

Book Reviews

General

Envisioning Power: Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis. By ERIC R. WOLF. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. xi, 339 pp. Cloth, \$45.00. Paper, \$16.95.

When Eric Wolf died in March of 1999, anthropology lost one of its finest. He left an immediate legacy in this volume, the product of decades of accumulated thinking and recent years of actual production. Wolf's concerns here are many, and in this brief note we can suggest only a few. He argues, for example, that we will better understand human society if we expand our concept of culture, relating it more explicitly to how ideology combines with "structural power." "Regnant ideologies" are constructed as part of cosmologies and are built on real cultural histories. One functional role of ideologies is to segment society through formulating "myth-history," defining the rules of who acquires and transfers power and how this is done. As a part of this structure, axiomatic truths, rituals, and performances are created. Wolf's concept of "structural power" does not derive from classic "structuralism," but refers to the deterministic relations that hold between ideology and practice.

The book is, in a way, a series of four histories. The first is a 50-page examination of "contested concepts," following the trail from the Enlightenment through the Counter-Enlightenment, Marx and Engels, pragmatism, the role of the mind, neo-Kantians, Weber, Gramsci, Mannheim, functionalism, linguistics, semiotics, and finally, ideas and culture in general. This whirlwind trip shows Wolf's masterly scholarship in intellectual history; more specifically, however, it provides the antecedents of the concepts that he uses through the remainder of the book.

Envisioning Power then continues with intense analyses of three power structures: the nineteenth-century Kwakiutl, the fifteenth-century Aztec empire, and the twentieth-century German National Socialists. In Wolf's analysis, the Kwakiutl chiefdoms constructed an ideology around kin relations, formalized through axiomatic acceptance of a primary lineage. Power invested in this lineage was passed on through gift giving that became famous as potlaches. Chiefs retained their power until the inroads of capitalism and the policies of the Canadian government forced them to abandon much of the ritual process. There is little historical data on the process that produced this system, but

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Wolf describes how Kwakiutl cosmology provided the common understandings necessary for its continuance.

The Aztecs take Wolf back to his early scholarly concern with Mesoamerican cultural history. The extensive research now available allows him impressive detail on how the Aztecs—or, more correctly the Tenochca—arose from an aggressive military group, constructed a mythical history to account for their success, and systematically segmented society in such a way that warfare retained a central role. Wolf is especially concerned with the importance of human sacrifice to the Tenochca system. It might seem strange that he dedicates a quarter of this chapter to the subject, until one realizes that he dedicates as much attention to the Judocide of the Nazis. Commitment to death guarantees continuity. (One is reminded of Alfred Emerson's observation that death is adaptive.)

Wolf had personal reasons for examining the National Socialists, the object of his final analysis. As a Jew he fled Austria and Germany and lost friends to the Holocaust. Here the abundance of historical data and Hitler's blueprint in *Mein Kampf* allow Wolf to detail the construction of the ideology that guided the Nazi operation from its beginning to its collapse. He describes a Nazi political organization little related to the existing German civil system; and one that essentially ran the country in confusion. Most intensive, both in Wolf's concern and in the history he tells, is National Socialism's dedication to the simple elimination of anyone who was outside the mythical Aryan population and state.

Envisioning Power is a thought-provoking synthesis of cultural anthropology and some central concerns of cultural history. Its principal weaknesses is that its focus on the elite leaves the dynamics of the mass of the populations of these societies little examined.

RICHARD N. ADAMS, Patzistz History Company

The Indigenous People of the Caribbean. Edited by SAMUEL M. WILSON.

Ripley P. Bullen Series. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997. Photographs. Illustrations. Maps. Tables. Bibliography. Index. xiv, 253 pp. Cloth, \$49.95.

Caribbean peoples, particularly those of Indian descent, as well as students of this region, have long needed a text such as the present multiauthored book on the indigenous Caribbean. The Virgin Islands Humanities Council is to be commended for targeting these audiences, and the editor for producing this book, despite the uneven knowledge and debates that have characterized Caribbean studies.

In his introduction, Wilson provides a good overview of Indian regional history from 4000 B.C. up to the present. As significant stages in this history, he singles out the transition to island living, manioc cultivation, and the development of large political systems.

Part one presents works on ethnohistory and archeology. Ricardo Alegría discusses early Spanish chroniclers and their agendas, although he does not caution readers about the possibility of an elite agenda in the Indian oral tradition. Louis Allaire discusses the