BOOK REVIEW


The award winning book mainly sees the world as a whole, like a system. Wolf discusses different populations, their modes of existence before European expansion and the manner in which these modes were penetrated, and subordinated—first by growing market and subsequently by industrial capitalism. The book shows that in the year A.D. 1400 the world already had regional linkages, but by European expansions, these regional linkages were spread to a global phenomenon. In the process of numerous convergent activities, such as fur trade, slave trade, movements of people, military forces, involved societies of the 'New World' (Americas) and 'Old World' (Asia, Africa, and Europe) experienced major changes.

The World in 1400: Before European expansion, the linkages of people were out of the build up of contentious hegemonic, political, and military system. Different agricultural regions generated separate politics but routes of traffic and trade connectedthese regions. The most important was the Silk Road. Related necessary exchanges connected pastoralists and agriculturalists in different continents. Kinship or ceremonial allegiances linked culturally distinct groups across Asia, Africa, and Americas. If there were any isolated societies, Wolf thought, were temporary phenomena. Thus, Wolf argues, analysis that shows different parts of the world as separated cannot portray the world condition even before the European expansion.

Modes of Production: Relying on Marxian idea of ‘mode of production’ Wolf shows these interconnections were rooted in political and economic factors. He defines mode of production as "a specific, historically occurring set of social relations through which labor is deployed to wrest energy from nature by means of tools, skills, organization, and knowledge." (p. 75). Wolf distinguishes three types of modes of production—the kin-ordered, the tributary and the capitalist mode. He characterizes them as follows: "the kin-ordered mode is predicated upon oppositions between those who belong and those who do not, and engenders distinctions of gender, rank and privilege favoring some kin over others. The tributary mode sets tribute takers against the producers of tribute and give rise to military and political competition both within and between the contending classes. The capitalist mode acts to accumulate capital through the hiring of labor power, but it is marked by the cyclical alternation of labor mobilization and labor displacement; each intake of labor power uproots some prior adaptation, while each sloughing off of labor power creates a new cohort of the disemployed." (p. 386). Thus, although these modes are subject to external influence, internal differentiation is at the heart of Wolf's definitions.

Capitalist and tributary modes differentiates between surplus takers and surplus producers, thus, both requires domination. Surpluses, gathered as tribute, opened up ways for mercantile wealth that led channels of exchange. Capitalist modes of production grew out of its ability to reproduce itself—develop internally and then growing out by entering into other modes and turning them into capital, such as the labour power. It relied on political and military power to seize zones.

Europe: Prelude to Expansion and political Consolidation: Between A.D. 800 to 1400, shift in long distance trade positioned Europe into a key area of commercial development. Numerous small and scattered tributary principalities of A.D. 800 had grown into politically and militarily consolidated kingdoms. Several consolidated kingdoms sought expansions. In A.D 900 Muslim worlds were in control of long distance trade between Mediterranean and Asian zones. After the rise of Italian ports, in A.D 1000, the trade started to come in favour of the West.

The movement towards political consolidation depended upon extracting tribute to pay for war. It could manage three ways, one- to expand externally and seize surpluses from enemies, two- Discover resources for selling to merchants for necessary goods,
and three-enlarge Royal domain. Europe followed all three strategies. Seizure of external resources was the main strategy. Central political consolidation took place at, what now we call, in England and France.

**State making and Expansion:** External warfare, trade and internal consolidation created new states in Europe. When agriculture and trading profits reached its limits, European replied to it by increasing the scale and intensity of war that required enhanced military power. The relations between central executive and merchants were very important. In the process, tributary system lost its ability to make alliances across states and dissolved into a guidance from a political centre in exchange of its tributary rights. Wolf sketches how Portugal, present Spain, Dutch Netherlands underwent a mercantile expansion. In seventeenth century, these states faced economic and political crisis again. Wolf reckons it a result of mercantile wealth's inability to transform ways of committing labour for creating new resources. Only England took the step for a capitalist transformation.

**The Search for Wealth:** Most of the time, Portuguese first opened up naval business routes to different continents. The spice and sugar trade between Asia, Africa, and America were accompanied by slave trade in southern Atlantic. The Europeans sought to control the ocean for vantage points in trade. Wolf reckoned that from then on, worldwide networks drew several continents into a global system of connections.

As a result of European contact, the Indian population of the ‘New World’ died by the ‘Old World’ diseases. Also they lost huge population under slave raiding by Europeans. The loss of manpower shackled the foundation of kin-ordered mode. They became under populated for enforcing and reproducing rights to people that made survival possible. Remaining small population base supported and transformed to European modelled ‘clean-tilled’ field based agriculture, instead of horticulture. In tributary mode, it caused transformation of existing polities.

**The Fur Trade:** Fur trade had profound impact upon the modes of life of the present North America. From the beginning, France and The Netherlands competed each other for control over the fur trade. Abenaki, Northeastern, Northwest, Huron, the Iroquois, the Cree, the Ojibwa, populations of the Great Lakes were involved in the trade. The competition between France and the Netherlands, and as a result of its subsequent extension, all Indian communities became each other’s competitors. This competition brought profound changes in the native’s livelihood. It increased the intensity of warfare among them, which forced them towards frequent dislocation from the original habitat and sometime even decimation. The competition destroyed many groups, remnant population merged with other groups under new ethnic identities. Mostly ‘Chiefs’ controlled local trades. Big man or chiefs became competitors as well. The population groups received European goods in exchange of fur and they re-patterned their lives around these European manufactures. The native people became heavily dependent on fur trade. With the decline of international warfare, and rejection of politically motivated flow of goods, they became subordinate producers and not partners in the international networks of exchange.

**The Slave Trade:** ‘Black Ivory’- the slaves, connected Africa to the global network. They provided labour for European mining and plantation in America. East Africa, West Africa, all became the area of supply. Through warfare, local chiefs engaged themselves in this trade. Kin-ordered mode, to some extent, was transformed into fighting organizations. The trade increased the power of local tributary leaders. Europeans provided ‘guns’ to their allies for effective slave raiding. In the process, militaristic states emerged in different parts of Africa. African hands controlled capture, maintenance, and overland transportation of slaves. The Europeans controlled the transoceanic transport. Thus, not only the Europeans, Africans themselves were engaged in slave tradings. These processes continued, until slave trade became unprofitable for the Europeans.

**Trade and Conquest in the Orient:** At the beginning, European control of Asia was weak. European power fought each other. Unlike Portuguese and Dutch, English powers came to India for
economic reasons. The British rule essentially broke down the politico-economic structure of the Subcontinent. Under the Mughal Empire, Zaminders collected tributes from cultivators and attributed some of that to the Emperor. Under the new British rule, (Permanent Settlement Act. 1793) Zaminders became the owner of the land, giving nine-tenth of their collected tributes to the English administration. Many Zaminders also lost their rule as they could not match the sun-set rule. As a result, new classes of Zaminders, brokers, middlemen, cultivators emerged. Already hard-pressed agriculturalists started to produce cash crops, such as tobacco, cotton, sugar, spices, jute etc. for the market. English rule also penetrated English style bureaucracy in India. While English goods were squeezed duty-free into India, many Indian gods were banned in English market. These processes enabled the English to gain control of Indian market. Indian handicrafts (such as cotton based crafts) were destroyed. “Indian surpluses enabled England to create and maintain a global system of free trade.”(p. 261). “India became key foundation of the emerging worldwide capitalist edifice.”(p. 261)

Wolf also discusses the impact of European intervention in China. Opium, tea, and sandalwoods were the most important trading goods. Large scale whaling for European market contributed to distribution of firearms that affected the power of local chiefs.

Capitalism: England provided the breakthrough towards capitalist mode of production. Machine productions, mainly textiles and later railroad construction transformed the lives both in industrial areas and in the supply zones of the globe. Both commodities and population started to roll towards developing centres of the world.

Industrial Revolution: According to Wolf, blocked by European lords to invest in acquiring land, and, getting political power, European merchants maintained commercial linkages for converting surpluses into commodities and commodities into money over wide geographical regions. Factory production, labour movement and other related processes created peripheries both within states and between different geographical areas.

After the mechanization, starting in 19th century, England expanded outward, swaying or penetrating other modes. Where it did not sway other modes, it dominated their inert-relation by connecting them with the capitalist world market. Wolf distinguishes two sources of differentiation in the capitalist mode. One is the obvious difference between those employing higher and lower ratio of capital in means of production. Another source lies in the capitalist mode’s repeated exhibits of upswings and downturns or retreats as result of internal contradiction; acceleration of profit, followed by deceleration of profit. The state is another carrier that differentiates between capitalist modes of production. In different states, the capitalist domination of one class over other is executed differently. How the state enters into capital accumulation abroad creates another differentiation among the capitalist states.

The Movement of Commodities: Criticizing Adam Smith and David Richard, Wolf suggested that no country ever select the commodity it was most qualified to produce on free choice. In most cases, it was rather, shaped or forced by more powerful participants. Followed by great depression of late nineteenth century, cash crops, industrial crops, livestock, gold, diamond etc. entered into the global market as commodity. These movements served the intensification of capitalist development. However, becoming engaged in such a capitalist movement does not mean that all parties have become capitalists. The capitalist system is an articulation of networks between capitalists and non-capitalists relations of production, dominated by the capitalist. Thus, the kin-ordered or tributary modes still have place in the capitalist networks but only marginally.

The New Labourers: In capitalist system, labour becomes commodity in the market that produces surplus for the capitalist. In the process of capitalist development, Wolf sketches three waves of working class migration; first one is within the centres of Europe. The second flow was from Europe to overseas, mainly to U.S.A. The third one carried labourers to the mining and the plantations of the Tropics. Such a movement juxtaposed groups of different cultural and social origins, creating unity and diversity between them. And presently, in the age of globalization, “Within an ever more
integrated world, we witness the growth of ever more diverse proletariat diasporas.” (p. 383)

Criticisms: Although Wolf is brilliant in his articulation; he gives little importance on local levels. He sketches the way local condition has been changed by the colonial powers but did not talk enough about the constraints that local conditions placed on global arenas. Production, from Wolf's analysis, is purely targeted for international market. However, various resistant against producing goods of European will critically demonstrated producer's struggles to produce goods of local value. When we talk about local conditions or local level production, it automatically fits in ecological considerations that affect local adaptations. Wolf did not give enough importance to this either. Thus, the general criticisms that Marxist writers do not give enough importance to local cultures can be labelled against Wolf as well. Apart from that, history, even the written history, is never complete and most of the time, it is contested. Any study that largely draws from such sources is always vulnerable on the ground of its validity. Apart from the criticism that Wolf did not discuss ideology enough to its importance, he even never tried to conceptualize mode of production rather, to him, it became a tool for looking at the history.

Conclusion: Wolf criticizes taking separate nations as basic of inquiry in social sciences. To him, the world is very much interconnected. Wolf also challenged the conventional representation of traditional societies in anthropology as slow to change and inflexible. Cultures, to him, are not fixed but changing, and forever breaking up. Thus, he thinks, culture needs to be studied historically. He said, “Theoretically informed history and historically informed theory must be joined together.”(p. 21). In doing historical analysis, he focuses on macro-micro relations, which emancipated anthropology from its traditional narrow emphasis on micro settings. To study the change over time, he adapted Marxist concepts, such as mode of production, exploitation, and colonialism. He viewed social life or culture as dominated by economic and political factors. Wolf viewed societies as heterogeneous and interpenetrating as opposed to functionalist view of societies as homogenous, externally distinctive and bounded objects.

Wolf’s methodology is sometimes termed as the World system approach. This approach ultimately leads to rethink the concept of culture as an independent, and bounded whole. He defines culture as “A culture is thus better seen as a series of processes that construct, reconstruct, and dismantle cultural materials, in response to identifiable determinants.”(p.387). Thus, in terms of Wolf's methodology, culture cannot be explained only by internal logic but also by various circumstances that dismantles and resembles it. To Wolf, these circumstances relies on the deployment of social labour and its manner sets the term of history. Thus, the construction of world (Ideology, and even the common terms) is a reflection of power relations. If the world were not interconnected in this way, one would find the so-called scattered ‘primitive’ people ‘without history’.

Md. Nazmul Hasan Chowdhury
NOTES FOR THE CONTRIBUTORS

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