The Idea of Power and the Power of Ideas: A Review Essay

In Envisioning Power, the late Eric Wolf, one of anthropology’s most renowned practitioners, argues that the time has come to fuse power to ideas, not least of all in order to revitalize the concept of culture. His argument is explored in three notable case studies: the Kwakiutl, the Aztecs, and National Socialism in Germany. Our main criticism is that the concept of structural power favored by Wolf is redundant and expendable, partly because the case studies, while elegantly presented, are inappropriate for the author’s theoretical interests. [power, culture, conflict]

In the timely study Envisioning Power: Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis (1999), one of anthropology’s most renowned practitioners, the late Professor Eric R. Wolf, turns his attention to a concept sinking fast (culture) and a concept rising fast (power). In recent decades the concept of culture has been subjected to severe criticism, while power, especially in the Foucaultian sense (whatever that means), seems to be on the verge of attaining celebrity status. As D’Andrade has put it: “One of the major things that has been happening in anthropology is that, little by little, the god term ‘culture’ is being eclipsed by the new god term ‘power’ ” (1999:96).

Although Wolf promotes power as a fundamental concept in anthropology, one that has for too long been neglected, it is not in order to hammer another nail into culture’s coffin. To the contrary, his aim is to salvage culture by fusing it analytically to power.

In the preface, Wolf observes that anthropologists have tended to view culture without power, while other social scientists have viewed ideology without culture; ideology here is an expression of power since it means “ideas advanced by elites or ruling classes in defense of their dominance.” Wolf’s ambitious task is to resolve the impasse between these perspectives. This is not, however, an abstract treatise on the relationship between two master concepts. Affirming the anthropological style of exploring theoretical issues in the context of concrete social action, the author organizes the book around three detailed case studies: the Kwakiutl, the Aztecs, and National Socialism in Germany. The quality of scholarship, as we would expect from an academic of Wolf’s stature, is admirable, and the three case studies are presented with stunning elegance. In our judgment, however, the book is not an unqualified success. Culture and power certainly are shown to be interconnected and of critical importance to the explanation of the three case studies. But culture often refers to little more than ideas, and power borders on being analytically redundant, mobilized periodically to explain what already is obvious in the text.

Power

In chapters one and two, Wolf sketches out the major issues, aims, and arguments of the study. Like most contemporary writers, he dismisses the conception of power as a substance or force, something that can be grasped or lost. He also is wary of the possibility that power will merely replace culture as an all-embracing totality that purportedly explains everything. Instead he suggests that we think of power relationally (p. 66) and regard it as an aspect of all human relations (p. 405).1 Echoing his 1990 article, Wolf distinguishes between four modalities of power (p. 5):
1. Power inherent in an individual (Nietzschean view).
2. Power as capacity of ego to impose her or his will on alter (Weberian view).
3. Power as control over the contexts in which people interact (tactical or organizational power).
4. Structural power: “By this I mean the power manifest in relationships that not only operates within settings and domains but also organizes and orchestrates the settings themselves, and that specifies the direction and distribution of energy flows.”

Wolf announces his intention of focusing on structural power, which he suggests places him in the same intellectual tradition as Marx and Foucault. This itself is not without controversy, given Foucault’s lack of enthusiasm for Marx’s analysis of ideology (1980:58) and his declaration that he is not a Marxist (Kritzman 1988:22; Rabinow 1984:385).

Culture

Wolf separates the general category of ideas from the more narrow category of ideology. By ideas he means “the entire range of mental constructs rendered manifest in public representations” (p. 4). By ideology he means “unified schemes or configurations developed to underwrite or manifest power” (p. 4). Following the lead of Kaplan and Manners (1972:112–113) a generation earlier, Wolf (p. 25) refers to ideology as an Enlightenment concept coined by de Tracy, who defined ideology as the science of ideas. By the time Marx and Engels began to make their mark, ideology had ceased to be an objective scientific concept, but instead a mechanism serving group interests.

In a highly stimulating discussion, Wolf draws on Isaiah Berlin’s concept of the counter-Enlightenment in order to understand the meaning of culture that took root in anthropology. The Enlightenment promoted reason, universalism, individualism, progress—a future world, inspired by science, in which disparate cultures would give way to global uniformity, sure evidence of the psychic unity of humankind. This set in motion a counter-Enlightenment movement, which glorified subjectivity, differentiation, tradition, particularism, and parochialism. These polar opposite positions, as Wolf acutely observes (pp. 64, 286–287), amounted to power contests reflecting class interests. Those opposed to the Enlightenment were the sinking remnants of the feudal elite, who correctly interpreted modernism as a threat. Those in favor of the Enlightenment—the rising bourgeoisie—were not as “universal” as their ideals suggested; universalism for them translated into the removal of class barriers to social advancement and trade barriers to open market exchange.

Culture (and society), according to Wolf, was very definitely a counter-Enlightenment concept—a conservative reaction to the Enlightenment. If this is correct, it throws a monkey wrench into the works of the postmodernists, who, as Whittaker (1992:111) has reported, have attacked culture on the basis that it is a modernist concept.

Not everyone would accept Wolf’s characterization of culture as a counter-Enlightenment concept. Kaplan and Manners (1972:5–7) contended that there have always been two schools of anthropology—the relativists, who fit the image of the counter-Enlightenment, and the comparativists, who took more seriously the axiom of the psychic unity of humankind and contended that there was sufficient uniformity across cultures to render comparison legitimate. More recently, several anthropologists such as Brightman (1995), Brumann (1999), and Lewis (1999) have begun to fight back against the critics of the concept of culture. Their argument, in part, is that it is a gross distortion to overlook the wide variety of ways in which culture has been conceived in the discipline, and that an emphasis on similarities across cultures has always been as prominent as that on difference and uniqueness.

At the end of chapter two, Wolf rejects the concept of culture that emerged from the counter-Enlightenment. Yet he nevertheless contends that the concept is worth saving, albeit in modified form. This is because of its “relational value” (p. 67), its capacity to bring together different sectors of social life—ideas, action, and social organization—that might otherwise be regarded as unconnected. In the final chapter of the book, he continues to defend the concept: “The concept of culture remains serviceable as we move from thinking about what is generically human to the specific practices and understandings that people devise and deploy to deal with their circumstances. It is precisely the shapeless, all-encompassing quality of the concept that allows us to draw together . . . material relations to the world, social organization, and configurations of ideas. Using ‘culture,’ therefore, we can bring together what might otherwise be kept separate” (p. 288).

How does he propose to salvage the concept? The first step is to follow the critics by redefining culture to emphasize diversity, ambiguity, contradiction, and imperfectly shared meaning and knowledge. The second step is to “cure” or “energize” culture by injecting power into it, rendering it robust and potent, finally capable of realizing the lofty explanatory demands that have been placed on it.

The Case Studies

Wolf selected three “extreme” or “salient” case studies—the Kwakiutl, the Aztecs, and Hitler’s Germany—where ideas and power were “dramatically evident” (p. 69), enhancing the prospects of understanding the connections between them. The cases are extreme in that they represent the far reaches of human variability, notably in the form of the potlatch, human sacrifice, and genocide. Of great importance is the argument that each of the cases represents a different type of social labor. Kwakiutl society was dominated by what Wolf calls the kin-based mode of
organizing labor. Aztec society had a tributary mode, in which the nobility was sustained by tributes from commoners. Hitler’s Germany was dominated by capitalism.

**The Kwakiutl**

The Kwakiutl, made famous in anthropology by Boas and his research assistant George Hunt (whose father was English and mother Tlingit), inhabit the northern coast of Vancouver Island and the bays and inlets of Queen Charlotte Bay. Wolf describes the Kwakiutl as a chiefdom, stratified into aristocrats, nobles, and commoners, but without a state apparatus or centralized political structure. The basic sociopolitical body of the Kwakiutl was the *nu-maym*, or household, each of which was controlled by a line of chiefs. A *nu-maym* consisted mostly (but not exclusively) of kin-related actors. Status was defined by a person’s genealogical proximity to the chiefly line, whose power and privilege was underwritten (a favorite word for Wolf) by the supernatural.

The supernatural, or cosmological premises about the nature of the world, shaped the material and organizational makeup of Kwakiutl society. Secular time corresponded to spring, summer, and fall, a period of hunting, fishing, and food gathering. Sacred time occurred in the winter, when cosmological ideas were expressed in myth and ritual. The chiefly class, with ancestral ties to the supernatural, controlled cosmological texts and ritually sanctioned feast foods. The Winter Ceremonial profiled the Kwakiutl worldview, saturated in the supernatural, and reinforced the claim of the chiefly class to sacred power. Visions enabled the chiefs and nobles to contact guardian spirits. Redistributive rituals (potlatches) allowed them to transfer vital forces from the cosmos to their guests.

Wolf emphasizes the enormous degree to which Kwakiutl society was transformed following contact with Europeans in the eighteenth century. Their kin-based mode of social labor succumbed to the capitalist mode, epidemics decimated the population, and a new class of competitors to the chiefs emerged, their wealth and power rooted in the marketplace. The heart of this case study concerns the reaction of the chiefs and nobles to threats to their authority, notably the manner in which they drew upon Kwakiutl ideas about the constitution of the world in order to fortify their position of privilege.

The strains in Kwakiutl society were manifested in the ceremonial exchanges collectively known as the potlatch, memorialized by Ruth Benedict in *Patterns of Culture* (1934). Wolf turns a critical eye to her work. In Benedict’s hands, the Kwakiutl are rendered as “Dionysians,” warlike irrationalists with a destructive urge and a personality described as “megalomaniac paranoid.” From Wolf’s perspective, the flaws in Benedict’s portrait are not limited to the outdated assumption that each society possesses a dominant personality type, a legacy of the culture and personality tradition that Benedict pioneered. Also at fault was the source material for her interpretation: oral texts. These texts did indeed document the conspicuous consumption in the potlatch and painted the Kwakiutl as bellicose irrationalists. However, in a refutation that would have made Radcliffe-Brown, always skeptical about the value of texts, sit up and smile, Wolf points out that the texts utilized by Benedict did not reflect actual social behavior. Indeed, Boas, referring to these texts, apparently quipped that they were in fact Kwakiutl ones but had nothing in common with the Kwakiutl people whom he knew.

Interpretations such as Benedict’s, Wolf adds, were also guilty of ethnocentrism. The potlatch was evaluated in terms intrinsic to capitalism. But the wealth displayed and the valuables given away or destroyed were not capital or commodities. Failure to realize this prompted Canadian authorities to ban potlatching “for the good” of the Kwakiutl themselves.

What Benedict, as well as the cultural ecologists who interpreted the potlatch as a distributive mechanism in times of scarcity, failed to appreciate, according to Wolf, was the connection of the potlatch to the supernatural. Cosmological ideas were embedded in these redistributive rituals. As Wolf states: “The ability to acquire wealth objects and to give them away in displays of the powers of one’s name was thus not only political and economic but derived from transactions with supernatural power” (p. 119). Equally important, strains emerging after contact with Europeans generated major changes in the potlatch ritual. Woolen blankets, which replaced hide or skin coverings, could be purchased by commoners engaged in wage labor. This enabled them to participate in potlatching and thus to challenge the authority of the chiefs. The chiefs fought back by evoking the image of the world rooted in cosmology, which placed them at the top of the heap. Over time, the struggle between chief and challenger became increasingly antagonistic, with competition overwhelming distribution and reciprocity. Yet as Wolf (pp. 279–280) insists, the truculence associated with potlatching remained in the realm of ritual; it did not translate into warlike behavior in the mundane world.

The Kwakiutl case is an excellent example of the manner in which the ideational realm can intersect with the materialist realm and constitute the basis of power and stratification. It also shows how a declining elite can forge an ideology from the supernatural realm in order to hold challengers at bay. Of course, the chiefly class enjoyed only a temporary reprieve. In the long run, the kin mode of labor gave way to capitalism, and thus power shifted from ideas rooted in the cosmology to those aligned with class. As for the potlatch, the prohibition was revoked in 1951. While it enjoyed a revival in the 1960s, it has less to do today, Wolf states, with the supernatural realm than with Aboriginal identity politics.
The Aztecs

The Aztecs, or Tenochca, dominated Central Mexico in the fifteenth century. The Tenochca were people from Tenochtitlan, one of several city-states in Mexico. Wolf focuses on this city-state because it was the largest and most powerful, and also the one best described in the literature. Tenochca society was stratified into distinctive classes and, unlike the Kwakialut, was politically centralized. The main classes were nobles (a warrior aristocracy), merchants (plus commoners who excelled in war), commoners (who supported the nobility with labor and the payment of tribute), and slaves. Wolf states that the nexus between power and ideas in Aztec culture was located in their cosmology, which penetrated and shaped virtually every aspect of material society, including the class system: “The cosmology underwrote the hierarchy of Tenochca social relations, creating a sociocosmic order wherein gods, nobles, commoners, and slaves were arranged in a graduated series with appropriate rights and obligations allocated to each distinctive grade” (pp. 188–189).

Cosmological ideas also dictated warfare and human sacrifice. The Tenochca king was the nation’s military ruler: “One of his first obligations following his installation was to go to war, return victoriously, and bring back prisoners to be sacrificed” (p. 149). While the nobles were the warring class, commoners also participated, and if they were successful—which meant returning with captives for sacrifice—they were granted privileges, but not full equality with the nobility. For example, in future battles they were required to dress differently from the nobles. Wolf states that “the Tenochca did not invent the custom of human sacrifice, but they implanted it with unparalleled intensity” (p. 190). He argues that human sacrifice was central to Tenochca society and intrinsically connected to the cosmos. The gods fed humans, and humans, through sacrifice, fed the gods.

Priests resorted to astrological observations and calendric calculations in order to mark the timing of ritual sacrifice. Captives were sacrificed during periodic rituals and to acknowledge astronomical events such as the eclipse of the sun. When a ruler died and a new one ascended to the throne (the kingship was sacred), large-scale human sacrifice occurred. As Wolf observes: “Making war and capturing prisoners for sacrifice constituted the guiding theme of public rituals, but it was embedded in a cyclical orchestration of displays that insistently recapitulated the imagery of the cosmic order, which the Tenochca ruler was required to uphold” (pp. 152–153).

Just as Wolf finds inadequate the ecological explanation of the potlatch, the same is true for human sacrifice and cannibalism. Marvin Harris (1977) has argued that Aztec cannibalism occurred because of a shortage of protein in their diet. Yet current scholarship, Wolf points out, suggests that “the Mesoamerican diet was balanced enough to obviate significant shortages of protein” (p. 191). Besides, it is improbable that enough people were sacrificed to nourish the entire population, and the fact is that human flesh was consumed primarily by the nobility plus commoners who had distinguished themselves in warfare. Wolf’s counterexplanation is that human sacrifice and cannibalism were means to influence the pervasive forces of the supernatural. The gods were capricious and terrifying, neither totally good nor evil, but they also were approachable. It was human sacrifice that got their attention and rendered them benevolent to human interests.

Similar to Kwakialut society, Aztec society experienced significant social change that mobilized ideas of the cosmos in the service of political struggle. The Tenochca state that emerged in the fifteenth century took shape as a result of the activities of a group of mercenaries who overthrew the existing rulers. These new rulers and their spokespeople rewrote history to show that their actions and leadership positions were preordained by the gods. In other words, they rearranged cosmological ideas to create a self-serving ideology. Astrological observations and calendric calculations were similarly manipulated by priests to provide ideological support for the new rulership. Once again, ideas located in the cosmos were fundamental to the formulation of relations between power and class.

National Socialism

As in the cases of Kwakialut and the Aztecs, Wolf’s focus regarding National Socialism in Germany is the nexus between ideas and power as they “unfold in time and space” (p. 267). There is, however, a poignancy to this case study lacking in the others. The author reveals how he and a friend from the Sudetenland of the former Czechoslovakia encountered SS troops on a bicycle trip to Munich in 1937; and he remarks (p. x) that National Socialism had a major impact on his personal and professional life. Whether in spite or because of such personal involvement, the author manages to pack into this single chapter much of the descriptive and explanatory essence of National Socialism.

Wolf traces Hitler’s emergence as the leader of the National Socialists in 1920, his appointment as Reich Chancellor in 1933, and finally his death by suicide in 1945. A great deal has been written about the class basis of the National Socialist membership, but in Wolf’s judgment it is not a fruitful line of inquiry. This is because people joined from virtually every level of the class system. While acknowledging the impact of Germany’s defeat in the First World War, and the ensuing economic and political dislocation, his central argument is that ideas dating back to the nineteenth century laid the basis for the development of Hitler’s party and its genocidal policies. As Wolf puts it: “The ideology of National Socialism that guided the Third Reich, which was largely systematized in Hitler’s Mein
_Kampf_, was not a ‘reflection’ of existing social realities. It was a medley of propositions developed during the nineteenth century, and even before, out of diverse social and economic arrangements” (p. 266). Paramount among these propositions were the ideas of Volk, Race, Reich, and Fuhrer.

Two historical conditions, Wolf argues, were of critical importance: the widespread local variation that existed in German society in the nineteenth century and status hierarchies that carried over to the next century. Although a pan-German nationalism was alive in the early 1800s, it was suppressed by the existence of a number of parochial statelets that jealously guarded their uniqueness and independence. Such local and regional variation mitigated against the formation of a modern state and partly explains why Germany’s development did not parallel that of France and England.

Wolf emphasizes the contribution of Prussia, which emerged as the dominant statelet, to the formation of a pan-Germany, providing some of its core values. Prussian militarism became a model for civil society. Hardness in character and human relations was admired, pity and emotionalism scorned. As Wolf explains: “These demands on people favored the dominance of a character structure first analyzed by Wilhelm Reich (1975), a mode of being and acting that repressed feeling as weak and feminine, was brutal to self and others, and was unresponsive to suffering—all traits captured by the term _hart_, hardened and hard” (p. 220).

Volk was another ancient idea among the Germans. Unlike the concept of nation, which was regarded as a political phenomenon, Volk was conceived as a phenomenon of nature. According to Wolf, “Volk is usually translated as ‘people’ or ‘nation,’ but stands for more than that: a social entity rooted in space and time and characterized by an enduring inner essence, a spirit or _Geist_, a vital soul, which manifests itself in cultural expressions, language and art, social relations and legal codes, and even economic arrangements” (p. 235).

National Socialism was intended to be more than merely a political party. It was meant to transcend party interests, to create a new society, a community of the Volk, distinct from and superior to the state itself. This may explain an unusual development: the establishment of a party bureaucracy alongside the state bureaucracy, leading to a remarkable duplication of effort and confusion of responsibilities.

As for status, pre-twentieth-century Germany was divided into the nobility, town citizens, and peasants. Membership in each status level was essentially kin-determined and fixed, with social honor and rights and duties varying with the level. There were further distinctions within each level, such as the upper and lower nobility, and sanctions against people in one status category associating with those in another. Although this scheme was pan-German, there nevertheless were regional and local variations. Peasants, for example, might be permitted to carry arms in one place but not in another. Also in operation was “domination,” the usual translation (Wolf prefers “rulership”) of _Herrschaft_ made famous in the social sciences by Max Weber. Domination entailed more than the exercise of power. It covered a diffuse set of ideological and religious principles that defined the social personality of an individual vis-à-vis a scale of superordination and subordination (p. 205). The status hierarchies in German society and the quality of hardness were reflected in the remarkable growth of university-based dueling fraternities between 1871 and 1918. Only those with whom it would be honorable to engage in combat were eligible to participate, and to give an inch was to lose face. Jews were excluded, but formed their own dueling clubs. Implicit in such dueling was the image of the ideal German youth—courageous, hard, conscious of his superiority in terms of class, and perhaps in terms of race as well.

As important as Volk was to Hitler’s perspective, it was race, Wolf states, that counted most. This brings us to anti-Semitism. “If the Aryans were the real culture builders,” Wolf writes, “the Jews were assigned the role of paradigmatic culture destroyers” (p. 237). Not only were the passports of Jews stamped with a “J,” and Jews compelled to wear a yellow star in public, but the names Isaac and Sarah were made mandatory, thus destroying their individuality. The author documents the efforts of the Nazis to develop innovative methods of mass extermination, such as the gas chambers at Auschwitz, of Jews and other “parasites.” These methods have sometimes been labeled “industrial killing,” something that would not have been possible in an earlier age. Hitler’s race policies extended to Slavs, with enormous consequences. The Slavic populations smoldered with enmity toward Russia. Had Hitler not inflamed that enmity, driving the Slavs to support Russia, the march on Moscow might have had a different ending.³

Finally, the idea of the Fuhrer. Wolf refers to National Socialism as a revitalization movement (p. 270), and argues (p. 197) that it can be better understood as a phenomenon similar to the cargo cults of Melanesia than as a rationally executed program. He describes Hitler as a charismatic leader (p. 233), “a kind of shaman” (p. 231), whose magnetism on the podium resembled a religious revival rather than a political forum. And he emphasizes Hitler’s absolute domination over his subalterns. What is significant is Wolf’s revelation (p. 230) that the idea of a Fuhrer also had deep historical roots in the Germanies. The principle of a strongman, who would lead the Volk and nation out of the wilderness, was prominent in “the romantic pre–World War I Youth Movement.”¹ This provides further evidence for the author’s argument that ideas dating back to at least the 1800s, mixed in with the important local and regional particularisms of the German statelets and the emphasis placed on status hierarchies, set the conditions and informed the power struggles that led to a tragically aberrant social movement—National Socialism.
In the final chapter of the book, Wolf emphasizes once again that the three case studies deal with societies under stress, in each instance leading to ideologies in the service of elites. Recapitulating his basic argument, Wolf writes: “These societies, carried forward by elites, were fashioned out of preexisting cultural materials, but they are not to be understood as disembodied cultural schemata. They addressed the very character of power in society, specifically the power that structured the differentiation, mobilization, and deployment of social labor, and they rooted that power in the nature of the cosmos” (p. 274).

The above analysis would seem to set the stage for a systematic comparison of the three cases in order to elicit their abstract theoretical implications. This was never Wolf’s intention. Early in the book (p. 16) he tells us that he is not very interested in comparing the cases, and on page 279 he states: “The three cases serve as entry points into a discussion of ideology, but as historical manifestations they remain incommensurate.”

While we shall have something to say later about the author’s position on comparison, for the moment we simply want to comment on the individual case studies. To state that they are effective would be to grossly undervalue them. Their many strengths include a rich historical dimension, a focus on culture as process, impeccable scholarship, enormous ethnographic detail, and elegant prose. In short, each of the case studies is a gem. However, they are based almost entirely on existing scholarship, including interpretations and theories mounted by others. Certainly Wolf takes a stand regarding these interpretations, but any novelty that his study possesses must lie in the framework that he erects, notably the attempt to insert power into the core of cultural analysis. In the next section an attempt will be made to assess this framework.

**Critique**

It may well be, as D’Andrade has observed, that power is pushing culture aside as the central concept in anthropology, but that may be tantamount to jumping from one sinking ship into another. This is because power as a concept is every bit as ambiguous and controversial as culture; in fact, while numerous writers have advocated that culture be ditched, the same has been true over the years for power (McClelland 1971:64; Wrong 1979:65). The literature addressed to power in political anthropology, political science, and political sociology rehashes most of the enduring dilemmas in the social sciences: macro vs. micro, structure vs. agency, intentional vs. unintentional, consensus vs. conflict, deductive vs. inductive, qualitative vs. quantitative, and positivism vs. phenomenology.

In this critique of *Envisioning Power*, the discussion will be confined to three controversial issues in the literature: the limits of power, the abstract analysis of power, and the explanatory capacity of structural power.

**Power Is Not Everything**

As Horowitz observed long ago in relation to the work of C. Wright Mills: “The emphasis on sheer power carries with it the danger of extreme reductionism, of a view of social relations in which culture has no part and no place” (1967:11). This charge has sometimes been leveled against Foucault, even though he has quipped (Kritzman 1988:39) that power as an autonomous question does not even interest him, and he has not attempted to develop a theory of power. It was in order to distance himself from the notion that power is everything that Dennis Wrong (1979:252) confined power to intended and foreseen events. His worry was that if power was extended to unintentional events it would be equivalent to the entire field of sociology. The danger of this has been clearly stated by McClelland: “If there is nothing but power to be discriminated, understanding will be frustrated. Not everything can be power; we must have at least one other class, perhaps to be called only not-power, to provide some contrast for comparison” (1971:44).

Wolf very definitely does not portray power as everything. Power is only one principal concept in his scheme, the others being ideas and social relations. Power, in Wolf’s approach, doesn’t obliterate ideas and behavior; it invades them.

**An Abstract Theory of Power Has Little Utility**

Geertz has remarked (1973:26) that there would be little point to try to write a general theory of cultural interpretation, since it is the particularities rather than generalities that count most. Similarly, it has been argued (Dahl 1986:40) that a general theory of power is either impossible or unfruitful, but for a different reason: power can only be analyzed after the fact. Bendix (1953) mounted this argument half a century ago, and more recently Isaac has written: “The concept of power cannot furnish us with the key to the study of historical change because in order to analyze power we must [first] undertake historically specific analyses” (1987:148). Etzioni (1993:19), incidentally, has suggested that the fact that power can only be analyzed after it has been exercised is its major methodological weakness.

Of course, not everyone would accept this characterization of power. Talcott Parsons, in his revised approach (originally he had favored the Weberian zero-sum perspective, whereby if one person gains power another person loses it), attempted to erect a general theory of power in which power became a system property, devoid of force, totally legitimate, and oriented to the fulfillment of collective goals (Parsons 1960:181–182, 1966). It may well be true, as various writers have complained (Dahl 1963:50; Etzioni 1993:21; Galbraith 1983:13), that too often the beneficial aspects of power are overlooked. Yet
Parsons errs in the opposite direction. As Giddens put it: “Parsons’ account of power and the electoral process reads like a description of normative democratic theory, and often like an apologia for American Democracy in particular” (1968:268). Other efforts at an abstract analysis of power, such as Wrong’s (1979) and Galbraith’s (1983), have tended to deteriorate into what might be labeled “definitional gymnastics.”

Wolf eschews any attempt to produce a formal theory of the relationship between ideas and power and opts for analyzing power after the fact, reconstructing it from three notable historical cases. He also avoids—perhaps too successfully—the definitional game as to whether, for example, power or authority should be favored, or influence over force. Too successfully because, as it shall be argued next, one of the weaknesses of Wolf’s approach is the crudeness of his concept of structural power.

**Structural Power Is the Key Dimension**

Let it be made clear that a great number of people who have written about power, possibly the majority, would disagree with this assertion. One of their arguments is that structural power is reified power (Eidlin n.d.; Lukes 1974). It attributes motives and will to groups and institutions, and it treats abstractions as if they were concrete. The underlying assumption is that power is voluntaristic and nominalistic, the property of human agency. Even those writers who dared to flirt with the notion of structural power, such as Bachrach and Baratz (1962, 1963) in the context of the ancient elitist/pluralist debate, and Lukes (1974, 1977, 1986) in his ambition to add a third dimension to decisions and nondecisions, got cold feet and reaffirmed their allegiance to power as human agency.

Some writers such as Giddens (1979) have promoted a synthesis of structure and agency. Isaac, inspired by Marx, rejected the opposition between the two, stating that “social power refers to the capacities to act possessed by agents by virtue of their social relations” (1987:81). Structure joined to agency certainly is an advance over the usual conceptions of structural power (Baldus 1975), which are content to highlight the sheer weight of the institutional framework, or “the mobilization of bias” in which advantage is structured in or out of a person’s life chances by virtue of one’s position in the stratification system. Excluding for the moment the important role attributed to ideas, Wolf’s approach is essentially the same as that taken by Giddens and Isaac. As the material in the three case studies reveals, his actors are not structural or cultural dopes, robots responding to the dictates of the institutional framework.

There is much to be said for a structural approach to power, one that makes room for human innovation. What is objectionable is the manner in which it is applied in Envisioning Power. In this study, structural power adds up to little more than a label, a concept that is branded every now and again to remind the reader that it is intended to be the focus of the study. Rather than illuminating the data, it merely restates what is obvious in the case material: that ideas interact with social relations in the context of contested patterns of advantage and disadvantage. In other words, structural power, at least in this study, is a redundant and expendable concept.

How can this be explained? The reason may be surprising but also simple. Wolf selected the Kwakiutl, the Aztecs, and National Socialism because they were societies in crisis, dramatic examples of the interplay between ideas and power. Our argument is that the choice of case studies was unfortunate. As numerous writers have pointed out (Bachrach and Baratz 1970:21; Dahl 1963:73; and Etzioni 1993:21), power and conflict are intrinsically connected, almost identical twins. The implication is that it was virtually impossible not to find power embedded in the three cases. As societies in crisis, they were saturated in power; power dripped from them. That is why the author’s periodic reminders about power strike one as gratuitous. Given the conflict-ridden nature of the three cases, what would have been novel is the demonstration that they were not permeated with power. Had Wolf followed Durkheim’s example in Suicide—deliberately focusing upon a phenomenon that seemed to be highly individualistic in order to demonstrate the relevancy of the sociological dimension—and selected case studies that appeared to be devoid of power, or had his research design at least consisted of one case in which ideas and power were clearly connected and another where they were not, the study would have been much more instructive.

The blatant presence of power in the case studies also may account for another peculiarity of the study: the virtual absence of the array of concepts usually employed when analyzing power (authority, manipulation, consensus, consent, persuasion, influence, and coercion or force). Surprisingly, in view of Foucault’s current popularity, Wolf ignores resistance and, except for brief comments (pp. 54–57, 283), has little to say about discourse. He also makes little use of the subtle concepts in the transactional version of political anthropology such as faction, core, middlemen, and arena, perhaps because of the transactionalists’ opposition to structural explanations. Yet the main reason for the conceptual parsimony in this study may be that it took so little effort to identify power. In these conflict-drenched case studies, power stood out like a bull on a hilltop.

This is not, let it be stressed, an argument against structural power per se, or structural analysis in general. Consider, for example, the issue of racism. Its key dimension is its structural or systemic character. However, if one launched a study of the Ku Klux Klan, it would not add much to periodically observe that racism was implicated. That would be all too obvious.
While power in this study may be a crude and gratuitous concept, this should not in itself detract from the author's central argument: that ideas, social relations, and power are interdependent, and that they vary according to the form of social labor. Yet there is a disturbing lack of consistency in the manner in which key terms are used and the links between key variables specified. At times the emphasis is on ideas and power, at other times culture and power, and elsewhere ideas, power, and social class (or social arrangements or social relations). At one point there is a reference to "Aztec ideology and structural power" (p. 134) as the focus of that case study. Three pages later the focus is on "the ways in which ideas formulated the relationships between class and power in this society" (emphasis added). Although early in the study the importance of distinguishing between ideas and ideology was emphasized, in the last paragraph of the book they appear to be used interchangeably. On page 275, a summary statement of the links among ideas, power, and social labor resembles a conventional Marxist approach, with the material relations of production producing power, and power shaping ideas. Yet, almost at the end of the book, culture is not only back on center stage, but culture with an old look: an all-embracing holistic entity, subsuming material relations, social organization, and complexes of ideas.

It may be thought that the criticisms here are picky. Some inconsistency, surely, is unavoidable when dealing with the connections among such abstract concepts as culture, ideas, social relations, mode of labor, and power. Yet, in our judgment, there is a deeper problem, one that concerns the author's ambition to salvage the concept of culture by fusing it to power. Wolf takes the position (p. 42) that Marx and Weber complement each other and states (p. 58) that he does not assign causal priority to either the materialist or ideational realm. Yet, if there is a consistent rendition on the role played by ideas in this study, it is that they carry greater causal weight than anything else. And not only this: more often than not, culture itself is reduced to ideas. This may have made it easier to mount an argument that power is intrinsically connected to culture without resurrecting the latter's image as a gigantic machine or force that encapsulates and controls just about everything human under the sun not dictated by biology. Yet ideas located in the cosmos or thrown up by history and fused to power do not exhaust the field of social action. There also are social relations as well as class-dependent patterns of ideas, or ideology. To Wolf's credit, he recognizes that causal weight can shift over time from one of these variables to another. In doing so, however, he undermined the privileged position attributed to ideas-power and creates the conceptual and causal confusion to which we alluded.

Weber, Geertz, and Parsons

In this final section, an attempt will be made to locate the intellectual tradition into which Envisioning Power fits.

Weber

In arguing that the materialist and idealist realms carry equal causal weight, Wolf has adopted an essentially Weberian position, although Weber's work also has its share of ambiguity. On the one hand, like Marx, he regards class as an objective category shaped by economic factors such as the possession or lack of possession of property (Weber 1953). On the other hand, he often has been derided (or applauded) for being an idealist, especially in connection to the Protestant ethic thesis, despite his methodological pronouncements to the contrary. To the extent that Wolf treats ideas as the key feature of human existence, his work, too, invites the idealist label.

It may be thought that Wolf's focus on structural power separates him from Weber. However, Weber's three types of authority could be construed as structural power, that which has been institutionalized. Nor is the obvious rebuttal, in our judgment, sound—that they refer to personality types or at least to dyads, face-to-face relationships, and thus are micro in nature. First of all, Weber explicitly stated that his types of authority—even charismatic—were sociological rather than psychological. Secondly, there is no reason why charismatic, traditional, and bureaucratic authority cannot be used to describe institutions and societies.

Finally, there is Weber's argument that powerful interest groups carry powerful ideas. This brings Weber in sight of Marx, and had it been the consistent position taken by Wolf—which he might have done had he not gotten tangled up with the task of rescuing culture—the suspicion that he is a closet idealist would never have seen the light of day.

Geertz

If one were to name the fellow travelers with whom Wolf consorted, Clifford Geertz would not be the first on the list. Yet much earlier than Wolf, Geertz (1973:35) pointed out that the concept of culture emerged to counter the Enlightenment view of reason and uniformitarianism. Even more relevant is the argument he mounted in "Politics Past, Politics Present," admittedly published in 1967 (reprinted 1973), thus predating his turn to thick description and textual analysis. In this article, Geertz showed how ancient ideas in Bali impinged upon contemporary society, shaping its political character. In a discussion that encompassed beliefs, values, ideas, and social structure and political instruments employed by the state, Geertz made an observation entirely reminiscent of Envisioning
Power: “the court and capital is at once a microcosm of supernatural order ... and the material embodiment of political order” (1973:332). In this context, he emphasized the significance of a Balinese myth that expressed their view of political development and was the deciding factor that reconciled their metaphysical conception of the universe with the ground-level distribution of power.

Not surprisingly, Geertz points to what makes Bali unique. His argument is that as a result of the influence of ideas that had developed several generations earlier, the Bali state at the time of his study converged not toward the centralization of power, as we would normally expect, but rather toward its dispersion. In this context, we might recall Wolf’s conclusion that his three case studies are not merely unique: they are incommensurate.

Parsons

When we first read Envisioning Power, especially the chapter on National Socialism, we had the peculiar feeling of having come across something very much like it before; and indeed we had: the writings of Talcott Parsons on Nazi Germany and fascism. From the outset let us try to clear up a point of confusion in Parsons’s work. His reputation, of course, is that of a theorist who focused on value orientations, idea clusters, and symbols. Thus in “The Role of Ideas in Social Action” (1964, orig. 1938), ideas are said to enjoy causal status. Yet, in “The Problem of Controlled Institutional Change” (1964:266, orig. 1945), he argues that social structure, not ideas, constitutes the independent variable. The source of confusion was Parsons’s attempt to carve out a distinctive conceptual territory for the social system, irreducible to culture or personality, and concerned with the institutionalization of normative expectations. Yet, as Robert Murphy (1971:56–57) has pointed out, perhaps with a tinge of hyperbole, the social system as conceived by Parsons is a meaningless residual category overwhelmed by culture. This is because the normative expectations that are institutionalized are the core ingredients of the cultural system: values, ideas, and symbols. The implication is that Parsons does indeed assign causal primacy to mentalist or idealist data.

We shall begin by indicating the similarities between Wolf’s and Parsons’s interpretations of Nazi Germany, turn to arguments that appear to separate them but actually don’t, and then point to some genuine differences between them.

Like Wolf, Parsons (1964:269) refers to National Socialism as “a charismatic movement par excellence.” He emphasizes the degree to which the Nazi movement was incubated in a set of ideas dating back to the previous century and earlier: the idea of the folk (or Volk), honor, duty, status hierarchies, militarism; the view of the world as a jungle, a hard place where only the hard survive and where mass suffering is an unavoidable consequence; the Volk as a master race, the corruption of modernity, and Jews as the symbol of all that is wrong in the universe.

Parsons also highlighted the formalism of German society (reflected in the penchant for titles), the clout of bureaucracy, and the suppression of individualism. He emphasized the ideology of male dominance, with women confined to the household, a point also made by Wolf (p. 239). Prussian militarism, Parsons argued, was a major influence on the development of the Nazi regime, the soldier a folk hero. Like Wolf, he also focused on the personality structure of Germans, describing it as “an emotional, idealistic, active, romantic component” synthesized with “an orderly, hard-working hierarchy preoccupied, methodical, submissive, gregarious, materialistic component” (1964:248). Elsewhere he describes the German character structure as dualistic: a combination of romanticism and authoritarianism. And he wrote: “The ability to mobilize the romantic urge was one of the most important sources of strength of the Nazi movements” (1964:271). By romanticism, Parsons meant not only idealized hopes, utopian dreams, escapism, and rejection of the existing social order but also the pre-modern notions of a community of folk, national destiny, and a commanding leader or fuhrer to achieve it.

As for anti-Semitism, in a passage that could have been penned by Wolf, Parsons observed: “The Jew of course served as the master symbol of the adversary of the German people and their mission. One of his most important functions is to unify the different evils which beset them in a single tangible symbol—above all to bring capitalism and bolshevism together. The Jew is not only a group enemy but is also a semi-magical source of ‘infection’” (1964:267).

Where the two authors appear to differ is in the emphasis that Parsons placed on Weber’s process of rationalization (Wolf referred to it in passing on p. 41 of Envisioning Power) and on Lutheranism. In Weber’s hands, the process of rationalization embraced a complex set of ideas including disenchantment (roughly the shift from the sacred to the secular), calculation and means-end schemes, and the growth of bureaucracy. For our purposes, the process of rationalization can be summed up by the term “modernism.” Modernism involved the shift from feudalism to capitalism, and increased trade and cultural flows between nation-states. The reaction against it resulted in a fixation on traditionalist sentiments leading to, among other things, nationalism. Parsons’s argument is that in Germany the clash between traditionalism and modernism was especially pronounced, generating anomy.

Yet the dynamics that Parsons attributed to the process of rationalization are essentially what Wolf captured in the terms “Enlightenment” and “counter-Enlightenment.” For both authors, what counted was the degree to which traditionalism, or historically rooted ideas and values, carried
Germany along a path not taken by other nations such as France and England, leading finally to National Socialism. Except for indicating that a majority of Protestants voted for National Socialism, Wolf paid little attention to religion. Parsons, in contrast, portrayed Lutheranism as a major player. Lutheranism, he argued, constituted "a master complex of ideological symbols" (1964:109) that included submission to authority, an other-worldly orientation, and a view of society as evil, reduced only by the harsh authority of divinely sanctioned leaders. Parsons concluded (1964:121) that there was a close relationship between formalism, romanticism, and Lutheranism. Where else have we seen all these elements? In the text of Envisioning Power. Assuming that Parsons's argument about the importance of Lutheranism is not wildly inaccurate, we might observe that Wolf managed to evoke Lutheranism without naming the culprit.  

Are there, then, no clear differences between the approaches and interpretations of the two authors? Certainly there are. While Parsons traces the origins of National Socialism back to ideas and symbols in the previous century, his work does not come close to matching either the historical depth or ethnographic detail of Envisioning Power. Nor does Parsons focus on what for Wolf is a major factor: the wide diversity at the local and regional level of the German statelets in the 1800s. The issue of power is more complex. Parsons in these essays virtually ignores the concept, whereas Wolf highlights it over and over again. Both authors reject Weber's approach to power, and just as it has been argued that Arendt's (and sometimes Foucault's) conception of power has much in common with Parsons's system perspective, it is tempting to add Wolf's name to the list. Yet to do so would be to overlook two fundamental differences in Wolf's approach. Unlike Parsons, he does not argue that power is always employed for the collective good, nor does he exclude force from power.  

The verdict should be clear. Even with the recognition that Wolf had the advantage over Parsons of half a century of further scholarship on Nazi Germany, the chapter in Envisioning Power is the more satisfying and penetrating work. Yet its overlap with Parsons's essays is undeniable, as is the common ground between the book as a whole and some of the writings of Weber and Geertz. Whether this causes one to applaud or groan presumably is itself a matter of politics.  

Conclusion  

By the 1970s, political anthropology had embraced three different models. The first was the structural model, represented by the path-breaking volume edited by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, African Political Systems (1940). The second was the processual or transactional model as articulated by Bailey (1969). The third was the political economy model, 15 not widely employed in the discipline but reflected in Fried's work on the state (1967) and, ironically, in much of Eric Wolf's earlier work. For example, in Europe and the People without History (1982), the world was presented as an interconnected whole, the result of 500 years of imperialism and capitalism. Culture, rather than being self-perpetuating, bounded, and unique, was portrayed as porous and fluid, unavoidably shaped by the political, economic, and ideological forces that encapsulated it. In this important study, an ethnographic application of the world-system model promoted by Wallerstein (1974) and Frank (1966), Wolf lamented the differentiation of the specialized social sciences from their political economy parent and lauded Marx as one of the last great representatives of a holistic social science. Early in Envisioning Power (p. 8), Wolf remarks that some readers may be surprised at the theoretical direction he takes, but he insists that it is consistent with his previous interests. It is correct that many of the same concepts (power, class, culture, and mode of production) appear in both studies. Yet there is a significant difference in emphasis. In Europe and the People without History, political economy clearly is the explanatory backbone, whereas in Envisioning Power, culture (or ideas) is allowed to stand on its own as an independent variable.  

This constitutes a major shift in Wolf's theoretical position, and we can only guess about the reasons why it occurred. Ironically, the explanation may have a lot to do with precisely what Wolf hoped to achieve: the insertion of power firmly into our conceptual framework. In recent years, power has surfaced in a number of theoretical perspectives and subdisciplines, from postmodernism and feminist anthropology to cultural studies, multicultural studies, and ethnic studies. The problem, from Wolf's point of view, is that power may have become too prominent, threatening to obliterate culture. Certainly, power was the victor in the massive critique of culture mounted by Abu-Lughod (1991), Appadurai (1991), Friedman (1994), and Keessing (1994), with the suggestion that the concept of culture be replaced by hegemony, habitus, or discourse. Wolf obviously did not join writers such as Brown (1996) and Lewis (1999), who resented the critique, lamented the high profile of power, and wanted to turn the clock back to the era when culture on its own was king; from Wolf's perspective, it was not a matter of culture or power, but rather culture and power. Yet in attempting to find room for culture, he seems to have crossed the line between materialism and idealism, in the process moving away from Marx and closer to Weber.  

Finally, there is Wolf's assertion that the three case studies are incommensurate. This unfortunately plunges us back to the counter-Enlightenment notion of cultural uniqueness, which, in today's globalized world, makes less sense empirically than politically; politically, because the claim to
cultural uniqueness sometimes serves as a weapon against globalization, or against discrimination more generally.

Of course every blade of grass is in some sense unique. Yet one wonders why in *Envisioning Power* three case studies were included if not to compare and contrast them. The author may have been influenced by the fallen fortunes of the comparative method, a victim of the anti-sci-

ence movement. Or his reasonable assumption may simply have been that three demonstrations of his thesis were stronger than one. There is another possibility. Comparison may have been eschewed not because of the uniqueness of the case studies but rather because of their remarkable analytic similarity. Each of them uniformly demonstrates the same thing: the connection between ideas and power. In this situation, further analysis in terms of comparison may well have been redundant.

In conclusion, due to the aesthetic presentation and rich flavor of the three case studies, *Envisioning Power* makes for delicious reading. Its theoretical contribution, however, is a different kettle of fish. This does not mean that the attempt to insert power into our conceptual framework, and fuse it to culture, was misguided. To the contrary, it is a project whose time has come. Yet if a scholar of Wolf’s stature ran into road blocks, only an optimist would predict that anyone else will have an easier ride.

Notes

1. This is the conventional view in the social sciences. For example, Etzioni (1993:18) and Foucault (Kritzman 1988:83) describe power as a relationship, and Bohannan (1963:268–269) and Wrong (1979:253) assert that it is an aspect of all human interaction.

2. Of great potential significance, especially in relation to Wolf’s case study of National Socialism, is his argument (p. 64) that while most of Europe, and especially France, promoted the ideals of the Enlightenment, it was in Germany that “culture” and the counter-Enlightenment flourished.

3. This same point was often made by a leader of the neo-fascist movement in Canada in the 1980s who had been born and raised in Serbia (Barrett 1987).

4. In Horowitz’s judgment, Mills did provide room for culture.

5. Parsons is not the only writer to have portrayed power as positive and legitimate. Arendt (1986:76) shares this viewpoint, and even Foucault (Rabinow 1984:175) argued that power produces knowledge.

6. Although Lukes was not always consistent in his conception of power, the view of structural power as reified was, according to Isaac (1987:75), his dominant position.

7. “Mobilization of bias,” an expression traced to Schattschneider (1960), influenced Bachrach and Baratz to momentarily entertain a structural as opposed to an agency perspective on power.

8. Although it seems only like yesterday that resistance and discourse captured the anthropological imagination, the glow around them had already begun to dim in the 1990s. Resistance, as several writers argued (Abu-Lughod 1990; Brown 1996; Ortner 1995), was highly romanticized, the subject of academic interest because large-scale rebellion and revolutionary change appeared to be luxuries of the past. As for discourse, the argument was that there was a hard core of political and economic inequalities (Gupta and Ferguson 1992) unresponsive to textual analysis. It is probable that Wolf was aware of these criticisms, which may partly explain why he did not dwell on resistance and discourse.

9. Although the transactionalists emphasized process, they did not necessarily ignore structure completely. For example, Swartz (1968:8) credits Bailey, who was soon to produce the major synthesis of the transactional school (Bailey 1969), with making room for structure.

10. The relevant articles are “Democracy and Social Structure in Pre-Nazi Germany” (1942), “Some Sociological Aspects of the Fascist Movements” (1942), and “The Problem of Controlled Institutional Change” (1945); also relevant is “Population and the Social Structure of Japan” (1946). All of these articles were reprinted in Essays in Sociological Theory (1964), which, for bibliographical convenience, will be the source of our references.

11. In his recent study, Dumont (1994:19) also points to the importance of Lutheranism in Germany, especially in fostering the idea of Bildung (self-cultivation), an expression of individualism not countenanced by Parsons.

12. However, according to Habermas (1986) and Wrong (1979), Arendt, like Parsons, embraces both of these positions.

13. While the similarity between *Envisioning Power* and some aspects of the writings of Weber, Parsons, and Geertz may be somewhat surprising, there is nothing odd about the intellectual overlap among these three other prominent writers. Parsons, of course, was deeply influenced by Weber, and Geertz was comparably influenced by Weber and Parsons.

14. It is tempting to point out that, in comparison to all of these writers, Marvin Harris, sometimes derided as a doctrinaire but conservative materialist, comes across as the more radical thinker. He is one of the few anthropologists to publicly side with C. Wright Mills’s argument about the power elite in America (Harris 1971:423) and to portray power as the basis of stratification. He also emphasizes (p. 408) the wide range of ideological mechanisms in the service of the elite, including the pabulum that passes for a college education.

15. Sometimes a fourth model was indicated—network analysis—but it was usually portrayed as a potential model or grafted onto the processual model.

References Cited

Abu-Lughod, Lila


Appadurai, Arjun

Arendt, Hannah  

Bachrach, P., and M. S. Baratz  

Bendix, Reinhold  

Benedict, Ruth  

Bohannan, Paul  

Brightman, Robert A.  

Brown, Michael F.  

Brumann, Christoph  

Dahl, Robert  


D’Andrade, Roy  

Dumont, Louis  

Eidin, Fred  
N.d. The Power and Powerlessness of the Communist Power System. Department of Political Science, University of Guelph, unpublished MS.

Etzioni, Amitai  

Forbes, M., and E. Evans-Pritchard, eds.  

Foucault, Michel  

Frank, André-Guider  

Fried, M.  

Friedman, Jonathan  

Galbraith, John Kenneth  

Geertz, Clifford  

Giddens, A.  

1979 *Central Problems in Social Theory*. London: Macmillan.

Gupta, Akhil, and James Ferguson  

Habermas, Jurgen  

Harris, Marvin  


Horowitz, Louis Irving, ed.  

Isaac, Jeffrey C.  

Kaplan, D., and R. Manners  

Keesing, Roger M.  

Kritzman, D., ed.  

Lewis, Herbert S.  

Lukes, Steven  


Lukes, Steven, ed.  

McClelland, Charles A.  

Murphy, Robert  
Wallerstein, Immanuel

Weber, Max

Whittaker, Elvi

Wolf, Eric


Wrong, Dennis