



NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES



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ERIC ROBERT  
WOLF

*1923-1999*

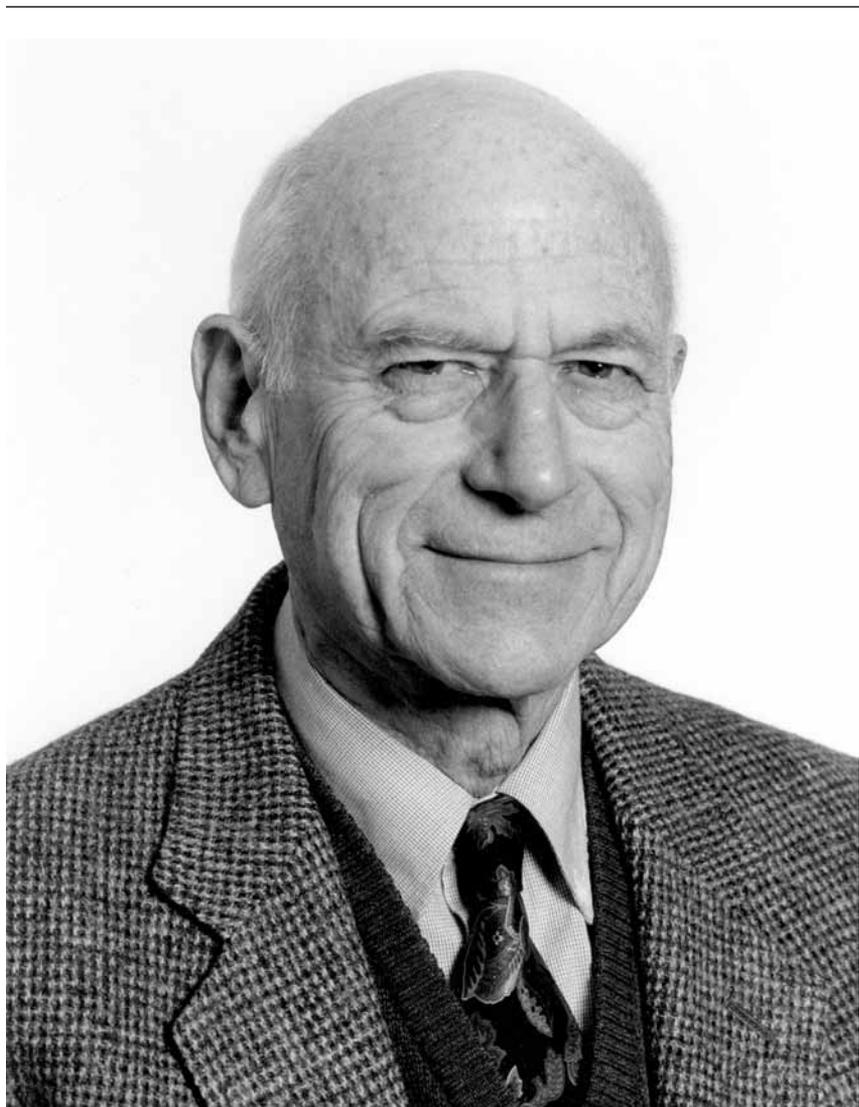
*A Biographical Memoir by*

*CONRAD PHILLIP KOTTAK*

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Eric R. Way

# ERIC ROBERT WOLF

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*February 1, 1923–March 6, 1999*

BY CONRAD PHILLIP KOTTAK

Eric Robert Wolf, an Austrian-born sociocultural anthropologist, was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1995. Wolf's lifelong fascination with cultural diversity can be traced to his childhood in multilingual Vienna and his teen years in multiethnic Sudetenland, where his Austrian father (his mother was Russian) ran a textile factory prior to the 1938 Nazi takeover. To avoid persecution as Jews, Wolf and his family moved first to England and then to the United States, where they settled in Jackson Heights, Queens, New York.

## *WOLF IN NEW YORK: QUEENS AND COLUMBIA*

In 1940 Wolf enrolled at Queens College, where he planned to study biochemistry. That plan changed when an early anthropology course exposed him to a field that encompassed his interests in culture, history, ethnicity, and the gamut of human experience. His mentor at Queens was Hortense Powdermaker.

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Eric Wolf (on right) with unidentified colleague while on leave from the U.S. Army in Venice, Italy, April 1945.

(Photograph courtesy Sydel Wolf)

**D**uring World War II, Wolf deferred his college education for three years to serve with the U.S. Army in the Italian Alps, where he would later return for anthropological fieldwork in 1960 (1974). Returning from combat duty, Wolf resumed his studies at Queens. He received his undergraduate degree from the Department of Anthropology and Sociology in spring 1946. Later that year, financed by the G.I. Bill, he entered graduate school in anthropology at Columbia University, from which he received his doctorate in 1951.

At Columbia Wolf entered a department still strongly influenced by the legacy of its founder, Franz Boas. Ruth Benedict, a Boas student, was one of Wolf's teachers. In 1947 the influential anthropologist Julian H. Steward,

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an eventual Academy member, joined the Columbia faculty, replacing Ralph Linton, who had moved to Yale. Steward's wide-ranging interests in contemporary (as well as ancient) societies, cultural evolution, and large-scale social processes attracted a coterie of left-leaning, politically oriented Columbia students. Besides Wolf, they included Sidney Mintz (a frequent early Wolf collaborator), Morton Fried, Elman Service, Stanley Diamond, and Robert F. Murphy. Wolf was part of a study group that called itself the "Mundial Upheaval Society" with Fried, Service, Diamond, Mintz, Robert Manners, and Daniel McCall as he planned his dissertation research (1948-1949), under Steward's direction, in a coffee-growing community in the highlands of Puerto Rico. That dissertation expressed Wolf's

lifelong interests in peasants, power, class, and patron-client relationships.

*WOLF IN MEXICO, THE ALPS,  
AND THE U.S. HINTERLAND*

After receiving his doctorate, Wolf began research in Mexico (1951-1952, 1954, and 1956), where he studied not only peasants but also the formation of national identity, writing an important article on the Virgin of Guadalupe as a key national symbol (1958). In 1952 Wolf accompanied his graduate mentor, Steward, in his move from Columbia to the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, where Steward would remain for the rest of his academic career. Wolf taught anthropology and worked with Steward at Illinois from 1952 to 1955, and then joined the faculty at the University of Virginia, where



Wolf, with son David, during a 1960-61 fieldwork trip in the Italian Alps.

(Photograph courtesy Sydel Wolf)

he remained through 1958. He spent the 1958-1959 academic year at Yale, followed by a brief sojourn as associate professor at the University of Chicago (1959-1961).

Wolf returned to Europe for fieldwork in the Italian Alps (1960-1961 and summers thereafter), in later seasons collaborating with his student John Cole. Their work focused on national identity and

ethnicity, including ethnic conflicts (1974). In 1961 Wolf, hired at the full professor level, joined the Department of Anthropology at the University of Michigan, where he remained through 1971, serving as department chair in 1970-1971.

A prolific, thoughtful, and generous scholar and a true gentleman, Wolf was liked and admired by his colleagues and

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students. At Michigan, where I met him when I joined the anthropology faculty in 1968, he was recognized as an excellent colleague and an innovative and concerned academic, who played a major role in organizing the nation's first Vietnam antiwar teach-in in 1965.

As chair of the newly formed ethics committee of the American Anthropological Association in 1970-1971, Wolf challenged the involvement of anthropologists in counterinsurgency research in Thailand. He and his colleague Joseph Jorgensen, also a member of the committee, resigned in protest of the AAA's handling of the matter and forcefully criticized what they saw as the misuse of anthropological expertise (1971). The controversy surrounding the affair led the AAA to adopt a code of professional ethics, which it maintains after recent revisions.

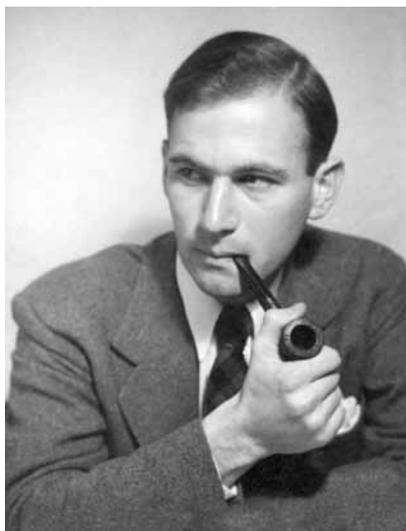
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*A prolific, thoughtful, and generous scholar and a true gentleman, Wolf was liked and admired by his colleagues and students.*

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Although a native German speaker, Wolf easily mastered English and had only the slightest accent. A soft-spoken man, he nevertheless commanded attention through his ideas, erudition, and the genuine interest he expressed in listening to what his colleagues and students had to say. He and his first wife, Kathleen Bakeman Wolf, known as Katia (who worked as a counseling social worker), liked to entertain. Their home on Forest Street in Ann Arbor was like a salon, where anthropologists, historians, and sociologists met and debated while enjoying food and drink.



Eric Wolf 1943

(Photograph courtesy Sydel Wolf)

Eric Wolf had a talent for using clear language in speaking and writing, even when expressing complex ideas. He wrote so well that I could assign his 1959 book *Sons of the Shaking Earth*—which drew on archaeology, history, and other fields to encapsulate Mexico’s diverse cultures and history—to my introductory anthropology course.

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### *WOLF AT MICHIGAN*

When Wolf joined the Michigan anthropology faculty in 1961, he entered a department that valued historical approaches and unorthodox thinking. A strong program in anthropological archaeology had been established by James B. Griffin (also an Academy member). A key founder of Michigan’s Department of Anthropology, who overlapped for a few years with Wolf, was Leslie A. White, who wrote extensively about the evolution of culture. White and Julian Steward were two key figures in reviving cultural evolutionary approaches in anthropology after the earlier rejection of those approaches by Franz Boas and his influential students. Wolf’s Michigan colleagues also included the historically oriented anthropologists Marshall Sahlins (a current Academy member) and Elman

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Service. The latter, as noted previously, had been a fellow student with Wolf at Columbia and shared with him World War II combat experience and a lifelong commitment to social justice. (During the 1960s Michigan had so many Columbia Ph.D.s—including Wolf, Sahlins, Service, Roy Rappaport, Niara Sudarkasa, and the author of this memoir—that people talked of a “Columbia-Michigan axis,” made up of anthropologists interested in evolution, ecology, and social change.)

As White, Sahlins, and Service were reviving interest in cultural evolution by focusing on ancient and nonindustrial societies, Wolf chose to study more recent change: historical processes in societies clearly formed within or influenced by the post-Columbian world system. Because of his interests in cultural history, the

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*Peasants* (1966) was a short but influential book that challenged the stereotype of peasants as backward survivors of a rural past untouched by recent world history.

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world system, and colonialism, and his penchant for interdisciplinary collaboration with social historians like Charles Tilley and Sylvia Thrupp (two other Michigan colleagues), Wolf was a key figure in Michigan anthropology’s historical turn. The focus on social and cultural history and comparative approaches that Wolf helped inspire is embodied today by Michigan’s outstanding joint doctoral program in anthropology and history.

Key works that Wolf wrote at Michigan included *Peasants* (1966) and *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth*

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Eric Wolf, 1968, in southeast Asia.

(Photograph by Myron Cohen,  
courtesy Sydel Wolf)

*Century* (1969). *Peasants* was a short but influential book that challenged the stereotype of peasants as backward survivors of a rural past untouched by recent world history. Rather, as Wolf pointed out, peasants could not be understood apart from the nation-states in which they lived. A defining

feature of peasants (as compared, for example, with tribal cultivators) was their obligation to turn over part of what they produced (Wolf called it “rent”) to landlords, government officials, and other higher-ups within the social hierarchy. In his later book *Europe and the People Without History* (1982) Wolf would characterize such a system as a tributary mode of production, and contrast it with kin-based and capitalist modes of production. Wolf’s recognition in *Peasants* of inclusion within larger systems of people previously considered backward, isolated, or marginal would reemerge and be applied much more broadly in his best-known work, *Europe and the People Without History*.

*Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (1969) examined popular revolutions in Russia, Mexico, China, Algeria, Cuba, and Vietnam from the perspective of

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peasants, whose ways of life had been threatened or destroyed by actions of world powers, including the United States in Vietnam. The impetus to write this book came not only from Wolf's prior work on peasants but also from his strong opposition to the Vietnam War. With its examination of uses and abuses of power in varied cultural contexts, *Peasant Wars* again foreshadows Wolf's later work, including his last major book, *Envisioning Power* (1999), and a collection of his essays *Pathways of Power* (2001).

In 1971 Wolf relinquished the chair of the Anthropology Department at Michigan and joined the faculty at Herbert Lehman College of the City University of New York (CUNY) and CUNY's Graduate Center. He became a Distinguished Professor at Lehman/CUNY, where he remained until his retirement in 1992. With his move to New York, Wolf and Katia divorced, and

the next year he married Sydel Silverman, herself a prominent anthropologist, who would be his intellectual companion and life mate through his death in 1999. Katia would eventually marry William Schorger, a professor in and former chair of the Michigan Department of Anthropology. Schorger, a specialist on the Middle East, had collaborated with Wolf at Michigan in a "Project for the Study of Social Networks in the Mediterranean Area."

#### *STEWARD AND PUERTO RICO*

Themes that dominate much of Wolf's post-Michigan work, including his most influential book, *Europe and the People Without History* (1982), may be traced back to his association with Julian Steward and Wolf's dissertation research in Puerto Rico. Steward probably is best

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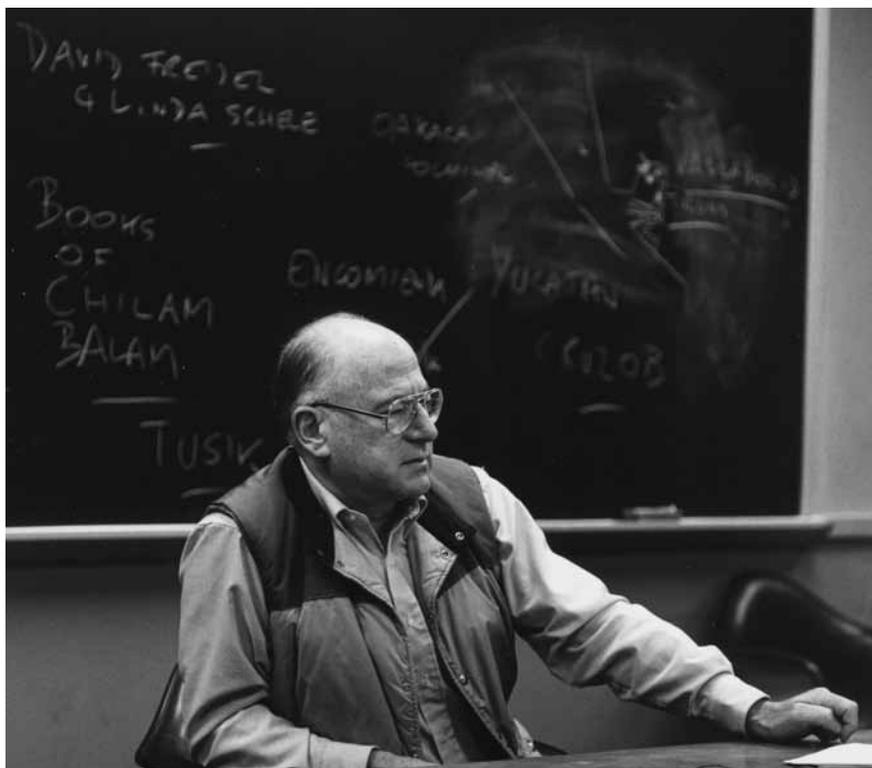
known for his influential collection of essays, *Theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution*.<sup>1</sup> Although published in 1955, that book assembled Steward's articles published since the 1930s. Along with Leslie White, Steward is considered one of the two leaders of mid-20th century neoevolutionism within cultural anthropology. While White wrote of cultural evolution on a grand scale from Paleolithic hunter-gatherers to ancient civilizations, Steward, surveying archaeology, history, and sociocultural diversity, saw cultures evolving along many lines, hence multilinear evolution.

Most significant for understanding Wolf is the fact that Steward also championed the idea that anthropology could contribute to the study of contemporary societies, including those, such as Puerto Rico, formed under colonialism and influenced

by economic and political forces within the post-Columbian world system. With his graduate students from Columbia as participants Steward developed a late 1940s research project that eventually would produce the book *People of Puerto Rico*.<sup>2</sup>

The key role that Eric Wolf played in anthropology begins most clearly with this ambitious project. Steward's goal was to apply his theoretical approach (as laid out in *Theory of Culture Change*<sup>1</sup>) to the study of a contemporary complex society. The book's chapters include a synthesizing introduction and conclusion (by Steward and his collaborators) and five chapters written by the graduate students based on fieldwork done by them and their Puerto Rican assistants. In *Theory of Culture Change* Steward argued that the anthropological study of any complex society must consider its varied economic and

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Eric Wolf in 1990, teaching at Herbert Lehman College of the City University of New York.

(Photograph courtesy Sydel Wolf)

ecological adaptations and their social correlates, as well as its national institutions, including its system of social stratification.

Accordingly, the researchers chose for study Puerto Rican communities with different economies and ecologies. Wolf

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did fieldwork in a coffee-growing municipality. Robert Manners's community was sustained by tobacco and mixed crops. Elena Padilla Seda studied workers on a government-owned sugar plantation, while Sidney Mintz worked among a rural sugar plantation proletariat. Note that all these rural communities produced cash crops valued in international markets. To round out the picture of Puerto Rican society, Raymond Scheele studied its prominent families, including business people, politicians, and other elites, including those with ties to the U.S. mainland. The goal of the integrated study was to understand Puerto Rican society, cultures, and ecological adaptations in the context of that island's history within a world system encompassing not only rural and urban Puerto Rico but also Spain and the mainland United States. I dwell here on Steward

because of his strong influence, not usually recognized by those who write about Wolf, on the latter's perspectives, approaches, and research interests. A key assumption of *People of Puerto Rico*<sup>2</sup> and of Wolf's subsequent work is that anthropologists should not study a society by viewing its communities as isolated units or by ignoring their connections to their larger society and the world system.

*WOLF IN NEW YORK: HISTORY,  
POWER, CONTACT, AND THE  
WORLD SYSTEM*

During his 21 years at CUNY (1971-1992), the longest time he spent in a single academic locale and thereafter, Wolf developed his interests in the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of historical encounters within the world system. *Europe and the People Without History* (1982), which used several case studies to illustrate the impact

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of colonial economic expansion on less developed societies (those without their own written histories) had a huge impact. It spurred anthropologists, including the U.S. and international students Wolf attracted to the CUNY Graduate Center, to focus on world system analysis, anthropology and history, and the legacies of colonialism and imperialism. Anthropologists could no longer dare to characterize the societies they studied as existing within a timeless ethnographic present or unaffected by external forces and world events. The study of the interaction between local communities and those larger forces would become a key part of anthropological analyses. Wolf, who previously had been highly respected for his work in the Caribbean, Latin America, and Europe, and on peasants, was catapulted to superstar status within the field of anthropology. In 1986 he was

elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 1988 he received the J. I. Staley Prize for outstanding scholarship in the field of anthropology from the School of American Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He was invited to be the distinguished lecturer at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in 1989.

In 1990 Wolf received a \$375,000 MacArthur Foundation “genius grant.” He used it, even after his retirement from CUNY in 1992, to complete a comparative study of the uses and abuses of power in three different cultural contexts. Two were well-known “anthropological” societies—the Aztecs of Mexico and the Kwakiutl of the North Pacific Coast. The third was Nazi Germany, whose power plays had exerted a direct and profound influence on Wolf’s

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own early life. Based on this project, the last book published before his death, *Envisioning Power: Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis* (1999) detected and described parallels between Nazi genocide, Aztec human sacrifice, and the development of frenzied potlatch celebrations among the Kwakiutl. Tracing the history of each case, Wolf shows how those societies were stressed by ecological, demographic, economic, social, political, and psychological crises. Such challenges led to ideological responses by sociopolitical elites aimed at maintaining power, but shaped in each case by distinctive, historically rooted cultural understandings.

*WOLF'S IMPORTANCE  
AND HIS LEGACY*

Wolf occupies a prominent place in the history of anthropology for several reasons. He

helped promote a reorientation in the units of study and analyses used by anthropologists. During the first half of the 20th century, anthropologists tended to treat the societies or cultures they studied as if they were isolated entities. The ethnographer's task was to capture their essence, their nature, the way (the one true way) they were. Anthropologists treated the communities, societies, and cultures they studied as if they were timeless or frozen in time. The ethnographer's job was to describe the traditional culture, also known as the ethnographic present, the way things were before Europeans arrived, before they began to change. Of course, the ethnographic present was an illusion; all societies have been influenced by outsiders for millennia. No anthropologist has ever studied a society unaffected by external forces and the world system. Wolf

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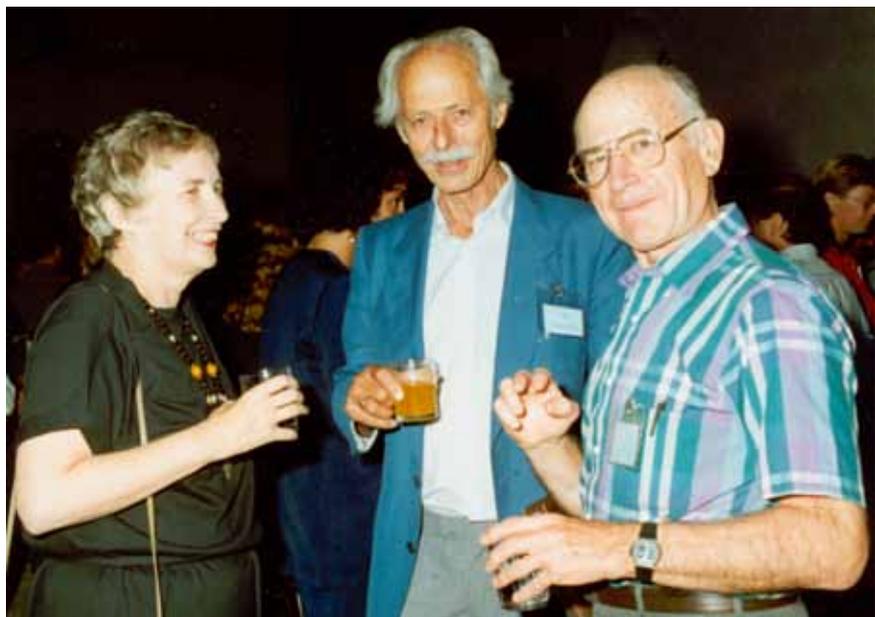
directed anthropological attention to those encounters within the world system: between Europe and the people without history.

Unlike the British functionalist anthropologists whom Edmund Leach once castigated as butterfly collectors because of their attempts to catalog societies and social types, Wolf saw no utility in treating societies as though they were in equilibrium. Like Steward, the other evolutionists, and even Franz Boas, Wolf recognized the ubiquity of contact and change in non-Western societies, especially since the advent of colonialism. For Wolf the study of process should be central to anthropology. Rather than something to be ignored in an attempt to capture the ethnographic present, change should be a key focus of ethnography.

Wolf also questioned the unitary nature of societies and

cultures. Underlying the Puerto Rico project was the assumption of diversity within nations and societies. No single community could accurately represent the whole of Puerto Rico. This is why Steward sent his students to four different communities, each representing an economic orientation important in Puerto Rican history. Wolf helped move anthropology beyond the study of “primitive” societies to include the study of complex and contemporary societies, including peasant communities, Alpine villages, Mexico as a nation, and eventually Nazi Germany.

Anthropologists now realize that even within non-Western societies once considered “primitive” or tribal, diversity exists in time and space and in relation to key social variables, such as gender. Today, book titles like *Crow Women*, *The Crow from 1850 to 1910*, or *My*



Wolf (right) with Sydel Silverman and Frederick Barth at the 1990 Conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists, held in Coimbra, Portugal.

(Photograph courtesy Sydel Wolf)

*Life as a Member of the Crow Nation* are much more likely than *The Crow Indians*. Anthropologists recognize that any ethnographic study is about some people rather than the society as a whole.

Wolf helped make the study of history and process a key part of sociocultural anthropology. His focus was on political and economic history, especially within the context of the world system and colonialism. Several

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prominent focuses in contemporary sociocultural anthropology trace their origins to Wolf; they include political economy, anthropology and history, and studies of culture, history, and power.

Wolf's work has inspired the anthropological study of modern nations, which thrives today. Anthropologists working in Europe within a Wolfian paradigm have advanced our understanding of postsocialist transitions. There is a populous Society for the Anthropology of North America within the American Anthropological Association. Anthropologists studying contemporary nations are much more likely to adopt Wolf's approach, focusing on diversity, process, and political economy, than the national character studies of Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead (best represented in Benedict's 1946 book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*). Recalling the search

for the ethnographic present, those books aimed at discovering unitary essences (e.g., Japanese culture). National character studies focused on what Academy member Anthony F. C. Wallace once called the replication of uniformity rather than the organization of diversity, Wolf's approach. No anthropologist today would even attempt to ferret out the essence of contemporary American culture, given the diverse interest groups that constantly contest what that culture is and should be.

Eric Wolf's legacy includes the hundreds of colleagues and students he taught, inspired, and otherwise influenced at the multiple institutions where he studied and taught during his 48 years as a professional anthropologist. His legacy extends to the tens of thousands who have read his books and articles and have been guided by his ideas. It reaches across nations,

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spread not only by books and translations but also by the international students who came to the CUNY Graduate Center to study with the master. Those especially influenced by Wolf's work include sociocultural anthropologists, anthropological archaeologists, historians, sociologists, humanists, and area specialists who focus on Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, and the Mediterranean. Wolf's legacy has given a firm foundation to processual approaches within a diverse tribe of people—anthropologists—who once were without, and truly needed, history.

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## CHRONOLOGY

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- 1923            Born on February 1 in Vienna, Austria
- 1933            Moved with parents to Sudetenland near German-Czech frontier
- 1938            Sent to England to escape Nazis, attended Forest School near Essex
- 1940            Incarcerated in camp for “enemy aliens” near Liverpool
- 1940            Moved with parents from England to Jackson Heights, Queens, New York
- 1940            Enrolled in Queens College, New York
- 1942-1945      Served three years with the Tenth Mountain Division of the U.S. Army in Colorado and Italy
- 1943            September 24, married Kathleen Bakeman (known as Katia)
- 1946            Graduated from Queens College
- 1946-1951      Attended Columbia University
- 1947            Julian Steward arrived at Columbia University; became Wolf’s mentor
- 1948-1949      Fieldwork among coffee growers in Central Highlands of Puerto Rico
- 1952-1959      Research in and on Mexico, leading to several articles and *Sons of the Shaking Earth*
- 1950s-1960s    Comparative studies of peasantries
- 1959-1969      Served on the editorial committee of *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (with Sylvia Thrupp as editor)

## CHRONOLOGY

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- 1960-1961 (Summers thereafter); eventual fieldwork with John Cole in two Alpine villages of the South Tyrol leading to *The Hidden Frontier*
- 1964-1971 Codirected the Project for the Study of Social Networks in the Mediterranean Area, University of Michigan
- 1965 With Marshall Sahlins, organized Michigan Teach-in against Vietnam War
- 1970-1971 Chaired Ethics Committee of the American Anthropological Association; with Joseph Jorgensen condemned use of ethnographic research for U.S. counterinsurgency efforts in Thailand
- 1970-1984 Served as coeditor of *Comparative Studies in Society and History*
- 1971 Moved from Michigan to New York
- 1972 Divorced from Kathleen Wolf; married Sydel Silverman
- 1970s-1982 Library and archival research leading to *Europe and the People Without History*
- 1990s Library and archival research leading to *Envisioning Power* and *Pathways of Power*
- 1999 Died on March 6, 1999, in Irvington, New York

### *AWARDS AND HONORS*

- 1960-1961 John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship for study of culture change in the Italian Alps
- 1964-1969 Career Development Award, National Institutes of Health for study of peasant social and political organization

## CHRONOLOGY

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- 1973-1974      Senior Fellowship, National Endowment for the Humanities
- 1986            Elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences
- 1988            J. I. Staley Prize, School of American Research, Santa Fe,  
New Mexico, for *Europe and the People Without History*
- 1989            Kevin Lynch Award, School of Architecture and Planning,  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for *Europe and the People  
Without History*
- 1989            Distinguished Lecturer, American Anthropological Association
- 1990-1995      Awarded "genius" fellowship by the John D.  
and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
- 1992            Honorary doctorate in law, University of Michigan
- 1993            Honorary doctorate in philosophy, University of Vienna
- 1995            Elected to the National Academy of Sciences

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### *PROFESSIONAL RECORD*

- 1946            B.A., Queens College
- 1950            (Summer); Lecturer, Department of Sociology  
and Anthropology, Queens College
- 1951            Ph.D., Department of Anthropology, Columbia University
- 1951            (Summer); Lecturer, Department of Sociology  
and Anthropology, Queens College
- 1952-1954      Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology,  
University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana

## CHRONOLOGY

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- 1954-1955      Research Associate, Project for Research on Cross-cultural Regularities, University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana
- 1955-1958      Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Virginia
- 1958-1959      Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Yale University
- 1959              (Summer); Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Columbia University
- 1959-1961      Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago
- 1961-1971      Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor
- 1970-1971      Chair, Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan
- 1971-1992      Distinguished Professor, Department of Anthropology, City University of New York: Herbert H. Lehman College and Ph.D. Program in Anthropology, Graduate Center
- 1992-1999      Professor Emeritus, City University of New York

### *MEMBERSHIPS*

Royal Anthropological Society of Great Britain and Ireland

American Anthropological Association

### *NOTES*

1. J. H. Steward. *Theory of Culture Change: The Methodology of Multilinear Evolution*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1955.
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With J. G. Jorgensen. They divide and subdivide, and call it anthropology. *The New York Times*, Nov. 30.

1982

*Europe and the People Without History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

1999

*Envisioning Power: Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

2001

*Pathways of Power: Building an Anthropology of the Modern World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.



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