlins, Levi-Strauss, Graeber, Godelier for instance – what specificities emerge that remain relevant?

We will have a major international workshop of anthropologists interested in a re-vitalized and updated Wolfian anthropology, to be held 23/24 September 2022, sponsored by Don Kalb’s ‘Frontlines of Value’ research program at the department of social anthropology at the University of Bergen.

### **Participants, titles, abstracts**

**Natalia Buier**

University of Barcelona

#### **Old questions for present predicaments: modes of production and the transition debate in *Europe and the People Without History***

This paper proposes a historical and methodological reading of the articulation modes of production debate through a close reading of *Europe and the People Without History*. By tracing the influence of the transition debate in Wolf’s work, I highlight epistemological aspects that remain central to the contemporary anthropological study of capitalist social formations. Recovering the implicit, and to a large degree overlooked, legacy of the transition debate in *Europe and the People Without History* highlights the analytical challenges that make Wolf’s theorizing of modes of production particularly salient for understanding the contemporary relationship between capitalist and non-capitalist processes of exploitation and extraction.

**Jaume Franquesa**

University at Buffalo - SUNY

#### **Eric Wolf and the question of nature**

Eric Wolf is often credited with coining the expression ‘political ecology’, yet he is rarely considered a key figure in the development of this field. Wolf first (and last?) used the term ‘political ecology’ in a 1972 paper reviewing several contributions that analyzed ecological relations and transformations in the Alpine region. Although left largely untheorized, Wolf’s use of this term seemed to signal the need to overcome the localist limitations of cultural ecology and to understand ecological relations and environmental change as a result of broader political economic transformations. The shift from cultural to political ecology thus insinuated is consistent with Wolf’s concurrent abandonment of the Stewardian paradigm and the adoption of a Marxist framework, a process that was to culminate a decade later in *Europe and the people without history*. However, it is fair so say that in this latter book ecological questions and concepts did not play a central role, and this helps to explain Wolf’s

peripheral and rather awkward position, a sort of absent forefather, within the development of the field of political ecology.

In this paper I plan to investigate the ‘political ecology’ of *Europe* (and germane works such as *Peasant wars*), exploring the environmental issues and currents underlying its main narrative. This excavation has two objectives. First, to analyze the ways in which a more explicit and conceptually developed political ecological approach may have helped Wolf illuminate the world historical transformations that he analyzed. Taking an opposite perspective, my second aim is to suggest how the current field of political ecology could benefit from a thorough engagement with the arguments and underdeveloped political ecology of *Europe*.

**Chris Hann**

Max Planck Institute, Halle, and Cambridge University

### Marxism and Eurocentrism

When Eric Wolf was writing his opus magnum in the 1970s, he had no inkling of what lay ahead: the demise of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist socialist regimes, the acceleration of neoliberal globalization (this vocabulary did not yet exist), and the rise of Asia, especially China. Wolf deserves credit for innovative adaptations of historical materialism (e.g. his concept of the tributary mode of production). But does his account of world history do enough to overcome the Eurocentric bias of the Marxist tradition? Is Asia adequately integrated? This paper will propose an alternative spatio-temporal framework, which might be summed up as *Eurasia and the People Without Axiality*.

**Don Kalb**

University of Bergen

### Anthropology and Big History: Three Models

Eric Wolf’s example in *Europe and the People Without History* is one of the three articulate models in anthropology that deal with big history. The other two are Jack Goody’s historical anthropology of Eurasia and David Graeber’s jumbo history of debt and inequality. In this paper I will try to compare these three systematically as to the initial questions they pose, their theoretical inspirations and visions, their conceptual and methodological tactics, their basic units of analysis, and their notions of space and time. If anthropology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has necessarily to be historical and offer grand visions that may inspire our small miniatures, what can we learn from these examples? And why does Wolf’s example then stand out?

**Sharryn Kasmir**

Hofstra University, New York

### ‘The New Laborers: Revisiting Wolf’s Last Chapter 40 Years Hence.’

The year after Eric Wolf’s (1982) *Europe and The People without History* was published, Cedric Robinson published his monumental *Black Marxism* (1983.) Both scholars wrote a global history of labor and capital. As well, both conceptualized many, differentiated laborers in a web of connection. However, Robinson turned for guidance to WEB Du Bois and the global color line, and he arrived at a theory of racial capitalism. In light of racial justice protests, calls to fully assess racial capitalism, and contemporary transformation of labor worldwide, what could we gain by re-reading Wolf’s final chapter “the New Laborers” through the lens of Robinson’s and Du Bois’ scholarship? What lenses can we bring to the study of “the new laborers” of our time?

**Jeff Maskovsky**  
City University New York

The United States and the People Without History

I put Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People without History* in conversation with African diaspora, Black feminist, and Native Studies scholars' new abolitionist formulations and emancipatory projects. These new formulations are generating excitement in anthropology and related fields because they help us to think in new ways about state logics of captivity, containment, settler violence, and antiblackness; they inform new historical and ethnographic accounts of the violent global histories of colonialism and imperialism; and they animate new sensibilities concerning the incipient, unruly, and beautiful forms of "livingness" that people improvise as they refuse the death-dealing logics of white settler colonialism and antiblackness (McKittrick 2006). Yet many of these new approaches are also silent on the essential issue of class. And they eschew serious engagement with questions of exploitation, capitalist labor regimes, historical political economy, and revolutionary transformations. Even work on racial and gendered capitalism by influential scholars such as Ruthie Gilmore, Angela Davis and Cedric Robinson is sometimes dismissed for its reliance on Marxian concepts. Indeed, many abolitionists argue that Black and Indigenous people were foundationally excluded from the category of "the worker" in capitalist modernity, and their struggles thus cannot be subsumed under those involving exploited workers. I want to suggest that *Europe and the People without History* can put the Marxian tradition in dialogue with abolitionism in a helpful way. If we read *EPWH* as an account of structural and tactical power in the forging of mutual interrelationships, interdependencies, and space-time improvisations, and work with an expansive view of class and social labor, we find ways to put racial and gendered capitalism, white settler colonialism, and antiblackness in the same frame without collapsing one into another and reinvigorate theorization around race, gender, nation, sex and their inter-relations.

**Oana Mateescu**

University of Bergen and Babes Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca

On the new plantations: European divisions of labor and knowledge

In the preface to the second edition to *EPWH*, Eric Wolf urges "closer attention to the relations of power that mediate between the mobilization of social labor in society and the mental schemata that define who does what in the division of that labor". This paper explores the uneven distribution of such mental schemata – the accumulation, articulation and portability of critical knowledge - by comparing the different urban economies of creative labor in Bologna (Italy) and Cluj-Napoca (Romania). Situating creative labor on a wider continuum (that involves also outsourcing, digital and platform labor), it focuses on the critical analogies that young laborers draw with serfdom, caporalato, slavery and plantation labor. Are these «necessary anachronisms» (Georg Lukacs) for the critique of contemporary divisions of labor? What political-economic and racial layers they reveal/hide? Do they also portend vocabularies of political action for a historically inflected understanding of contemporary capitalism?

**Patrícia Alves de Matos**

University of Lisbon

Eric Wolf's Marxian approach to the labour process and the goal of explanation in anthropology: humans disguised as robots in call centre labour

Call centre labour is shaped by a fundamental contradiction present to different degrees in all forms of service labour. Under conditions of intense, technologically mediated forms of surveillance, call centre operators are required to fulfil quantitative targets of work performance (e.g. number of calls answered per hour, etc.) while also focusing on the qualitative dimension of their interactions with clients over the phone, including following conversation scripts and 'showing a smile in one's voice'. The dominant tendency in the literature is to consider that the quantitative and qualitative contradictory work- output requirements leads to the disembedding, disembodiment, depersonalisation and de-subjectification of human linguistic capabilities. Inspired by Wolf's Marxian approach to the labour process together with critical feminist theory, drawing from an extended case-study in the Portuguese call centre sector, I argue that the tension between quantitative and qualitative work outputs targets enables the incorporation within the valorisation process of operators' morally and socially embedded agentive linguistic capacities of decision- making, problem- solving and ethical evaluation. I suggest that the dominant view of call centre operators as robots instead of humans is an expression of a broader tendency among some critical theory literature to reinforce a 'capital-centric' explanatory model to address emerging forms of exploitation and value extraction under contemporary capitalist service labour regimes. Such explanatory model is unable to analyse the conditions that might facilitate or prevent the fit between specific labour forces and labour regimes within a particular economic and political- historical setting, or to specify how and why labour takes the form it does, and what its human consequences are. This is especially relevant in the call centre sector, where I shall argue profitability is ensured through the commodification of human agency.

**Susana Narotzky**

University of Barcelona

People Without History: The Value of Worthlessness to Capitalism.

Eric Wolf's masterpiece was centered on connections between modes of production, forms of social labor differently organized but related to each other, systems for producing, channeling, and extracting value of different kinds that were never isolated but became increasingly related. "Understanding how humans transform nature to their use does not stop with the description and analysis of techno-environmental interaction. The laborer, the direct producer (...) is someone who always stands in relationship to others as kinsman, serf, slave, or wage laborer. Similarly, the controllers of social labor are not to be thought of as technicians who guide the technical operations of work. They are assigned to their positions by the system of deploying social labor, which casts them in the role of elder kinsman, chief, seigniorial lord, or capitalist. It is this conception of social mobilization, deployment, and allocation of labor that allows us to understand how the technical transformation of nature is conjoined with the organization of human sociality." (1982:74)

This contribution will use present day ethnographic material to highlight the "Without History" phrase as one of the key insights of Wolf's work that we need to develop in the analysis of present-day mobilizations of social labor and nature. Expelling people from "History" is a spatial-temporal valuation device for designing and legitimating exploitation and dispossession, as History is the construct of valuable sociality –that which needs to be reproduced— as opposed to other less valuable forms of sociality which become merely instrumental to the reproduction of the "People with History". Racial capitalism, plantationocene, and capitalocene scholars have developed this line of analysis productively. I wish to build on their scholarship to show the pervasive and central valuation aspect of constructing worthlessness for capitalist accumulation, in its extractive, productive, and financial dimensions.

**Patrick Neveling**

University of Bournemouth

Unfortunately, there are no histories of people without Europe:  
On the denial of imperialism in anthropology's neoliberal encounter

One key aspect of Eric Wolf's seminal *Europe and the People without History (EPWH)* is a formidable intervention on the world-spanning incorporation of humans into the Eurocentric world-system from 1400 onward (Wolf 1997 [1982]). Wolf distinguishes between a roughly 3.5 centuries long period of European expansion *In Search of Wealth* up to the mid eighteenth century and the globalisation of *Capitalism* from then on. The two main empirical sections of the book are framed by this periodisation. While this periodisation is commonplace among global and economic historians since the *Great Divergence* debate of the late 1990s and early 2000s (Pomeranz 2000), it has been contested by postmodernist and culturalist anthropologists of the 1980s; foremost Talal Asad's extended 1987 critique of *EPWH* for ignoring the autonomy of political systems outside Europe into the present (Asad 1987). This paper offers a reading of the book that expands Wolf's analysis of "mercantile wealth" (pp. 83-88) as a betwixt and between mode of production that bridges the tributary mode and the capitalist mode. Focused on archival and ethnographic material from different world regions (Caribbean and the Indian Ocean) the paper argues for an incorporation of "merchant wealth" as a subtype of the capitalist mode of production that is crucial during the peaks of (neo-)imperial expansion. Instead of an autonomy of non-European political systems as claimed by Asad, this paper puts the complicity of local European and non-European compradore bourgeoisies at the centre of major moments of capitalist expansion since the mid eighteenth century. The overwhelming empirical evidence for such complicity highlights that a persistent denial of imperialism as the project of a transnational capitalist class beyond Europe was central and formative for what I have identified elsewhere as mainstream anthropology's neoliberal encounter (Neveling 2016) in the 1980s.

**Antonio Maria Pusceddu**

University of Lisbon

Connections and contradictions: Some thoughts on Eric Wolf's political ecology

Eric Wolf is unanimously considered among the path-breaking scholars for the emergence of political ecology, now broadly understood as an interdisciplinary field that engages with the interconnection of political, economic and ecological processes. The very current use of the term is conventionally attributed to Wolf's brief commentary to a special issue on 'Dynamics of Ownership in the Circum-Alpine Area' (1972), credited for recasting 'political ecology' through the lens of political economy. No less important is the fact that *EPWH* is recognized among the most influential works on the theoretical and methodological development of political ecology. My contribution at the conference is to critically reflect on the current (continuing?) relevance of *EPWH*'s vision and method for an anthropologically minded political ecology. I will try to do so by focusing on two conceptual tenets of *EPWH*: connection and contradiction.

**Jeremy Rainer**

Max Planck Institute, Halle, Germany

Making, Taking, and Relating: Modes of production in a polycentric world

The mode of production plays a central role in Wolf's *Europe and the People without History*. Identifying three basic modes of production (capitalist, tributary, and kin-ordered), Wolf sought to characterize the fundamental principles organizing the production and distribution of wealth throughout human history, and to explain the emergence of the modern, North-Atlantic-centered,

world system as an interaction between those three modes and their respective political and economic logics. In this essay we build on Wolf's analysis, while pushing the envelope of Wolf's mode of production concept to make room for more diverse and evolving forms of economic organization and political power. We argue that Wolf's modes of production can be characterized by their respective emphases on "making," "taking," and "relating;" beyond the largely historical account provided by Wolf, these terms themselves provide useful entry points for a critical political economy, directing our attention away from the subjectivist and exchange-centered assumptions that predominate across disciplines from anthropology to economics, while highlighting key questions about the organization of production, distribution, and domination in the world today. This analytical approach, however, points us towards the recognition of more, rather than fewer, modes of production in the contemporary world economy. Considering various examples of recent and emerging forms of economic organization, we suggest that critical political economy would benefit from a more open-ended, flexible, and multiple use of mode of production than the one Wolf proposed, but also requires his analytical emphasis on identifying the commonalities, differences, and unequal interconnections between them.

**Luisa Steur**  
University of Amsterdam

#### Wolf's Marxian analysis "out of the closet"

Abstract: This contribution probes the limits of Wolf's insistence that his reliance on Marx – his "Marxian" anthropology - was purely for the purpose of furthering anthropology's ability to understand the world and did not aim to contribute to any political project building on Marx. I argue that this "in the closet" quality (Marcus and Menzies 2005) to Wolf's Marxian analysis has become outdated in contemporary anthropology and draw on the work of amongst others Burawoy and Wallerstein to underline the importance of the contradictory unity of theory and practice in the Marxian tradition and to suggest more productive ways of tackling this contradictory union than the one offered by Wolf. I then move on to argue that such a Marxian political engagement is necessary also to retain the radical edge of Wolf's main insights in *EPWH*, which otherwise may seem to have become commonplace in anthropology at large. Finally, I offer some reflections on how Wolf's methodological and theoretical interventions have helped me to search for an understanding of the relational processes unfolding in Kerala and Cuba that, while not aligning entirely with any of the political actors on the ground, does rely on a Marxist political drive to strengthen labor's ability to confront capital.

**Theodora Vetta and Irene Sabaté Muriel**  
University of Barcelona

#### People without history in the era of financial capitalism. Some insights on indebtedness in the European South

*EPWH* was a ground-breaking work explaining the logics and mechanisms of European colonialism and capitalist expansion. Wolf's historical and relational approach allowed him to account for global processes of social change, expressed in variegated, localized ways. It was these dense violent linkages between colonial centres and non-western societies and their localized entanglement with cultural and social organization that enabled the development of and hegemony of capitalism. While the presence and operation of debt and credit relations

recurrently emerge throughout the book, Wolf does not treat them as a coherent whole. He nonetheless notes their role in specific political economic processes, such as agricultural production, the mobilization of industrial labor, long-distance trade, or imperialist and military operations. Given the growing dominance of finance capital, actors, discourses and practices since EPWH was written, in this paper we will ponder over the kind of questions concerning debt and credit relations that Wolf would ask today. How would he conceptualise the current financialization of capital, energy, and nature, social welfare and social reproduction? We develop this along two axes. First, we sketch the role that credit and debt played in what Wolf described as different modes of production. From kinship obligations to public colonial loans, from pyramidal bills of credit to capital advances and land mortgages, and from merchants, bankers and moneylenders to indentured labour, credit and debt seem to implicitly structure the colonial and capitalist trajectories, with different manifestations and intensity in time and space. Second, trying to pick up where Wolf left off, and starting from ethnographic insights in Greece and Spain in the past two decades, we draw a multiscale understanding of financialization processes, pointing to the interconnections of credit and indebtedness, property, taxation, and welfare regimes. If capitalist futures entail not simply the search for new markets and fixes, but also require the constant making and unmaking of people/regions “without histories,” who are those people without histories *within* Europe today?

#### **Ariel Wilkis**

National University of San Martin, Argentina

#### “People without currency”: The popularization of the US dollar in Argentina from 1930 until the first decades of the XXI century

In this paper I present the results of research on the process of "popularization" of the US dollar in Argentine society, politics and economy from the 1950s to the present day. I explore the possibilities opened by the work of Eric Wolf to develop an analysis framework centered on the interaction of historiographic analysis and ethnographic understanding of the long-lasting and slow-maturing process that turned the dollar into a global currency rooted in the everyday life of groups and social classes that live outside the United States.

#### **Invited discussants:**

Stephen Campbell, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Lesley Gill, Vanderbilt University

Marc Morell, University of Bergen

Jorge Nunez, Kaleidos – Center for Interdisciplinary Ethnography, University of Cuenca

Maka Suarez, University of Oslo

Nindish Sundar, University of Amsterdam

Ida Susser, City University of New York.

Sarah Winkler-Reid, Newcastle University.