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A Conversation with Eric Wolf

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comments and reflections

a conversation with Eric Wolf

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What is an anthropological text? A discourse fixed by writing forged in the process of encounters between an author as a bearer of a cultural history and an institutional system determining the articulation of his/her disciplinary universe, and conditioning the delineation of the central problems, the choice of key theoretical interlocutors, methods of investigation and presentation. Simultaneously it is a reflection of the dialectic of confrontation, at a particular time and place, with individuals and groups interpreting the world through a symbolic system that is (often) different from the author's.

Instead of eclipsing the author and his world, a practice represented by certain trends in hermeneutics, the goal here is to locate an author within the cultural, intellectual, and political currents of his time and to elicit his active participation in unravelling the meaning of these currents.

The format of the following conversation with Professor Eric Wolf was structured by my desire to comprehend the nature of transitions in anthropological theorizing. This conversation was preceded by my reading of his major works as well as all his available writings in English, and by earlier conversations in 1984.

coping with a world in crisis¹

Ashraf Ghani: In the wake of Schorske's *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna*, and Janik's and Toulmin's *Wittgenstein's Vienna* the Museum of Modern Art recently held its exhibition of *Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture & Design*. Does the Vienna of the first decade of your life evoke images in sharp contrast to these celebrations of Vienna of 1900?

Eric Wolf: That's a hard one to answer, because, in some way, some part of that exhibit evoked very strong memories of recognition. My mother was a great admirer of Adolf Loos, one of the architects who played a major role in launching the new Vienna style; but I always thought that the stylistic principles of that group were very formalistic and too cerebral. They lacked vitality.

AG: Was Vienna of the 1920s a place where conflict was very visible?

EW: Almost continuously. I have quite strong memories of different kinds of events that were laden with conflict. I used to play in a park that was very close to the University, and student groups would come out and beat each other to death, literally.

AG: Did spatial division symbolically mark the social divisions in Vienna?

EW: Oh, I think very much so. The various districts had very different kinds of social physiognomies, and people have very strong attachments to the particular district in which they live. Partly that's unreal, because people move around a lot, and the fringe areas in the districts are inhabited by people who come from outside. Again, there were certain areas where I was not supposed to go. My school district included a working-class area. I was fascinated by the working-class kids who belonged to a different culture than my own, but you didn't easily go into that section. And across the Danube canal, on the other side of the Danube, there was a largely Eastern European Jewish settlement, and it was thought of as a different world).

AG: Did you have any experience of a Jewish community in Vienna?

EW: No. I didn't have any sense of a Jewish community as such. My parents were both pretty nonreligious, I suppose on occasions I must have gone to a Synagogue to witness a marriage or something.

AG: How did your family perceive itself in relation to the Enlightenment?

EW: My father was a Free-mason and had a strong belief in the power of reason, and in human potentiality. I think he retained this kind of sense throughout his life, uncontaminated by any kind of sociological analysis. My mother, who wanted to become a doctor and had studied medicine in Russia, belonged to the generation of people when women were moving into professions, for the first time that it had happened. I think, in her own right, she was a feminist, not in terms of declarations, but in terms of her stand on human possibilities. She and her friends talked rather admiringly of what was going on in the Soviet Union. The Free-mason view of my father involved what was essentially an Enlightenment view.

AG: Were you required to memorize Goethe, Schiller, and other German classic poets?



Figure 1. Eric and his mother vacationing in Austria. 1925.

EW: Not in elementary school. When I went to elementary school, the socialists had taken over the city government; they had put their best teachers into primary schools, and they were hell bent on teaching the practical realities of life. That meant turning your back on the classics and paying attention to ordinary kinds of folk, even in readings and theatrical presentations. Later on, when we moved to Czechoslovakia, in the German Gymnasium, there was more of an emphasis on Goethe and Schiller. My father was a great Goethe buff. I always thought that Goethe was a bit too pompous for my taste.

AG: Did your mother's Russian family connections open up a different cultural vista?

EW: They were very far away and came from a barbarian fringe of the world. I never visited my grandfather in Harbin, but what I heard of his life among Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Russians, and Tungus greatly appealed to me. East Asia was one of the never-never lands of my youth.

AG: Was the depression a factor in the movement of your family to Sudetenland?

EW: Well, it was in 1933. The corporation for which my father worked had its factories in the north of Bohemia. In the old empire it had been one economic unit, with offices in Vienna and factories in what then became Czechoslovakia, and during the depression it became necessary to make these factories more productive. So my father was sent there to work the work force harder, introduce the speed-up and triple shift production.

AG: Do you have any memories of the rising tide of anti-semitism?

EW: In Vienna, Hitler was becoming a presence in the early thirties, and that presence would mark one's life. By 1934–35 the Sudeten German Party began to develop. They were, I think, at first an autochthonous local party, then they began to converge more and more with the Nazis, and eventually came in line with its leaders and became one of the elements of the German Reich.

AG: Louis Trenker and Karl May have been mentioned as important in defining the images of nature and of other cultures. Were these two authors in any way important to you in this period?

EW: I think Trenker especially. He had made movies about mountaineering, that's how he really started, and became, with Leni Riefenstahl an evocative photographer mastering nature through mountaineering, climbing, and skiing, all things that I was involved in. Later on, he began to extend his glorification of mountain life into a stress on rural existence, but also on nationalism and his books took on pan-German and then Nazi, overtones. I found a convergence with Andre Gorz.² We both went through a Trenker phase, an adolescent boy's dream of proving one's manhood, and hyperglorification of physical activity. It is a kind of thing I now recognize as a dangerous business that drives a lot of the Israeli world view. That is, they want to demonstrate that Jews can be just as militaristic as other people, and, having proved that, that is enormously satisfying.

AG: What about Karl May?

EW: I shared the admiration for Karl May with Karl Wittfogel and Hitler. Karl May was an interesting phenomenon, because he wrote books both about the old west in the New World, and about the Near East, never having been to either. He invented these characters who would heroically stalk around America and Arabia. I never liked his Indian tales quite as much. I didn't think they were as good as Fenimore Cooper's tales, but I did like the stories about the Near East. His heroes in this thing were sort of, not so much nationalistic Germans, as Christian gentlemen.

AG: On a different note, was the process of proletarianization in the Sudetenland visible to the naked eye?

EW: Yes, it was visible to the naked eye. The factory in which my father operated drew its labor force both from Germans and Czechs, and the Germans were mostly people who had been small farmers, artisans. Their small-scale agriculture and home-weaving was being done in by the factories, so they had to go to the factory. They experienced it as a process of downward social mobility. And that's an ingredient in the increasing ethnic strife. For the Czechs, I think they had escaped labor on large agricultural estates. They were moving into factory work mostly as socialists with a labor tradition. I think they saw factory work as positive, a new kind of hope. But in both cases, the process of proletarianization was an everyday event visible to the naked eye. And all my friends came from that kind of background, all the kind of people I went to school with or associated with.

AG: Has the experience of these five years been critical in shaping your view of the role of class, and class conflict, in society and history?

EW: Yes, I think both class and ethnicity have been tangible phenomena for me. I still have no theoretical closure on how they are related. I see them as intimately involved with the whole process of proletarianization and how people were positioning themselves in regard to each other.

AG: Was the division of the working class into two antagonistic ethnic segments and the increasing importance of National Socialism in Europe, instrumental in sensitizing you to the simultaneous importance of economic relations, political power, and cultural forms, the continuous thread of your writing?

EW: There is no question about it. These concerns already go back to Vienna, when I think of those working-class kids who went to school with me. They were mostly of Slavic, south Slav, or Czech descent. And I think there is something about Vienna that has not been explored enough. Those districts we talked about earlier have an ethnic and class character, and how that is mixed together varies but has never been clear. There is an old Germanic population in Vienna, but it was being swamped by migrants at the end of the 19th century. I hadn't heard of the concept of culture but how people ate, how they spoke, how they dressed, the kind of names they had, marked populations off against each other.

AG: How did the Anschluss impinge on you and your family?

EW: My father was at Vienna at the time, and there was immediately, of course, the question of how he would get out, because the frontiers were closed. It was a great blow to us, I think. My father was probably as close to an Austrian nationalist as one can come, and we had a sense that that was homeland for us. There was also a sense that as long as Austria existed, there was a counterpoise to Germany. So that was a great blow. And then, of course, my father's sister was married to a man who was the head of the Vienna Ethical Culture Society, and the Nazis arrested him. Lots of people that we knew were either put in jail temporarily, or were under some kind of duress. My father got out because the factory sent a representative to Vienna, who was a member of this Sudeten German Party; he clearly had some kind of direct link to the Nazis. In fact, in the fall of 1939 they took over Sudetenland. My father, at that point, recognized that this was it and tried to get me out. It put a crimp into a plan that my friend Kurt and I had to go and bicycle to Turkey in the summer of 1938. We had already worked out an arrangement that we would wash dishes on one of these Danube steamers that went down to Ruse. We would load our bicycles on this boat, and wash dishes, and get off. The Nazi occupation stymied it.

AG: How did the two years at the Forest School, Essex, contribute to your intellectual formation?

EW: A lot. I think at the time I didn't see it that clearly. But looking back, I am sure it was very important in a number of ways. There was a whole new cultural setting. I learned English. Ac-

tually, I won the prize for the English essay. That I still find rather extraordinary. I fitted in rather well. I became a house monitor, one of these types they have trying to discipline the younger folks. At the same time, I thought the whole thing was very strange. It was a very important learning experience, in that I could see it as being a different culture that you could learn, but that you were not really part of. That was one aspect of it. Also, the headmaster believed in science. He was a Canadian, and contrary to many other such schools, where classics were emphasized and science was held in low esteem, he believed in science; and he hired a priest for two of us, a boy called Stevens and myself, who wanted to learn biology. And under the tutelage of this divine, we dissected all kinds of animals, reptiles, and fish, and we learned about Darwin. Not just the notion that natural phenomena are interesting but that you could think about them systematically. That was an entirely new experience. I had not had that before. We had had some things doing physics, but not much.

AG: And you started reading Huxley there?

EW: I began to read Huxley, Haldane, H. G. Wells, and Lancelot Hogben. There is a book about this group which calls it the *Invisible College*, and in a peculiar way, that was my introduction to the Invisible College, because I really learned a lot through reading these people, who were different from one another but shared the notion that science could be made every individual's intellectual property.

AG: Your introduction to the social sciences, as indicated in your appreciation of Norbert Elias,³ took place in an alien detention camp in Huyton, near Liverpool, in 1940. How did the experience of this camp affect your conceptualization of society and political organization?

EW: It was really quite an absurd experience because what the British did in 1940, was to incarcerate all enemy aliens within a certain radius of big cities, especially London. It was a reaction to the imminent fall of France and their sense of having to go it alone, and to the fear of a fifth column within their walls, which I think did exist. Among the many people that they brought to these camps were a few Nazis, but the vast majority were people who had gone to England as refugees. What was more significant is that they had done this without any kind of previous organization, so that medical facilities and other facilities were woeful. In my case we were herded into a half-built housing project, without any infrastructure. That's when I realized the talent of the communist party in organizing food distribution, medical services, psychological counseling, keeping order, making sure that people wouldn't fight. There were people, from the Spanish Civil War, but also those that had come out of the German communist movement. I think they do extremely well in times of adversity, if not at all that well afterwards. They don't seem to be able to build socialism with the same verve. But they were very impressive. I was organized with several other kids into a group that would go and steal stuff from the officer's mess—food, medicine, and newspapers—collect bricks that were lying around this housing project, pieces of wood and tar, so that people could build shelter. The other side to this was, of course, people in this camp who had just arrived in England after losing their shirts in the Continent, and had opened up shops and found themselves once again without any kinds of means of support. They were very depressed; several committed suicide. Or people who would fight over the one piece of meat that swam in the soup. I learned a lot about people under stress. And then, of course, the third thing is, when intellectuals get together they organize seminars. We ran these symposia on topics on everything under the sun. One man preached vegetarianism; I had written a paper on Frederick the Second of Prussia in school and I talked about Frederick. Elias talked about social networks. That was an entirely new idea for me.

AG: Your immigration to the United States in September 1940 was part of the emigration of 300,000 Jews from Germany at the time. Did Europe at the time look like a subject of history or its victim?

EW: Maybe that's not the way I would put it. For a long time German dynamism seemed so powerful that it threatened to take over Europe, perhaps the rest of the world, in short order. In 1940 there was no sense that the English could hold out by themselves. The incipient reaction of the Russians was, first of all, of accommodation, and then disastrous defeat, so that for a while it looked as though this was going to be the fate of Europe. Whatever was going to be built, there was not something in which one would have a part. Other people would do this. I never had the sense that the Nazis were not human. After all, these were all the people that I had gone to school with. But they had a formidable ability to organize people, to unleash them. What the future would look like was very much in doubt.

AG: The time separating your departure from Europe as a refugee, and your return there as a member of the United States Mountain Division was quite short, but significant. Did it feel like you were a witness to the end of a civilization, or the uprooting of a whole way of life? (see Figure 2.)

EW: It had the feeling of a flood that had poured over people and the flood receding, and actually, physically, that's the way it looked. Italy, when we got there, was a battlefield, and people huddled in half-destroyed houses. What the Nazis did not carry off the Americans stole. Everything seemed to be stripped down to the bare walls, and many times the walls had holes in them. You could see large numbers of people who had no place to go. So it had the quality of a disaster, a natural disaster. And then, of course, in addition, lots of hungry people wandering around, all kind of raggle-taggle soldiery was marching up and down the landscape.



Figure 2. Sgt. Wolf getting a haircut in the field at the 10th U.S. Mountain Division Training Center, Camp Hale, Colorado. 1944.

When the German army finally surrendered, there came with them women that they had picked up here, there and everywhere. The American army did not allow these women to join the men they had travelled with in this concentration area. They were freed to go wherever they could go, but that was an act of human kindness that was actually ferocious. Or the Germans had collected Tatars from the Crimea, who formed part of their regiments. They were going to be handed over to the Russians. I, together with some other people, helped some of them to escape. They were totally lost in Italy, where they spoke no language, and probably had very little idea of what ultimate ideological struggle they were involved in. There were lots of people like that. That world was filled with types who had been scraped off whatever locality they had had. This last year Sydel and I went back to the village where I had spent one winter. I did not recognize it. What I remember was a place that looked like the plague had struck it. Now the houses are all whitewashed, and have flowers in their windows. They looked warm, inviting, and pleasant. It has become a mountain resort for people from Tuscany. Then, it was just in ruins. I would have not thought that it would recover that fast, and I think in fact most of Europe has recovered. Germany looks very well off, as though the war never had taken place.

AG: Before joining the U.S. Army, you had enrolled in Queens College in New York, but had also spent a summer at the Highlander Folk School in 1941. How did this exposure to contrasts shape your image of the United States?

EW: Well, that was very important. Queens was one thing, the Highlander Folk School, the experience of eastern Tennessee, was a whole other story. It really allowed one to see something of the underbelly of the South in ways that I had never, ever imagined. This was just after the New Deal effort to better economic circumstances through farm administration aid, and the TVA that had been built, and so on. But you could still see that the people were terribly poor and oppressed. It gave me a sense of the South that I still retain. When I went to Virginia, I had a sense of how it had been beaten down into dependency after the collapse of slavery. But quite apart from the slave issue, the South had become an internal colony of other areas. That gave me a somewhat differentiated sense of the U.S. This is an enormously variegated country within certain commonalities.

AG: Queens College had been fairly newly founded and a lot of the teachers were emigrés. What are your reflections about the quality of teaching at Queens College at that time?

EW: The quality of teaching, I think, was absolutely fabulous. I think I did not completely take advantage of it all, and I am not quite sure why. I had Carl Hempel for philosophy, Banesh Hoffman for mathematics—these people went on to become giants in logic and mathematics—Joe Soudek, who was a member of the Frankfurt school in economics. It was good teaching, and some of it stuck. I think I didn't quite connect with it. I was sick and tired of college by the time I went to the army. The army saved me from being a dropout. I would have probably never been a dropout, because I am too conscientious, but it allowed me to put some things in perspective. I finished after I came back.

AG: It was also at Queens College that you discovered anthropology. Why did anthropology appeal to you?

EW: One day I walked into a class in anthropology given by Joe Bram. It was a course on Asia, and it may have been one of the first courses on Asia offered there. He was talking about something that interested me.

anthropology and its societal context

AG: Your entry into anthropology coincided with the time when the nature of public power and its exercise became the central issue of American society. Are we still in this period?

EW: I got into anthropology at a time when the New Deal was already an old deal. It had a peculiar novelty, and its positive forward thrust had been such that a lot of people got involved in it, and saw it as an imaginative, innovative movement. I think that had already sort of cooled. There had been a depression in 1938–39, and the war had taken over the forward thrust. People came back from the war with an enormous sense that there was a new world, and that you could still possibly do something new and more hopeful. I don't know that anyone really had any realistic ideas about how to do this or, if so, that really didn't form part of a discourse. There was a sense that the Allies had won the war, some kind of connection had been built with the Soviet Union and the rest of the world, but it wasn't very analytical. Public power, the power of the state as such, had taken the form of the war effort and this enormous mobilization of everybody's energy, partly because the war was seen in such positive light. The state did not then look like the cold and iron monster that it has since become. Although clearly it must have been at the time.

AG: The National Teach-In of 1965 and the Thailand episode may be seen as the highmarks of two opposed responses of anthropologists to what you called "the return of Machiavellian politics."⁴ Did these events constitute a watershed in terms of your image of anthropology as a discipline?

EW: I don't want to confuse my own sense of what was involved there with the direction of anthropology. I think that somewhere in there, there is a recognition that culture and power are not two entirely separate realms. It took anthropologists a long time to come to that conclusion, and it is not an easy conclusion to reach. Because, if you take the traditional culture concept, there is no power in it, and it does not engage that issue, and you can live happily ever after and talk about the Navaho and the Japanese, as if they had only culture and this other facet of things didn't matter. I think that what the Vietnam experience—and subsequently other kinds of events—demonstrated to everybody was that there was a connection, and that connection was not only a connection between culture and power, but also in the way in which an observer engages that whole issue. I came into anthropology when it was still innocent and pristine, and by the late 70s we were aware that difficulties, complexities, and guilt had accumulated. I think that is probably part of the malaise of anthropology. It is not easily sorted out.

AG: Was there also a sense that a "church of marginals" was giving way in the face of conflicts that were ripping the society apart?

EW: Yes, I think that anthropology was a kind of home for many of us, where you met kindred souls who could talk and communicate with each other. Then, gradually, some of the people who were communicants in this church moved on to involve themselves with other things. Then you suddenly discover that that has polarized people. It is a rather difficult *crise de conscience*. For myself, lots of old friends no longer talk to me, and it has happened not only to me, but to others.

AG: In *Anthropology* you argued that "American anthropology owes the greater part of its theoretical armament to importations from across the Atlantic, which it has applied with its characteristic pragmatism to data collected by indigenous practitioners." Is this a paradox and if so is there an explanation?

EW: It is a paradox, but I think it may have historical roots. One part of American anthropology is indigenous and connects up with attempts to understand Indians. Schoolcraft and Morgan, people who are actually involved with Indians—as it were, the Indians next door. There is another part of American anthropology which comes from Germany. The model of the American university is really that of a German university. In order to be an intellectual and academic, you have to follow that kind of a style. There is a kind of a grafting of the two, which doesn't always work. Somebody like Steward, I always thought, since he was a very contradictory person any-

way, was really more of an indigenous forester type. I mean that the foresters and the intellectuals are two different kinds of people, but they used to live together quite easily in anthropology; but there is a kind of disjuncture.

AG: Is it because of disjuncture that whatever gets to be imported gets to be transformed?

EW: Yes, it has to be. It necessarily has to turn into instruments for others to use. The New Archaeology often strikes me as a good example of this. Evolutionism, and the notion of ecological systems and dirt archaeology are brought together there, I think, in quite innovative ways.

AG: In a review article on civilization in 1967, stressing the importance of metahistorical assumptions, you argued that “the choice lies not between natural history now and philosophy later, as Kroeber would have it, but in what kind of philosophy we dare put to our work in our investigations.” Have anthropologists become more willing to confront their metahistorical assumptions, or are we still trying to postpone the task?

EW: One reason, I think, is that the natural history approach is very productive, and we can always find another phenomenon to look at, another tribe, or a new set of arrangements, that you hadn’t seen before, and the way philosophy has developed itself as a discipline allows very little easy fitting of one kind of approach with the other, or one set of techniques with the other kind of assumptions. So we live with a lot of unspoken assumptions. For instance, when I think of books on Wittgenstein’s Vienna, which do attempt to pose the question, “Well, who is Wittgenstein in terms of his background,” we don’t have anything like that.

institutions and networks

AG: The dominant locus of production of anthropology has been the academy. Given your experience in a wide range of universities, what sorts of institutional settings have you found conducive or obstructive to your work?

EW: Well, I mean, my answer has to be very personal, because at different points in one’s life, one needs different kinds of things. I had a teaching job at Queens, but that was just teaching in the summer. My first job was teaching at Illinois, in a variety of courses. What was interesting about Illinois was both the teaching and the presence of all these assorted people around Steward, like Murphy, Ben Zimmerman, and others. So there was a lively anthropological discourse. I then went to Virginia, where I was the only anthropologist, in a very different setting. Urbana was very big and drew high school graduates from everywhere in the state. Virginia was much more aristocratic, Southern, more limited. I think that move was very good for me, partly because it got me out from under Steward’s⁵ aegis, to do my own thing, but also because, I think, there may not have been more than 12 people using the library; it was a very good place to sit down and work on my own materials. Teaching demands were fairly heavy, but I learned a lot from teaching different things. In addition to that, you really had a great deal of peace and quiet, and no involvement in academic administration. The whole thing was run by “heads,” and it’s my experience that democracy comes with an awful lot of committees. If you have a head, you’ll very often get a tyrant, by whose rules you then have to live, but it saves you a hell of a lot of time, whereas, wherever you have committees—which essentially don’t make any ultimate decisions either, but where you have to show up and involve yourself, in pushing some rock from one side of the room to the other—you really use up an awful lot of energy. Virginia was also the place where I met up with these people in psychology who were interested in systems theory. I then went to Yale, and again, I was fortunate in that I was an outsider there for a year. I think I was badly prepared for Chicago because of this. What I found difficult in

Chicago was that there was really a gerontocracy with the appearance of committees. The committee would meet and discuss endlessly how many stamps to put on a letter to somebody in Indiana, but real decisions were made by elders; it was like an Australian kinship system. Also, an overload of religious ritual and an obedience to the ancestor, which was a bit cloying. Because they define themselves as a research department, and not a teaching department, you had enormous numbers of graduate students who were living in the shadows, who had never been able to talk to one of these gerontocrats, or even one of the junior faculty. So the junior person coming in inherited all these lamenting masses and that is an enormous drain on one's time and energy. Michigan was quite different from this: first of all, it was much more participatory, but there was also an effort to reach conclusions. There were committees, but essentially the chairperson made decisions, and you were left to do your work. It didn't have this overload of either ritual or fake involvement. At C.U.N.Y., there are committees, but as long as Sydel⁶ has run the system it has been run with tight efficiency, decision making is always brief and to the point, and effective. Again, I think that saves time and energy. It creates problems of its own, because there are a lot of people who feel that they are not involved in the supposed process of making decisions.

AG: Besides the fulfillment of your duties in the formal institutions, you've invariably found your own informal network of connections. Will you say that the contrast in the process of learning was especially evident in the case of the department of anthropology at Columbia and the M.U.S.? [ed: Mundial Upheaval Society]

EW: Yes, I think that was enormously productive. We really learned an awful lot from each other.

AG: Could you tell us something about the M.U.S.?

EW: It started out as an effort to pass exams, a mutual education group where people who knew something would report to the others in order to condense and abbreviate the whole process of learning by trying to encompass everything, but the people who became bound together in this way had other commonalities. One of which is that we were veterans, and therefore slightly different and somewhat standoffish towards the rest of the student population. And we all had some kind of socialist sympathies, and I think we saw anthropology and that kind of socialist concern as having some connection with each other. The questions of class structure and state formation were there at the beginning, not just simply as a result of discovery. There were certain people, like Elman [Service], who were somewhat older and had more knowledge of anthropology, and also could talk about kinship in authoritative terms and really explain that field to us, whereas somebody else coming in learning Australian kinship might drown in the data.

AG: What have been the highlights of your experience at Michigan and at C.U.N.Y., the two arenas of your most intense intellectual engagements?

EW: They are somewhat different. Michigan afforded me, first of all, lots of opportunity for discussion among faculty, many of whom were my friends. I also belonged to another discussion group, organized by the psychoanalyst Frederick Wyatt, who brought together people from anthropology, history, literature, philosophy, and psychology in biweekly meetings. There was that combination of a rather lively department, and this discussion group gave me access to other kinds of things that were going on. And then, increasingly, from 1964–65, on, engagement in political issues, the civil rights business, the Vietnam War, and a sense that anthropology spoke to the issues. I carried that through to the Graduate Center. Being a public university, C.U.N.Y. does have that kind of quality of talking to the political issues. Again, people who talk to you. I don't have a discussion group at this point, partly because I've got too much to do. That, however, is one of the drawbacks of being in New York. I think that unless you are actually in New York City and have a group of people that you see easily, the city is too large, too

centrifugal, to allow that. Actually, from that point of view, I think that this continuous praise of New York as an intellectual citadel is a bit overrated. I think that there are lots of lectures and gala events that one could go to if you have the stamina, but the actual opportunity to get a group of interacting intellectuals together quietly is rather slim.

interlocutors

AG: An engagement with Marx has formed one of the continuities in your work. Two questions about this. First, was your encounter with Marx direct from the beginning or mediated by the interpretations of others?

EW: Well, I think I got to Marx indirectly, through other people's writings, first through John Strachey, later through Paul Sweezy's *Theory of Capitalist Development*. It wasn't really until the early- or mid-fifties that I began to read Marx firsthand, seriously. I still don't command that corpus the way I would like to. I'm now beginning to discover redundancies, that is, the same themes, the same phrases in the *German Ideology* and in later works, and if one were a real Marx scholar one would know that much better. I started out with a kind of guerrilla warfare, and I will not claim that I have a real engagement with Marx the way, say, Wittfogel does, where Marx is the third person in the Wittfogel household. Esther refers to Marx as "your friend" when talking to Karl. That was the first part of the question.

AG: The second part of the question has to do with different aspects of Marx. One of his earliest notions is the concept of commodity fetishism utilized in your work in the 1950s, in the piece on haciendas and plantations, jointly written with Sidney Mintz, and in the piece on Santa Claus.⁸

EW: Well, that still remains to me one of the most interesting things in Marx. It is one that I continuously chew over. I'm now working on ideology; I always thought that that remains one of the potentially pregnant problems that Marx tackled. I also like that notion that the explanatory model, as it were, deals with forces that lie under the surface. You can't take the observed data, unless the ultimate reality and what links them together is understood, and the two are put together. The particular discussion of commodity fetishism does that.

AG: Karl Wittfogel and Julian Steward may be seen as links between anthropology and Marx's notion of labor. In your piece on the Puerto Rico project,⁹ you differentiate between work and labor and accept Robert Murphy's argument that Steward was actually dealing with work. Was Wittfogel's notion of labor-process, at any point, important to you?

EW: I had read Wittfogel's *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Chinas* before I went to graduate school, the summer before I went to Columbia. I found it by accident in the University of Wisconsin library. I was enormously impressed by that whole book. It was a great educational experience, and I still like it better than *Oriental Despotism*, which went off wildly into constructs that are not all that persuasive. I also liked, out of that, Wittfogel's return to the physiocratic model; that is, he sees society as a system of circulation of energy, if you like, different elements traveling, connecting groups and classes, so it has that kind of system quality to it that I found impressive. What I liked about Steward is his engagement with processes of work. I think that Murphy is perfectly right in saying that that was his way of talking about production; that is, processes of work organization, how you collect piñon nuts and what the implications of this are for social groupings. So I think that the *Basin Plateau* book is still, to my mind, the high point of the Stewardian effort. I think that Julian had a very fertile mind but I don't know whether he stayed away from problems of class and class struggle and the state on purpose, or whether that was just not the way he thought about things. I don't have any sense that he consciously decided

that he wasn't going to be interested in class, but the effect of that was to send him off in sociological directions.

AG: What are your reactions to Lattimore as he figures in your writings, especially in connection with the frontier?

EW: What I liked about Lattimore's *Inner Asian Frontiers* was what I liked in Wittfogel, the large-scale view of the interrelationships and their dynamics. It still remains one of the great books to read. V. Gordon Childe was also important. We had to read ten famous books when I first came to Columbia, and his *What Happened in History* was one, and I thought that was also very productive. It was not as finely nuanced as Lattimore's *Inner Asian Frontiers*, but, I thought, similarly interesting in looking for dialectical relationships between the center of Mesopotamia and its hinterland, and trying to locate the archaeological record in relationship to it. I think another person who was very important for me was Angel Palerm, because he came out of a quite different milieu, but had also discovered V. Gordon Childe in Mexico, and the concept of urban revolution, and was involved in bringing about a major shift in Mexican archaeology, from just looking at sites to looking at the total cultural formations and changes.¹⁰

AG: An anthropologist of similar status but different orientation was Ruth Benedict. You worked on her project, and subsequently in your teaching of culture and personality there must have been a sort of engagement with her. What are your thoughts on Benedict?

EW: Like Sidney [Mintz], I have a sense of a very gracious person who had a sense of people's talents and capabilities. I did have a discussion with her early on at the end of my first year at Columbia. I said I was interested in how things changed, and she said she was interested in how they remained the same. She told me to read de Tocqueville about America; she was impressed at how much that image of America was the image of America of today. On the other hand, I wrote a paper on Bastian for her theory course, because I thought that there was something very peculiar about Lowie's depiction of Bastian. He was especially nasty about Bastian, and Bastian had been Boas's teacher, and I wondered what was involved there. So I read some Bastian, and found him really quite different from the way he was depicted by Lowie. I think Benedict appreciated the idea that somebody would go out and work on somebody's corpus. On the Europe project she pretty much let me do what I wanted. She occasionally made comments that made me think that she had an uncanny ability to find telltale diagnostic things. That was, perhaps, a kind of poet's capability. If you take *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, not as the Japanese national character, but the social organization of Samurai tradition, it had a lot going for it. I think if you marry Benedict and Gramsci, you could get a lot of mileage out of it.

AG: In *Anthropology* you saw a possible relation between Sapir's work and Marx's theory of alienation. Has that suggestion been taken up by anybody, or do you see work in linguistics that takes that direction?

EW: There is this whole new trend in linguistics. The Language and Power symposium at the last AAA meeting is one example of this. The French—especially Barthes, Kristeva, and Lacan—have spoken of a "politics of signifier." I think that this is an enormously important, and possibly productive, way of thinking about language, but also about power. But I don't know whether that connects up with Sapir.

AG: The more important point was about the direction of trends in linguistics. You've not only engaged linguistics, but in both *Sons of the Shaking Earth*, and *Anthropology*, you took account of Archaeology and Physical Anthropology. What is the distinctive mark of this engagement, and why is this engagement important to you as an anthropologist, and for others as anthropologists?

EW: Archaeology, because in the Stewardian sense they have a lively sense of material relationships of what they find and what they are involved with. They also produce very interesting

models of how social processes work, partly because they take a longitudinal view on things, and because they are forced to use ethnological information in their models, especially with the New Archaeology. I was always impressed by the sophistication of their models, at times crazy, but they were rather honest about what they were trying to do, so one can critique it and say this is where the argument is weak, and this is where it is strong. I suppose I also like the other aspect of their work, that they are out there in the rain, sleet, and snow recovering all this stuff. They have an engagement with landscape and settlement patterns, and what you see when you walk in the woods. Physical Anthropology, I suppose, because, after all humans are biological creatures. Culture would look very different if we didn't have sex and a way of passing on the information of the DNA, or if sex and aging did not exist or, if we weaned infants at 24 instead of 2. The biological design is a very important aspect of how to understand cultural processes. I greatly like, for example, Frank Livingstone's attempt to link the processes of the clearing of tropical forests in West Africa to the incidence of sunlight and the creation of pools of rainwater that foster malaria, and the bearing of this on selection.

AG: Stressing the holism of anthropology in a time of increasing specialization, you simultaneously argued that while the writer creates his work of art, "the anthropologist, to the contrary, describes and analyzes a phenomenon he has done nothing to create." Would you say that a current trend in anthropology is consciously questioning this distinction?

EW: Yes. To look upon anthropology as an invention of the inventor. Now, I have no watertight argument against people who want to take it up as an art form or a form of entertainment, but I think that it gets its greatest strength from trying to explain something, and explain something that is out there and happens to people. I'm much less interested in hearing about how people react to what is happening out there, or look for the locus of explanation in their own navel. I really think that that is a form of escape. There are plenty of reasons as to why one would want to escape from the world, and perhaps not take it so seriously. It's also a form of a kind of entertainment and playing that can be fun, but I don't think it is serious business.

AG: How would you characterize the impact of structuralism on anthropology?

EW: I think it had an enormous impact, especially as a result of the Lévi-Straussian effort, because it brought renewed attention into this whole realm of human endeavor that is connected with creating symbolic systems, and it is at the opposite end from Morgan's pronouncement that "I am not going to talk about religion because it is all the irrational outpouring of savages." That makes no sense. I think that it is paying off in that sense; not necessarily by the way Lévi-Strauss does it, by orchestrating all these themes across boundaries of ever renewed reformulations of the same story. But when you look at what we now know about Amazonian Indians, and how they understand the world and construct their world, that is being helped by both the method and the interest, and I was very pleased to see that at the last meetings, there was a symposium on trying to see how these symbolic systems change under the pressure of acculturation. Usually there is a tendency to look at these things in term of themselves, as pristine models, but they don't have to be looked at only in those terms. They can be seen as both internally and externally involved in a whole web of relationships, so that, I think, is a real plus. But structuralism does have a tendency to formalism. The people who were involved with the major structuralist effort now talk about practice or praxis all the time, and I am not exactly sure where that is actually going, or whether it is a kind of verbal way of eating your cake and having it too.

AG: Isn't it a way of talking in Marxist terms, but essentially reproducing a Durkheimian structure?

EW: Well, especially if you don't construct a structure which has contradictions in it. Then you get a kind of Durkheimian society or social totality, and the only question to ask about it is its

reproduction over time. Then it has got to be kicked from the outside, or from some other level of activity. And I suspect that, if I understand Marshall Sahlins' model of Hawaii, that is essentially the way he sees it—that there is this structure that reproduces itself unless it receives a kick from the outside, or is assaulted from the inside by accident. Otherwise, it would simply remain the same.

AG: In other words, the problem of change is still not addressed?

EW: No. Along with change, there is the whole problem of cohesion of social life. Because I suspect that social life is not as cohesive as we made it out to be, either in terms of functionalist models or structuralist models. And how cohesion is maintained or integration is integrated has always struck me as one of the key problems.

AG: You saw the initial work of Geertz on the religions of Java in very positive terms. What has been your reaction to Geertz's subsequent trajectory?

EW: I'm puzzled by it. I became puzzled from the moment that I read *Islam Observed*. Because it struck me as an unacknowledged return to Ruth Benedict: compare two figures that exemplify Islam as it is in Morocco and Java; and it remains on that level. That is, "look, the xyz's do it interestingly and differently from the abc's." And after that, he went more and more into a kind of microanalysis of particular situations, moving away from what I thought was an interesting larger sweep that he began with. I have no sense of where this goes. The Balinese cockfight, as an example of this, could have gone into a much larger and more fleshed out, more interesting, discussion. But, essentially, instead of moving towards the larger context, or gaining significance from the larger context, it becomes more and more a search for vignettes that don't even answer to the idea of thick description. I think the involution is partly in him. And it is too bad. Because I think the man has real talent, but he stays away from political economy on purpose, and posits this ideal of translation from one language or culture into another as the ultimate goal. While I think of that just as one step in a much more complicated grid.

AG: In a number of essays, in the 1950s and 1960s, you addressed the problem of symbols and the problem of cultural forms, and coined the term "master symbol" in your analysis of the Virgin of Guadalupe.¹¹ In a recent review of the concept of corporation, you have again called for an historically grounded analysis of symbols and cultural forms. But, in the intermediate period you did not devote much time to these concerns. Why?

EW: I think it is really a hard one. Because I don't quite know how to do it. This has been one of the things that has bothered me about how my present project on culture and ideology is going. I'm working on case histories, and I get the sense that I don't quite know how to do this. To say "here is a symbol and it has the following relational aspects" is a bit of a fraud, unless you can really show it developing over time, and the historical literature doesn't lend itself to that. Maurice Bloch's material on Madagascar is very rich. But it also affirms a hypothesis that needs to be proven, that is, that these family, household, or village levels of rituals get to be elevated to the level of the state in the way in which he argues, and I think that that may be so, but it is not easy to corroborate. Or, let's say, I have been looking at Aztec material on sacrifice. There is clearly a shift from an emphasis on sacrificing people in connection with agricultural calendric rituals to the immolation of prisoners of war. But the material isn't rich enough to allow us to see it step by step. You can make inferences from the historical data, but it is ultimately a bit of a construct. So that just when you need lots of finely grained information we don't really have the ethnographic detail.

AG: Next to symbolic anthropology, one of the most important developments in anthropology has been the rise of feminism. What are your reactions to this particular perspective?

EW: Well, on general grounds, it is a perspective that has to be welcomed, because it does open all kinds of research on what women do, and not just men. I don't take the position that

women have been absent from anthropology, or that Audrey Richards wrote a male type of anthropology. I think that doesn't make much sense to me. But it is certainly true that a lot of reporting is done about men by men and not about women. So, the kind of work that Steven Hugh-Jones and Christine Hugh-Jones did in the Amazon, where she talked about manioc processing and production, and how the women do this and ritualize it, as against the male process of ritualization is extremely valuable. There are also a few theoretical discussions, I think, that advance the whole field, more in terms of questions that are being asked than in terms of the answers. I find that, at the moment, the theory of the whole movement lags behind the research. We are getting endless studies of poor women here and there, and how they manage to raise their children against great economic, social, and political difficulties, and how heroic they are. And I suppose you can multiply studies like these endlessly. Women everywhere are doing this against great odds. But the whole question of imbalance between male and female, and how come, and what is entailed in the differential construction of gender, remains an open issue.

AG: Another development of the 1960s and 1970s is the rise of a consciously self-proclaimed marxist anthropology. Has it, the structural marxists' version in particular, borne much fruit or is it more structuralist than marxist?

EW: Well, it is more structuralist than marxist. And, actually, the quantity and quality of new things that have come out in this way is pretty limited. It is curious that, for instance, when Godelier finally goes to New Guinea and writes *La Production des Grands Hommes*, it is an interesting book, but is not very marxist. The relation between males and females is described in detail and analyzed, but not really explicated. The same is true of Ken Post's analysis of the rebellion in Jamaica in the 1830s from an Althusserian point of view. The book is interesting and important, yet he himself now says that he would like to rewrite it with more attention to culture. He has discovered that Afro-American songs and music and oral tradition have something to do with all this. I suspect that the total effect of structuralist marxism is a heightened awareness of class and hegemony and modes of production and relations of production. So that is no longer anathema in analysis. It can be built into whatever people do.

AG: Was reading Althusser important for the formulation of your own concept of mode of production?

EW: Yes. I thought that it added a demand for a certain kind of clarity. I mean, before Althusser you could fudge a lot of things. And I think that's what the French occasionally do, inject their enlightenment clarity into discourse. It has that kind of effect, at least on me. But I am not sure that, therefore, I necessarily buy Althusser's discussion of ideology, or the construction of the subject.

AG: You have had a sustained dialogue with marxist social historiography: Hobsbawm, Thompson, and others. What has been the importance of that tradition of scholarship for your work?

EW: Well, on the one hand, they have a clear interest in the social/economic/political role of subaltern classes and groups. I think what Hobsbawm and all the others have done, Rudé and Thompson, is to create a kind of legitimacy for looking at such groups, and how they affect history and are affected by it. Thompson uses the concept of culture much more than the others. I think Hobsbawm is, in a way, quite eclectic on that issue. Sometimes, he is willing to use the term, and sometimes not. I am never quite sure both Thompson and Williams mean the same thing when they are talking about culture as the Boasians do. It would be interesting to bring all these people together to see what they mean by culture. I find, ultimately, Williams especially, but Thompson also, talking much more about values and the artistic shaping of the world, rather than about the matter-of-fact detailing of practical activity that the Boasian an-

thropologists talked about. The notion that working classes have cultural features and characteristics is, I think, useful. But the way in which Thompson, especially, creates a class culture which seems to be a bounded totality in opposition to gentry culture, I find unreal. The interesting thing about the notion of hegemony is precisely that it comes with a class analysis, not just a class, but classes in relationships; and that all of these processes go on between and among different groups, and ebb and flow back and forth, with interruptions, and attempts at control, and resistance, but within a field of relationships. So there is ultimately something very parochial about that "Western marxist" notion of culture. I wish they would break out of it.

AG: Speaking of hegemony, have you found Gramsci's work useful?

EW: I am very intrigued by it. Not so much that I saw in it something entirely novel, but it strikes me as an interesting way to think about how streams of culture operate in relationship to class relationships and their complexity. What is missing there is, I think, the aspect of the symbol story that Turner was concerned with, that ideology not only represents class relations, and not only naturalizes social relationships, but it anchors itself in concepts and symbols of what he called the rectic pole, in blood and sex and other primordial constructs. And it is this peculiar tendency towards the primordial that really needs some explanation. Because it raises the question whether classless societies do not also have ideologies, because they certainly traffic in a lot of primordial symbolisms and especially gender, I mean all that business that goes on in Amazonia and New Guinea is laden with that kind of view of the world. Class society simply lays hold of these polarities and extrapolates them to class relations. That makes the whole explication of symbols very complicated.

AG: In 1964 you maintained that Freud's *Totem and Taboo* "might almost serve as an indicator of the pendulum swing in anthropological thinking." Has Freud had a place in your thought?

EW: I think that there is an aspect of Freud that fascinated me. I do think that there is a possibility of a psychoanalytic concept of human biology that we could do something with. Perhaps one could draw on Turner. I also think that Freud is perfectly integratable with Marx, if you don't see the family drama as the end-all and be-all of social relations, but as a conveyor belt of other forces. I guess I share Freud's sense of human limitations as against the American Freudians, who believe that humans can become anything that they want to, given the proper kind of therapy. I think there is a kind of sense that humans represent a peculiar "contraption" produced in the course of the evolutionary process, with capabilities and limitations that are mutually determinant. And that this organic creature has to cope with all kinds of problems, having to stand up on its hind legs, leading a long life instead of one that is sweet and short, having to channel impulses, and so on. So I think that there will be a renewal of interest in Freud. We now have an anthropology of emotions and cognition, and symbolic anthropology, and I think these things need to be put together.

master symbols¹²

AG: Is it correct to say that a typology, to you, is an abstraction created out of concrete investigation in order to comprehend the concrete phenomena more easily?

EW: Yes, I think actually that that's very close to the way Steward also used the term. I am not sure why it gets to be called type rather than model, but, type in the sense, I suppose, that it accounts for different kinds of arrangements, in the archaeological sense and the cultural historical sense. I think it is essentially an intellectual step taken to understand certain relationships, and then, having abstracted, coming back to see how it works in reality. I think that, ultimately, the strength of anthropology lies in this backward and forward relationship. On the

other hand, one could say that it is a weakness, because people who have totally abstract mathematical minds move quickly to an impersonal, nonreferential universe. Anthropology cannot make that leap that easily, and when it does, it is never very convincing

AG: Typology in your work has been directly linked to comparison. Doesn't the comparative orientation of anthropology demand construction of typologies?

EW: Yes, comparison is an essential part of it. You try to look at what you see here and what you see there, and what you see at one time and what you see at another, and that is difficult to do without in some sense reifying the relationship at point A and at point B, creating a kind of synchronic model of A and B, and then comparing. But it is necessary to do that. And that, in a peculiar way, that's where we remain functionalists, even though we do not buy functionalism as a total theory, because those sorts of relational models are close to what the functionalists tried to do in looking at one set of relations, say West Africa and then East Africa, and comparing them. Just that one cannot end up with these as eternal verities. It is a step in thinking, and not a result.

AG: From your third article onward the word "system" has a very distinct place in your work. Does this somehow relate to your experience in Virginia?

EW: Well, I hadn't thought about it in those terms, but it very well might. At Virginia I met Arthur Bachrach, who was in the psychology department. They were going to form a study group on cybernetics and systems theory, and I was invited to join them, and we would read things and then discuss them, and that was also, of course, the point when the concept of information entered the social sciences, and where you could think of relationships having an information component that would act as a governing or a steering mechanism. The whole thing gets a bit mechanical at this point, and also much too cohesive. But I still think of it as a very fruitful way to organize one's research; it's a research strategy that really pays off when you're looking for relationships. It may not be ultimately the explanatory mode that you want, but on the artisan level of how one orders data and thinks about them and looks for connections, that it is a very useful way of doing things.

AG: The conclusion of the piece "Haciendas and Plantations in Middle America," written with Sidney Mintz, speaks clearly to this issue. There you argued that "a system may be seen as a series of interdependent processes which may bear on each other in a number of ways . . . Each of these processes may be examined as a continuum in time, in differential involvement with other processes. A social system may therefore be viewed as a set of process *continua* examined synchronically. The type under which the system is subsumed, in turn, represents an even more generalized statement about comparable sets of variable processes."

EW: I can see now that that whole way of talking about systems is much too mechanistic. On the other hand, I suspect we're, on some levels, stuck with this because we do have to make synchronic comparisons, we can't approach every problem by knowing all the historical processes that lead to result A and B. So as a kind of first-hand approximation it is a useful tool.

AG: The state, from your first published essay to the latest book, has formed a continuous object of theorization. As this is not a general characteristic of the period, I was wondering as to how the concentration on this subject started and developed?

EW: I am not sure. I think that both Redfield and Gordon Childe talk about urbanism and civilization, but I had an early sense that the state was a different kind of phenomenon not synonymous with either, and that you could also have states that don't have urban centers, at least in terms of size and heterogeneity of population in the Redfieldian terms. And that classness is involved with stateness. That the development of classes implies a movement towards some kind of a center that could control this relationship. I can't really point to any one thing that is

seminal in my picking this up, but, maybe, marxist literature played a part. I suspect even a central European proclivity, but it is certainly different from the emphasis that existed in American anthropology, even in Steward. He saw the nation as a level of sociocultural integration and, not the state, as a machinery of government.

AG: You have paid systematic attention to cultural form, arguing for comprehension of persistence of form in the context of changing content. How did this orientation originate and why is it still occupying a prominent place in your work?

EW: I don't know where that comes from. I suspect that I had that very early. I have this memory of going to museums and copying what was in the showcases, both with a kind of sense that form is an opportunity and a constraint; that is, if you choose, or have to use a certain form, that has consequences in itself. And it is not totally neutral, or that you could simply do anything. I don't know whether this comes out of some kind of sense for material form; I also have a sense of forms of behavior, and that certain forms of etiquette structure behavior. The Central European code of politeness certainly allows you to make distinctions of hierarchy and station. And politeness is one of these phenomena that, presumably, an egalitarian society can do without. I think to some extent, what functionalism did was to move attention away from form, which had been very much in the forefront of diffusionist and historical reconstructionists, and an interest in form wasn't really recovered until Lévi-Strauss. I do think that we need to come back to consider forms.

dialectic of investigation and presentation¹³

AG: We have been discussing your engagements with people as interlocutors. But there is also the engagement with places, and the Caribbean, Europe, and Latin America immediately come to mind. How has this dialectic affected your thinking?

EW: Well, in some way, Latin America and the part of Europe that I come from are not that far apart. There are people who argue that there is one culture area, in fact, from Pakistan all the way across the Mediterranean to Latin America. There are similarities, and I think that there is a kind of Hapsburg ordering of social relations and supernatural relations in Central Europe that gets replicated in Spain and expressed in Latin America. In general, you know, I find myself much more at ease with people who have learned how to cope with these hierarchies and who, therefore, also leave you an autonomous field that is defined by status and by etiquette, in place of the immediate onslaught of direct relationships, and this is why I often feel easier with Latin Americans than I feel with North Americans.

AG: You have undertaken fieldwork in a number of places and under a variety of conditions. How have you found fieldwork as a process and what does it force you to do?

EW: Well, I don't find it easy. At the same time it is enormously rewarding, because you really find out lots of things you have never thought about. I found it hard in energy terms, and also in personal terms, I am not that easy with people. But there comes a point when you know more about the community than any member in it and, at that point, you really experience a change in the level of knowledge. And, if you do it well over time—John Cole and I used to joke in Tyrol about being able to predict what somebody was going to say, and sure enough, someone would come, open his mouth, and address us just in those terms. In a sense, that is very rewarding, because it tells you that you are on the right track.

AG: In your method of presentation you have continuously opted for experimentation with the format. I see a parallel in the way *Sons of the Shaking Earth* and *Anthropology* are written, the former as an attempt to make sense of a changing reality through the tools of anthropology as

a four-field discipline, and the latter as taking stock of the theoretical nature of the constructs and orientations of the field. The *Hidden Frontier*, on the other hand, is much more politically centered and structured differently. What sorts of considerations entered the writing of these books?

EW: Well, *The Hidden Frontier* has a background for me in the Mexican fieldwork, because the Mexican fieldwork was framed to get at the formation of Mexican nationality. That is why I picked that area of Mexico to go to, the heartland of the Mexican independence movement. The Baji'o¹⁴ article that came out of it is not very satisfactory in terms of present language. It uses the notion of acculturation. Had I known about hegemony at the time, I would have phrased it differently. But, essentially, in order to integrate the nation, the different parts have to acculturate to one another, adopting new models that allow this process to happen. So *The Hidden Frontier* story really speaks to the same concern, and it is an issue that was absent in the Puerto Rican book. And it is absent in part because Steward organized it that way; as you may know that the issue of whether Puerto Rico is a nation or not has exercised critics of the book. Puerto Rican nationalists feel that the book has shortcomings, and although they are wrong in the way they go about it, I think they are right, in that the book didn't engage what makes Puerto Rico Puerto Rico. There is a lot of talk about the Spanish heritage, but it didn't deal with identity of the Puerto Rican, and I suppose I am ultimately interested in how such identities are created; the process of creating nationals out of heterogeneous elements is an interesting anthropological problem.

AG: In your piece on American Anthropologists and American Society, you call for a systematic history of the world. Was that the point at which you had decided on writing *Europe and People Without History*?

EW: Well, I was working towards it. This thing took a long time, because it seemed like an overweening and arrogant thing to do. But I thought that something like this was what was needed. Eventually, everybody kept talking that now that we know about colonialism and imperialism and capitalism, we need a rewriting of anthropology. Nobody was doing it. I think that that was a kind of early unconscious program that I was setting myself. Actually, I think that early in the *Anthropology* I had already talked about the possibility of writing the cultural history of the world system. In some ways this dovetails with the *Human Condition*. That is, one could think of writing a world history which would incorporate many different perspectives, and convey a multiple set of images that would come out of this conversation.

AG: In the process of writing a lot of your books, especially *Europe and People Without History*, you have had to systematically encounter the work of historians. The question is, can anthropologists rely on the work of the historians, or do we need to go beyond them continuously, do they even ask the questions that are of interest to anthropologists?

EW: Well, they don't, and in some ways that is why this book took so long. I had thought in 1973–1974 that I would go to London and sit down and write this book, which I had already sketched out in general outline. And I thought that I would read what historians had written and summarize it, put it together and come out with some kind of a story. The thing is, they don't write history the way we would like them to, so that I found myself redoing, rethinking, reorganizing what they had done. I am not exactly sure what the difference is; I have puzzled about this. There are, of course, some historians, especially in Africa, who have already been trained by anthropologists, or have absorbed the anthropological concerns. Not all, but many, and they are much easier to deal with and read. But if historians have no sense of social structure, then you have to extrapolate and interpret what they mean.

AG: What type of work would you like this book to generate, in terms of fieldwork, analysis of historical material, and re-analysis of anthropological works which have been done before?

EW: Well, first, I think there is a lot of material that can be re-analyzed. I think there is a lot to be said for good traditional anthropology, because it allows itself to be re-analyzed. I mean, many of the early anthropological accounts are extremely honest in what data they furnish, so that is one thing, I think to create a more real history for the people that we study. The second is more difficult, because I think that if we no longer deal with closed societies or closed cultures, but with intermeshing networks of relationships, the question of how the boundaries between subunits are created, organized, and maintained, becomes both more interesting and much more challenging. And I suspect that that is where a lot more thinking needs to go on. That is, how the Ojibwa become Ojibwa and confront the English qua Ojibwa rather than innumerable little tribelets—that the creation of Ojibwa identity is similar to the creation of Bohemian identity—that is, the process is the same. I mean how all those subunits of people who really don't comprehend each other's dialect, that can't talk to each other, and belong to different lords in the 18th and 19th centuries, get to have a sense of national identity—to the point where there are actually philologists who manufacture a language, and some historians who fake historical documents in that language to demonstrate that that entity exists. And I think that that is an interesting and very difficult problem to understand. But I think that it requires both ethnohistory and fieldwork. The third thing is that once you think in those terms, certain kinds of anthropological endeavors are probably slated, not for disappearance, but for revision. The Human Area Files, I think, need to be modified greatly; I mean, there are already mathematical anthropologists who are working with networks rather than with these entities. There is also a need for allowing more variation. Even Murdock understood that there existed major and minor patterns of social organization, and that such variation might be related to variation in ecology or political economy. This could also be spelled out mathematically, if not in a simple kind of way. And I think similarly functional analysis needs more sense of rather complex and contradictory processes in which people integrate. Another area connected with this identity problem, but not the same, is the creation of symbolic structures and what is involved in it, and how it works, not just descriptively—not just that Sherpa do it this way and the !Kung Bushmen this way—but some effort at comprehending whys and wherefores. I think that is a major challenge. But perhaps an impossible one, I am not sure.

AG: What is your research agenda now?

EW: Well, I am trying to build up case histories that would exhibit some of these relationships and problems. I have already said something about the difficulty of using the available ethnographic record to do this, but it may be possible to see the production of symbols in relation to economic and political change in a somewhat different way. It is not just, I think, that symbols have a history and that they are used as instruments for some purposes. Symbol systems are constructed, by whom and for whom, by whom and against whom. I am trying to build up cases that will speak to these questions.

notes

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¹Dorthea and Alexander Leighton in their book *Gregorio the Hand-trembler* isolated the significant life events to focus on in talking about his personality. In an autobiographical lecture at Yale in 1984 Wolf drew on this method to delineate the significant events/crises of his own life, a procedure that I follow here.

²Gorz's *Le Traître* Paris, 1973. For May see Morton's "Tales of the Grand Teutons" *The New York Times Book Review* 4 January 1987:15–16.

³See "Encounter with Norbert Elias," in Peter R. Gleichmann *et al.*, eds., *Human Figurations*, 1977:28–35, Amsterdam.

⁴See "Introduction to the National Teach-In," in L. Menashe and R. Padosh, eds., *Teach-Ins*, Praeger, 1967:156–158; and Wolf and Jorgensen, "Anthropology on the Warpath in Thailand," *The New York Review of Books*, 19 November 1970:26–35 for a contemporary view.

⁵For the relation to Steward and the impact on the study of peasantry see Sydel Silverman, "The Peasant Concept in Anthropology," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 7(1):49–69, 1979.

⁶The reference is to Sydel Silverman, currently Director of the Wenner-Gren Foundation and before that executive officer of the anthropology program at C.U.N.Y. She is married to Wolf.

⁷Wolf's institutional experience is as follows: Illinois (1953–55); Virginia (1955–58); Yale (1958–59); Chicago (1959–61); University of Michigan (1961–71); Herbert Lehman College and C.U.N.Y. (1971–present).

⁸See "Haciendas and Plantations in Middle America and the Antilles." *Social and Economic Studies*, 6:380–412, 1957; and "Santa Claus: Notes on a Collective Representation." In *Process and Pattern in Culture*, 64:147–155, Robert A. Manners, ed., Aldine.

⁹See "Remarks on *The People of Puerto Rico*," *Revista Interamericana/Interamerican Review*, 8(1):17–25, 1978.

¹⁰For an appreciation of Palerm see: "Obituary: Angel Palerm Vich." *American Anthropologist*, 83(3):612–615, 1981.

¹¹Of a number of essays see "The Virgin of Guadalupe." *Journal of American Folklore*, 71:34–39, 1958.

¹²As Wolf has recently written "The Vicissitudes of the Closed Corporate Peasant Community." *American Ethnologist*, 13(2):325–329, 1986, no questions about peasants were asked. A question about history and, in the earlier sections, questions about British and French anthropology, Durkheim, Fortes, Gluckman, Kroeber, Leach, Redfield, Weber, and White have been omitted.

¹³Books written by Wolf were published in the following order: *Sons of The Shaking Earth*, Chicago, 1959; *Anthropology* Prentice-Hall, 1964; *Peasants* Prentice-Hall, 1966; *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* Harper & Row, 1969; with Edward Hansen, *The Human Condition in Latin America* Oxford, 1972; with Angel Palerm, *Agricultura y Civilizacion en Mesoamerica Mexico*, 1972; with John Cole, *The Hidden Frontier*, Academic, 1974; *Europe and the People without History*, California, 1982. In 1976 he edited *The Valley of Mexico*, published by University of New Mexico Press; and in 1984 he edited *Religion, Power and Protest in Local Communities*, published by Mouton.

¹⁴The reference is to "The Mexican Bajio in the Eighteenth Century." *Middle American Research Institute Publication* 17, Tulane University, 1955:177–200.

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