AHR Reappraisal

Crooked Lines of Relevance

Europe and the People without History, by Eric R. Wolf

PEKKA HÄMÄLÄINEN

Eric R. Wolf's *Europe and the People without History* is typical within a very small corpus of books that have irrevocably changed how we see and make sense of the world.[1] Published in 1982 but in preparation for more than a decade, the book diagnosed a scholarly rut, put forward a new paradigm, and then showed in detail how the new history Wolf advocated might look in practice. Like Karl Marx, Fernand Braudel, Edward Said, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Joan Scott, Wolf asked scholars to think more critically and harder about what they argued and why, and to question their underlying assumptions about historical change, human societies, and the human condition. Wolf was not alone in his frustration with the state of affairs, but it was his critique that captured the scholarly zeitgeist. This was largely due to his evocative formulation "people without history," which captured how scholars—historians, anthropologists, and sociologists—packaged societies and entire civilizations and continents into neat boxes for analytical purposes, portraying them as self-contained orphan entities without connections to each other and the larger worlds around them. Wolf's "people without history" were first and foremost the indigenous, non-European peoples who were seen as hopelessly isolated and static before European colonialism and imperialism integrated them into the world, but in a roundabout way, the formulation also applied to Europeans themselves: their histories, too, were stunted and flattened by the failure to see "the world as a whole, a totality, a system" (385).[2]

If Wolf's diagnosis was piercing, so too was his prescription. First, he insisted that

The author wishes to thank Samuel Truett for commenting on an earlier draft of this article.

[1] Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, Calif., 1982).

[2] For positive reviews of *Europe and the People without History* upon or soon after its publication, see, among many others, Eric Hobsbawm, "The Movement of Capitalism," *Times Literary Supplement*, October 28, 1983, 1182; Philip D. Curtin, review in *American Historical Review* 89, no. 1 (February 1984): 89–90; Daniel Chirot, review in *Journal of Social History* 18, no. 1 (1984): 119–124; Michael S. Kimmel, review in *American Journal of Sociology* 89, no. 5 (1984): 1219–1221; John W. Cole, review in *Theory and Society* 14, no. 1 (1985): 111–115; William Roseberry, review in *Dialectical Anthropology* 10, no. 1–2 (1985): 141–153; Jonathan Friedman, review in *European Sociological Review* 3, no. 1 (1987): 83–85; Talal

societies needed to be studied not as closed systems—nations, societies, cultures—but as dynamic interconnected historical phenomena, "bundles of relationships" (3). From this, a number of salutary outcomes would flow: the notion of Europe's inevitable global ascendancy would be laced with contingency, a sense that things did not need to end up the way they did; a multitude of essentializing categories (such as the West, the East, and the Third World) would be replaced by a holistic view of the world in which societies constantly redefine and remake themselves in interaction with others; and Europe, and more broadly the West, would be cut down to size as the progenitor of the modern, globalized world. Second, Wolf maintained that the study of social relations needed to be reconnected with the study of political economy. He denounced what he saw as a deeply damaging division of academic labor that occurred with the emergence of sociology as a discipline. When sociologists appropriated the study of social relations, Wolf lamented, they severed the social from the political, the economic, and the intellectual, creating a fractured academic landscape where disciplines existed in silos, rigid and self-sufficient. Wolf was mainly concerned with the implications of this fragmentation for anthropology, his area of expertise, but historians took notice as well. Indeed, *Europe and the People without History* is in its essence an attempt to reconceptualize five centuries of world history since the dawn of the fifteenth, a century Wolf portrayed as one of accelerating and thickening global connections. The book is a panoramic survey of global comparative anthropology—according to one scholar, "unsurpassed" as such—but its impact in the field of history is arguably as profound as it has been in anthropology.[3]

If some of Wolf's approaches and arguments seem self-evident, even commonplace, to today's historians, it is because his agenda has been so widely embraced; it has become the standard we take for granted. Historians of all stripes now emphasize connectivity, entanglements, fuzzy boundaries, transcending processes, and competing narratives over macro-scale inevitabilities, master tropes, centrist paradigms, or what Wolf called "the charmed circle of the single nation-state" (9). Three and a half decades after its initial publication, Wolf's magnum opus appears triumphant, its lessons absorbed into historians' collective intellectual DNA.

Consider the currently thriving field of global history, for instance. In 1982, at a time when "Western Civilization" was the closest thing to a world history course at most U.S. colleges, *Europe and the People without History* joined William H. McNeill's "A Defence of World History" to chart wider historiographical horizons. Where McNeill emphasized the centrality of "encounters with strangers" as an engine of innovation and macro-scale change, Wolf depicted the post-1400 world as an inherently interconnected entity of multiple centers woven together by mobility, long-distance trade, and ecological exchanges, thus challenging the prevailing Eurocentric

Asad, "Are There Histories of Peoples without Europe? A Review Article," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29, no. 3 (1987): 594–607. In 1995, a group of scholars, mostly anthropologists, put together a volume charting the influence of Wolf's scholarship. The essays are, as is the nature of festschrifts, generally positive and praising. See Jane Schneider and Rayna Rapp, eds., *Articulating Hidden Histories: Exploring the Influence of Eric R. Wolf* (Berkeley, Calif., 1995). The three contributing historians focused on Wolf's work on peasants.

[3] Thomas Hylland Eriksen, "Foreword to the 2010 Edition," in Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*, new ed. (Berkeley, Calif., 2010), ix–xviii, quote from ix. See also Ronald Hutton's review of the 2010 edition in *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 18, no. 5 (2013): 660–661.

interpretations that revolved around the so-called "European miracle" or veered toward crude materialism. In a key passage, he formulated a conspicuously modern vision for global history. When exploration, commerce, and colonization stitched continents together in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, he wrote, "events in one part of the globe would have repercussions in other parts. The several continents would be drawn into one worldwide system of connections" (129). Indeed, Wolf's central argument, that densely knit human networks—local, regional, continental, hemispheric, and transoceanic—formed the hardwiring of a globalizing world, anticipated one of the key modes of modern global history, the connective approach, which seeks to illuminate how empires, nations, mercantile companies, migrants, slaves, and other actors have facilitated the movement of people, power, goods, technologies, ideas, animals, and pathogens across cultures, societies, and nations, spawning developments that transcend social, political, and geographical boundaries. He was writing global history at a time when historians had not yet truly realized that there could and should be such a field.[4]

Wolf's forceful rejection of determinism, whether environmental or cultural, coupled with his staunch inclusiveness, produced a book that prefigured how global history would be taught and thought decades later. Even if its impact is not always acknowledged, *Europe and the People without History* prepared the ground for wide-lens works that step outside Eurocentric currents to examine the world through interlocking networks and flows of peoples, ideas, and things. Moreover, the book approached global history through a particular lens: according to one scholar, it was "the first global history from below." While de-centering Europe, Wolf the anthropologist also stressed the capacity of indigenous societies and various non-state actors to forge transcending networks of power, belonging, loyalty, and cooperation through kinship bonds, a notion that would well serve today's global historians, who too often tend to focus on empire, state, and capitalism-driven macro-scale developments at the expense of the more intimate face-to-face ways of connecting peoples and worlds. As global historians press on with their struggle to shed the sticky centrifugal residue from their formulations, *Europe and the People without History*, with its ethnographic richness and inclusiveness, may well find surprising new relevance.[5]

[4] William H. McNeill, "A Defence of World History: The Prothero Lecture," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 32 (1982): 75–89. On the "European miracle," see E. L. Jones, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies, and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia* (Cambridge, 1981). For assessments of Wolf's pioneering influence on global history and global studies, see, for example, Eve Darian-Smith and Philip C. McCarty, *The Global Turn: Theories, Research Designs, and Methods for Global Studies* (Oakland, Calif., 2017), 10. For a connective approach to global history, see James Belich, John Darwin, and Chris Wickham, "Introduction: The Prospect of Global History," in James Belich, John Darwin, Margret Frenz, and Chris Wickham, eds., *The Prospect of Global History* (Oxford, 2016), 3–22, here 14–21; Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton, N.J., 2016).

[5] David Ludden, "Introduction: A Brief History of Subalternity," in Ludden, ed., *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia* (London, 2002), 1–39, quote from 5. For examples of wide-lens works, see Robert B. Potter, *The Urban Caribbean in an Era of Global Change* (New York, 2000); A. G. Hopkins, ed., *Globalization in World History* (London, 2002); J. R. McNeill and William H. McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird's-eye View of World History* (New York, 2003); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World* (New York, 2003); C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford, 2004); John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405* (New York, 2008); Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J., 2010); Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, 2010); Charles H. Parker, *Global Interactions in the Early Modern Age,*

Saying this is not to be taken as some vague acknowledgment of how unpredictably books can go in and out of style: the new relevance of *Europe and the People without History* may be closer at hand than one might think. Global history exploded onto the scene in the early 2000s—the establishment of the *Journal of Global History* in 2006 seemed to announce at once the arrival and maturation of a new field—but now, less than twenty years later, the momentum may be dissipating. A 2013 survey of nearly sixty history departments in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada revealed that the discipline remains conspicuously national and Western-centered. In the U.S., according to that report, 68 percent of published research focused on North America and Europe, as compared to 75 and 84 percent of the output in Canada and the UK, respectively. In U.S. departments, 9 percent of historians specialized in East Asia; in the UK, the corresponding figure was 1.9 percent. Jeremy Adelman sees here not only a "backlash against post-national, cosmopolitan storytelling," but also historians' collective failure to produce truly global stories: the Anglo-centric tendency to see the rest of the world through a prism calibrated around Western preoccupations and sensibilities, he thinks, is deep-seated.[6]

If Adelman's remedies—embracing both the insiders and the outsiders, the winners and the losers in the globalization process, and accepting that global integration spawns as much (if not more) isolation, resentment, and resistance as it spawns belonging, empathy, and connectedness—are correct, then *Europe and the People without History* suddenly appears strikingly timely and relevant. Wolf insisted that capitalism—and, by extension, global history—should be seen not as a system "encompassing the whole world in a homogeneous field of effects" (303), but as a varied, dynamic, and fundamentally unpredictable field of forces that privileges and marginalizes people and entire societies in a relentless, erratic cycle. Underneath the theoretical crust, one finds a surprisingly modern take on global history that speaks directly to Adelman's concerns about the field's selective bend. Wolf's global web is a constantly transmuting "rough-and-tumble" (387) of integration and disintegration. It is filled with openings and bridges—and pitfalls and barriers. *Europe and the People without History* is preoccupied with major global themes—the post-1400 explosion of colonialism, the rise of capitalism, the emergence of global empires—but it is also alive to the local and regional alternatives to those seemingly monolithic, transcending stories.

Along with Wolf's insistence on seeing societies and cultures as unbounded entities, a defining trait of *Europe and the People without History* is its scale-straddling approach to the study of the past. Wolf's world history is a kaleidoscope that shifts constantly from the intimate and the local to the regional and the macro-scale and

---

1400–1800 (New York, 2010); Catherine M. Tucker, *Coffee Culture: Local Experiences, Global Connections* (New York, 2011); Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Princeton, N.J., 2014); Monica Heller and Bonnie McElhinny, *Language, Capitalism, Colonialism: Toward a Critical History* (Toronto, 2017). Not all of these authors cite *Europe and the People without History*.

[6] Luke Clossey and Nicholas Guyatt, "It's a Small World after All: The Wider World in Historians' Peripheral Vision," *Perspectives on History*, May 2013, https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2013/its-a-small-world-after-all; Jeremy Adelman, "What Is Global History Now?," *Aeon*, March 2, 2017, https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment.

back again, allowing us to see how even the largest global processes of colonialism, imperialism, and state-building were embedded in local settings where they were intensely contested and laden with new meanings. Here *Europe and the People without History* emerges as a precursor of approaches and methodologies that seek to understand historical processes through various analytical lenses and from multiple vantage points: it both anticipated and paved the way for what we now know as connected histories, entangled histories, *histoire croisée*, borderlands history, and transnational history. With slightly different concerns and emphases, each of these approaches challenges empire- and nation-driven narratives by questioning what is normative, by gravitating toward the fault lines of large power systems, and by focusing on the ambiguities of power and the unpredictability of historical change. When Wolf criticized "the social scientist's model of distinct and separate systems" (71) and urged scholars to focus their attention on the linkages and overlaps among empires, nations, economic systems, and cultural spheres, he was already sketching the current academic mindset, which sees empires, nations, and societies less as containers of historical processes than as sieves through which those processes flow, with unpredictable outcomes. Ann McGrath's evocative notion of the nature of scales, people, and things—"the micro and macro are not only companions, but can also be one and the same creature"—captures much of how Wolf wanted us to see the world and the people in it.[7]

The citation chains for *Europe and the People without History* have thinned out over time, reflecting how Wolf's arguments became omnipresent, a self-evident part of the scholarship that seeks to step outside empire- and nation-centered frameworks. This does not mean, however, that the intellectual chain has been broken. When Wolf urged scholars not to treat named entities—say, Iroquoia, Greece, Persia, or the United States—as fixed and separate entities, he was laying the necessary groundwork for a 2007 *AHR* Roundtable in which historians reimagined the histories of Spanish and British America as an entangled whole, a single hemispheric system of community, and examined the entirety of Spanish America as a contested borderland where indigenous people pitted competing empires against one another to preserve their own power and sovereignty. Similarly, when Wolf wrote that the United States was never "a thing propelled toward its unfolding goal by some immanent driving spring, but rather a temporally and spatially changing and changeable set of relationships" (6), he foreshadowed how scholars have now reconceptualized early American history, embedding it into broader continental, hemispheric, Atlantic, Pacific, and global contexts; highlighting conflicting allegiances that transcended national boundaries; and questioning the clear-cut labels "Americans," "Canadians," "Spanish," "Mexicans," "Natives," and "citizens." This is exactly how Wolf saw the

[7] Wolf privileged histories of trade, migration, and commodity and labor flows in his analysis. The new histories mentioned here have broadened the lens to include cross-cultural interactions, intellectual exchanges, knowledge formation, hybridity, and subjectivity. On analytical lenses and scales in historical writing, see Jacques Revel, "Micro-analyse et construction du social," in Revel, ed., *Jeux d'échelles: La micro-analyse à l'expérience* (Paris, 1996), 15–36; Sebouh David Aslanian, Joyce E. Chaplin, Ann McGrath, and Kristin Mann, "How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History," *AHR* Conversation, *American Historical Review* 118, no. 5 (December 2013): 1431–1472, quote from 1436; C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, "On Transnational History," *AHR* Conversation, *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (December 2006): 1441–1464.

world, people, and history: as inexorably connected, inherently malleable, and unpredictably messy.[8]

[8] Wolf argued for the malleability of social groups and identities in several other works as well. See, for example, Wolf, *Peasants* (Englewood-Cliffs, N.J., 1966), especially 80. On connected and entangled histories, see Michael David Fox, Peter Holquist, and Alexander M. Martin, eds., *Fascination and Enmity: Russia and Germany as Entangled Histories, 1914–1945* (Pittsburgh, 2012); James Epstein, "Politics of Colonial Sensation: The Trial of Thomas Picton and the Cause of Louisa Calderon," *American Historical Review* 112, no. 3 (June 2007): 712–741; Rafe Blaufarb, "The Western Question: The Geopolitics of Latin American Independence," ibid., 742–763; Eliga H. Gould, "Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds: The English-Speaking Atlantic as a Spanish Periphery," ibid., 764–786; Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, "Entangled Histories: Borderland Historiographies in New Clothes?," ibid., 787–799. On borderlands histories, see, among many others, David J. Weber, "Turner, the Boltonians, and the Borderlands," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 1 (February 1986): 66–81; Daniel H. Usner Jr., *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1992); Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel, "Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands," *Journal of World History* 8, no. 2 (1997): 211–242; Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples In Between in North American History," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (June 1999): 814–841; Samuel Truett and Elliott Young, "Making Transnational History: Nations, Regions, and Borderlands," in Truett and Young, eds., *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History* (Durham, N.C., 2004), 1–32; C. Patterson Giersch, *Asian Borderlands: The Transformation of Qing China's Yunnan Frontier* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006); Daniel Power and Naomi Standen, eds., *Frontiers in Question: Eurasian Borderlands, 700–1700* (London, 1999); Benjamin H. Johnson and Andrew R. Graybill, "Introduction: Borders and Their Historians in North America," in Johnson and Graybill, eds., *Bridging National Borders in North America: Transnational and Comparative Histories* (Durham, N.C., 2010), 1–29; Leonard J. Sadosky, *Revolutionary Negotiations: Indians, Empires, and Diplomats in the Founding of America* (Charlottesville, Va., 2010); I. William Zartman, ed., *Understanding Life in the Borderlands: Boundaries in Depth and in Motion* (Athens, Ga., 2010); Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, "On Borderlands," *Journal of American History* 98, no. 2 (2011): 338–361; Tiya Miles, "Of Waterways and Runaways: Reflections on the Great Lakes in Underground Railroad History," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 50, no. 3 (2011): 434–440; Leslie G. Cecil, ed., *New Frontiers in Latin American Borderlands* (Cambridge, 2012); Nathaniel Millett, "Borderlands in the Atlantic World," *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2013): 268–295. For *histoire croisée*, see Michel Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, "Penser l'histoire croisée: Entre empirie et réflexivité," *Annales: Histoire, Sciences, Sociales* 58, no. 1 (2003): 7–36; Joel F. Harrington, "Historians without Borders? *L'histoire croisée* and Early Modern Social History," in Christopher Ocker, Michael Printy, Peter Starenko, and Peter Wallace, eds., *Politics and Reformations: Histories and Reformations—Essays in Honor of Thomas A. Brady, Jr*. (Leiden, 2007), 79–90. On new histories of early America, see, among many others, Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence, Kans., 1998); James F. Brooks, *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002); Colin G. Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West before Lewis and Clark* (Lincoln, Nebr., 2003); Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006); Samuel Truett, *Fugitive Landscapes: The Forgotten History of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New Haven, Conn., 2006); Juliana Barr, *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman: Indians and Spaniards in the Texas Borderlands* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2007); Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War* (New Haven, Conn., 2008); François Furstenberg, "The Significance of the Trans-Appalachian Frontier in Atlantic History," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 3 (June 2008): 647–677; Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven, Conn., 2008); Christina Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010); Brett Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slaveries in New France* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2012); Anne F. Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families: A History of the North American West, 1800–1860* (Lincoln, Nebr., 2011); Michael Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America* (Philadelphia, 2012); David Igler, *The Great Ocean: Pacific Worlds from Captain Cook to the Gold Rush* (New York, 2013); Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Encounters at the Heart of the World: A History of the Mandan People* (New York, 2014); Natale A. Zappia, *Traders and Raiders: The Indigenous World of the Colorado Basin, 1540–1859* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2014); Michael A. McDonnell, *Masters of Empire: Great Lakes Indians and the Making of America* (New York, 2015); Andrew Lipman, *The Saltwater Frontier: Indians and the Contest for the American Coast* (New Haven, Conn., 2015); Robert Michael Morrissey, *Empire by Collaboration: Indians, Colonists, and Governments in Colonial Illinois Country* (Philadelphia, 2015); Joshua L. Reid, *The Sea Is My Country: The Maritime World of the Makahs* (New Haven, Conn., 2015); Andrés Reséndez, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America* (New York, 2016); Steven Hahn, *A Nation without Borders: The*

More explicit intellectual lineages surface when we turn to Wolf's contribution to the history of capitalism—or what has now come to be seen as a capitalism-slavery nexus. The book traces the transition from what Wolf called a tributary mode of production to a capitalist one in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the concurrent creation of the world community as a capitalist order. If Wolf's grand scheme seems mechanistic and outdated today—his sequencing of world history into kin-ordered, tributary, and capitalist modes of production is too perfunctory and neat for current relativist sensibilities—his discussion of the intersections among colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, slavery, and racism is anything but. He embedded the slavery-driven plantation economy of British North America and the American South firmly within the histories of empire and global capitalism, capturing the central conceptual thrust of the new, widely acclaimed histories of capitalism. Like Edward E. Baptist, he recognized the inbuilt coercive violence of early capitalism when he showed how Africans and Native Americans "were made to labor in servitude to support a new class of overlords" (380), and like Sven Beckert and Walter Johnson, he saw a direct link between capitalist expansion, indigenous dispossession, and the rise of imperial states capable of opening markets, enforcing asymmetrical trade relations, and sponsoring webs of exploitation on a global scale. Like Johnson, Wolf mobilized a Marxist political-economic framework when he sought "to lay bare the laws or regularities surrounding the production of wealth" (19), and like Johnson, he found in capitalism's core a brutal, technology-driven urge to commodify both nature and people for the benefit of a cosmopolitan master class—although he couched his analysis in more formal and detached language. And like Seth Rockman, who in 2009 published one of the major works on the labor-slavery-capitalism nexus, Wolf emphasized the tendency of the capitalist mode of production to homogenize diverse pools of labor into a "disposable mass" (379), thereby blurring the distinctions between laborers and the enslaved, between free and coerced labor. Along with the works of Eric Williams, Edmund Morgan, and many others, *Europe and the People without History* is part of a sprawling intellectual root system of modern capitalism scholarship, a system that extends deeper than is often realized or acknowledged.[9]

United States and Its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830–1910 (New York, 2016); Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions* (New York, 2016); Coll Thrush, *Native Seattle: Histories from the Crossing-Over Place*, 2nd ed. (Seattle, Wash., 2017).

[9] Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1944); Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975); Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, 2014); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (London, 2014); Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013); Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore, 2009). For other important recent works on capitalism, see Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, 2003); Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, N.C., 2005); Dale W. Tomich, *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Lanham, Md., 2004); Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007); Gene Dattel, *Cotton and Race in the Making of America: The Human Costs of Economic Power* (Chicago, 2009); Charles Post, *The American Road to Capitalism: Studies in Class-Structure, Economic Development and Political Conflict, 1620–1877* (Boston, 2011); Joyce Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution: A History of Capitalism* (New York, 2010); Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York, 2011); John Tutino, *Making a New World: Founding Capitalism in the Bajío and Spanish North America* (Durham, N.C., 2011); Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capi-*

As wide-ranging as its strands of influence are, the book's most pointed legacy may be within indigenous history. *Europe and the People without History* appeared just as the "new Indian history" was cohering into a methodology in North America, sweeping aside ingrained Eurocentric biases and challenging tired tales of native peoples as helpless victims of colonial expansion and inward-looking innocents trapped on the wrong side of modernity and history itself. Wolf's evocative title was a call for anthropologists and historians to historicize indigenous societies, to see them as inherently historical entities: complex, dynamic, and poised to wield power far beyond their borders. Wolf urged scholars to restore groups that standard anthropological and historical texts had relegated to the margins of history, thus adding a powerful voice to the nascent scholarly quest to integrate indigenous peoples into larger narratives—and then reconfigure those narratives.[10]

That has now happened, and Wolf contributed to the shift in several important ways. His scathing critique of the "West and the rest" model of history, his denouncement of the anthropological notion of pristine native cultures trapped in a historical vacuum, and his quest to restore non-European peoples as shapers of the modern world amounted to a rallying call to imagine native peoples and their place in history anew. But Wolf also offered concrete methodological tools for how to go about it. As an anthropologist, he was accustomed to looking at things from the perspective of seemingly marginal actors. Large portions of *Europe and the People without History* examine vast continental and global processes from the perspective of indigenous African, Asian, and American confederations, kingdoms, and nations. Such a spatial orientation, viewing events and processes from indigenous domains outward rather than from imperial and national realms inward, allowed scholars to see indigenous

---

talism and Risk in America (Cambridge, Mass., 2012); Michael Zakim and Gary J. Kornblith, eds., *Capitalism Takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago, 2012); Matthew Salafia, *Slavery's Borderland: Freedom and Bondage along the Ohio River* (Philadelphia, 2013); Andrew J. Torget, *Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800–1850* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2015); Richard White, *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865–1896* (New York, 2017). On the evolution and intellectual root system of capitalism historiography, see Seth Rockman, "Slavery and Capitalism," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 2, no. 1 (2012): 5; James W. Cook, "The Kids Are All Right: On the 'Turning' of Cultural History," *American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (June 2012): 746–771; Scott Reynolds Nelson, "Who Put Their Capitalism in My Slavery?," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 5, no. 2 (2015): 289–310; Louis Hyman, "Why Write the History of Capitalism?," *Symposium Magazine*, July 8, 2013, http://www.symposium-magazine.com/why-write-the-history-of-capitalism-louis-hyman/; Sven Beckert, Angus Burgin, Peter James Hudson, Louis Hyman, Naomi Lamoreaux, Scott Marler, Stephen Mihm, Julia Ott, Philip Scranton, and Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, "Interchange: The History of Capitalism," *Journal of American History* 101, no. 2 (2014): 503–536; Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, "Introduction: Slavery's Capitalism," in Beckert and Rockman, eds., *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia, 2016), 1–27, here 8–9. For an assessment of Wolf's impact on the study of capitalism, see Josiah McC. Heyman, "Eric Wolf's Ethical-Political Humanism, and Beyond," *Critique of Anthropology* 25, no. 1 (2005): 13–25.

[10] For analytical overviews of "new Indian history," see Daniel K. Richter, "Whose Indian History?," *William and Mary Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (1993): 379–393; William T. Hagan, "The New Indian History," in Donald L. Fixico, ed., *Rethinking American Indian History* (Albuquerque, N.Mex., 1997), 29–42; Ned Blackhawk, "Look How Far We've Come: How American Indian History Changed the Study of American History in the 1990s," *OAH Magazine of History* 19, no. 6 (2005): 13–17; Nicholas G. Rosenthal, "Beyond the New Indian History: Recent Trends in the Historiography on the Native Peoples of North America," *History Compass* 4, no. 5 (2006): 962–974; Frederick E. Hoxie, "Introduction," in Hoxie, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of American Indian History* (New York, 2016), 1–14, here 3–6.

peoples as independent actors and revealed previously obscured political strategies, diplomatic-commercial networks, and power structures.[11]

The upshot has been particularly marked in the historiography of pre-1900 North America. Where scholars previously saw a geopolitically flat and amorphous indigenous landscape of hundreds of locally bounded tribes, they now see a patchwork of different social worlds—middle grounds, native grounds, frontier exchange economies, interior worlds, and indigenous empires. Although indigenous-driven, these were composite worlds of Indians and Europeans that were deeply enmeshed in continental and hemispheric flows of goods, ideas, people, and power; they were nexuses of relations and attachments—political, economic, cultural, and historical—or what Wolf called "relationships among sets of relationships" (6). As scholarly paradigms, they realize Wolf's aspiration for histories that can "abrogate the boundaries between Western and non-Western history" (x), showing how "'their' history and 'our' history emerge as part of the same history" (19).[12]

The paths of intellectual influence have not always been straightforward, of course. In writing about the fur trade in the North American interior, Richard White embraced Wolf's view of Indians as independent political actors, but rejected his interpretation of the fur trade as too simplistic because it neglected the shared world of natives and newcomers that persisted for generations, while Kathleen DuVal positioned her argument of a cosmopolitan native ground in the heart of the continent against Wolf's model of deepening indigenous dependency on European markets and indigenous retreat in the face of European colonialism. Yet Wolf's masterwork seems to have helped both these scholars sharpen their own ideas by pushing them to think hard about the nuances hidden beneath his sweeping formulations. Like all great and complex and enduring books, *Europe and the People without History* has shaped things as much through its misses as through its triumphs.[13]

Wolf's most elemental concerns in the book are the containers into which scholars pour the histories they uncover and the comprehensiveness of those histories. At present, empires, nations, and states have been the subject of numerous broadly con-

[11] For a sample of books that bear Wolf's influence, large and small, see Marianne Schmink and Charles H. Wood, *Contested Frontiers in Amazonia* (New York, 1992); Sally Engle Merry, *Colonizing Hawai'i: The Cultural Power of Law* (Princeton, N.J., 2000); Seth Garfield, *Indigenous Struggle at the Heart of Brazil: State Policy, Frontier Expansion, and the Xavante Indians, 1937–1988* (Durham, N.C., 2001); Jean Besson, *Martha Brae's Two Histories: European Expansion and Caribbean Culture-Building in Jamaica* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002); Peter Gow, *An Amazonian Myth and Its History* (New York, 2002); Peter Mitchell, *African Connections: Archaeological Perspectives on Africa and the Wider World* (Lanham, Md., 2005); Cynthia Radding, *Landscapes of Power and Identity: Comparative Histories in the Sonoran Desert and the Forests of Amazonia from Colony to Republic* (Durham, N.C., 2005); Jennifer Nez Denetdale, *Reclaiming Diné History: The Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita* (Tucson, Ariz., 2007); Karl Jacoby, *Shadows at Dawn: An Apache Massacre and the Violence of History* (New York, 2008); Thomas D. Hall and James V. Fenelon, *Indigenous Peoples and Globalization: Resistance and Revitalization* (Boulder, Colo., 2009); Margaret M. Bruchac, Siobhan M. Hart, and H. Martin Wobst, eds., *Indigenous Archaeologies: A Reader on Decolonization* (2010; repr., New York, 2016).

[12] Many of the works on Native American history cited in note 7 could also be cited here, for early American history, Native American history, and borderlands history are deeply intertwined.

[13] Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York, 1991), 483–484; Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia, 2006), 5–6. For Richard White's assessment of *Europe and the People without History*, see White, "Using the Past: History and Native American Studies," in Russell Thornton, ed., *Studying Native America: Problems and Prospects* (Madison, Wis., 1998), 217–243, here 229–230.

ceived global and comparative histories; indigenous and non-state societies less so. There are, of course, superb histories of indigenous and non-state peoples in specific places in time, but there have been few attempts to embed those histories into broader global and comparative contexts. Empires, nations, and states still dominate the historiographical landscape, channeling broad-gauge histories into familiar containers and creating vast blind spots around them. But that is changing now, and if the recent trends are any indication, the change will only accelerate. Ever since the Columbus Quincentenary in 1992, transnational conversations about indigenous issues have gathered momentum, and the study of non-state actors is thriving within political science. The emergent subfield of settler-colonial studies is a case in point. Focusing on transcending global processes of indigenous dispossession and replacement by expansionist settler societies, it seeks to lay bare the power structures, ideological constructs, and spatial strategies that settler empires have mobilized to assert sovereignty and juridical control over indigenous societies and lands.[14]

Settler-colonial studies is a thriving subfield in its own right, but it also embodies a broader, burgeoning trend. The geographical range of most history departments may remain limited, but there is—or will soon be—a critical mass of scholars committed to the study of the non-Western world to fundamentally challenge the existing master narratives of global history. Along with sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists, historians will be producing broadly conceived global histories of indigenous and non-state peoples, and when they do, *Europe and the People without History* may once again speak powerfully to them. Whatever misgivings we may harbor about Wolf's theoretical positions, his great achievement of placing indigenous societies, peasants, immigrants, and other supposedly marginal peoples in the same frame with empires, nations, and states as shapers of a common global history stands. It can be done.

Europe and the People without History has always divided scholars. While the book was hailed as a major contribution to several fields and disciplines upon publication, it was also severely criticized for its factual errors, theoretical narrowness, and interpretive overreach, and even denounced as "an exercise in Marxist piety" and a "commodity-book" that "proceeds in a straight line through History seen as progressive stages in the unfolding of a Totality."[15] Similar ambivalence surrounds the book today. It is widely recognized as a foundational text, but less often adopted as a conceptual model. It is

[14] On settler colonialism, see Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London, 1999); Julie Evans, Patricia Grimshaw, David Philips, and Shurlee Swain, eds., *Equal Subjects, Unequal Rights: Indigenous People in British Settler Colonies, 1830–1910* (Manchester, 2003); Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen, eds., *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century: Projects, Practices, Legacies* (New York, 2005); Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409; Lisa Ford, *Settler Sovereignty: Jurisdiction and Indigenous People in America and Australia, 1788–1836* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010); Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (New York, 2010); Fiona Bateman and Lionel Pilkington, *Studies in Settler Colonialism: Politics, Identity and Culture* (New York, 2011); James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (Regina, Sask., 2013); Walter L. Hixson, *American Settler Colonialism: A History* (New York, 2013); Lorenzo Veracini, "'Settler Colonialism': Career of a Concept," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 41, no. 2 (2013): 313–333; Gary Clayton Anderson, *Ethnic Cleansing and the Indian: The Crime That Should Haunt America* (Norman, Okla., 2014); Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846–1873* (New Haven, Conn., 2016); Edward Cavanagh and Lorenzo Veracini, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism* (London, 2017); Gregory Evans Dowd, "Indigenous Peoples without the Republic," *Journal of American History* 104, no. 1 (2017): 19–41.

more famous than celebrated, cited more often than it is emulated. When I was writing *The Comanche Empire*, I read *Europe and the People without History* to understand interconnectivity and human webs but shed its systemic undertones and its scheme of a sweeping, seemingly irresistible world-historical sequence of successive modes of production culminating in a capitalist order. I struggled to reconcile Wolf's eye for complexity and contingency with his historical materialism. I did not cite the book.

A gradual fading may simply be the fate of even the most of renowned of works: changing circumstances spawn new questions, scholarly sensitivities shift, new models arise. As is true of many other scholars, I imagine, Wolf's influence is deep but largely hidden. But with *Europe and the People without History*, something else seems to be in the mix. I have traced here the book's resonances for a range of historical specialties, but more often than not, it does not appear in citations even when the resonances seem obvious. This has something to do with the fact that Wolf was an anthropologist and answered primarily to other anthropologists, and it has a lot to do with his devotion to Marxist materialism, which according to some critics led him to double back toward European capitalist expansion as an engine of macro-scale historical change. It also has to do with how he wrote. Wolf's writing style was passionate and pointed, but he did not infuse his narrative with vignettes, characters, or human drama. Much of his writing was in the social-science mode, focusing on processes, configurations, and underlying structures, which imparts a sense of detachment that may seem sterile in the current intellectual climate, where historians want to understand the interior worlds and emotional lives of their subjects—even when dealing with such macro-scale abstractions as capitalism and imperialism. Ours is not an age of strong theoretical stances, and it is certainly not an age of Marxist leanings, which seems to exclude *Europe and the People without History* from reading lists and bibliographies.[16]

This, it seems to me, is more a matter of fashion than of substance, for Eric Wolf is with us still. His imprint is there in the fabric of new histories of indigenous peoples, borderlands, and capitalism, and his early call for connective world history is now suddenly relevant to historians' quest for inclusive, unbiased, and open-ended global history. We owe him another look.

[15] For critical reviews of *Europe and the People without History*, see, for example, David Gress, review in *New Criterion* 2 (October 1983): 64–69; William McNeill, review in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 14, no. 3 (1984): 660–662, quote ("an exercise") from 660; Michael Taussig, "History as Commodity in Some Recent American (Anthropological) Literature," *Critique of Anthropology* 9, no. 1 (1989): 7–23, quotes ("commodity-book," "proceeds in a straight line . . .") from 9.

[16] For critiques of Wolf's materialism, abstractions, and overemphasis on European capitalist expansion, see Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York, 2003), 69; Nazmul Hasan Chowdhury, review of *Europe and the People without History*, *Asian Affairs* 27, no. 1 (2005): 72–79; John Tutino, *The Mexican Heartland: How Communities Shaped Capitalism, a Nation, and World History, 1500–2000* (Princeton, N.J., 2018), 4.

Pekka Hämäläinen is the Rhodes Professor of American History at Oxford University and a Fellow of St. Catherine's College. He is author of *The Comanche Empire* (Yale University Press, 2008), and co-author with John M. Murrin, Paul E. Johnson, Denver Brunsman, James M. McPherson, Alice Fahs, Gary Gerstle, Emily S. Rosenberg, and Norman L. Rosenberg of *Liberty, Equality, Power: History of the American People* (Cengage, 2014). He is currently finishing a book titled *Iktómi's People: The Lakota Age in America* (Yale University Press, forthcoming 2019).